



< Dale Griffith '92 (center) helped former prison inmates Tabatha Rowley and Robin Cullen tell their stories in a prize-winning narrative.

STORIES

Dale Griffith '92 taught women at a Connecticut prison to write. Success nearly killed the program. **BY CAROLYN BATTISTA**

Photography by Bill Burkhart

As soon as she began teaching at a women's prison, Dale Griffith '92 began encouraging her students to write. "I'd learned experientially that writing heals, that it can be a way of making sense of what happens to you," she says.

She never imagined all that would follow. She never imagined that a best-selling novelist, Wally Lamb, would join her in running a writing workshop at York Correctional Institution in Niantic, Conn., or that the York writers would see their work published, or that one of them would receive an award from PEN, the literary organization. Nor did she imagine how the women would be penalized for these efforts, how they would nearly be squashed and silenced.

But the women have kept on going, often under fire. Through their writing, they have transformed themselves. They have led the Connecticut legislature to change a law, and they have demonstrated clearly—to other women, to other inmates, to readers, and to audiences all over—what can come from breaking the chains of silence.

Always, Griffith has listened to them, supported them. Lamb, author of *She's Come Undone* and *I Know This Much Is True*, says, "Long before I arrived on the scene, Dale was gently coaxing her incarcerated students to find their voices, so that they might come out of the dark and into the light about who they were, who they are, and who they might become."

In the winter of 2003, HarperCollins published an anthology of the York writers' work, edited by Lamb and titled *Couldn't Keep It to Myself: Testimonies from Our Imprisoned Sisters*. The first part of the title comes from a gospel song, and the book is filled with stories that the writers finally could not keep to themselves. There is, for instance, the story told by inmate Barbara Parsons Lane, of how, as a little girl, she was molested by her grandfather. "Don't say a word," her mother said.

The book also includes an essay by Griffith, who arrived at York in 1994, with her new teaching certificate. She'd entered Wesleyan at age 37, after community college. During the next three years she left a bad marriage, worked as a waitress, looked after her three youngsters, studied, and wrote.

For a long time, she says, "Institutions—school, church, marriage—had all kept me in my place. I was silenced. At Wes they asked, 'What do *you* think?' Wes saved my life." She sought a job at York on the advice of a friend who worked there. "Some of the women have been through hell and back," the friend said. "You'll relate."

Over the years Griffith has taught a mix of subjects to women whose offenses range from fraud to murder. She gets to know the women and to care about them. Tabatha Rowley, now released, says, "She took me under her wing. She believed in me before I believed in myself."

Nancy Whitely, also released, says, "She sees things in people. She told me I was intelligent; nobody had ever told me that before."

Griffith always makes writing part of her teaching because she sees writing as a way to understand—and break away from—crushing events, feelings and choices. "If you don't understand, you repeat," she says. "By writing, and letting even one other person read your work, you can become free."

In her early years at York she regularly printed up booklets of students' work, including one titled "Acts of Courage." In that, she recalls, women wrote about turning themselves in, returning to school, telling the truth, even giving up children they loved but couldn't take care of.

"Some of the women trust paper before they trust the ear. One told me, 'Seeing it on paper makes it more real,'" she says.

In 1999, Lamb was invited to York to give a talk on writing—a talk he figured that many inmates attended mainly to see "that guy who was on *Oprah*." But when it was time to go, one inmate asked if he was coming back. Lamb, who'd planned only a brief visit, found himself agreeing to return. He and Griffith have led a weekly writing workshop ever since.

Griffith says that Lamb took writing at York to a new level. He modeled good writing, and he edited up a storm, taking time to ask probing questions and make copious comments on each draft of each piece that each woman wrote. "Wally is a craftsman, and he brought what the women are doing into craft," says Griffith.

More and more, the women opened up. They poured out the stories of their lives—stories of incest, rape, teenage pregnancy, being beaten by parents and boyfriends, joining a gang because it felt like "a family." They noted, too, the grimness and craziness of life in prison. Rowley, for instance, wrote of officials seizing the hair she'd trimmed off her own head.

Many told what they'd always been told not to, and they supported one another in their quests for self-understanding. Whitely says, "I'd been lying to others and to myself. For once, I was telling the truth and sharing it. It changed my life."

They kept on writing—and rewriting. Griffith regularly points out that the process of writing is like the

process of life: an early draft may not be so good, but it can be improved.

One day, Lamb showed some of the women's work to his editor at HarperCollins, Judith Regan, who was deeply moved by the women's honest accounts of their lives—lives that imprisoned them long before they wound up behind York's electric fence. She saw a book, and Lamb set to editing selections for it.

Trouble erupted just days before *Couldn't Keep It to Myself* reached the bookstores, when the Attorney General of Connecticut slapped the book's contributors with "cost of incarceration charges" of \$117 a day. Barbara Parsons Lane, a contributor who joined the workshop saying she wanted to write about her life in order to understand it, and who is serving a long sentence after killing her abusive husband, received a bill for \$339,505. Invoking a vaguely worded law, the state said it was entitled to collect because the women were receiving money as a result of their participation in a program paid for by the state. The state also sued HarperCollins for the money it set aside for the contributors—\$5,600 for each of them, to be paid upon release from prison.

"It was one of the hardest periods of my life," says Griffith, who felt for her students. "The women were devastated. Many have post-traumatic stress syndrome; this triggered old stuff."

Writers who'd been released encountered problems along with praise. One, Robin Cullen, recalled her terror at seeing the sheriff's deputy who delivered the charges. Was he coming to take her back to prison?

"The women on the outside got the bills, yes, but they also got applause," says Griffith, for once the book was published, there was resounding applause for the women who wrote so honestly and courageously. Contributors who'd been released began to join Lamb for television appearances and for readings at bookstores, schools and libraries. At many such events Rowley, a talented singer, has drawn loud cheers when she belts out the song of the book's title.

"The audiences cheered for all the women, but those on the inside didn't get the experience," says Griffith. "They got no glory."

For more than a year, the "cost of incarceration" charges loomed over everybody. In the prison, the writing workshop continued, with newcomers joining the veterans. But some of the book's contributors found it difficult, even impossible, to write. "They were flattened," says Griffith.

Then another success brought another terrible blow to the women. When one of them won an award,

prison officials shut down the writing program and seized the women's work.

In March, the PEN American Center awarded its 2004 PEN/Newman's Own First Amendment Award to Barbara Parsons Lane. The \$25,000 award, established by actor Paul Newman and author A.E. Hotchner, is given annually to someone who has fought to safeguard the First Amendment right to free expression as it applies to the written word. Lamb had wanted to nominate all the contributors to the book, but since the award is designated for an individual, he'd nominated Lane as someone who has truly turned her life around. At York, she earned an associate's degree, tutors for Literacy Volunteers, trains dogs to aid handicapped people, and helps in the prison hospice program. She has become a serious writer and a mentor to others in the writing group.

PEN also praised the other contributors for their courage, noting that the State of Connecticut was, intentionally or not, penalizing them for exercising their constitutional right to free expression.

Now came more penalizing. On March 29, 2004, a prison memo ordered the shutdown of the writing program. ("It is suspended effective immediately," said the memo.) It ordered the confiscation of the women's computer disks and the removal of information from hard drives. Griffith was reprimanded (for not reporting the nomination); Lamb was barred from coming into York and was denied permission to tell Lane of her award.

"Though I'd done nothing wrong, I really thought I was going to lose my job," says Griffith, who was also worried—again—about her students. "They felt a lot of dread," she says. They were already having a hard time; now what? When some of the incarcerated writers learned that disks were being confiscated, they erased their own material, because they didn't want strangers ("unkind eyes," Lane called them) reading their very personal stories.

Griffith feared that the writers could not carry on, but they did. "Even while the program was shut down, the women were still writing," Griffith says. "They passed work back and forth to each other, using what they'd learned. They edited each other's work, asking questions and making comments, just as Griffith and Lamb did. ("This is good; do you want to make it even better? You might try....")

"And this time, when the going got ugly, they wrote about it," Griffith adds. They wrote to families, supporters, politicians and Department of Correction officials. Theresa C. Lantz, commissioner of the depart-

ment, came down from Hartford. "She talked to the women personally for a couple of hours," Griffith recalls. "The women used their voices, and they felt like she heard them."

Newspapers covered the award and the prison's harsh response. A *60 Minutes* team came, asking questions.

Commissioner Lantz told *60 Minutes'* Graham Messick that there was no "shutdown," only "a breakdown of communication." There was a need, she said, to protect Lane from having other inmates try to get her prize money. Richard Blumenthal, attorney general of Connecticut, said that the "cost of incarceration" bills were necessary in case the book became a best seller. He also promised that there would be an

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investigation, and that if inmates' writing, their property, was destroyed, he would prosecute.

With all the coverage, wheels began to turn. In mid-April, the prison reinstated the writing program. There were diligent, and mostly successful, efforts to retrieve the lost writing.

On April 19, Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal announced the state's settlement with HarperCollins. Of the money the publisher set aside, one share is going, at the writers' request, to Interval House, an organization in Hartford that provides services for battered women and their children. Each writer is contributing \$500 of her share to the state, mostly for the writing program, but can keep the rest.

On April 20, at a PEN gala in New York City, Lane's

children received her PEN award for her; she will be allowed to keep the prize money.

The writers will not pay "cost of incarceration" charges. The Connecticut legislature amended the state law regarding such charges, specifically exempting any money that inmates earn through rehabilitative prison programs.


Many of the more than 100 women who have participated in the writing program have now been released. Some have gone on to college, on to good jobs. Only three, including two with serious mental health issues, have returned to prison. Griffith considers that a fine record, since national statistics show 70 percent of released inmates returning within five years.

There is a lot to cheer for, including the book itself. "But the women on the inside may not know the impact of their work until they get out," says Griffith. Fear and dread have often overshadowed their achievement. "I think they are proud to be part of it all, but they've paid a big price," she says.

The book continues to open eyes. "It has a strong effect, being out there," says Rowley, noting that it helps people to see inmates as human beings. At readings, she says, people praise the writers' honesty and courage. "I think by using our voices, we have helped others find theirs," she says.

Whitely says, "The book is in writing groups, in schools, in probation offices." She considers it a boon to people who feel isolated, in terrible situations. "When you read about somebody who experienced something similar, and was brave enough to get out, it can help."

And, says Rowley, "People tell us the writing is really good."

Griffith and Lamb take turns, as ever, leading the weekly workshop. "The women are still writing—talk about 'acts of courage!'" says Griffith. "They've shown others that you can write your story, and it can make a difference." 

Griffith's work was the topic of a 2004 Reunion & Commencement WESeminar. As of Jan. 1, she is working for the community college system in North Carolina. Her first assignment is at a maximum security prison for men.

**Do you have an opinion about this topic?
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