

Marcelle Haddix

Making a Movie with Thea St.Omer

Here, Marcelle Haddix recounts her experience collaborating with Thea on the making of a short film, Writing Outside School Walls. This film, along with a conversation held last fall between Haddix and poet Georgia Popoff, is elsewhere in this section.

—Nancy Keefe Rhodes, Ed.

On a cold and rainy Saturday in November of 2009, I remember the rush of emotions I felt after witnessing tens of young writers walking to the Dunbar Community Center to participate in the first-ever Writing Our Lives conference. Close to one hundred middle and high school students attended the conference I planned with graduate students from Syracuse University, and they participated in workshops led by university professors and students and community writers on expository writing, journalism, personal narrative, and spoken word poetry. When we planned the conference, we had no idea what the response might be.

The conference was intended as an extension of the work I began the previous summer in the Syracuse community. In response to outcries from parents and community members about their dissatisfaction with the educational experiences and outcomes for their African American youth, I wanted to identify and implement solution-oriented practices that held potential for working against what was, and has been, a mis-education of Black children. To that end, I began offering regular writing workshops at a local library for any young person who wanted to attend, and the students showed up. I began working with teachers and librarians in local middle and high schools, and the students showed up. So, no different, on that Saturday in November of 2009, the students showed up. The youths' persistence and enthusiasm was palpable. Hundreds of students proclaimed, "I am a writer. I have a voice." In that moment, the Writing Our Lives movement began.

That day is forever etched in my memory, though there was a missed opportunity to document what was happening. Douglas Biklen, the Dean of our School of Education at the time, happened to make it to the conference that Saturday, and he too was awed by what he observed: rooms filled with youth writers claiming their identities as writers and sharing their stories. The purpose of Writing Our Lives was simple—provide a space for young people to write—yet so es-

sential and powerful. Dean Biklen, an award-winning documentary filmmaker, suggested to me that I might consider filming what was happening in *Writing Our Lives*. He believed in the power of film not only capture events but as a tool to transform and incite action. I began *Writing Our Lives* because I was concerned about the education for children of color in schools characterized by low performance and lower resources; I was just as concerned about the educational experiences for my own African American son. It wasn't enough to offer workshops or conferences; I had to consider how I might communicate this work so that it could affect change in teacher practices in school spaces that extended within and beyond Syracuse.

Dean Biklen introduced me to Thea St.Omer, a filmmaker who he had commissioned to produce a couple of short films for the Syracuse University School of Education. At the time, Thea was also teaching courses for the Newhouse School of Public Communications. I realized too that I had been in the audience of an early SU screening of her film *Nigger* the previous year. I was familiar with her work but this would be my first time working with a filmmaker. After the Saturday writing conference, we began an afterschool *Writing Our Lives* program at Nottingham High School. Several days a week, I, along with SU graduate students, would offer workshops after school in the school library. I felt this would be a natural opportunity to have Thea film footage from our afterschool program and to document the voices of youth writers, teachers, and community writers involved with the program.

To get started, Thea and I met several times, usually over a meal or coffee and tea, to talk about what we envisioned as a final product. These occasions were also important for Thea and I to get to know each other, to establish a working relationship, and for her to gain a clearer understanding of the essence of *Writing Our Lives*. From the onset, I knew that this was more than just a filming job for Thea; she became a part of the fabric of the program. She wanted to get to know me and the youth writers and teachers who were integral to the growth and success of the program. We both also agreed that we wanted to produce a film that leveraged the authentic voices of the youth, and to do this required time. One could not just go into the space, set up a camera, ask questions, and expect young people to share their personal thoughts. At the same time, however, Thea wanted to be able to be in the space in ways that would not disrupt the naturalistic setting that we worked to cultivate. We questioned whether her presence would affect students' impulse to write and share freely and whether they might feel inhibited by her camera lens. Thea was intentional about insuring that that would not happen.

Over the course of several weeks, Thea visited the school to observe the everyday happenings there, to begin to know the students who participated in the Writing Our Lives afterschool program, and to understand how our space was situated within the larger context of the school. She filmed for hours in the library space as students traveled in and out of the space between class periods. She aimed her camera at visual representations of students' writing practices, from the use of digital tools to the act of putting pen to paper. She interviewed students about their understanding of what it meant to be a writer and about how they felt school defined writing compared to how they defined writing for themselves. She asked teachers to reflect on their expectations for student writing and their objectives for teaching 21st century writers. She captured students' poetic performances and asked them to talk about their writing products. She also interviewed me about my vision for Writing Our Lives. After hours of filming and editing, she created this ten-minute film that was aptly titled *Writing Beyond School Walls*. While what we witnessed happened within a school space, the prevailing theme was that students' voices and stories transcended beyond the school to connect with a broader writing community.

Since the creation of this film, Writing Our Lives has certainly propelled beyond school walls—the project includes the annual Saturday writing conference, afterschool programs in schools and in community centers, and summer writing institutes. The film has been a useful tool for communicating to broader educational audiences the importance of creating and sustaining spaces where young people feel that they can write their lives using multiple tools, for multiple audiences, and in multiple ways. In many ways, Thea composed the story of Writing Our Lives—she visualized our story and centered youth voices. For that, I am forever grateful to be a part of her film legacy.



Dr. Marcelle Haddix is a Dean's Associate Professor and chair of the Reading and Language Arts department in the Syracuse University School of Education. Her scholarly interests center on the experiences of students of color in literacy and English teaching and teacher education and the importance of centering Blackness in educational practices and spaces. She directs two literacy programs for adolescent youth: the Writing Our Lives project, a program geared toward supporting the writing practices of urban middle and high school students within and beyond school contexts, and the Dark Girls, an afterschool program for Black middle school girls aimed at celebrating Black girl literacies. Haddix's work is featured in *Research in the Teaching of English*, *English Education*, *Linguistics and Education*, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, and in her recently published

book, *Cultivating Racial and Linguistic Diversity in Literacy Teacher Education: Teachers Like Me*. Her awards and recognitions include the American Educational Research Association Division K Early Career Award, the National Council for Teachers of English Promising Researcher Award, and the NCTE Janet Emig Award. She earned a Ph.D. from Boston College, a master's degree in education from Cardinal Stritch University, and a bachelor's degree in English education from Drake University.