

Young Authors Greenhouse Program Reflections 2021-2022

Young Authors Greenhouse's program staff reflect on time with our young writers after each program. We ask that our program leaders share any golden details that help describe a special moment during the program and its meaning. These reflections are used to deepen our understanding of the student experience and ensure we are aware of and responsive to the wants and needs of our young people. Many sections also serve as examples for the ways we cultivate YAG's organizational values of curiosity, creativity, equity, quality, and joy.

The following are a sample of reflections from two after-school programs (Writing Adventures Club & Writing Lab) offered through our writing center and two during-school programs (Exploring the Galaxies Within and Young Authors Book Project) offered in partnership with a JCPS school.

“Writing Adventurers Club” — After-school Program

When we talk about impact, we often talk about numbers, but we know that whether one student or 25 students are in our program, there is an impact happening. Where there is one student, there are many stories to be told.

This year, we partnered with the Louisville Free Public Library to run a series of three writing workshops. We wondered how many students would show up—and one did. We apologized to the family about the lack of other students and said we understand if they didn't want to stick around. But they did. This student, age 7, eagerly and energetically participated, bringing her dad and young sister into the process by engaging them, asking for their ideas as she wrote. At the end of the session, this student had written an amazing poem celebrating the joy of eating a popsicle on a hot day. Her dad was so appreciative of the workshop and the student said, "I really learned a lot about how to write poems today!" Later that day, the student signed up for our after-school writing workshops. She joined a small group of our youngest writers and became such an important addition to the group. This student was a writer who found fellow writers to write with, talk with, and share ideas with. She advocates for herself and gives feedback to our workshop leaders, like needing more writing time so she doesn't feel rushed, which shows the type of dialogue we encourage between staff and students. Sometimes, students in our programs have a transformation, a turn toward identifying as a writer. Other students, like this young author, come to us knowing that they are writers and find immediate belonging in our programs.

Writing makes me feel creative. It feels like cooking. First, my face gets hot, but at the end, it's always delicious.

—Ellie, age 7

We often begin Writing Adventurers Club by asking the students to describe how they are feeling and then ask a question pertaining to the writing prompt of the day. A couple of weeks ago we asked students to write about something they were passionate about. A student held up a picture of a sunflower he had drawn and asked his fellow WAC students if they knew what it meant. He went on to explain that the sunflower is the national flower of Ukraine and he asked if he could read a poem to the group that he had written during his free time.

Here is the poem he read:

I don't know some things about Ukraine.
I don't know what their flag looks like.
I don't know if they drive on the right or left side of the road.
I don't know the names of all the places in Ukraine.
I don't know what animals live there.

I do know they are brave.
I know that they don't deserve what's happening to them.
I know their national flower is the sunflower.
I know they play violins in basements while bombs fall.
I know their librarians are fierce.
Ukraine, we don't know everything about you, but we will still cheer you on.

—Sage, age 9

It is worth noting that this poem reached 2,161 Instagram accounts. 391 people interacted with the post and 152 people reshared it.

Sage's poem inspired the following week's writing prompt. I encouraged the students to write a love letter to the world. Sage wrote more during this session, expressing care and concern for people of Ukraine and displaying a deep understanding of the state of the world when he wrote, "today it feels as jagged as a pointed saw."

Today it feels as if the world is a maze.
Today it feels as jagged as a pointed saw.
So many decisions to make, knowing they always affect.

So, today I will give all my day to Ukraine, my sympathy, my money and my cheering for them.

For every school there are bullies, for every continent there are bad people. I am on your side, Ukraine. Like what I said, some people are bad and Putin is one of them.

Yeah, he might be smart, but he has no fair reason and is super mean.

I give you all my sympathy. War is never fair. The sounds of marching soldiers isn't fair, the smell of burning architecture is even worse. I give you all my sympathy.

—Sage, age 9

One of our students in the Writing Adventurers Club was having a rough day and when it came time to share, he didn't want to, but felt bad that he didn't want to. Our workshop leader sent an email to his caregiver just to reiterate that it was okay that her young writer didn't share with the group and we were always big fans of his writing. The next week, before the session ended, the student said, "I didn't know that I had so many fans!" It was this reminder that our programs provide this community of support and that we will keep showing up and cheering students on—no matter what kind of day the student is having. "Writing makes me feel like a plant growing taller and taller."

The WAC students wrote about legacy today. We read an essay, *Born on the Water*. I asked them how the excerpt made them feel. We read lines like, "they were brokenhearted, beaten, and bruised but they became healers, pastors and activists, doctors and counselors." The students answered thoughtfully. Nandan wrote, "I feel that the people that were mentioned in the excerpt are fighters. I think they are creative and brave, strong and special in their own way." Sage wrote, "I feel . . . positive for each second of the day. Proud to know my own history." I love how he didn't see the history of Black Americans as a separate story but acknowledged that it is our shared history and it is important that we know it.

We spoke of the word legacy and its meaning. The students named figures in history with a legacy - they spoke of MLK and Sojourner Truth. But then we brought it home - I asked about members in their family who are leaving a legacy. Ellie said it was her mom because she helped her calm down when she worries. Nandan spoke of his Dad and the legacy he is leaving of instilling courage and bravery. Nandan spoke too of how his Dad helps him put things in perspective, that a big test isn't the "end all of end alls" and helps him re-focus on what matters most. Both Nandan and Ellie displayed a high level of awareness of their own emotional health.

The writing prompt asked the students to write their own legacy, to write about what they wanted others to learn from them. Ellie wrote about wanting equality, not just racial equality but gender equality as well. Ellie talked about how much she loves the color red but that when she was in first grade she was told by the boys that this was a boy's color and that she should like purple instead. She held her ground and said to this day she still claims red as her favorite color. An interesting conversation sprung forth with each student chiming in with a story of their own about how they were told, some as young as pre-school, which color they should like best. Isaac said, "there are no girl or boy colors, or boy or girl toys, there are only gender neutral." I think we should do a lesson on gender equality! They seem very interested and have personal experiences to write about. I love to observe when they all get going over a topic - they start talking over each other at times, but it is great to just sit back and listen to them talk to one another about their experiences. Legacy meant different things to different students - there was writing about saving the oceans, about the desire to be kind to others, to help others, of gender equality, sea turtles, mountains, and frogs. Curtis has started speaking up so much more now and I can see his level of comfort growing. He gave feedback on each piece of writing that was shared this afternoon. His comments actually encouraged others to give their own feedback. At one point during the session each student had their own stuffed animals or as Isaac calls them, "his lovey." I looked at the screen and saw a frog waving, an owl, a large toad, a chipmunk . . . for many of these students, a lovey or a stuffie is one of their most prized possessions. It is also something that brings them comfort. I love that they aren't shy about sharing their lovelies with the group—that they hold them up proud. At times they will even speak in their voice - so Ellie will answer a question but as Ellie's frog. It is adorable and also this shows imaginative play happening over Zoom!!! It is also showing that for the students WAC is a safe space. I love how they blur the lines between the imaginative and the serious . . . kids are experts at doing this!

At the beginning of today's session Nandan was drinking a traditional Indian drink called panakam. He spoke about this being a once yearly drink that his mom and grandma prepare. He described it as tasting "hot, sweet, and tangy all at the same time." This line made it into his writing piece later on in the session and I really loved how he not only taught us about a traditional yearly drink he enjoys in his home but that he also then used it in a new way later on in his writing: "Mexican tacos that smell like heaven and taste hot, sweet, and tangy all at the same time." I loved the synergy between a lived experience at home and a fictional/creative piece. Isaac also shared with us why Lamby, his lovey, is so important to him. He was given this lamb when his parents got a divorce and this stuffed lamb means the world to Isaac. Lamby sits atop Isaac's head most WAC sessions, but this afternoon we learned why it is so special to him. I am grateful that the students feel that the WAC space is a safe space to tell their stories.

We had spontaneous cat dancing in today's session! Students were asked to write their own writing prompts and it inspired Sage to write recipes for cats, which he did. In the last line, he wrote that his cat, upon eating the new recipe, got up on his two feet and started dancing! Ellie said, "I imagine it like this. . . ." and she proceeded to dance on screen. Then Sage said, "well I imagined it like this. . . ." and did his own cat dance on screen! It was a moment of joy sparked from a warm-up exercise—recipes for cats wasn't even the main writing prompt. Sage ended up with two pieces of writing! Sage told the group that he aspires to start a Poetry Club one day! (I received an email from Sage's mom after the session saying that the Poetry Club had already begun! He held his first official club meeting with his mom and grandma right after the WAC session ended.) Sage's mom emailed the following: "The Poetry Club has already been founded—he sat his grandma and me down after the session today and walked us through writing our own cat recipe pieces. His grandma didn't quite follow the instructions and he told her that the rules of the Poetry Club were to use your imagination and don't follow the rules!"

“Writing Lab” — After-school program

In our programs, we always talk about how writing is a helpful way to process what is going on around us and poetry can be a powerful way to express our feelings and share our ideas. After the tornado on December 10, one of our students, Carrie, age 11, was in a neighboring town to the tornado's path. A day after it hit, she emailed us a poem to share with our community:

As our governor once said, “*We will* get through this. Together.”

Somewhere too close to home was hit by a tornado.

And we weren't.

Feelings too close to home feel like they were hit by a tornado.

But they weren't.

We were out of power,

It was like *we* were the ones hit.

But we weren't.

Lots of people were hit.

Lots of people are helping.

The tornado hit so many places that would help people.

But they couldn't.

This is a sad time.

This is a bad time.

But we can get through this.
Together.
This tornado *will not* stop us.

Throughout the semester, we have students share their writing with us—but to see how one of the first things that a student did in the aftermath of a tragedy, was to *write*, really reiterated the importance of creating spaces where students can write their hopes and dreams, but also their worries and scary experiences as a way to cope and process.

“Exploring Galaxies Within”

— Fern Creek High School & Olmsted Academy South Middle School

This fall we expanded our partnership with Fern Creek High School’s Ivy+ Program with English teacher Brent Peters. Titled *Exploring Galaxies Within*, the twelve-week workshop focuses on memoir writing. Because of this, the writing explores identity, personal experiences, and feelings. We begin the course with one-on-one sharing and over the course of the program students share their work with the whole group. Due to the personal nature of the writing, the students were nervous to share their writing with the whole group, but eventually this time became their favorite. Students said they loved how it led to their learning about each other. In one session where we wrote about what made us afraid, the response from Kayla, 16, was that “It is good to know what someone fears so we can help them through that.” This was also shown by students reading out loud others’ work to help them overcome shyness of sharing their work to the group. Mr. Peters noted that the collaboration and connection in that process built new relationships among the writers and their shared passions helped them open up more to each other. He also noted that he could see the connections in the room forming when students heard what the writers had written, learning about their inner worlds changed the way they saw each other for the better:

Heat brushed against my face as I was encased in the darkness of my eyes. Shuffling feet and animals moving surrounded me, trapping me in a circle of weakness. With closed eyes, I could make out the faint shadows of people beside me. Listening to the world as such had my blood pounding in my ears. A woman’s strong, calm voice filled my ears as she instructed me to take a step forward. Unable to see what lay ahead, I blindly followed her words. Nothing. There were no rocks, no sticks, no fallen leaves crunching beneath my feet. Simply . . . silence.

—Courtney, age 14

In the Spring semester, *Exploring Galaxies Within* was hosted by Olmsted Academy South Middle School. This semester included writing both an essay and creating a podcast production. With that in mind, students wrote both for the ear as well as the page. Holley's piece demonstrates this dual focus perfectly. During the recording of Holley's piece, another teacher was in the room to support the recording space and commented on how wonderful she thought Holley's piece was, and how surprised she was because Holley seemed to always be in trouble and compared her to her older sister as much more "rambunctious." Holley talked about this in her piece—being compared to her sister and feeling judged for many reasons. She was able to process, express, and counter those judgments in her essay, all while engaging her many talents, including rap:

My room is a place I love because I feel
I have the most stability there than in other places.
It's where I organize my thoughts, wear what I please,
and watch what I want.
LED lights that change color according to my mood,
sometimes pink, sometimes blue.

All my stuffed animal friends, chilling with me in my room.
Bed that's so soft, makes me feel like I'm walking on the moon.
Window that carries breeze through the night,
that makes my day and makes me feel nice.

My guitar that I call foxy because of her complexion.
My room kind of makes me forget I have depression.
I feel like when I get home
my room is my safe place because I'm alone
and not around anyone but myself,
nobody to judge me,
annoy me,
or interact with me.
My room relieves me of the struggle of having to interact with others
and leaves me to my thoughts.

My room is a place I love because I can be myself.
Speaking of my room, this is something that I wrote there.

This feeling of insecurity, oh so familiar.
Changing my pace so I can see my life clearer.
Dealing with the non-feeling feeling of life.
Even if the scars aren't light.
I need to learn to love what I am and what I have.

To be me, be free and not pick at my scabs.
Love my body and appreciate my face.
Because I don't want insecurity to be my fate.

A poem I wrote when I was feeling insecure about my body and my scars.
That haunting feeling that always creeps back in.
“Everybody is self-conscious, I'm just the first to admit it.” Lyrics written by
Kanye West, I wish I wrote them myself.”

—Holley, age 13

Young Authors Book Project **— a year-long program with students at Olmsted Academy South**

At the beginning of our Young Authors Book Project, not every student identifies as a writer. Sometimes, we are met with some skepticism. The very first thing that students write is a letter to Young Authors Greenhouse, sharing how they are feeling about starting this program—sometimes anxiety, sometimes excitement. One of the students wrote, “I don't really write and it wouldn't really be the first thing I want to do, but I don't have a problem with it and I will do it.” During the course of the semester, this student became more confident—looking forward to new prompts, giving feedback to other students, and sharing her work. The very last thing that students write in the program is a letter to future or fellow young authors. Here's what McKenzie wrote: “Writing is something I never thought I'd be into but this class made me feel different about it. While I was in this class I made friends. I laughed, I had fun, I made memories. But most importantly, I felt safe and wanted. This classroom is not somewhere you need to feel weird and feel like you can't talk about things. I can write whatever I want to and I can pour my heart out to it and I can feel safe. Writing is fun and I had so much fun in this class and I'm so sad to leave.”

We can always share stories about our students and our programs, but it is so powerful for students to be able to reflect and write about their experiences in our programs—and not just all that they accomplished, but how they felt in our programs. Safe and wanted. That's the heart of it.