

# Writers Matter at La Salle University

## Teacher Testimonial

*“This program has blended naturally into my classroom environment... It allows the students to analyze their role in the classroom community along with their role in their home communities. Asking students to think about who they are and why/what makes them who they are is very powerful and valued.”*

\* \* \*

Kate Bitto

Charles W. Henry School

Grade 5

## Letter from the Directors

It is with great enthusiasm that we enter our thirteenth year of providing a unique and innovative opportunity for elementary, middle and lower high school students to learn critical writing skills through the use of journal writing as a vehicle for self-expression in the Writers Matter Program.

Created in 2005 for middle school adolescent students to motivate and encourage them to become better writers, Writers Matters continues to expand and grow. In 2008, *Voices of Teens: Writers Matter*, was published by the National Middle School Association and in 2014, a second book was published by Temple University Press titled *Empowering Young Writers: The Writers Matter Approach*. Over the years the program has been widened to include elementary students.

Additionally, several articles have been published, the program has been presented at many local and national conferences, three self-published books have been created in cooperation with Writers Matter teachers and ongoing professional development is provided to give the teachers the resources needed to succeed in providing quality writing instruction for the students.

Since the inception of the Program, close to 20,000 students have participated. This year our program includes 17 schools, 70 teachers and over 3,300 students (grades 3-9). This is a record number for Writers Matter!

## Student Writing Contest

Each spring we host a Writers Matter Writing Contest to demonstrate how students have learned to use writing to express the things they care most about and help give them a “voice” with which they can discuss their own lives and the issues that are important to them.

This year’s theme for the Writing contest was ***Do you have the power to find light from darkness?*** There are many challenges we face every day in our world. These challenges can be personal (problems with our family, friends, school, etc.), or these challenges can reach a broader audience (school shootings, inequality, oppression, etc.). This year, we wanted the students to not focus on these challenges but rather how they face these challenges and overcome these difficult times. (Continued on p. 2)

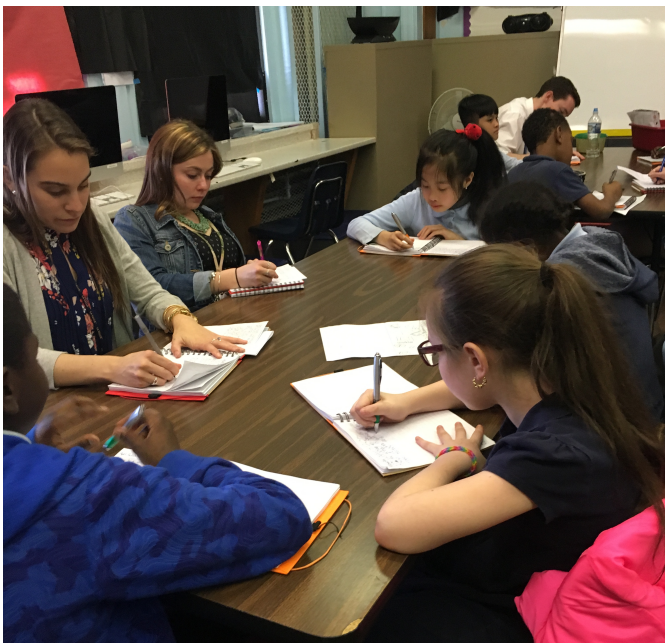


We wanted them to focus on positive aspects of their lives and think about what they can learn from these experiences that can carry them through difficult times.

Here are some prompts the students could consider as they wrote a letter, poem, essay, short story or digital story about finding light in a dark world:

- A difficult problem that you personally have had to face. How were you able to press through that difficult time? Were there people in your life who helped you? Were there things that you did to help yourself? What advice might you have for someone else going through a similar situation?
- Something really special or wonderful that has occurred in your life. What made this even so special? What did you learn about yourself and others from this event? What lessons can you take from this event that can sustain you when times are tough?
- A social justice issue and how you can be a light for those who are in darkness, those who are oppressed, those who do not have a voice.
- Our constitution states, “a more perfect union.” What does a more perfect union mean? Is it a more perfect union? How can we make it a more perfect union?

The contest was opened to both the middle school students as well as the elementary students. Samples of the students’ work, as well as winning entries, are featured throughout this newsletter.



## Contest Winners

### MIDDLE

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Place:

*Smile the Pain Away*  
(Wagner)

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Place:

*No Title* (McDaniel)

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place:

*A More Perfect Union* (Henry)

#### Honorable Mentions:

*You can Get Through It*

*A Dark Happy Place*

### ELEMENTARY

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Place:

*Do you Have the Power to Find Light from Darkness* (Moore)

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Place:

*The Adventures of John Lewis* (Henry)

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place:

*Women* (Moore)

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place:

*When the Darkness Became the Light of my Future* (Moore)

#### Honorable Mentions:

*Selling Drugs*

*Brother*

*The Voice of Lowell*

## Elementary School Contest Winners

### Grand Prize: *Smile the Pain Away*



Deep in a dark world.  
 There's a hole where each person feeling pain lies alone.  
 No one to talk to no one to see.  
 And one of those people used to be me.  
 Everyone was gloomy and sad.  
 Thinking that everything they did was bad.  
 Criticized for differences.  
 Hated by looks.  
 Everyone was scared and still, like books.  
 But one didn't want to feel this way anymore.  
 She climbed out her dark hole and begin to smile.  
 The light appeared after a while.  
 When she was in her dark hole she thought of how to  
 make herself happy.  
 She decided she was going to keep herself happy by  
 doing different things and things she enjoyed.  
 She felt like it was time.  
 To leave her hole.  
 And be free with the light.  
 She smiled happily.  
 Crying tears of joy.  
 She yelled out to everyone crying more as if her tears  
 were waterfalls.  
 "It's all over now!"  
 "Don't hide your specialty!"  
 "As long as you feel happy... Being you.."  
 "Then there's no need to feel pain!"  
 She yelled and felt as if her heart was beating out her  
 chest.  
 The others heard her touching words and one by one felt  
 the strength to climb out their hole.  
 They all cried, all tears like rain.  
 As more light began to appear.  
 All the pain.  
 Tears and sadness.  
 All gone. Just happiness. And acceptance.

## WRITERS MATTER INTERFAITH INITIATIVE—An Interfaith Approach in a Changing World

Writers Matter Interfaith Initiative (WMII) entered its first year with high hopes and expectations. It brought together 55 middle school students from three faith-based day schools in greater Philadelphia who wrote about their religions and their lives and shared this information with students in the other schools. One class in each school—an 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies class at Al Aqsa Islamic Academy, a 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade elective 'major' at Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy, and an 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts class at St. Christopher Catholic School—participated in 2017-18, and all are planning to participate again this year.

One teacher involved in the program said, "*Beyond learning about students from the other schools, the goal was to break down barriers and misconceptions...and come to the idea of inclusion,*" and another said the program was "*not just about finding commonalities, but...learning to be friends and accept differences.*" Here are a few examples of the student writing:

***We are misunderstood./We are Muslims./We are the ones that are thought of as terrorists./We are the ones that follow only one God./...We are loving people./We are supposed to be kind to everyone./...***  
 (Dunia, Al-Aqsa; November, 2017).

***I am from a fun family who laughs and cries,/from a family who is religious and loves Jesus like a family member,/...I am from a place that is green, white, and red,/from a place that can't live without pasta like how a person can't live without water,/and from a place that loves meatballs too...*** (Joey, St. Christopher; November, 2017).

(Continued p. 11)

---

**SECOND PLACE: No Title**

---

In my own opinion the thing that makes up a perfect union is a union who has established a right for themselves, people who know who they are and stand up for what they believe. The union also has to be protected, they need to be safe in or out of their homes, without riots happening or rebellious actions that people are making as a “union” themselves, known as Domestic tranquility.

Along with making a perfect union there are many difficult problems that go along the way with trying to make a “perfect union.” Social Justice and the “Union” has a strong connection with each other. If you had the position to change lives and affect those people who are in the darkness and don’t have the voice to speak for themselves and how they need somebody to take up for them, people in the right position can change lives and deserves respect.

With that being said, when I was younger I could have used somebody who would have stood up for me. Somebody who had a voice to speak for me. At that time, I was experiencing something that I couldn’t speak about, because I didn’t have the voice for people to hear my opinion. I was bullied in my South Philadelphia neighborhood because I am Asian, and everyone calls me “Chinese boy” or “Ding.” It’s so racial and because I am Filipino, many people don’t bother to ask what my nationality is and how I feel living and going to school in a culture that is predominantly African-American. I hated being bullied when I was younger, I even experience a little of it now and I’m 14. Yet, I’m able to handle it better at this age then when I was younger. When I see someone being bullied, I am so quick to intervene, especially in my school. I remember being that child that was not stood up for. I am now feeling more empowered to help the unjust, the voiceless, and the unprotected. I want a more perfect union, but I know that justice has to start with the person who is writing this paper. It has to start with me.



*Muslim students teaching Jewish and Catholic students about prayer and how they practice their religion. Jewish and Catholic students also have the same opportunity to share their religious practices with students in the program throughout the year.*

### THIRD PLACE: *A Perfect Union*

Our constitution states “a more perfect union,” but is it really?

A more perfect union would be freedom and rights for all, with no one being discriminated for their beliefs, religion, culture, or skin color. A perfect union would stand for women’s rights, African-American rights, Muslim rights, people of color’s rights, people with disabilities’ rights, immigrants and illegal immigrant’s rights, and so many more. A perfect union would be about love and kindness, not hatred, guns, and violence. It should be about a helping the community and treating the world around us with respect, and this would include all living beings and occupants of the Earth, not just the humans. It would not permit polluting our lands, oceans and atmosphere with chemicals. It would not involve melting polar ice caps and icebergs by warming the world with the overuse of technology and by making more greenhouse gases. A more perfect union should be sharing the world with animals and plants, not destroying ecosystems for large-scale chemically supported farming and unchecked development of luxury houses, apartments and shopping centers.

I think that the U.S. is not a perfect union because there is a lot of racial injustice and gun violence. People are taking their anger out on the world and on others instead of calming down or getting help. Kids are getting hurt and killed because people are angry about the disadvantages they face in their lives. The U.S. has a long history of those in power putting down various ethnic groups based on prejudices. Unfortunately, some people choose to take their anger out on their community and schools. We don't have a perfect union because our country continues to fight with each other instead of listen to each other and have an effective conversation. It could be the laws themselves that are unfair or unjust and not the people enforcing them. It is not perfect with all of the under-resourced schools where kids are disrespectful and ungrateful towards the teachers, each other, and the environment. It isn't a perfect union because of the of all the ecosystems and habitats that are being destroyed because people are greedy and want more.

We can make it a more perfect union by not prejudging someone because of the color of their skin or their religious beliefs. perfect union by having people control their anger or not get upset about small things, or just ask others for help. The government could pass laws that make it harder to buy a gun and have a background checks for all that do. Military-style rifles and guns should not be available for anyone to purchase. The U.S. could stop putting certain ethnic and religious groups down just because they have different beliefs. People can stop taking their anger out on schools and go sort it out peacefully. If you have a problem with the laws you can write to the government or get involved; be the change you wish to see. The government could work hard to make laws that benefit everyone, not just most people. Kids could respect the environment and teachers more and be more grateful for what they have in school. Everyone could start looking at the world in a more sustainable way and reduce the amount of natural areas turned into new developments and start to reuse land that has existing houses or businesses on it that no one uses anymore.

Our constitution states “in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility.” Can this generation make one?



*Writers Matter student from a local school visiting La Salle.*

**HONORABLE MENTION:** *You Can Get Through This*

You can get through it.  
 Even though your skies have turned black  
 And there's no turning back.  
 You can get through it.  
 Even though your sun has set.  
 Nevertheless.  
 You can get through it.  
 Just think of your happy place.  
 Happiness will come back.  
 You can get through it.  
 Just think of the people that care.  
 Doesn't matter if sadness is in the air.  
 But you have to understand.  
 Sadness will always come again.  
 Just don't let the sadness overpower you.  
 Think of the happy times you've had.  
 And what made you happy.  
 Don't forget what put you in that sad and painful place.  
 So you can learn your lesson.  
 And fix your mistakes.  
 What's the point of making mistakes if you don't learn from them?  
 Even though the sun will set at night, the moon will come and give you a bright light.  
 YOU WILL GET THROUGH IT.



*La Salle students talking to 9<sup>th</sup> graders about college and what helped them get accepted to a college of their choice.*

## An Enhanced Focus on Professional Development & Growth

### ANNUAL WRITING INSTITUTE

On August 15<sup>th</sup> we welcomed over 40 enthusiastic Writers Matter Teachers to our 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Writing Institute.

The Writers Matter Writing Institute brings the teachers together before the school year starts to talk about writing and more importantly the students. During this one-day workshop, the teachers wrote, read, listened and talked about their own writing, their students' writing, current writing research and the Writers Matter program. The teachers engaged in several activities that they can use with their students such as writing an "I am From," "We are From" and worked on revision, giving them the perspective of what it is like for the students in their class.

With a focus on the writing workshop, we spent some time looking at the structure of writing workshops and troubleshooting some issues that may arise. The teachers also had an opportunity to create a "Best Part of Me" piece that was inspired by Wendy Ewald's book. The day concluded with a look at the Writers Matter books and an opportunity to meet as a school to discuss what WM will look like this year in their classroom, in their school and as a professional learning community. It was an inspiring day.

### INCREASE IN TEACHER LEADERS

We are excited about our increase in number of students, teachers and schools involved in the WM program as this is our largest year ever. We increased our number of teacher leaders to accommodate our growing population and to assist with ongoing professional development in their schools.

The teachers continue to meet at La Salle 4 times throughout the year in addition to the Summer Writing Institute. The teachers also participate in bi-weekly, in-school meetings lead by the teacher leaders. In these meetings, teachers share their student writing and a one-page analysis of the drafts with the other teachers in their school. Each piece of writing is followed by a group discussion where questions are asked and further analysis is provided. This form of professional development provides each teacher an opportunity to reflect on their current practices and learn about the methods of their colleagues. The teachers also present various classroom discoveries and lesson plans providing an optimal forum for meaningful and ongoing professional development.

(Continued on p. 7)

## INCREASE IN TEACHER LEADERS

The teacher leaders designated to each school plan the bi-weekly meetings, keeping the meetings focused and provide mentoring to the other teachers in the program as they get WM started in their classroom. This year, we are also adding special Teacher Leader meetings in the fall and spring as an opportunity to provide professional development for the leaders at each school to ensure that they are able to bring back new ideas and help them grow as leaders. The directors make regular visits to the schools observing WM lessons being taught in the classroom as well as attending at least one meeting each month.

## Elementary School Winners

### GRAND PRIZE: *Do You Have the Power to Find Light from Darkness*

I've been through many challenges in life. Challenges, that I still have to this day, challenges I need to face on my Sown, and ones I need someone else to add some light to my darkness. But today I've overcome many challenges, but there's also challenges I have, that push me under, or over, the cliff. Sometimes I don't even know how I get over some of my challenges or why I have them in the first place. But there's NEVER a time where light is not to be found, and I know people say never say never but this time it is true. I believe everyone has a spark of light in them to help overcome their challenges and I always try to find that light in someone even if I need a shovel to dig deeper.

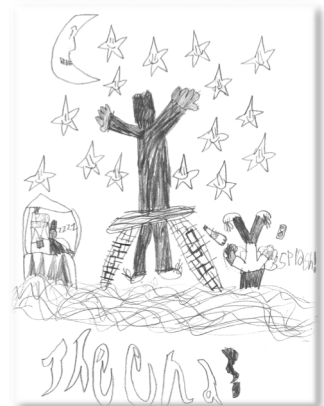
Things in the dark that make us cry or want to die, things that make us sad or really mad, we have the power and light to get through them. I know because if I had no light, not even a drop, I wouldn't be here right now to write this and dig deep in myself to figure out what to write (which is frustrating by the way). But like I said, it's not impossible if you have the power of light. Sometimes I want to cry a river, and other times I wonder why God put me on this dark earth. But I've got to the point where I know why he did, that reason was to write this essay to let everyone across the world to know that we have the power of light to get through the darkness!

### SECOND PRIZE: *The Adventures of John Lewis*

I have been arrested many times and since I have been in this cell I have kept on thinking about how to get out of this dump, more than thinking about what to do when I get out of this place. Luckily, we were released some days later I called a meeting with Dr. King the next day. "John, the white people think they have all power over us and they send us to the jail almost every day. What do we do about it?" asked Dr. King. "Almost, Martin, Almost. We could ignore them," I said. "What do you mean by that?" said Dr. King. "I mean they are not our leaders. We are all our own leaders. We control our brains, not them." I said. But then it hit me. One word. MARCH. That is right.

Soon the news spread out faster than the Flash. So began The March for the Freedom of the African American people. Or The March for Freedom for short. Finally, the March came. It was a typical walk except for the fact that it was a longer period of time. Then, as always the police came out. They were screaming and hollering at us like a drill sergeant getting a full body tattoo. See? That is the difference. They are always really mean and really bossy and really strict. We are really nice and really fair and really calm.

They brought their bats out. And soon. WHAP! KRACK! SLAP! POW!



**THIRD PRIZE: *Women***

I would say of course women deserve to be treated as equally as men because women, are human beings just like men. They breathe, eat basically they do everything that men do. They also have similar basic needs as men do such as clothes, housing, education, and more take care of their family. But we have been seeing the opposite of that in most American jobs where millions of women are cheated with their hard earned money and their right such as earning less pay than men even when they are doing the same work as men, women are also cheated of their right in most workplaces such as the chance being promoted in their workplaces, even when they are qualified for promotion. These unfair treatment towards women does not make any sense to me at all. Women deserve the best because without them there would no humankind because they bare us and take care of us after we are born is this the way we should pay them back? Of course not.

**THIRD PRIZE: *When the Darkness Became the Light of my Future***

Living with my grandma truly changed my life. This wasn't an easy task. Sometimes out of the blue I would think about my past, but I'd try and focus on school. I realized my grades were getting better each marking period, and each year. By third grade I decided what I wanted my career path I would take. When I go to college I want to study the law and become a family judge. This is all because of one judge. The judge changed my life, and I want to listen to children and change all children's lives because this matters!

**HONORABLE MENTION: *Selling Drugs***

Selling drugs to kids is ruining our lives. It hurts me when they say a kid gets killed by drugs. How do we make the world a better place if we haven't stopped the drugs? I know I have a dream just like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. My dream is that we will stop the drugs and not see anymore kids die. We will keep fighting. We are the future. We will make this world a better place.

Some kids are so pressured that they even commit suicide. I know what's right and what's wrong, and I know the world will change. I will make it right. I know we can stand for our rights. So let's come as one and fight. Let's stop killing our kids. It hurts when a mother cries because they forced her daughter or son to do drugs. These kids think they can't live without it and it kills their lives. I don't get why stores sell it. Kids just go in and ask for it, and the people giving it to them don't even care about them or know how old they are.

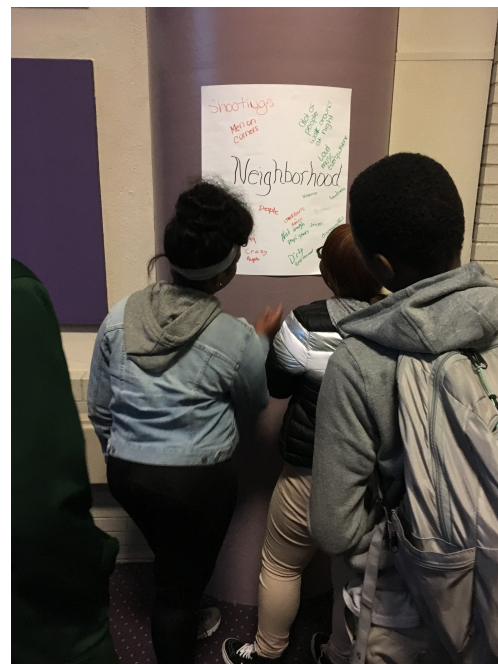
I know I have a dream. I will change the world and make it a better place so kids can be okay. Even if the kids don't have a voice, I will be their voice and their light in their darkness to save them.



## MENTORSHIP PROGRAM AND CAMPUS VISITS

The Writers Matter program continues to provide La Salle University mentors to many of the participating schools. This past year we invited the students from Parkway Northwest School for Peace and Social Justice to participate in a day of writing and reflection at La Salle. The theme of the day was “What’s Your Ill.” The students engaged in discussion about issues they face daily, shared their thoughts and had time to reflect on these challenges in writing. Before leaving, one of the students said, “you need to come let us show you our school now,” so we did just that. The La Salle students toured Parkway and again we engaged in an afternoon of writing, this time focusing on how we can handle and rise above the challenges we face. It was a great day for all involved!

The after-school programs continue to be very successful. In addition to the continued program at Lowell Elementary, we have added an afterschool program at Mitchell Elementary School. It is a great opportunity for students to work with their teachers and La Salle mentors on learning more about themselves and how to face the challenges ahead of them through the vehicle of writing. These afterschool programs are a collaboration of Lead teachers at each of the schools, the teacher consultant and La Salle University undergraduate student mentors.



*Students brainstorming during a day of writing at La Salle University.*

## EVENTS & PRESENTATIONS

In April, two Writers Matter teachers, Kelly Ann Coughlin and Erin Cunningham, presented the La Salle Writers Matter Program at the School District of Philadelphia’s Teacher Symposium. The title of their presentation was, *Creating a Writing Environment For Student Voices*. They talked about the importance of Student Voice in both the elementary and middle school classrooms. Coughlin talked about the students writing Advice Letters and sharing them anonymously schoolwide. Cunningham talked about the power of “I Am From” poems and partnerships with Young Playwrights that allow students to see themselves as “real” writers.

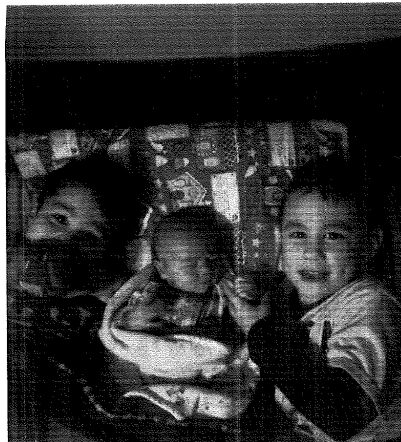
In February 2019, Dr. Kimberly Lewinski will be presenting at the Association of Teacher Educators Conference in Atlanta, GA. The title of her presentation is *New Dimensions for Collaboration and Research: An Online Research Team of Teacher Educators and the In-Service Teachers They Support*. She will share the works she is doing with the Writers Matter program and how it is influenced by her early work as a writing researcher in graduate school. She discusses the research from the Writers Matter program with her colleagues from around the country to support, trouble shoot and innovate new ways to help teachers bring meaningful writing into their classrooms.

---

### Honorable Mention: *Brother*

---

My life was forever changed the day I met my little brother.  
 I didn't know his name but I guessed it may be Jim or Gunther. Would he be a boy or a girl?  
 If it was a boy I would do a big long twirl.  
 When I saw him for the first time he was as little as a skittle,  
 I cuddled him close and thought of all the fun times to spend.  
 Thanked God for giving me a sweet forever friend,  
 I learned to share my toys and my food which wasn't always easy. He cried and he cried and it made me  
 feel quite queasy. Our times together became quite a treat. My family was now complete.




---

### Honorable Mention: *The Voice of Lowell*

---

This year I was picked to be the voice of Lowell Elementary. I am responsible for doing the morning announcements. Every morning I go to school early to practice my announcements for the day. I start off by saying the Pledge of Allegiance and the Star Student Pledge. I believe I have the power to find light from darkness because in the beginning of the school year I was nervous about everyone hearing me over the loud speaker. Now other students look up to me and I feel brave. When I see students in the hallway, they tell me that I do a great job, and that one day, they would like to say the announcements just like me. When guests are in the building, they hear me say the announcements and they also tell me that I did a great job. They tell me that I am a good public speaker. I am proud of myself for being a good role model to the younger students because they tell me that they want to be

like me when they get to 4<sup>th</sup> grade. My teacher, my principal, and my mom feel happy that I am a hard worker. Now that it is the end of the year, I get to train another student to be the voice of Lowell Elementary for next year. I know that student I choose will do a great job.



# Writer's Matter Abroad

## PEN PAL PROGRAM

The Writers Matter Program continues to grow internationally. This year we are excited to start a Pen Pal Program with one of our Philadelphia Schools and a school in Israel. The students will use this opportunity to learn about one another through writing letters and completing shared assignments as a way to learn about one another and see the similarities and differences that transcend our world's borders. We look forward to watching this program unfold throughout the year. Stay tuned.

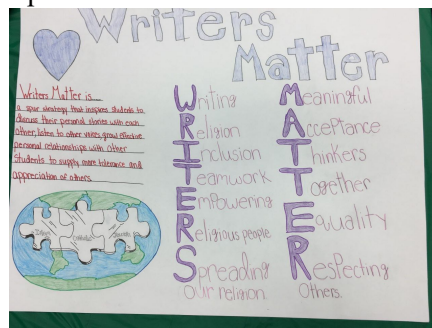


## INTERFAITH CONTINUED

*...I am from the scent of wine and fresh baked challah, my watering mouth as we say the brachot./I am from the scent of chicken in the oven every night./I am from the begging for something other than chicken every night./I am from the joyful sounds of voices in synagogue, the prayers make me smile every time... (Claire, Barrack; November, 2017).*

Throughout the year, the students in each school produced a collective “We Are From” video to introduce their school life to the others, they framed and responded to questions about each other’s faith and traditions, each class produced a second collective video that briefly highlighted each student’s new year’s resolution for participation in WMII or life at school and finally, cross-school teams produced end-of-year ‘infomercials’ about WMII.

In their end-of-year infomercial, one group of students summarized their WMII experience in the acrostic below.



(infomercial by Ryan, Talia E., Maryam, Sohaibe, Patrick, Talia W., Paige, Sophie; May, 2018).

Among the keenest measures of learning is the ability to discern what one has learned. As one student wrote in her end-of-year survey: ***“All I wanted to know [about the other two religions] was answered but there must be more to learn”*** Abby, Barrack; May 2018.

We are anxious to discover what we will learn in the 2018-2019 program.

## Consider Giving To Writers Matter

Please consider contributing to Writers Matter. Your contribution goes directly towards the purchase of books and writing materials for the students, as well as for after-school programs.

If you are interested in participating in our adopt-a-school program, please contact Bob Vogel. All contributions are tax deductible and La Salle University meets all requirements for a 501C3 organization.

**Checks:**  
La Salle University-  
Writers Matter

**Mailed to:**  
1900 West Olney Avenue  
Box 809  
Philadelphia,  
PA 19141

### Special Thanks To....

This Program is generously supported by the following lead funders: PTS Foundation (Pam and Tony Schneider), Tyler Aaron Bookman Memorial Foundation (Jill and Neil Bookman); Jeff and Dana Berstein Family Foundation; Drs. Mark Cornfeld and Melissa Cooper and the Moses Feldman Family Foundation (Moe and Susan Feldman).

*A heartfelt thanks to these special individuals for their vision to help those less fortunate than themselves.*

Thank You.

*Bob Vogel*

Founding Director, Writers Matter  
Program at La Salle University,  
Emeritus Professor, Department of  
Education, La Salle University  
&

*Kimberly Lewinski*

Associate Director for the Writers Matter  
Program at La Salle University  
Associate Professor, Department of  
Education, La Salle University



**To Make an Online Donation go to:**

[https://lasalle.force.com/connect/dn8n\\_SiteDonation?id=a1Nf40000015BcI](https://lasalle.force.com/connect/dn8n_SiteDonation?id=a1Nf40000015BcI)

**Please be sure to specify WRITERS  
MATTER in the “comment line” when  
completing the on-line form.**