

# BLUE CANVAS

Premiere issue September 2009  
A magazine creating appreciation of art and creativity



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Where They Need To Be



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“Never underestimate the power of a girl and her pen.”

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Allison Deegan once had a pretty dim outlook on teenagers, viewing them as “scary, bratty, self-involved, and general pains in the butt.” But since becoming involved with WriteGirl, Associate Director Deegan has a whole new outlook: “Now I understand completely that they’re the ones charged with managing the world after we’ve had our turn, and we must invest absolutely everything we have to equip them for the job.”

With input from Deegan, Executive Director Keren Taylor founded WriteGirl in 2001 as a mentoring organization that pairs teenage girls with professional female writers in order to empower them through self-expression. While Taylor, a songwriter, poet and freelance writer, started the non-profit group in New York City, WriteGirl never really took root until she settled in Los Angeles. The organization has since grown from a small club of 20 teens and 20 women to a full-fledged foundation accommodating nearly 250 teens and 150 women. In addition to encouraging individual writing teams to meet for weekly writing sessions, WriteGirl also facilitates monthly genre workshops, public readings and the publication of an annual anthology, as well as other books.

“We’ve grown so much,” says Deegan. “Our books go around the world now. We’ve had numerous translations, and last year, won

our first international book award, along with many national awards. We’ve expanded to serve critically at-risk girls who are pregnant and parenting. We finally have a wonderfully skilled professional staff, and now we’re forming an alumni army with hundreds of women and girls who have shared in the WriteGirl experience. They are extending the reach of our program globally.”

Despite the expansion, the main focus remains the girls themselves. WriteGirl proudly boasts a 100% success rate in encouraging girls to graduate from high school, with an emphasis on improving the quality of communication and expression on behalf of the teens. The monthly workshops, which cover writing genres from songwriting, screenwriting and poetry to creative non-fiction, ensure that the girls remain open to all forms of expression, enabling them to learn a wide array of writing techniques and other tools that will benefit them at the university level and beyond.

Karen Toledo, a 16-year-old mentee, credits WriteGirl with exposing her to new forms of writing, as well as encouraging her to blossom from a shy wallflower into a self-confident young woman. “Before I was in the program,” she says, “I was a timid and insecure girl. Through WriteGirl, I got to meet my mentor, who coached me out of my shell. My writing skills have improved, too. WriteGirl

showed me that all forms of writing are fun.”

The high school sophomore isn’t the only one to benefit. As a result of her involvement with WriteGirl, Allison Deegan has settled into her role as a public education administrator and a doctoral candidate in education. “WriteGirl got me involved in public service in a way I never had been before,” she says. “Without the insights gained from working with WriteGirl, I don’t think I would have made that transition.”

The mentoring organization is now focusing on developing numerous program elements, such as producing books for teachers, maintaining an online support forum and working with other youth programs to develop mini-workshops. But as is the case with most arts-related institutions these days, WriteGirl has also been struggling to find and maintain fiscal support. A number of the foundation’s most reliable donors have recently withdrawn funds for the mentoring program due to international financial cuts or other budget-tightening measures.

Still, WriteGirl remains characteristically optimistic, spurred on by the spirit of its members, the virtue of its vision and the boldness of its credo: “Never underestimate the power of a girl and her pen.”