



# HERE'S MY HEART, HANDLE WITH CARE

► ELISABETH WILHELM

A typical student has access to teachers, counselors, friends, clubs, and teams to gain a sense of belonging and find a conduit for creative expression. For the students at a teen incarceration center in California\*, that scenario is a pipe dream.

**IN** many cases, the students are ticking time bombs with no creative outlets, constantly facing violence and ostracism from their peers. Jane Guttman, the librarian at the center, is determined to do everything in her power to help her students open up. She has created a haven amidst the chaos of court dates, social workers, and violence that surrounds her young charges, but she wanted to do something more for those who were desperate to write out their fears and their dreams.

In March 2006, Jane came to me and Hope Clark, my partner and co-founder of the Little Owl Mentoring Program, and asked how we could tailor the program—which matches young writers with adult writers online for free—to the needs of her students. We leapt into action and brought on board dozens of mentors who were raring to work with these teens. Yet I knew we could do a lot more.

**Absynthe Muse** (<http://www.absynthemuse.com>), the young writers Web site that I founded and base of operations for Little Owl, won a Do Something GameStop grant that allowed us to buy journals, pens, and writing books for Jane's library. A huge box of books donated by **Kiwibox** (<http://www.kiwibox.com>) supplemented those supplies.

Two days after Thanksgiving in 2006, I stepped out of the taxi into mild California weather wearing a glove on my right hand. Jane had called me the night before.

"I forgot to ask you, Lis. Do you have any facial piercings?"

"Um, no."

"Okay. How about visible tattoos?"

I looked down at my right hand, completely covered from elbow to fingertips in henna designs. "Crap." I failed the first test. In order not to expose the malleable minds that I was encountering to possible gang-related symbols on my right hand, I had to wear a glove. I was sure a lot of the teens would wonder why I was doing the Michael Jackson thing.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Past the first detector and after an odd glance from the on-duty police officer, I was greeted by Jane, a prim woman with frizzled gray hair who radiated perfect calm. We walked between low-slung temporary buildings fading into the cold fog. The basketball court and three meter-high fences were topped with coils of razor wire.

Then I stepped into the library and gasped. The large room was brightly lit, contained several desks and comfortable chairs, and the walls were completely lined with young adult books and other titles of interest for teens. There were even comic books crammng the shelves. The materials that Hope ordered from Amazon had arrived, so we dug through the piles of journals and writing books, finally locating the **PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives** (ReganBooks/HarperCollins, 2005) book, which we would be using as part of our lesson.

As we organized our supplies into piles, Jane gave me a quick rundown of what to expect. She told me that in the past, these teens haven't felt that they've accomplished anything. Most of them don't own a thing, much less a book. A few write, but others associate it with schoolwork. Many have difficulty reading or writing at the fifth or even third grade level, so I decided to approach the students with a three-pronged literary attack: **PostSecret**, paper cranes, and exquisite corpse. For two days, I would work with three groups—two regular incarceration boys' units and one maximum-security girls' unit. I was anxious to see how they'd react to these bizarre inducements to write.

*\*Editor's Note: The name of the center is withheld per the request of the institution.*



## THE PLAN UNFOLDS

The regular incarceration unit boys were very restrained and respectful, calling me “ma’am”—which was surreal because some of them were only a year younger than I. Jane and I went around the room holding a box of tissues, asking them to pull out sheets. Some smart-alecks pulled out ten, whereas most restrained themselves to just a few. Groans and giggles emanated around the room when I explained that for each tissue they pulled, they had to tell something about themselves. No one was forced to divulge personal information, but the stories that they willingly shared were heartbreaking. One sixteen-year-old boy told me, “I’m proud that my son is celebrating his fourth birthday.” Others fervently repeated that once they got out, they would make the right decisions so that they didn’t end up back here again.



Then we moved to “secrets.” For those of you who are unfamiliar with **PostSecret** (<http://www.postsecret.com>), compiler Frank Warren asks people to send postcards to him with their secrets written on them. These postcards number in the thousands every week. Some are disturbing, others are beautiful, and many are really depressing. They express the human condition in the simplest way possible. I chose **PostSecret**’s formula as the first writing exercise that I wanted to do with these teens.

I showed some of the postcards from the book and asked the teens why someone might want to send a secret written on a postcard to an unfamiliar person. Their answers were so rich and deep, saying, “Because they did something bad and can’t tell anyone,” “Because it feels like a weight off your shoulder to tell someone,” and “Because writing it down makes you feel better.” I just wanted to hug all of them.

I passed out blank postcards and pencils. “Choose carefully what secret you wish to share with a complete stranger,” I said. They all got busy figuring out what secret they wanted to tell. What was more extraordinary, those who wrote down a secret didn’t mind revealing it anonymously with the class.

Sometimes their secrets were poems. Other times, they were about the food at the center. Although all these teens’ secrets blurred together, two in particular stand out in my memory:

*I have a son no one knows about.*

In response to this secret, Jane shared her own personal story about having a child whom she only recently has begun to know. Jane gives herself so selflessly to her students, trusting them with pieces of her. In return, they always seem to handle her with gentle care.

*I always hoped to meet my older sister.*

Later on, Jane shared with me that this young person’s ten-month-old sister was fatally thrown against the wall by her mother’s boyfriend.

## BREAKING THROUGH

Even on the writing level, their voices were filled with a raw power. Next I introduced the idea of “exquisite corpse,” in which I would start the story with one sentence, and then the next person would write the following sentence, fold down the top of the paper to hide the first sentence, and pass it on for the next person to continue.

Naturally one would contain potty humor, but the other had some semblance to a real story. I would have loved to listen to their life stories. Although most young writers must dream up plot, characters, and dramatic tension, these teens live their stories every day. Yet both the discipline of the center and the caring adults who work there help to alleviate the outside stressors of these students’ lives.

The group of girls presented a very different dynamic. They felt more at ease in their own skin, more mature somehow. But that didn’t

prevent them from giggling at one another about comments that were made. Jane—who moved as fast as a snake—laid the smackdown, reminding the girls that no comments will be made unless they are respectful and positive. She would tell me later that the girl who was laughed at would beat the daylight out of the girls who insulted her.

The last group of boys seemed more rambunctious and out of control, responding to me with a hint of suspicion. I think they loosened up once I promised to rap for them. Yes, me, a white girl from Germany, rapping.

Well, okay, not quite rapping, but the spoken-word poetry (which I read from an anthology) comes pretty close. I had promised Zoraida Córdova, a staff member on **Absynthe Muse**, that I would share her poem published in the book *Growing Up Girl: An Anthology of Voices from Marginalized Spaces* (GirlChild Press, 2006). The poem is about Zoraida screwing up an Ecuadorian dish that her grandmother valiantly tried to teach her to make while force-feeding her advice about finding the right man. Zoraida and her family are naturalized American citizens from modest beginnings, which comes with a sense of pressure from both her family and society. I knew this pressure was something the boys could tap into when I saw they were nodding and suddenly wanted to share their own poetry.

## ON WINGS OF CRANES

On the second day, I told the first group of boys the story of **Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes** (Tandem Library Books, 1999) and taught them how to fold their own crane. When Jane saw the boys licking and splitting the paper to make a square out of a letter-sized piece, she muffled giggles and turned to face a wall to gain control of herself. Apparently bodily fluids are a no-no, but it would have been worse to ask for scissors.

The boys struggled with every fold, making them clumsily with big hands and often asking for my help. I could feel the boys taken aback when I crouched by their desks to help them with the complicated folds, my hands directing where their fingers should go. Every student in that class completed a paper crane, their faces glowing with this small pleasure of accomplishment. I showed them how to write a simple haiku, clapping out the syllables with them and showing examples on the board. They then wrote their own haiku on pieces of scrap paper and transferred them to the wings of their cranes.

Some of the boys got so into it that they wrote several haikus. Others doodled on their cranes, adding trees, suns, and jet engines, refolding the crane wings to make them more aerodynamic. Then they started having contests to see who could fold a tinier paper crane with his scrap paper. I offered to ask the teacher to hang them up from the ceiling. They refused, wanting to bring them to their cells instead.

We gave the girls journals in which to write their hopes, dreams, and thoughts, and they took them with solemn expressions. For the boys, Jane’s assistant and I carefully pulled out the staples (which could be used as weapons) from the bindings of comic books, counting the staples again and again to make sure we had them all before disposing of them in the trash. As I walked away from the grinning faces I felt lighter, somehow. I hadn’t expected for it to be so easy for them to unfurl. Their paper cranes will swing lazily from the ceiling and melancholy secrets will be mailed. When they leave this place, perhaps they’ll share their stories with the world. ■

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