

Writing Center for the Greater Capital Region

Tri-city children pair with
Times Union to build skills and
enthusiasm in Schenectady

Three years ago, Schenectady resident Lori Cullen '87 was teaching English at the State University of New York, Albany and at the same time home schooling her son, Justin. "Children from the neighborhood would drop by the house and, out of curiosity, open Justin's texts to see what he was up to," Lori explains. These occasional visits stepped up in regularity; the children started making it their weekly—sometimes daily—routine to solicit help from "Justin's mom" with their writing and grammar. Lori not only embraced the opportunity, but encouraged it to grow.

As the children's enthusiasm for these ad hoc sessions mounted, Lori realized their interest was more than casual. She organized a field trip to the *Times Union*, the Capital Region's chief newspaper. "The students were invited to a news meeting," she says, "and the people at the *Times* were so impressed, they asked the children to do some writing for the paper—and they were serious."

Lori founded The Writing Center for the Greater Capital Region, and since 2004 the Center has served children in grades six through 12 from Schenectady and surrounding areas. The Center not only strengthens writing skills, but through

its partnership with the *Times Union*, it gives its members a taste of real-world journalism in a way that classroom lessons cannot.

A mentor from the *Times* works with each child in the program; the boys and girls attend editors' meetings where they'll discuss the news of the day and brainstorm story ideas. Charged with their assignments, students return to The Writing Center to research, interview and write. The children meet with their mentors throughout the process to discuss and revise their work. In addition, a writer from the *Times*' features department leads workshops once a week on topics like descriptive writing, interviewing skills and journalism ethics.



Lori Cullen '87

"The fact that their mentors [from the *Times*] write for a living drives the students' interest in the field," Lori says. "The experience is real-world in time and in application. The children realize that professionals must revise their work many times, which helps them understand they have to do the same. They see that the *Times* writers apply standards to their work, and learn the importance of adhering to the same standards.

"[The Center] is open to anyone, and we recruit aggressively in urban districts. I came to America from England with my family, and we lived in a disadvantaged neighborhood for a while. My writing was what singled me out in school—it's what allowed me to leave that neighborhood. My writing led me to A Better Chance, the program that eventually led to Milton. In starting the program at The Writing Center, I wanted to reach out to children who are in challenging situations—dealing with difficult home lives or struggling in school. So often these children will gravitate towards basketball or music, but I try to let them know that they can use their words, which cost them nothing, and that those words could help change their lives.



Mentors from the *Times Union* work with Tri-City writers

"Many children come into The Writing Center thinking they don't have much to say, or that their stories aren't important. They don't have confidence in what they're doing. The best part of my work is watching them discover their voices and gain a sense of their own power. Even though they're young, they're working in a professional environment. They're taken seriously, and in turn they take their work seriously. They become comfortable interviewing the president of a company over the phone because they've gained credibility through their work."

Students enjoy writing about the things that interest them—like Earth Day, music bands, their city's lack of skate parks, and "kids and money." A recent project addressed what it means to be American. As Lori explains, many of the students at the Center are from immigrant families. In a discussion about culture, the children talked about what they think it means to be Jamaican or African or Haitian in America. One finally asked, "Then what does it

mean to be American?" Identified in their bylines as special contributors, students answer that question in this year's July 4 issue of the *Times Union*. Molly Shapiro writes about comfort food and culture; Sammie Oluyede connects her American and Kenyan roots; Allegra Cullen reconciles her biracial heritage, using the texture and "attitudes" of her hair as a metaphor.

"Youth is always represented by other people, by older voices," Lori says. "Here, at the Center and at the *Times*, we're establishing a core of young, urban writers embedded as part of the paper—as a constant voice that helps fortify a sense of diversity. These young voices are important, as important for us to hear as for them to speak."

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