



Jenn De Leon

TEACHER. AUTHOR. CHAMPION.

by Mindy Fried, Ph.D. of Arbor Consulting Partners

“As a teacher, I know to expect this sight come September just like I can expect juicy Expo markers to run dry. What I can never quite anticipate, however, are the stories that will bloom within the silent spaces.”

Some people will remember the Boston winter of 2015 for its interminable snowstorms that plagued the city week after week, taxing the city’s transportation system, shutting down stores and restaurants, grounding people from traveling to their workplaces, and closing down schools. But the seventh-grade students from the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) School will remember that grueling season by the exciting writing project they completed with their English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, Jenn De Leon, in collaboration with 826 Boston’s Young Authors’ Book Project, which culminated in a collection of short essays called *Things Will Get Better & More Delicious: Stories From Our Lives So Far*.

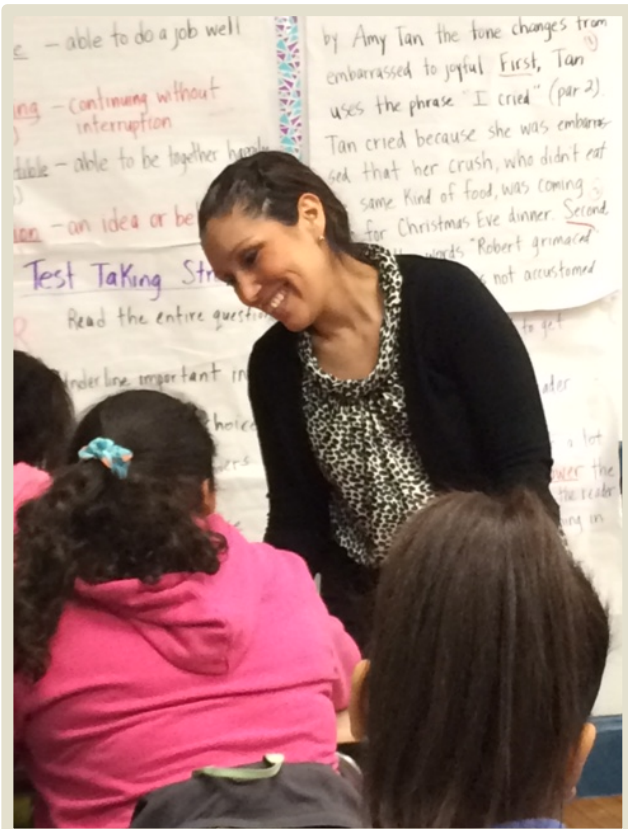
In the book’s opening “Letter from the Teacher,” Jenn says, “Picture it. A crowded classroom—bodies and books and twenty-eight desks and chairs, a white board, hardwood floors as old as time, three glossy plants, a water bubbler, and tall windows that let in light. As a teacher, I know to expect this sight come September just like I can expect juicy Expo markers to run dry. What I can never quite anticipate, however, are the stories that will bloom within the silent spaces.” And bloom they did.

The Young Authors’ Book Project

When Jessica Drench, the Associate Director of 826 Boston, approached Jenn about doing the Young Authors’ Book Project (YABP), her immediate response was, “It just makes so much sense.” They had had a positive collaboration the previous year, when 826 Boston brought tutors into Jenn’s classroom. The YABP was a much bigger commitment, but Jessica told Jenn, “You’re a writer and a teacher. We do this book project. You’re around the corner. Let’s work together!”

It’s important to note that, in addition to being an ELA teacher at BTU, Jenn De Leon is also a published author, the editor of an anthology, *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education*, and a writer of fiction, essays, and poetry. She is also active in the Macondo writing community, an annual gathering of creative writers who use their writing “in some way to help make the world a better place,” founded by writer Sandra Cisneros.

During the summer, Jenn and Jessica tossed ideas back and forth. Should students write a book of short stories? How about poetry? Ultimately, they landed on memoir writing, standard curriculum for seventh and eighth grade, but they decided to introduce a twist. “We thought, you know, it’s kind of boring if you just write these memoirs that are like, ‘When I was little I fell from a tree and broke my leg, then I got better,’” said Jenn. Instead, they would have the book project be a “memoir remix,” in which some pieces would be “unconventional types of memoirs, like speculative nonfiction or collage essays. Or telling a memoir through a letter to a brother that they no longer see, or a parent who’s passed away.”



English Language Arts teacher Jenn De Leon in her classroom at the Boston Teachers Union School, Boston, Massachusetts.



They identified reading material that Jenn would incorporate into her curriculum, including some excerpts of other memoirs and a list of nonfiction pieces. As a former teacher, Jessica is able to provide very helpful and concrete support in curriculum development. They also came up with writing prompts, like having students write a scene about a story that has influenced them even though they weren't physically there.

From October 2014 through February 2015, Jenn's curriculum was wrapped around this in-depth writing project, with two classes totaling 45 students, writing stories that captured significant experiences in their own lives. A cohort of five tutors, trained by 826 Boston, made one-hour visits twice a week over a five-month period to work closely with individual students on their writing. Initially, many of the students thought that when they finished typing their story, or when it came out of the printer, it was really done. But that's not how it works, Jenn told them.

Rachel Bergquist, a former 826 Boston Commonwealth Corps In-School Program Coordinator who coordinated the YABP, described a piece by a girl who wrote about her family vacation to the Dominican Republic, but it "didn't seem like it had to do that much with her." Rachel noted that in one sentence, the student had touched on how different it was to be in the Dominican Republic on vacation, compared to being home in Boston. So she suggested that the student write it more like a "back-and-forth" between Boston and the Dominican Republic. "Like a conversation between two places?" asked the student. The final piece is a script with two characters: Boston and the Dominican Republic. The piece includes these lines:

***Boston:** Kids here eat Cheddar Fries and drink a lot of Arizona drinks and they're really good. So...there's this girl who visits my corner store almost every morning around 7:40 a.m. She gets a pack of gum, those Cheddar Fries, and an Arizona drink.*

***Dominican Republic:** You're making me a little jealous there. I really love that girl. She's the kind of girl who is always hopping from place to place and sneaks up on her grandmother in the kitchen to help her serve dinner. She really loves this place. She was born here, she grew up here, and sometimes it is hard for her to be over there where she doesn't have many family members or people to support her whenever she needs a shoulder to lean on.*

***Boston:** Yeah, but I hear she also dreams about you and your corner stores every night. She loves watching people go by on the street while she sits outside with her family. She even likes the sounds of car alarms. So even when she's here, she's dreaming of there.*

Rachel hadn't intended an actual conversation, but "it was a fantastic misunderstanding! . . . It was so exciting to see it come to life in a script-like form. We transferred all the best details and best scenes to her new piece. By the time we were done, her piece was completely different and she was glowing with pride." With very little prompting, this student found a masterful way to express her complicated feelings about her culture, her sense of identity, and her sense of home.

More than a teacher

In order to demystify what it means to be a writer, Jenn also shared drafts of her own writing. "[I would show] students, just physically, the marks on the paper," so they would see that even a published writer has to struggle with writing and rewriting. "This is what the process is." They gradually learned that the bulk of the work was revision. When Jenn brought her own published anthology into class, students were blown away, even though she had told them that she was a published author. "They said, 'WAIT! You wrote that?!' and they were passing it around saying, 'Oh, that's you!'"

Commenting on Jenn's background and experience, Jessica says, "I think the fact that Jenn is a writer and a published author is unique. She just has the insight and the experience of publishing, and really understands the writing process firsthand. We have worked with a number of powerhouse teachers, some of the best teachers in the system. Jenn is just in that class; the quality of feedback that she gave students, and also that she's able to guide kids who had emotional, behavioral issues, who might not have been in class as much."

826 Boston has completed twenty-four YABPs over a period of eight years, working with a variety of schools and student populations. According to 826 Boston Executive Director, Daniel Johnson, several key factors have contributed to the success of this project, starting with buy-in from school administrators and having high-quality teachers at the helm. By these standards, BTU is an excellent match. Lindsay Chaves and Betsy Drinan, the "Teacher Leaders" of BTU, are 100% in support of this project, and are excited that Jenn is taking it on. "Jenn is a writer and a teacher and a wonderful human being," and this project is "totally what you want to see kids working on," they say. Without 826 Boston, "the project wouldn't go into as much depth," and they plan to continue the project this coming year. Johnson notes that "there is no single factor that's more important to the YABP's success than the quality of classroom teachers," particularly those who are effective communicators, who incorporate the project into their regular classroom curriculum, and who are willing to put in the extra hours necessary to make this project successful.

Jenn is a master of her classroom. She is open, warm, and calm. When a new group of students barrels into her room, many of them towering over her 5-foot 2-inch frame, she quietly informs them, "This is not how we enter my classroom." They go back



into the hall, and re-enter, their introduction to her gentle but firm approach. On one day, she introduces students to a short story by Edward P. Jones, called "The First Day." Drawing upon one of the story's themes, Jenn begins by asking students if they have ever felt embarrassed by a relative or close friend. One student takes the plunge and tells a story about being embarrassed when her mother yelled at a cashier who made a mistake with their order at Burger King. There is a pause, as Jenn waits for the student to finish, and then she praises her for telling this story, calling her "courageous". Jenn then tells her own story about feeling embarrassed by her mother when she was their age. It was on a trip to the dentist when she was having her wisdom teeth removed. Not only had the dentist been rude to Jenn; the bill was twice the amount expected. "My mom flipped out!" Jenn said. "How many people have been in that situation? I was mortified, super embarrassed." And as the doors open, another student talks about a time that she was food shopping with her mother, but realized that [her mother] had forgotten her credit card when she went to check out. "She was like, can I leave the stuff? I can get the credit card. I'm a half-hour away." The student exudes, "I was so embarrassed."

After talking about their own experiences, they're ready to launch into talking about "The First Day." Who was the author? Who is the narrator? And why did the main character feel embarrassed? When someone in the back of the classroom is whispering, Jenn calmly says, "People are talking. Let's [show] respect." And when one girl asks what's happening in the story, and another girl admits she's "kinda lost," Jenn reassures them it's okay. "That's why it's important to stop [and discuss the story]." Jenn uses the gift of storytelling to define the tone of the classroom.

Working with 826 Boston

826 Boston provides the project management for the Young Authors' Book Project, as well as the trained tutors. They also bring years of experience with publishing. Says Jessica, "It's a beautiful partnership in that we are leveraging what teachers are already doing, and also helping them execute things that they're creating and envisioning but wouldn't be able to do without the added support."

This year, what Bostonians came to call "Snowpocalypse" added a further challenge. But the commitment to this project was strong and contagious. "We've never seen the retention that we did with the volunteers, considering the winter that everybody suffered," says Jessica. "This group of volunteer tutors was so persistent and motivated in finishing the project with these kids, and when the schools opened, they made it there," despite the subway being shut down and the difficulty of traveling by car.

Jenn felt the pressure, too. "There was so much work involved, with all those snow days. [The word] stressful isn't accurate enough. It was pressure. I felt pressure, like I can't let the kids

down. I can't let 826 down." But she stayed constant in her commitment. She adjusted some curriculum time, came in on her off-days, and remained in steady contact with 826 staff and tutors. "I definitely would say if they were not involved in this and sort of holding my hands, and helping with deadlines and with the actual contact hours, there's no way I could have done it. Maybe we would've had a print publication, or had to go to Staples or something, but even that . . . The life of a teacher, it's like, all of that sounds good in August, and by February you're like, 'A flyer will do!' But to have a professional book? No way!"



Jenn working with her student in Boston.

Jenn approached her colleague, founder of the Macondo writing community, Sandra Cisneros, hoping she would write the foreword to the book. Initially, the answer was no, but Jenn persisted. This, too, was a lesson for her students. "I wrote her this long email, talking about the kids and about how we always came back to her work. She has this great line in her book, *House on Mango Street*, about a character who has learned to 'sit her sadness on her elbow' as she looks out the window, and I thought, you know, the kids know what that's like." Sandra finally said yes, and this is an excerpt of what she wrote:

"I started writing in secret when I was in the sixth grade, after reading some bad poetry for children in our school textbook. I wrote about sunsets, the wind, and other outbursts of nature, which makes me laugh now, because I lived in the knucklebone of the city, with not much beauty around me . . . Where are these wondrous creations now? Who knows . . . The young writers in this anthology, as you'll see, have built wings of their own. With the help of 826 Boston tutors, teachers, and each other, these incredible students were able to write memoirs, true stories that transport us to different places in the world and within ourselves—from the Dominican Republic and rural Maine, to the blurred line between childhood and adolescence. May their words, and the fluttering of their wings, sustain you."



Transformation of students through storytelling

Jenn talks about her students lovingly, painting portraits of transformation as they explored more deeply what their stories were really about. Describing this process for her student, Jalen, she says, “He wrote this piece about winning a football game. It was pretty standard, you know, he had the winning play. That was the outer story, and after peeling the onion, like, what is this really about, he worked and worked and worked on it. And the language was more nuanced and polished, but there was a missing piece. So we did this thing where we were seated [opposite each other] and we had a Chromebook with the document pulled up, and I would just ask a question, make a change, and then he would think and then he’d make a change, so it was really a back-and-forth process. That was neat, and the piece really ended up being about his father and how that’s a way he has bonded with his father, watching football together.”

Jenn says that while another one of her students, Melany, likes writing, “She didn’t announce it. She came in the middle of the fall and was very quiet, and through this program she seems to have really embraced her identity as a writer.”

And her student, Marcela, “wrote about her twin sister who has Down’s Syndrome and goes to a different school. And students were surprised when she first shared her story. There was so much packed into that story.”

Describing how students learned more about one another in the process of creating this book, Jenn says, “Julian was writing a piece set in the Dominican Republic and [another student] was listening as he was revising, and he said, ‘Wait—your dad died?’ And Julian said ‘Yeah,’ and [the student] said, ‘Sorry.’ And it was this moment of connection, because [that student] has been in foster homes and he’s been through a lot, and I thought, they’ve probably been in school together now for three years, and how would they know this about each other?”

The Young Authors’ Book Project challenges students to work hard, and some of Jenn’s students struggled along the way. The beauty of this project is that any student who completes the process is published. “It’s not like there’s a committee that decides which pieces are worthy,” says Jessica. “It’s literally a matter of putting the effort in to completing the process, which is an incredible life lesson.” Of the two seventh-grade classes Jenn teaches, one is primarily students with special needs. Jessica appreciates Jenn’s acumen in working with “harder-to-reach” students. “In the end, Jenn really came in and brought out stories to completion with a handful of kids that haven’t gotten there and wouldn’t have without her support.”

She was also moved by “seeing at-risk adolescents and at-risk boys, in particular, participate in this sort of project-based learning and then just produce such strong final products and be part of a collaborative effort.” Creating a community of writers, one that is inclusive, “is just very powerful.”

Jenn believes that working with 826 has made her a better teacher and a better writer. “This is my audience,” she asserts. She appreciates being able to pass on her skills as a writer, knowing that they can apply these skills to other areas of their lives. She talks to students about how their writing can help them “win grants and scholarships and fellowships and convince City Hall not to give you that parking ticket.” And she couldn’t wait for their families to celebrate the book with them. So many of the calls parents come to school for are related to problems with their children. “The more reasons we can have families coming in for positive events, the better,” she says.

Jenn is a believer in the power of storytelling, particularly for people who are “left out of the narrative.” Being able to tell your story, she says, is powerful. “We control the narrative. We don’t just have others writing about us. We are a force. We’re authorities.” She hopes this process is powerful for her students, even beyond the life of the project, that they see themselves as story generators. “If we don’t write our own narratives, who will?”

PROJECT CREDITS

Mindy Fried, Ph.D., Arbor Consulting Partners

Arbor Consulting Partners was formed in 2002, and its senior social scientists have over twenty years of experience consulting to governments, businesses, universities, and foundations as well as to community-based organizations. They offer superior analytical expertise combined with a firm knowledge base in six principal areas: Community Development, Environment, Public Health, Human Resources, Early Care and Education, and Arts and Arts Education.

826 Boston

826 Boston kicked off its programming in the spring of 2007 by inviting authors Steve Almond, Holly Black, Junot Díaz, and Kelly Link to lead writing workshops at the English High School. The visiting writers challenged students to modernize fairy tales, invent their ideal school, and tell their stories. Since then, 826 Boston has enlisted and trained 2,500 volunteers to provide writing support to more than 16,000 underserved youth from Roxbury, Dorchester, and Jamaica Plain.

826 National & The 826 National Network

826 National’s seven chapters (located in San Francisco, Ann Arbor/Detroit, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, DC) offer a variety of inventive programs that provide under-resourced students, ages 6-18, with opportunities to explore their creativity and improve their writing skills. They also aim to help teachers get their classes excited about writing. Their mission is based on the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention, and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success. The 826 National office serves the growing educational network by providing strategic leadership, administration, and other resources to ensure the success of the 826 chapters.

826 National contracted Mindy Fried, Ph.D. from Arbor Consulting Partners, to compose the 826 National Network Stories. The goal of the series is to illuminate narratives of a few inspirational, key players across the 826 network who contribute to our mission in different ways.



EXCERPTS FROM

Things Will Get Better & More Delicious: Stories From Our Lives So Far

“Writing a story is like cooking a meal, and our stories have taken a long time to simmer. It was almost six months ago that we first put the pot on the stove . . .

**We’ve learned it is a lot of work to write one story;
even though it’s short, you still have to put a lot of effort into it.”**

—The Student Editorial Board



“Impact of a Chromosome” by Marcela V.

In the photo, everything about us is identical. My sister Gaby and I are each eleven months old, each wearing a pink, fluffy dress. Our baby feet are smushed into shiny black Mary Jane flats. White headbands adorned with puffy flowers decorate our faces. Even our smiles are the same: wide, pink, with no teeth peeking out.

What the picture doesn’t show is our main difference: Down’s Syndrome. Down’s Syndrome is when you are born with fewer chromosomes. Normally a child gets twenty-three chromosomes from their mom, and twenty-three from their dad for a total of forty-six. My sister has forty-seven chromosomes: one more than she should. She thinks, learns, moves and does things differently than all of us perfectly formed humans.

“Driving Closer” by Julian A. B.

When I was a kid, my father and I used to play with cars when he came home from work. He ran his own mechanic shop. So, picture my Dad still in his navy blue mechanic jumpsuit, crawling along the special rug (the one with the roads and buildings), playing cars with me. These are moments I know I’ll return to again and again, for the rest of my life.

When I was seven years old my father had a heart attack and died. Everything changed. My mom boxed up all the cars, but I managed to sneak some upstairs. For hours I would hold them in my palms and just stare.



Images were designed by the students in collaboration with BTU’s Visual Arts Teacher, and accompany the students’ essays in the final published book.