



# The "Where I'm From" Project

## Connecting to History and Community Through Poetry

### SUMMER BRENNER

**A**ROUND THE WORLD, stories have always passed from one generation to the next. Though these stories can refer to lives far removed in time and place from our own, they almost always focus on the same core questions: what insights can one generation impart to another; and how do we connect—and stay connected—to family, history, place?

The "Where I'm From" project evolved from a belief that these family stories can help guide youth, validate elders, and provide an intersection for their shared experiences. The project is named after and based on the poetry format that inspired it. I first encountered this format in a Richmond, California, classroom whose walls were plastered with "Where I'm From" poems, each an expression of energetic street grit and wistful longing. The format consists of a dozen or more lines beginning with the phrase: "I'm from," followed by a blank space with an instruction to complete the line with place names, the names of family members, favorite foods, etc., and is often used by teachers to entice students to reflect upon themselves and their surroundings.



Francisco, Stephanie, Adela, Javier, Ying Mei Tcheu, Bianca, Gilbert, Adam, and Jessica—participants in the "Where I'm From" project. Photo by Ruth Morgan.

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*Summer Brenner* has received grants from *The Christensen Fund* (to underwrite "Where I'm From"), the *California Arts Council*, *California State Library*, *The ED. Fund*, and *Friends of the Berkeley Public Library* to conduct literacy-related projects at schools, libraries, and drug-recovery programs in the Richmond and Berkeley area. She is a member of *West County READS* (a coalition of literacy advocates) and the *Youth Transportation Coalition* (advocating for free/reduced bus fare for low-income students). She is the author of eight books of poetry and fiction, including the young adult novel, *Ivy*, *Tale of a Homeless Girl in San Francisco*, and *1-5*, a crime novel which will be published in fall 2008 by *PM Press*.

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"Where I'm From" project participants Betty Reid Suskin and Jorge Argueta. Photo by Ruth Morgan.

ceived differences and underscore a mutual history of migration, peonage, and discrimination.

Starting with this simple poetry format, I worked to develop a broader project in partnership with Ruth Morgan, executive director of Community Works, an organization that seeks to provide disenfranchised populations in the San Francisco Bay Area with opportunities to build community and give voice to their experiences. In late 2006, a grant from The Christensen Fund allowed us to get the project off the ground, and we started off in nearby Richmond, where an enthusiastic history

Richmond is a small city on the northeast shore of the San Francisco Bay, heavily populated with low-income families and a diversity of cultures. In parts of the city, crime is high, employment is low, and "murder capital of California" occasionally splashes across the headlines.

Although the "Where I'm From" project can easily be adapted to other demographic groups, our target was the at-risk high-school population of Richmond. The school district that encompasses Richmond serves over 30,000 students and cites 80 languages within its 65-square-mile jurisdiction. Our initial group of 15 students was comprised of African-Americans, Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and first-generation Latinos. Because of the ever-increasing tensions between Black and Latino teens, we welcomed the mix, hoping our project would diminish their perceived

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To prepare for interviews, we met weekly to discuss personal migration patterns, reasons for migration, and the meaning of oral history. We also discussed interview techniques (such as “active listening”), and helped the students become more familiar with the “Where I’m From” format.

Students devised a uniform questionnaire, incorporating “Where I’m From” prompts (as questions rather than declarations) starting with basics, such as date and place of birth. The information they gathered from using this questionnaire for their oral history interviews would ultimately be used to create the lines of their poems; “I’m from my birth on March 16, 1994 / I’m from a 14-hour labor at Highland Hospital and my mama’s pain.”

The students also added queries of their own. “What were the worst (or stupidest) things and best (or smartest) things you ever did?” “I’m from driving without a license and getting popped / I’m from visiting my grandma every summer in Seattle.” The group process of designing the questionnaire allowed for a great deal of individual creativity as well.

Once the questionnaire was finalized, we were ready to proceed. Students began with several “practice” interviews with members of the local community. These proved crucial in helping the students understand the process. Interviewees were mostly thoughtful, open, and generous. The group setting in the classroom relieved any single student of responsibility for a full interview. They each took turns asking a question and jotting notes. If nothing else, students learned from these initial interviews that every life holds a story.

Over four weeks, they interviewed:

- an African-American elected official whose father’s family fled Louisiana under death threats and who himself was a draft resister during the Vietnam War;
- an octogenarian Mexican-American who grew up in San Diego and moved to Richmond after the Korean War;
- an Irish-American whose immigrant parents raised nine children in a nearby two-bedroom house; and
- a Chinese-American whose parents were engaged at six months in a remote village north of Shanghai and whose father left at 16 to seek livelihood, first in Europe and then New York, and did not return to China for his bride for almost 20 years.

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"Where I'm From" participants Ruby Jean Fox and Bianca Charles.  
Photo by Ruth Morgan.

Students were notably impressed by these jaw-dropping, dramatic narratives.

Following the group interviews, students worked collectively on poems that described their interview subjects, debating which highlights to include. This aspect of the project expanded the self-referential responses of "Where I'm From" into external observations of the interview subject: "Where He's From" and/or "Where She's From." Converting the interviewees' answers into lines of poetry was an essential element in building bridges between generations.

In an area like Richmond, where poverty puts teens at risk for dangerous behavior, we looked forward to our students sitting down with a family elder and gleaning words of advice from a seasoned voice of experience. However, when the time came to schedule actual interviews, obstacles arose immediately.

"I don't feel comfortable with anyone in my family," a boy confessed. "Troubles at home," a girl told me. "They're all crazy," another said. Some families had no elders; others lived too far away. Some family members refused to be photographed; others could not take time off from work.

We adapted: if no relatives were available, members of the community could be invited in their stead. In fact, interviewing outsiders proved to be the unexpected proverbial "blessing in disguise." Teenage angst and family baggage dissipated. Inhibitions for both parties noticeably decreased. In a few cases, the interviewee instantly became a mentor.

By the last day of school, in spite of absences, sickness, dropouts, delays, and no-shows, the students had completed their interviews and composed their poems. In addition, they had comported themselves beautifully. In all cases, the interviews were conducted with an air of mutual respect. Under these particular circumstances, students were not trained both to interview and take notes at the same time. Nor were there resources to record and transcribe the interviews. During the interviews, I took notes. Later, in the classroom, students used my notes and their own memory to write poems about interviewees as well as "Where I'm From" poems about themselves.

Interviews with family generally took place off campus in their home; community interviews took place at school. Ruth Morgan and I oversaw each interview and afterwards, Ruth took photographs.

When relatives were interviewed, students usually learned something amazing about their own family ("You mean he's my great-grandfather!"). When they interviewed outsiders, they heard from role models who contrasted with the adults at home. Interviewees also appreciated the rare opportunity to express themselves. As one elder remarked, "Nobody ever asks you to sit down and tell them about your life, and by the time they think of it, it's too late."

Overall, the project exceeded our expectations in helping students connect to history and place: not just their own, but also that of their elders, most of whom were born into a different world. It also helped them give voice to the power and beauty of these connections, and, through the culminating exhibit, the opportunity to share these honest and life-affirming views of themselves and their community with others.



"Where I'm From" project participants Blanca Luz Miranda and Stephanie Lizzeth Hernandez. Photo by Ruth Morgan.

**R**uth Morgan and Community Works (CW) have produced several outstanding exhibits of youth art with important social themes. Working mostly with high-risk, under-served populations, CW exhibits have focused on the Civil Rights Movement, the Japanese-American internment camps, and the experiences of children of incarcerated parents. These exhibits have traveled coast to coast, from Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture to the San Francisco Public Library.

In the spring of 2008, the "Where I'm From" exhibit, 15 4' x 2' panels displaying student poems and Ruth Morgan's photographic portraits, opened at the Richmond Museum of History. The "Where I'm From" youth helped plan the event and acted as co-hosts and speakers. In attendance were over 100 family members, friends, and community leaders, including the Mayor of Richmond and the superintendent of schools.

In the coming months, the "Where I'm From" exhibit is scheduled to travel to storefronts at Richmond's regional Hilltop Mall and a community art gallery in Berkeley.