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Community project connects writers and workers

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By Charley Hannagan
Staff writer

In March 2005, Gertrude Danzy's mother was dying of lung cancer.

"I would work and go to the hospital. The one appointment I would keep the whole week was my class through Bread and Roses, the unseenamerica project," she said.

The photography-writing class became a lifeline for the Syracuse University custodian, 57, a place to express her feelings about being a daughter and a worker.

"My initial thought when taking the class was to see what it was all about," Danzy said. "As Mom got sicker and sicker, the class became an escape for me. It helped me keep my sanity while my mother was dying."

Danzy's photograph of her mother, Helen Tisdell, lying in a hospital bed and her poem "See Me" are among the works compiled in: "Working: An Anthology of Writing and Photography" that is being published by Syracuse University Press and New City Community Press.

It is a collection of pictures, poems and stories written by a remarkable group of Syracuse workers who came together for a class that evolved into a writers' group.

The group stretches back to 2005, when Danzy and others joined a photography and writing class for workers sponsored by the unseenamerica project of Bread and Roses, the nonprofit cultural arm of the 1199/SEIU union. The project sought to encourage workers to tell their stories.

The next year, Stephen J. Parks, a newly arrived writing professor at Syracuse University, became the group's spirit guide.

He merged his university students with the group for classes, took them on a trip to England to meet with other worker-writers and had them present their work before academics.

Parks, 44, commutes to Syracuse from Philadelphia. He is the founder and executive director of New City Community Press, which is publishing the anthology along with Syracuse University Press.

Tuesday the authors will read their poems, stories and memoirs to the public at "Working: A Celebration of Syracuse Workers in Words, Photography and Music" the opening ceremony for the two-day 2008 Ray Smith Symposium "Artworks: The Role of the Arts in U.S. Worker's Struggles." The event is from 7 to 9 p.m. at Maxwell Auditorium at Syracuse University.

"Folks who rarely get listened to are going to share their stories," Parks said.

People who read the book will find it beneficial, said Danielle Rose Quigley, 26, of Remsen, a restaurant server and Syracuse University student who wrote about her experiences as a paper collator for the book. "It might open people's eyes. Not everybody who's working, that's all they're doing," she said.

Parks and members of the group expect the book to be used in college classrooms to tell the stories of working people.

It's the first time Syracuse workers have had a professional help them tell their stories, said Ann Marie Taliercio, president of Local 150 UNITE HERE!

"This is what his press does. It gathers stories of the underserved populations, the voiceless," said

Taliercio, whose essay speaks about her efforts on behalf of a hotel worker facing firing because of child care problems.

Parks is drawn to the stories of people society ignores.

His father repaired radars for the tugboats moving barges along the three rivers in Pittsburgh.

"My dad was a voracious reader," he said. "I'm sure part of this grows out of that. No one would have thought of my father as an intellectual."

New City has published "Soul Talk," a book of poems written by Syracuse city school students, which is used in the schools. It has also published books about a Mexican community in Southeastern Pennsylvania, Philadelphia's Chinatown and the disability culture in Philadelphia.

Parks received mixed reactions from unions and arts organizations when he approached them for money to publish a book of Syracuse workers stories.

Some unions were enthusiastic and donated to the project. Others were reluctant to donate money for something not directly attached to job training, he said. And the arts organizations, "they told me workers aren't really writers," Parks said.

"I was so offended when they told me," he said. "Electricians can't parse a sentence? C'mon, you're kidding me."

"We had all these great stories and nobody would give me money to print them," he said.

Eventually local organizations pulled through for the book project, including the DeFrancisco Arts and Cultural Heritage Grants of the Cultural Resources Council, the Gifford Foundation and the Mary Ann Shaw Center for Public and Community Service.

The writers group hasn't meet for some time, although it will likely resume, Taliercio said.

Some group members have moved on. They are putting their efforts toward volunteering or being community activists. But they've left their voices behind in the book.

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