

TEACHERS & WRITERS MAGAZINE

Winter 2013-2014 • Vol. 45, No. 2

The Bechtel Issue

**2013 Bechtel Prize-
Winning Essay**

**"Inside Words: How to
Teach Writing in Prison"**

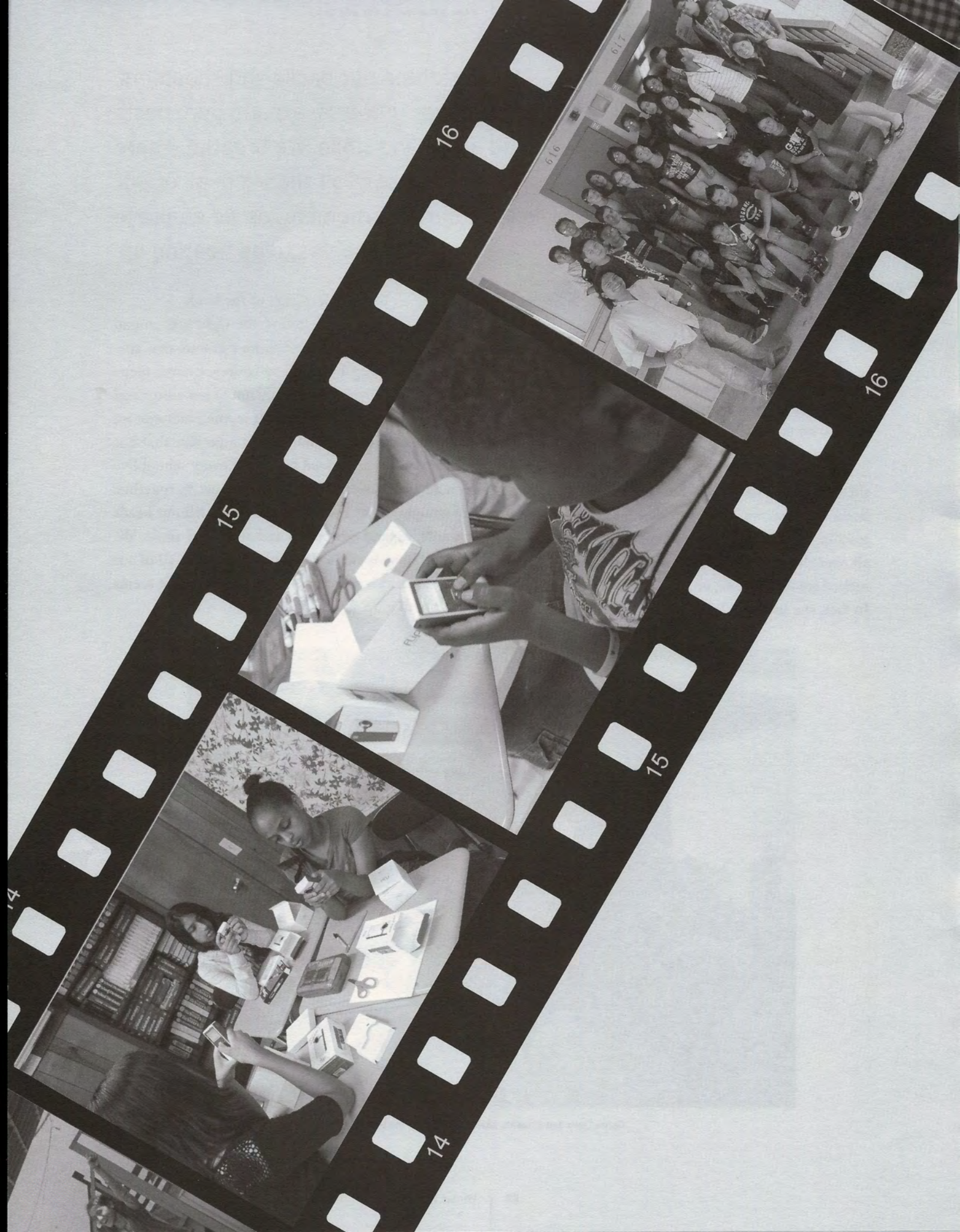
Using Poetry to
Explore Family History

**Creative Writing and the
Common Core**

Helping Kids
Explore Sadness

The Moving Story Project

On Writing and
Vulnerability



16

616

617

15

15

14

14

The Moving Story Project

Watching Words Come Alive

HARRIET RILEY

SIX MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS GATHER in a circle in a corner of their classroom and brainstorm ways to “show” a class poem in a stop-motion video.

“Let’s cut a long road out of a brown paper bag,” says Daniela.

“Good idea,” Antonio says. “We each can use that as a background. Every line could take place along that road.”

“I’m going to use a toy cow for my line and take pictures of it moving along the road,” says Sergio.

Elizabeth looks at her storyboard sketches, jumps up, and says, “I’ll make a paper hat with a feather flying onto the road for my line.”

The students continue to share ideas and sketch onto their storyboards as the writer-in-residence walks around the room supervising each small group.

Combine filmmaking, writing, and middle school students and you get a rich mix of creativity and

Harriet Riley is a freelance writer focusing on creative nonfiction. She has published articles in Teachers & Writers Magazine, Mississippi, Pensacola, Telling Our Stories Press, and other magazines. Before moving to Houston in 2007, she taught undergraduate writing classes at the University of West Florida in Pensacola. She has also worked as a non-profit director, hospital marketing director, and newspaper reporter. She has her MA in print journalism from the University of Texas at Austin and her BA in English and journalism from the University of Mississippi. She is in her sixth year as a writer-in-residence with Writers in the Schools in Houston.

self-discovery. The Moving Story Project, based in Houston, Texas, offers inner-city students from late elementary grades to high school the opportunity to practice creative writing and develop filmmaking skills as they write poems and turn them into animated stop-motion films. The students take part in every part of the process, from drafting their original poems to creating storyboards, building sets, recording audio, and, finally, shooting the footage.

This innovative school-based program was developed just over two years ago in a collaboration between Writer in the Schools (WITS) Houston and Aurora Picture Show, a Houston-based non-profit micro-cinema. It was a natural partnership, says WITS Associate Director Long Chu, as both programs “recognize the importance of providing high-quality arts education to children as they learn and develop into adulthood.”

In each school the Moving Story Project visits, a writer and filmmaker work with students to create rich, visually-oriented writing. “The students learn where a word can take you and how an image can make it stronger,” says Camilo Gonzalez, the media arts education manager at Aurora, who worked with WITS writer Sara Cooper to develop the Moving Story Project. Cooper had worked previously in technology camps in New Mexico, where she says she witnessed how powerful it could be for students to make their

The program lets students see “how writing and filmmaking work hand in hand,” while giving them an opportunity to create in ways that are not typically available in the classroom.

words come alive through audio and film. In planning the project, Cooper says she wanted to keep writing at the forefront. When she brought the Moving Story Project to her students at Kaleidoscope Middle School, a multicultural inner-city school where she was a writer-in-residence, she had her students work with the poems they had created after reading Sandra Cisneros’s “My Name” essay from *The House on Mango Street*. Cooper had each student select one line from his or her poem, then asked them to work together to combine their individual lines into stanzas using group storyboards. “This meant they had to collaborate on revising and on conceptualizing story in new ways,” Cooper says.

Gonzalez, who worked with Cooper as the filmmaker on this first project, said that storyboarding is “where the magic happens.” Working together in groups, students come up with images that will communicate their lines of poetry visually in six small squares on the storyboard. Each student ends up with essentially one line in the final piece and it must work cohesively with the other writing from their group.

“This kind of collaboration and transferring between modes encourages a particular kind of critical thinking,” says Cooper. “The students are continually problem-solving, and writing is at the center of this.”

After students participating in the Moving Story Project finish creating their storyboards, they move on to designing their own sets. Materials they have used range from recycled objects to personal photos, mirrors, shoeboxes, cucumbers, construction paper, pipe cleaners, and more. The sets are created in a group with input from every student. Once the sets are finished, the students help shoot footage with stop-motion animation techniques. On the last day of the project, students view their finished film and get copies of the DVD to take home to share with their families.

Aurora Picture Show has submitted all six of

the films created through the Moving Story Project so far to film festivals, and one was recently selected for a youth film festival. With or without

a broader audience, however, Gonzalez says the project is extremely valuable because it allows students to “discover their voice” and to hone their creative and critical-thinking skills by working with professional writers and filmmakers.

In each school the Moving Story Project visits, the focus of the writing and the film is different, reflecting the interests of the students. At the Kaleidoscope Middle School, the focus was on the school’s multicultural community. An elementary school in the Heights neighborhood of Houston chose an environmental focus, and students at another school wrote about their dreams for the future.

Emily Triantaphyllis, a young documentary filmmaker who worked on a recent project at KIPP Middle School with another WITS writer, said that the program lets students see “how writing and filmmaking work hand in hand,” while giving them an opportunity to create in ways that are not typically available in the classroom. Cooper agrees, and says she has witnessed how the unique nature of the Moving Story Project has allowed a number of students—previously tentative about writing—to move into leadership roles. “Someone has to lead the group for the project to work, and it isn’t always the student you’d expect who steps up,” says Cooper.

By the end of each residency, all of the various pieces of the project—the writing, the collaboration, the storyboarding, the creation of the sets, and the filming—lead back to one central focus, says Cooper: “What is behind the Moving Story Project is the story,” she says. “The technology just allows the stories to come alive in ways that are tangible for the students.” 📺

To view some of the stop-motion animation films by students in the Moving Story Project, go to:

vimeo.com/24487496
vimeo.com/68330980