

Highland Park writing workshop aids Latinas

Community Writing Project led by UIC researcher

By Georgia Garvey Tribune reporter

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Women cry, laugh and reminisce as they scribble their personal histories as immigrants onto loose-leaf paper in a Highland Park church basement during a writing workshop designed to help boost their creativity and self-esteem.

The participants -- mostly Latinas from Highland Park and Highwood -- spend hours discussing the stories in Spanish over cookies and coffee, then painstakingly edit and rewrite them. At the end of 10 weekly sessions, they'll compile their favorite pieces.

Instructors hope the workshop will inspire the women to be more confident and engaged in their communities. The women just enjoy the benefits of sharing their experiences.

"I think it's brought us a lot more than we ever thought," said Marielena Lara, 38, of Highland Park.

The class, led by researcher Janise Hurtig at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is the latest in a decade-long effort to bring writing workshops to immigrant or low-income communities in Chicago and the suburbs.

Hurtig said the Community Writing Project was inspired by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who believed traditional education often failed to equip people to fight the injustices that victimize them. Freire proposed an alternate way of teaching, where students explore a subject with teachers who value their experiences and opinions. The hope is that the students can then improve their lives.

UIC's College of Education has undertaken dozens of workshops in Latino and African-American communities under the writing project, Hurtig said, many of them in schools. The Highland Park Presbyterian Church group meets most Monday afternoons through the end of the month.

Hurtig said it's "great" when a class leads to concrete actions -- such as when some students mobilized to support a woman being evicted from her home. But the real goal, she said, is to boost students' self-esteem and nurture their creative abilities.

"They're very good storytellers," Hurtig said. "They have a lot of (writing techniques) that they're doing intuitively."

Hurtig said the classes aren't only for women, but women are more apt to attend. They often write about their lives, childhoods and homesickness. In one essay that Hurtig translated into

English, Martha Sanchez, of Highland Park, described memories of family get-togethers in Mexico.

"Every Thursday and Sunday my aunts, cousins, my mother and us, we would get together to share happy moments from our lives," wrote Sanchez, 35. "Everyone brought food, and we would put it out on a table that my aunts set."

Reading the essay in class, Sanchez became teary during a passage about how her youngest son never has met his family in Mexico. The women passed a box of tissues and patiently waited for her to compose herself and begin again.

Some women were too emotional to read their own essays, so others volunteered. The students described the workshop as "therapeutic" and talked about how important it had been to learn about their classmates' troubles and joys.

That sense of mutual support feeds what Hurtig and fellow instructors Nora Barquin and Alicia De La Cruz hope will be a new, stronger sense of self. Many of the women are wives and mothers, who often focus on their responsibilities to others, they said.

"Maybe they never have had the time to sit and reflect about this stuff," Barquin said.

The opportunity to be creative might be rare for suburban women, who Hurtig said are less connected to others than city dwellers. In Chicago neighborhoods such as Pilsen or Little Village, she said, there are thriving Latino communities. But in the far-flung suburbs, immigrants may be surrounded by people with whom they can't communicate and don't have much in common.

"A lot of these women are pretty isolated," Hurtig said, and many of them "come here with their husbands, and neither the wife nor the husband has extended family."

Bertha Chavez works with the Family Network, a nonprofit family support agency that helped facilitate the writing workshop. Chavez has found herself swept up in the class, writing essays along with Barquin and De La Cruz.

In one, Chavez, 53, described a neighbor who helped shepherd her through her early days in the United States.

"That woman taught me how to raise a son in a different country," Chavez wrote and Hurtig translated. "She taught me how to call the doctor for an appointment and also how to value your rights as a person and a patient."

Hurtig sees writers like Chavez finding themselves as they discover new ways to express their identity. The women, she said, discover that the sessions help them feel "confident and emboldened."