

Students As Teachers

By JOANNE MASON

Sylvia was frustrated with me. "Why are you helping him? He has a dictionary." She tilted her head toward another student who was quietly struggling to write directions to her church. "You should be helping her."

This was Sylvia's way of helping her team, her fellow students at the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center in Springfield. "Team" is Sylvia's word, one she used with pride when her class composed group poems in the style of Langston Hughes, poems revealing their feelings on being adults learning to read and write.

I was a volunteer with Read/Write/Now for only a short time, but I'm positive that the lessons I learned from the students were more valuable than anything they learned from me.

I took literacy for granted. When I was 4, my 9-year-old brother built me a desk out of cardboard boxes and taught me to raise my hand and ask questions. He cut vivid letters

out of construction paper and hung them from the ceiling with some of Mom's sewing thread. Once, he snuck into my room with a Magic Marker and wrote the names of all my toys on the actual toys. Literacy-wise, I was off and running and never stopped.

As I got older, it was amazing to me that these experiences weren't universal.

"A beginning reader is not a beginning thinker," is the motto on Read/Write/Now's promotional brochure.

Take Theodore. For weeks, I watched him grapple with text, trying to make meaning out of alphabet soup. I quietly cheered him on as he wrote two sentences about his vacation. He stalled out over spelling, wanting every word to be absolutely perfect, hesitant to take a chance on just getting the words out and letting the context carry the meaning.

But when his class reached the Langston Hughes unit, he transformed. The teacher read a poem

and the students practiced reading it together. And then, touchingly, beautifully, Theodore explained what the poem meant to him. Seeing Langston Hughes through his eyes made me want to read more poetry. And I'm sure I wasn't the only one who felt that way.

The students were excited to create their own poems. One group compared learning to read and write with climbing a mountain, noting that there could be dangers and mishaps along the way. You need to have the right equipment, one commented. There might be bears lurking in the forest, or mudslides that would make you lose ground. The key was to keep moving forward.

I had to stop volunteering at Read/Write/Now when I got a new job. I'd like to go back though. I miss those poetry lessons.

Joanne Mason is a former volunteer at Read/Right/Now. She can be reached <jmason88@msn.com>.

WAITT House ...

Continued from page 24

enrolled in WAITT House and obtained her high school diploma. In 2001, she was invited to work at WAITT House as an administrative assistant, and this is the job she holds today. Ms. Cardoso attended Roxbury Community College where she gained her associates in Business Administration; she now attends the University of Massachusetts working on her bachelors in business. I asked Ms. Cardoso what she likes about working at WAITT House. She said it is a comfortable environment and she likes working and supporting those in her com-

munity. I also asked her who she looks up to the most at work. She said "I see everyone equally." I can see how Ms. Cardoso's skills as a former manager have helped her in the way she sees life and treats people. I asked Ms. Cardoso to name one of her greatest lessons in life. She said "to be together and help others get a better life." She said she learned this from her mother.

For more information about Aileen's transition from student to staff, check out her article from *The Change Agent* at <www.litwomen.org/tca/tcaSupp_16Scot&Blck.pdf> Mrs. Charlotte E. Stewart de Barros

(aka Ms. Stewart) is a parent, student, community activist, and a budding writer and speaker. Ms. Stewart has been a mental health counselor with Bay Cove Human Services for over 16 years. She has taken classes at the ABCD Urban College and has attended many trainings and programs where she earned many certificates. She also went on to own and operate her own daycare center. Ms. Stewart recently completed a college course given by the WAITT house and Roxbury Community College. Ms. Stewart is continuing to pursue her degree in English and hopes to teach one day. She can be reached at <charlotterominda@msn.com>.