

LIGHTING THE LAMP FOR YOUNG READERS AND WRITERS

► AL DESETTA

In 1984, a young immigrant from Haiti joined a teen writing program in New York City called Youth Communication. Just fourteen, the girl had been in the United States for only two years, undergoing a bewildering and often alienating experience. She began working one-on-one with an adult editor on her first story, which started to explore the cultural differences she had encountered. ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨ ✨

Three years later, she began writing another essay that took a deeper look at her immigrant experience. To escape the poverty, oppression, and despair in Haiti, the girl's parents had immigrated to America with her older siblings, leaving her behind in the Caribbean nation to be raised by relatives until they were established. In her essay *A New World Full of Strangers*, the girl described arriving at the airport in New York and meeting her parents after eight years of separation:

Since I did not remember what my parents looked like, I was very frightened when a tall bearded man started to hug me. I was even more afraid when a chubby woman placed her arms around me and exclaimed, "At last my little girl is home!" I felt like an orphan who was being adopted against her will.

My American brothers, who had given me timid hugs before piling into the car, were now curiously staring at me. I wanted to plead with them to accept me, not stare at me. But I suddenly realized that they had every right to stare. I was, after all, a stranger—even to my own family.

The girl's alienation extended to school.

One of the girls on the lunch line lifted my skirt up in the air and began to laugh. During her fit of laughter, she managed to spit out the word "Haitian" as though it were the filthiest and funniest word she'd ever said in her entire life.

Unfortunately the verbal abuse did not stop. "Haitians are filthy. They have AIDS. They stink." Even when I could not understand the actual words, the hatred with which they were expressed hurt me deeply.

That young writer was Edwidge Danticat, and her essay was a catalyst to an acclaimed literary career. She went on to write the novels **Breath, Eyes, Memory**; **The Farming of Bones**, and **The Dew Breaker**. She also wrote the short story collection **Krik? Krak!**, the memoir **Brother, I'm Dying**, and a series of books for young adults. Danticat's work has won several literary prizes, including the American Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

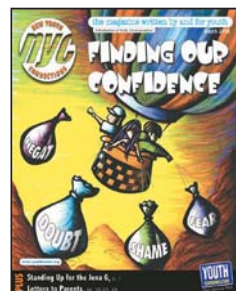


Throughout her career, Danticat has chronicled the Haitian American experience, bringing to light a culture that previously had little representation in mainstream American literature. In doing so, she carries on the tradition of the writing program that first turned her on to the possibilities of having a voice. And, like several other authors who wrote in the program as teens, she's used her experience at Youth Communication to write young adult books that explore socially significant issues.

BEGINNINGS

Youth Communication was founded in 1980 by Keith Hefner, who won a MacArthur Fellowship for his work in journalism and youth development. The program is built around the core belief that reading and writing are the best ways to foster reflection and discussion. Public high school students who

join the program work one-on-one with adult editors and publish their stories in two magazines—**New Youth Connections** (NYC), written by New York City teens, and **Represent**, written by and for teens in foster care. Youth Communication is committed to providing an outlet for youth who might not otherwise be heard.



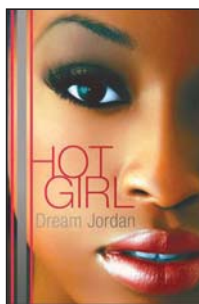
“If they didn’t have that goal,” Danticat says, “they might not have taken me on as a writer. It’s obviously played a huge role in what I was writing then and what I am writing now. The fact that they were interested in working with inner city youth was so valuable to so many of us.”

Central to the program is not only the diversity of its teen staff but also the expectation that writers think deeply about their experiences. The adult editors guide young writers through multiple revisions. The experience, Danticat recalls, “was really the first time my writing was taken seriously.” It was also the first time she wrote for a reader other than herself. “Writing for **New Youth Connections** also allowed me to probe deeper into the subjects I was interested in,” she says. “The idea that a piece of writing is never totally ‘done,’ I first learned there. They taught

me that you can always get better, that you can always improve.”

That process results in stories with the power to deeply connect to teen readers. One of those readers, Delia Cleveland, read NYC as a teen and says she admired the “edgy and truthful voice” of the writing, which showed her that other young people were going through the same things and could “talk about deep subjects in a candid, sharing way.”

Cleveland soon joined the writing staff and, like Danticat, went on to become a professional writer herself. Seeing her first byline in **New Youth Connections**, she says, was “a major part of my start.” Her work touches on serious young adult themes that are often explored in the pages of **Represent** and NYC. Her new novel **Hot Girl**, written as Dream Jordan, describes fourteen-year-old Kate’s journey through the foster care system, and she is at work on a sequel in which Kate must navigate an abusive relationship.



In fact, Youth Communication alumni have gone on to publish more than fifty books, including a number of books for young adults, almost all of which explore socially significant issues. Their books, like their stories at Youth Communication, reflect a diversity of voices and encourage teens to read by providing an accurate mirror of their experiences.

MORE SUCCESS STORIES

Another of those authors is Veronica Chambers, who joined Youth Communication when she was a teen and has since gone on to write for both adults and teens. Now Features Director at

Glamour, Chambers has authored twelve books, including **Mama’s Girl**, a memoir of surviving a childhood of poverty and abuse and a Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Best Books for Young Adults selection in 1997.

When she arrived at Youth Communication, however, her writing future was far from assured. “That was because I didn’t have any confidence in my own story,” Chambers remembers. “I was a kid dealing with a tough family, and it took me ten years to gain the confidence to write my story in **Mama’s Girl**. Youth Communication said to me, ‘This isn’t about whether you’re a rich kid who’s led an interesting life; it’s about the work.’ Each time I brought a story in, I was given the tools to make it better. I didn’t know it at the time, but I actually got something more valuable than an A.”

For Chambers, who is black and of Panamanian descent, writing for a teen audience has been an avenue to explore her Latina heritage. She’s writing a series of books about *quinceañera* (“Sweet Fifteen”) culture, a rite of passage for young girls in Spanish-speaking countries. Ethnic identity issues are important to Chambers, who has had to overcome the publishing world’s tendency to pigeonhole books. When Chambers’s agent was shopping around **Mama’s Girl**, there was resistance from publishers because the story was about a woman who was both black and Latina. For market reasons, publishers wanted the story to be *either* about black people *or* Latinos—to choose and select, which Chambers says is an “adult” response. “It was really frustrating,” she says. “It was something I was constantly weighing—how to present myself.”

Young adults, she finds, have a more sophisticated response to her work. Chambers notes that she never gets “any messages from teens saying, ‘Oh, but you’re black and Latin?’ If a character is multiracial, they get it. Teenagers understand ‘complicated’—it’s where they live and breathe. That’s a really beautiful thing that I’m especially grateful to them for.” In turn, Chambers gives talks to youth at schools and libraries. Remembering that the only books she owned as a child were free ones, she makes it a point to give away as many copies of her work as she can.

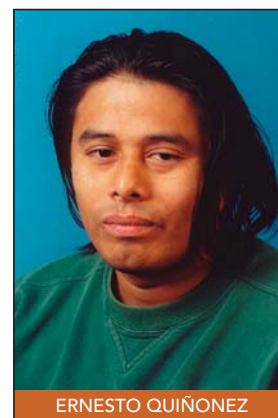
For Ernesto Quiñonez, as a teenager growing up in the Bronx, writing for **New Youth Connections** fostered a respect for language that he found invaluable at a formative moment in his life.

“I came from the MTV generation,” recalled Quiñonez, a novelist and professor of creative writing at Cornell University. “And here was **New Youth Connections**, where the word actually meant something and actually spoke to me. And I think that was the big influence on my writing.”

Writing with and for his peers showed Quiñonez “that you really have to be committed and have discipline. It was very different



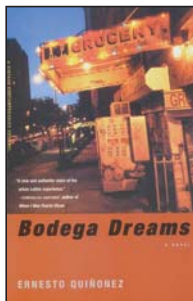
VERONICA CHAMBERS



ERNESTO QUIÑONEZ

from writing a composition in English class where there were only one or two drafts. And that said to me, 'You better get your act together and really work.' The standards were just so much higher."

Quiñonez's first book, *Bodega Dreams*, is a streetwise, darkly lyrical novel about Spanish Harlem. Although not marketed as a young adult book, most characters are teens and the book is frequently assigned to high school students. Quiñonez, who was born in Ecuador, feels a strong commitment to that audience and makes it a point to visit high schools so that young people can "see a writer who looks like them. I think that gives them the idea that they can do it too. Should they work hard, something good will happen. And I let them know that."



LISA RHODES

Lisa Rhodes, author of young adult biographies of Toni Morrison, Coretta Scott King, and Barbara Jordan, says her experience at Youth Communication as a teen "was the first time I had the opportunity to express what it felt like to be a young black woman."

"I remember I had written an article about racism and I got a letter from a New York City Councilman

saying how impressed he was with my writing," she recalled. "He said, 'You're following in the footsteps of Susan Taylor at *Essence* magazine.' That was the first time an adult outside of my school and my family validated my writing."



TONYA LESLIE

Tonya Leslie is another writer who benefited from Youth Communication's dual role as a writing and youth development program. Leslie is now Senior National Account Manager for Reading is Fundamental at Scholastic and is writing a young adult book about the Middle Passage. But as an eighteen-year-old, just taking the subway from her home in Queens to the program's office in Manhattan was a "big deal" for her.

Most adults "really have a hard time giving young people the space to make mistakes, the opportunity to take chances," says Leslie. "It's much better when someone shows you a path and says, 'This is the road. I'm standing back here if you fall, but go ahead.' That's really empowering."

Leslie kept that advice in mind as an author. While working at Girl Scouts of the USA, Leslie co-wrote *True You!*, an interactive workbook meant to strengthen relationships between girls and mothers during adolescence. She says the advice and activities in the book are modeled on the respectful way that adult editors worked with her when she was a teen.

COMPLETED CONNECTIONS

Danticat also sees a direct connection to Youth Communication in her writing for young people. Her young adult novel *Behind the Mountains*, written in journal form, describes thirteen-year-old Celiene Esperance's journey to New York to rejoin her family and escape the violence in Haiti, an echo of the themes she first explored at seventeen.

"When I was writing *Behind the Mountains*, I couldn't stop thinking about *New Youth Connections*. I almost saw the main character in that book writing for the magazine in the future."

Danticat feels that it is vital for authors to reach young adults. "As clichéd as it sounds, [teens] are the future of reading," she said. "If we don't encourage younger people to read, who's going to be reading our books in the future? The magic of discovering a book at a young age—a book that encourages you to read other books—is priceless."

"In many ways, *New Youth Connections* serves as that first catalyst to reading—and writing. For many, it's the first time that they recognize themselves and their experiences in the written word. Once that light has been lit, it can never be put out." ■

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Al Desetta is the editor and author of several nonfiction books for young adults, including The Struggle to Be Strong (Free Spirit, 2000/VOYA October 2000) with Sybil Wolin. He was founding editor of Represent, Youth Communication's nationwide magazine written by young adults in foster care. Under his leadership, Represent received journalism awards from the Child Welfare League of America and the Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families.