



THE ZWICKLER FAMILY MEMORIAL POETRY LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Final 2-Year Report: January 2020 - December 2021

Between 2020-2021, Alliance for Positive Change received a total of \$8,000 in foundation grant support (\$4,000 per year) from the Phil Zwickler Charitable and Memorial Foundation Trust to support the continuation of the **Zwickler Memorial Poetry Leadership Program**. For more than 17 years, Alliance has cultivated group facilitation and leadership skills of advanced participants in the weekly Creative Writing Workshop, so that these individuals may become leaders of the writers' group. This process has significantly developed the skills, confidence, and self-esteem of the Poetry Leaders themselves, which reinforces their recovery and advances their personal development goals.

2020-2021 PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

The Poetry Leadership Program remains one of Alliance's shining examples of resilience given the challenges of a global pandemic and remote communication and participation. The program connected participants with each other in a new format, paving the way for creative and unique opportunities for self-expression and personal growth. While COVID continues to limit the way participants interact with each other, the group was slowly able to return to 12 people at an outdoor setting at Alliance's Keith Haring Harlem Center, engage in the December 2021 World AIDS Day Café, and meet weekly in-person and remotely.

Returning to In Person Workshops Sessions:

As a response to the global pandemic, Alliance's physical offices closed in March 2020, and staff worked remotely for the remainder of 2020 and then in a hybrid format of 2 days per week onsite (staggered staffing) and remote the remainder of the week throughout most of 2021.

The weekly Creative Writing Workshop halted in March 2020, and all 18 participants did not attend a program meeting until September of 2020. During this time, however, Azeem Khan, the decade-long group facilitator of the Creative Writing Workshop, reached out with weekly phone calls to participants to encourage them to write as a strategy to cope with the stress and isolation of the pandemic. This outreach was a crucial motivator for participants to write; they returned with prompts, poems, and short stories written during this difficult time.

Starting in September 2020, creative writing workshop participants reconvened for in-person sessions (social distance, wearing masks) outside (weather permitting) at the Keith Haring Harlem Center (East 104th Street), initially with 3-5 people. Azeem states that meeting in-person was "effective in so many ways, particularly the sounds and sights of nature which inspired the Poets and ignited their creativity. As the weeks went by participants returned with tears of joy and social distance hugs not only for the creative writing program but the entire Alliance family they have created and nurtured over the years, and the new participants eager to start their journey."

In April 2021, the number of participants grew from 7-12 people and the Creative Writing Workshop moved to Alliance's Midtown Central community center (West 35th Street), adhering to COVID safety protocols of social distancing and masks. The program maintains 12 people per group; however, the goal is to return to pre-pandemic levels of 18 participants in 2022.

The group members continue to inspire one another through poetry, creative writing prompts, short stories, and other creative outlets to understand and reflect on current realities, foster curiosity and hope, and continue the path to positive change and recovery. Participants returning to the Midtown Center reported feeling a sense of “home,” and weekly Tuesday groups are a source of connectedness, support, and sense of family.

World AIDS Day Poetry Reading:

On December 1st, 2021, the Poetry Leadership Program engaged in a successful World AIDS Day Poets Café both in-person and virtually. Over 10 poets participated by reading poems in an in-person and virtual format. The event was broadcasted and shared by Manhattan Neighborhood Network for over an hour. After the broadcast, most poets were on-site at Alliance's Midtown Center for the weekly Tuesday Creative Writing Workshop.

The Manhattan Neighborhood Network did not save a unique link for Alliance, however you can view our social media promoting the event [here](#).

Reflections of 2020-2021 Alliance Poetry Leaders:

Rosa Velez and Azeem Khan are veterans of the Creative Writing Workshop and Poetry Leadership Program, who together run the workshops, handle class logistics, and empower participants to share their heartfelt work. Throughout the group sessions with Rosa and Azeem, participants shared:

- “Creative Writing brings structure to my life”
- “I feel worthy and hopeful”
- “I feel heard and appreciated”
- “I am in a safe space”
- “I can be doing something positive for myself instead of harming myself”

Many of our participants face health and mobility challenges to meeting in-person, however with Rosa’s and Azeem’s leadership and encouragement, the poets remain inspired, reflective, creative, and buoyant in maintaining their health and recovery through the Creative Writing Workshop and the Poetry Leadership Program.

2022 Program Goals:

Alliance Voices at Barnes & Noble and Situations:

The annual Barnes and Noble poetry event in April 2020 and 2021 was canceled due to COVID. We hope this event will return in person in the Spring of 2022 to celebrate National Poetry Month. We welcome the Zwickler Family Foundation to join Alliance at Barnes and Noble should health and safety guidelines permit.

In 2019, Alliance self-published the 21st edition of our literary magazine, *Situations*, featuring the original poetry written by Creative Writing workshop participants. This is the “crown jewel” of the poetry program at Alliance, and the poets look forward to reading new selections from a newly published compilation of *Situations*.

Two anonymous poems (written by creative writing workshop participants) are attached to this report. Some of the poems remain anonymous as an exercise to engage each other by guessing and learning each other’s writing style. Poets highlighted in *Situations* may be commemorated for a birthday, anniversary, or memorial, or poems may address a topic discussed in the weekly group. Recognizing the poets in *Situations* gives participants a sense of accomplishment and validation for their writing, with the hope that their work will inspire future writers and poets in this program and beyond.

Continuation of Poetry Leadership:

The Poetry Leaders were finally able to reconvene in 2021, adhering to social distancing and health standards. The Poetry Leaders look forward to expanding the group to a minimum of 18 people in an in-person space in 2022.

The Poetry Leadership Program is a source of pride for Alliance and the program's participants. We appreciate our ongoing collaboration with the Phil Zwickler Charitable and Memorial Foundation Trust in 2020-2021 and value our partnership in 2022 to further support the Poetry Leadership Program. This support takes the form of monetary stipends for Poetry Leaders, who facilitate Alliance's Creative Writing Workshops.

Of special note, Azeem Khan, longstanding poetry participant and leader of the creative writing workshop at Alliance received his American citizenship in 2021, and on October 18, 2021, joined Alliance's full-time staff as a patient navigator with the prevention services department. We are thrilled and proud to formally welcome Azeem to the Alliance staff. As part of Azeem's staff responsibilities, he will remain a co-facilitator of the Creative Writing Workshop.

On behalf of Alliance, all of us are exceptionally grateful for the Zwickler Family Charitable and Memorial Charitable Trust support. Your dedication and belief in this program are crucial to the continuance of the **Zwickler Memorial Poetry Leadership Program**, which has produced so many benefits for its participants, who are living with chronic health conditions, including HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, diabetes, and histories of substance use and mental health challenges. The Poetry Leadership Program helps participants to make lasting positive changes towards health, housing, recovery, and self-esteem. We are so very proud to be your partner and look forward to the New Year with continued success and healing.

With respect and admiration,



Sharen I. Duke
Executive Director/CEO

Everybody Is Doing It

In Hawaii they Hula They
Tango in Argentina They
Reggae in Jamaica
And they Rumba down in Cuba, In
Trinidad and Tobago
They do the Calypso And
in Spain the Spanish They
really do Flamenco.

In the Punjab they Bhangra How
they dance Kathak in India Over in
Guatemala
They dance the sweet Marimba,
Even foxes dance a lot
They invented the Fox Trot,
In Australia it's true
They dance to the Didgeridoo.

In Kenya they Benga They
Highlife in Ghana They
dance Ballet all over And
Rai dance in Algeria, They
Jali in Mali
In Brazil they Samba
And the girls do Belly Dancing In
the northern parts of Africa.

Everybody does the Disco
From Baghdad to San Francisco
Many folk with razzamataz Cannot
help dancing to Jazz, They do the
Jig in Ireland
And it is really true
They still Morris dance in England
When they can find time to."

Anonymous

Alliance creative writing program participant, 2020

What If...

Mr. Ifonly

Mr. Ifonly sat down and he sighed,
I could have done more if only I had tried If
only I had followed my true intent
If only I had done the things that I meant If
only I had done the things that I could
And not simply done the things that I should If
only a day had lasted a year
And I had not lived in constant fear
Mr. Ifonly sat down and he cried:
I could really have lived if only I had tried!
Now life has passed me by and it's such a crime, Said
Mr. Ifonly who had run out of time

Anonymous

Alliance creative writing program participant, 2021