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UNCOMMON GOOD

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Yajaira’s Story

I am Yajaira Duran and I just graduated from Pomona High School. Before I get into all of the amazing things Uncommon Good has done for me, I would like to share my background. You would not think an 18-year-old would have much to say about their background, but I do.

I was born in Chicago, Illinois. Sadly, when I was only seven-months-old my mother passed away due to a stroke. My father? Who knows? I have no face or name to claim for the title of father. When I was one-year-old, I had surgery on both of my feet since I was born with clubfeet. So just one year on Earth and I already had a major death in my life and went through an eight hour surgery. I remember starting preschool in a wheelchair and then graduating to a walker.

After my mom died, my aunt and uncle took custody of me. I refer to my uncle and aunt as mom and dad because they raised me. They never had a chance to go to school except for some elementary school in their home country and they don’t speak English. My dad works really hard cleaning up toxic spills. They have always tried to give me the best life that they could. They pushed me to go to college because it was an opportunity they didn’t have. They are my main source of motivation.

They always knew what I was capable of doing, but many people doubted me. As soon as someone knew my story, I could see the pity in their eyes and the image they had of me. And the image? Not so good.

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Uncommon Good graduate Yajaira Duran.



Dr. Crystal Unzueta with her patients at the Universal Community Health Center.

The Joy of Serving Where the Need is Greatest

The cognitive dissonance was extreme: Tiny first graders were laughing merrily as they ran through the playground, while the graffiti covered sign on their schoolyard fence read “No Weapons On Campus: Bring a weapon...Get arrested/expelled. “ Worn storefronts across the street were topped by slum housing units, and homeless encampments were tucked into surrounding alleys and parking lots. The iconic image of the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared in multiple locations, like a harried mother trying to ward off all possible dangers to her children. The men I passed returned my greeting, but the overburdened women pushing strollers and carrying grocery and laundry sacks, did not look up from the sidewalk.

I was on my way to visit the Universal Community Health Center, and I was very excited. The nonprofit center was founded years ago by two of the first generation of doctors in our Medicine for the Economically Disadvantaged (MED) program. MED helps idealistic young doctors and other health professionals to repay their sky high student loans so that they can afford to work at jobs serving the poor. As difficult as it is to imagine, some young people are graduating from medical schools with hundreds of thousands of dollars in educational debt. When I tell this to the international visitors who come to tour our organization’s famous Whole Earth Building, they are speechless. They cannot believe what has become of our education system. Nevertheless, thanks to funding from the California Community Foundation, the California Wellness Foundation, the Rose Hills Foundation, Queenscare and the Children’s Fund, we are able to help young doctors repay these debts so that they can pursue their dream of working in the communities that need them most.

I always look forward to visiting our inspirational MED doctors’ clinics, but I had a special reason to be excited about the visit today. The clinic’s founder, Dr. Edgar Chavez, had come to this country as a child with his family as refugees from El Salvador. Our MED program had helped him to pay down his educational debts to a manageable level. Now, 18 years after we started the MED program, Dr. Chavez was hiring a young doctor to work with him, Crystal Unzueta, who would be among the second generation of physicians to benefit from our program.

Crystal is a first generation Mexican American who was born and raised in inner city Chicago in a neighborhood very similar to the one in which she now

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The First Step Towards An Ecological Civilization



Youth from Japan visit Uncommon Good's Whole Earth Building.

(In April Uncommon Good's Executive Director was invited to describe the organization and its programs to an audience of visiting Chinese scholars at the 12th International Forum on Ecological Civilization. This is the text of her remarks, which prompted a lively discussion with the scholars.)

The first step towards achieving an ecological civilization is for people to believe that it is actually possible to create such a thing. Most of us here in the United States who are aware of the destruction of the environment, especially middle aged and older people, have lived with the seeming inevitability of global environmental decline for so long that many of us do not believe that humanity could ever change its destructive ways. We have lost hope and therefore are not motivated to try to take action to reverse our plummet into ecocide.

We do have an old saying in this country, however, that "Seeing is believing." Our charitable organization, Uncommon Good, gives people a way to "see" a sustainable future so that they can come to "believe" that it truly may be possible to create one. Uncommon Good models, admittedly on a small scale, how to live in harmony with nature. Actually, its small scale might be an advantage because the average person may be able to relate to it and to envision himself or herself creating something similar, in a way that he or she could not if the organization were very large and complex.

Yet Uncommon Good is not a stand alone environmental model. Rather, it goes about its business of educating young people, helping low-income families, assisting doctors who bring healthcare to the poor, and growing food for the hungry and the community, but all the while doing so in ways that nurture and preserve the earth and its resources.

The very building that houses Uncommon Good, the Whole Earth Building, is an excellent example of this. It is a first-of-its-kind-in-the-world green building. It was constructed by hand, using little more than on-site earth, with the help of children, parents and grandparents from the organization itself and from the larger community. Not only is the building a wonderful example of how any community, no matter how impoverished, can create structures without harming the earth, but it also is a building which keeps people safe from natural disasters such as fire, tornadoes, hurricanes and earthquakes. It was been visited by people from every continent who want to learn how to build in a way that protects both people and the planet.

Uncommon Good's education program incorporates environmental learning, activism and leadership for children and youth into its design. Through its Teen Green club, students tend an organic farm plot, study environmental issues with their "Environ-mentors" from Pomona College, decide on ecological justice projects for their communities, then carry out those projects. These projects



Twin sisters show off radishes from Uncommon Good's farm program.

have included opposing polluting businesses in their neighborhoods, planting trees in the local wilderness area, creating a "green business" rewards program, and cleaning local beaches. Uncommon Good's Whole Earth Building itself was the idea of a Teen Green student.

Uncommon Good's urban farm program uses better than organic methods. Its plots are farmed without the use of synthetic agricultural chemicals, not even the ones that the U.S. government allows organic farmers to use. Natural cycles of crop rotation nurture an environment for healthy soils and beneficial insects. Water wise irrigation methods are employed. Half the food grown is given free of charge to the low-income families in Uncommon Good's education program. The other half is sold to the local community to create a small income stream to help support the program. The farm project is committed to an unprecedented quadruple bottom line which consists of earning money, paying fair wages, giving back to the community, and benefitting the environment.

Uncommon Good's Medicine for the Disadvantaged program helps young doctors, dentists, pharmacists and optometrists who graduate hundreds of thousands of dollars in educational debt, to repay their school loans so that they can practice medicine in poor communities. Our visitors from other countries stare at me in disbelief when I tell them that our young medical professionals are graduating with huge debts, some over \$700,000! Yet even in our medical program, we have a holistic focus. In addition to supporting western medicine doctors, we hold eastern medicine workshops for our Uncommon Good families and our larger community. These have included Traditional Chinese Medicine workshops, and clinics with energy practitioners (such as Reiki healers) who work without using chemical medicines that often have toxic side effects for people and for the earth.

I would like to conclude with a question. What are the Chinese words for sustainability and environmentalism? Are your words dry and technical like ours are? Or do you have words that express more of the passion and love that many of us human beings feel for our earth? I would like to see us here in the U.S. develop new words for this subject, words that better convey our emotional connection with nature. I propose the new word "amaterra" as a beginning. It means "love of the earth" in the ancient Latin tongue. Do you like it?

“I always get nervous before a concert, but my nerves go away during the performance. I just look at Rachel and it calms me down”

A Perfect Match

When a child enters our mentoring program, we try to pick out a mentor for him or her who would be a good match for the child's personality and interests. When the prospective mentor and mentee first meet, we hold our breaths to see if it really is a match made in heaven.

I recently spoke to one of our students, Anahy, and her mentor, Rachel Huang, who have been together for seven years. Anahy and her mother had seen a giant banner at her school advertising Uncommon Good's mentoring program and decided to check it out. The day that Anahy came to our office to meet her proposed mentor, she arrived early and while she was waiting outside for her appointment, she started chatting with a nice lady who also was there. The two hit it off, not realizing that they were the two that we hoped to match.

Little did Anahy know or understand then that Rachel is a supremely gifted violinist who has performed all over the country as well as in Europe and China. She also has taught music in universities throughout the United States and currently is a Professor of Music in the Joint Music Program of the Claremont Colleges. She is a graduate of the New England Conservatory, Radcliffe and Harvard University. Even as a little girl, Rachel had an uncommon devotion to her music. At the age of nine she was crazy about horses and begged and begged her mother for a pony. Her mother finally responded that she could either have a pony or continue with her violin lessons. Rachel chose the violin lessons.

That first day they met, Rachel was charmed and delighted when Anahy said that she was interested in learning to play the violin and to speak French, a language Rachel speaks fluently. Under Rachel's guidance, Anahy began her love affair with music, learning to play both the violin and piano. They also went to concerts of the Claremont Orchestra and Rachel was especially touched when Anahy and her entire family would attend her recitals at the Claremont Colleges. The two of them performed together, including playing for the Grand Opening of Uncommon Good's Whole Earth Building office. Anahy also was selected for the First Violin Section of her high school's orchestra.

“I always get nervous before a concert, but my nerves go away during the performance. I just look at Rachel and it calms me down,” Anahy confessed with a smile.

As their friendship grew, the teacher and student explored other common interests. They learned to make tamales and spent countless hours in the Scripps College ceramics studio creating with clay. Anahy's favorite experience was a moonlight hike up the Mount Baldy trail that the two of them did together two years ago. Rachel enjoyed learning about Anahy's other interests, too, such as the 60 chickens that she and her brothers were raising in their family's backyard for a 4-H project. As Anahy grew older, Rachel delighted in her many accomplishments, such as maintaining a 4.8 GPA while taking rigorous Advanced Placement classes, being selected for Pomona College's exclusive college preparation program known as the Pomona Academy for Youth Success, becoming president of the 4-H Club, and being elected president of Uncommon Good's Teen Green youth environmental service club. Anahy also reached out to give back to the community in many ways, including tutoring younger students at Uncommon Good, serving as Vice-President of her school's Kiwanis Key Club, volunteering through Rotary,



Anahy with her mentor, violinist and Scripps College music professor Rachel Huang.



Anahy (3rd from right) volunteering with Uncommon Good's Bridge tutoring program for younger students.

and volunteering at the local hospital and library, winning many awards for service and academic excellence along the way.

Over the years, Rachel also shared with Anahy some memories of her own youth, and in particular, her music teachers. In one such story, Rachel told Anahy that when she was ten-years-old her violin teacher went to study in New York and upon her return said that she'd met a young boy pianist who she thought would get along with Rachel very well. Rachel, being an age at which she thought all boys had cooties, was embarrassed. Six years later, Rachel met the boy, Hao, at a music camp and later they both attended Harvard. Today they are married and both teach music at the Claremont Colleges. After their wedding, Rachel tracked down her former teacher and told her she had been right about that boy. Recently she also found another of her early teachers via Facebook and sent him a message sending her love and thanks for making her life in music possible.

From the way that Anahy cradles her violin and looks so lovingly at her teacher, I believe that someday Rachel will get a message, too, on Facebook or its future equivalent, in which Anahy thanks her for her priceless gift of music and friendship - a match made in heaven, indeed.



Anahy performs with her mentor, Rachel.

Young Men Step Up



Uncommon Good student and math whiz, Justin Apresa, who founded our Bridge tutoring program for our younger students

Late one recent evening, Justin Apresa flew into our office, so excited he could hardly speak. Justin is a student in our High School Scholars program. Prior to 4th grade, he hated math and got bad grades in the subject. This changed when one of his uncles who is a math whiz took an interest in him and convinced him that numbers could be exciting and fun. Now Justin takes advanced math classes and aces them. However, something about the classes troubled him. He noticed that there were very few of his fellow Latinx students there with him. (Latinx is the preferred term now in place of the older term, Latinos, which implies a group of men only.) Justin’s concern is reflected nationwide. In the U.S. only 6.5% of jobs held in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM jobs) are held by Latinx employees. Even though 30% of the population in California’s Silicon Valley is Latinx, they are only 3% of that area’s high-tech workforce. And once administrative and support jobs are eliminated from the equation, the number of Latinx workers with actual high-tech jobs may be as low as 1%.

These realizations motivated Justin to want to start a tutoring program for younger Latinx kids. He approached us about it and we were able to secure space at Pitzer College. He recruited his friends and together they began the Bridge Math Tutoring program for our younger Uncommon Good children.

Justin’s other concern is the civic disempowerment of his generation. So he joined our effort to get high school students registered and pre-registered to vote for California’s primary election and beyond, and advocated for his fellow students at his high school to take an interest in voting.

So why was Justin so excited this recent evening? He’d just learned that he’d been accepted into the extremely selective Pomona College Math Program which allows high school students to take advanced mathematics classes alongside college students. While that might not sound terribly thrilling to those of us with average brains, for a math brainiac like Justin, the thought of being able to take elite college level Advanced Placement Calculus 3, or Linear Algebra, in the heady atmosphere of Pomona College, put him over the moon! And of course he also realized that this program could help him gain entrance into some of the finest colleges in this country, as well as open the door to his dream of becoming an aerospace engineer.

But the story does not end there. At our annual Board Meeting this spring, Justin gave a presentation to our board members about how he started the Bridge Tutoring Program. Sitting quietly in the audience was another of Uncommon Good’s students, 14-year-old Andrew Miron. After the meeting, Andrew approached me and confided that Justin’s example was inspiring him to want to act on one of his passions, which was creating a healthy cooking and eating club for his peers.

Andrew told me that prior to last year he thought the subjects of health and healthy eating were boring. But within the past year several things happened to change his thinking radically. The family’s beloved grandmother died at the relatively young age of 56. His father, who works six days a week and commutes four hours a day to his job, began to feel even more tired than usual and then was diagnosed with diabetes. His mother also was in poor health.

“We were all scared when Grandma died so soon,” he said. “I realized that



Justin, (5th from right) with his fellow tutors and students in the Bridge tutoring program.



Uncommon Good students register their peers to vote.



Uncommon Good student, Andrew, who is promoting healthy food for people and the planet.

my parents were also having bad health issues. What if they died, too?”

So Andrew started to educate himself about health, and in particular, the relationship of food to health. He learned that much of what was marketed as “health food” was a lie. He was shocked to read about corruption within the FDA and how government contracts with unhealthy food providers skewed government recommendations about diet. He found out that since 1977 diabetes and obesity rates in the U.S. had been rising steadily, especially in his Latinx community. After learning these things, Andrew realized that he wanted to learn to cook and to make healthy cooking positive, fun, and creative for his peers and their families. He decided to start with his own family, and came up with a healthy meal and exercise plan for the entire family, which he enforces. He and his dad now are running together, and his family is using the produce from Uncommon Good’s farm project in their new healthy diet.

The second step in Andrew’s plan is to talk with Uncommon Good’s Teen Green students in the fall and see if he can inspire them to also take an interest in exploring the subject of healthy food and the effect of food production on the environment. He’d like to create a healthy cooking and eating club and have Iron Chef style cooking contests for his peers, perhaps with celebrity chef judges. I’ve offered him my kitchen if he and the other students would like to get together to try out recipes. We might even be able to arrange “behind the scenes” tours of the kitchens of famous restaurants. Stay tuned as this wonderful young man cooks up his dream into a delicious reality!

Yajaira’s Story *(con’t. from page 1)*

The moment people knew I had a social worker they automatically thought I was an underachiever, dumb, or in some kind of trouble. I clearly remember one day going into the counselor’s office because I needed a copy of my transcript. I asked my counselor to print one because my social worker needed proof that I was on track to graduate. When she looked at my transcript, she was in disbelief, almost as if she couldn’t believe the grades I had earned. She continued to explain to me what my transcript stated as if I didn’t know how to read my own grades and interpret the progress I had made in three years. Leaving her office, I felt as if she, too, had automatically underestimated me as soon as I said the words “social worker”. Two simple words that had no meaning for me had a major impact on her, so much impact that she had this whole image of me already without even knowing me. Yes, my background has shaped me into the person I am today, however my background doesn’t define who I am. There is more to me.

My parents knew that I should go to college but like many other parents they didn’t know where to start. But when I was in 4th grade, my mom found out about Uncommon Good and signed me up. Uncommon Good taught my parents how they could help me go to college and gave me mentors who took me to the colleges and exposed me to college life. For example, one of my mentors was a Harvey Mudd College computer science major.

Uncommon Good has helped me explore different kinds of colleges, including taking me on a tour of public and private colleges my junior year. Other Uncommon Good students and I visited colleges in North Cal which was an opportunity many people in my community don’t have. Actually, that started when I was in elementary school and Uncommon Good staff played college bingo with me. So since the fourth grade Uncommon Good has been feeding information about college to me. They offered SAT and ACT test preparation classes, and anything and everything that would prepare me for college. They helped with the college process. I literally lived there in the summer. I would go in needing help to write my personal statement and my personal insight questions for my college applications and they would take me in with open arms. They also helped me fill out all the financial aid applications.

Uncommon Good didn’t just share information about college, they also gave me life skills. They gave me leadership tools that I am now taking into all parts of my life. For example, this year I am the president of Teen Green, the Uncommon Good youth environmental service club. I also am the president of MECHA, the student Chicano club that explores Chicano culture, politics, history and civic engagement. I also am Vice-President of the Superintendent’s Student Advisory Council for my school district. I represent my school and meet with the Superintendent every month to bring up issues of importance to us as students.

I also am an intern with Day One, a public policy organization and have been an intern for Senator Connie Leyva. In addition, I worked on the successful mayoral campaign for the current Latino mayor of my city of Pomona. Everything that I did in high school was because Uncommon Good took me out of my little shell and exposed me to the world.

I also worked at the LA County Fair and at a clothing store at the mall because I wanted to learn financial responsibility and a little extra cash didn’t hurt.

Somehow, I also found the energy to play sports and was on my school’s cross country and soccer team. At the same time, I did community service at a local senior home and I am giving back by being a tutor for a younger student now at Uncommon Good.

Uncommon Good also helped me keep up my grades by getting tutors for me. With their help, I was able to maintain a 4.3 GPA throughout my four years of high school.

Uncommon Good has done so much for me and my family. I see the staff of Uncommon Good as an extension of my family. I’ve known them since I was 8 and I am 18 now. As I grew, I also have seen the program grow and become this amazing place that does so much for the community. They opened my eyes to the reality of the world and what I need to do become a successful woman in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) field. I recently looked at an essay I wrote in the 4th grade for Uncommon Good in which I said I was going to grow up and go to UCLA. I had put that down not because I knew anything about UCLA but because it was the only college I’d ever heard of. Guess what? I’ll be attending UCLA in the fall as a STEM major.

Thank you, Uncommon Good, for helping me on this amazing journey.

“Uncommon Good also helped me keep up my grades by getting tutors for me. With their help, I was able to maintain a 4.3 GPA throughout my four years of high school.”



Yajaira shares her life story at Uncommon Good’s annual reception.



Yajaira participating in an Uncommon Good voter registration drive.

The Joy of Serving *(con't. from page 1)*



Sign at elementary school across the street from Dr. Unzueta’s clinic.

works. Her mother started working on a factory floor at age 15 and has never stopped since. Her father walked acrossed the Rio Grande River at age 18 and got a job making mattresses in a factory. Crystal remembers as a little girl helping him to study so that he could pass his citizenship test.

As a child, Crystal realized that her neighborhood was not safe. She remembers hearing gunshots in the night, and even when she was allowed to play on the sidewalk in front of her grandparents’ home, she recalls being intimidated by the shady characters who would walk by. Her parents were very strict, not allowing her to walk anywhere because they were concerned for her safety. Their concerns were not overblown. Some of Crystal’s young cousins already had been lost to drugs, gangs and imprisonment. So to escape being housebound, she threw herself into after school activities - basketball in elementary school and the dance team in high school.

Crystal’s mother had not finished high school and her father had only been able to go to school for two years. They were nervous about Crystal going to college because of the cost and the fact that they were already in debt. But a high school counsellor took an interest in her and her 4.2 GPA and suggested that she apply to the University of Illinois. She was accepted and entered with the idea that she would like to work in the community in some capacity in health care. But not knowing how to achieve this goal, she signed up for what she thought was the most applicable major: animal biology. Once again, a counsellor came to her aid and told her that there actually was a major in community health.

Crystal was inspired to become a doctor when she worked in a community clinic while in college. She was shocked to see how complicated it was for patients to obtain healthcare. Some with serious illnesses and disabilities had no transportation. Some had a combination of grave diseases such as diabetes, heart failure and high blood pressure, of which they were not even aware. Others could not afford to take time off work to visit a doctor. Others had to travel long distances by bus to find an affordable pharmacy to fill prescriptions.

However, there was an older doctor at the clinic who poured cold water on her dream of becoming a physician. He subtly discouraged her and asked questions such as “Don’t you want to have kids?” as if becoming a doctor and having children were impossible to combine. Crystal began to doubt herself. However, after she graduated from college she worked in a pulmonary lab where the lead doctor was a Latino who restored her faith in herself and told her that if she ever needed a job she should come to him. Bolstered by his encouragement, she applied to the University of Indiana Medical School, though still wondering

if she would be accepted, partly because everyone she knew who was applying to medical school was male.

Happily, Crystal was accepted to the medical school and chose a concentration in geriatrics, a choice that was influenced by her close relationships with her grandparents. She recalls one of her patients, Alex, with special fondness. Alex, an immigrant from Uruguay, had been an award winning professional chef and had cooked for celebrities. Now, however, he was going blind and had Parkinson’s Disease. He suffered in his nursing home because the institutional food was bad and for safety reasons he was forbidden to cook. He became clinically depressed and withdrawn. Crystal came up with the idea of encouraging him to draw pictures of the dishes he used to cook. He had enough eyesight left to be able to paint these pictures and found that it really cheered him up. He felt like an artist once again. He also would send Crystal out on surreptitious reconnaissance missions to bring him in food that he actually enjoyed.

When Crystal first applied to medical school she was shocked at the cost. “Sometimes you feel like you’re drowning,” she told me. Upon graduation in 2014 she owed \$285,888. Now, four years later, even though she has been making payments, the growing interest has increased her debt to \$377,658. After she graduated, she was offered a well-paying job in a private medical practice which treated patients who were compliant with their treatment and educated about their health. She seriously considered it, given her debt load. But she also was powerfully drawn to the Universal Community Health Center because the patients there reminded her of her family. In the end, her heart won out over her financial worries, and she accepted the much lower paying job at the clinic. “I’m happy coming to work every day,” she reports. “I never feel like it’s a burden or that I can’t wait for the day to be over.”

Crystal’s day-to-day work involves treating many cancer patients, recent hospital discharges, well children exams, and lots of people with depression, particularly older Latinas who bear the brunt of caregiving for multiple generations. Crystal told me about one such patient, whom we’ll call Juana, a pseudonym. Juana is the caregiver for her elderly mother, a job that requires her to be on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. None of the other family members are able or willing to help. Juana did manage to line up one of her sisters for an hour or so, however, so that she could get to the doctor to take care of her own medical issues. However, Juana’s exam kept getting interrupted by frantic calls from the sister, demanding, “Where’s Mom’s pills? Mom has to go to the bathroom – what do I do? Mom’s calling for you – what do I do now? What does she eat for lunch? You need to get back here!” Crystal stopped the exam and gently asked Juana if she suffered from depression. That question opened the flood banks and Juana burst into tears of exhaustion, hurt and despair. Crystal comforted her, talked about the often unacknowledged stress of caregiving, and told her about a caregivers’ support group that the clinic offered. In the end, Juana agreed to come and check out the support group. “That’s why I’m so very much in love with what I do,” Crystal confided.

I left the clinic humbled and awed by the pure goodness of Crystal, her boss Dr. Chavez, and their co-workers. And as I retraced my steps through the neighborhood, I could not help but feel hopeful, despite the signs of poverty, to see the generous hearted young leaders who were emerging from the struggles of the immigrant community and dedicating themselves to making our world a more compassionate and loving place.



Sewing machine store and housing down the street from Dr. Unzueta’s clinic



Dr. Unzueta with a young patient.



The co-founders of the Universal Community Health Center, Dr. Jaime Lara and Dr. Edgar Chavez.



Young patient and her mother in the Universal Community Health Center pediatric examination room.

All Write!

Though our Uncommon Good students have the priceless gift of being bilingual, they do have to work harder than their monolingual peers when it comes to learning to write fluently in English. To help them achieve this, and more importantly, to help them find and use their own unique “voices”, generous students from the Claremont Colleges offer our younger students a Weekly Writing Workshop, affectionately called 3W by the kids. The college students work with our youngsters to help them write original stories which then are published in a journal and celebrated with a launch party.

I stopped by a recent session at which the children were describing the stories they were writing. While it was delightful to see them discovering the joy of creativity, one thing disturbed me. I’ve noticed over the years that the stories that our kids produce have grown more and more violent. Murder and mayhem abound. I’ve thought that the reason for this might be a combination of the violence prevalent in media and video games, and also, sadly, in some of their lives and neighborhoods.



3W writing mentor, Cameron (3rd from left) with his creative writing students.

“...violence could simply be a lazy author’s way to move the story’s plot forward.”

However, on this particular day I was very impressed to hear one of the program coordinators, Naima Valdivia, a history major at Pitzer College, challenge the kids about this. A Latina, she grew up in a family similar to those of our kids. She told the young writers that she had noticed the high level of violence in their writing. She explained that if this was important to the story, then it may be relevant to include. However, she also pointed out that violence could simply be a lazy author’s way to move the story’s plot forward. She challenged the children to create more complex stories that had at their heart other dimensions of human feeling and behavior. She told them that those would be the kind of stories that would be chosen to be published in the class journal, given them a motivation to improve their narratives.

It was so heartening to see these wonderful Claremont Colleges students, who included a poet who was fond of William Carlos Williams, an International Relations major, a Public Policy Analysis major, a Legal Studies major and a Neuroscience major, helping our kids learn to reflect and ultimately to create, a world that challenges violence as the norm.



3W writing mentors, Becky and Naima, with their budding authors.