While much of the writing world was on strike last year, the writers at the Telling Room were taking time out to help young people find their muses, making the rest of us feel like money-grubbing erudites. "We believe the power of stories can literally change the lives of young people and change the fabric of the community at large," says their pleasantly non-corpsepeak mission statement.

And change the community they have. The Telling Room’s collection of 15 immigrant and refugee teenagers’ coming-to-America stories, I Remember Warm Rain, was the number two best-seller at Longfellow Books last year, just after the final Harry Potter book. (And excerpts from that project, published in the Portland Phoenix, took second place for racial and ethnic coverage in the New England Press Association’s 2007 Better Newspaper Contest.)

Founded in 2004 by three local writers, the Telling Room has presented famous authors in a Living Writers Series, arranged in-school workshops, opened a location on Commercial Street for drop-in tutoring, and begun an annual Maine Writers On Maine forum for high school students and teachers.

Standing firm behind their belief that writing should be fun, the Telling Room encourages young people to tell their stories with games and field trips designed to awaken the writers within each of the kids lucky enough to participate. Since all of the Telling Room’s programs are free, students of all backgrounds are able to take advantage of the opportunity to create with guidance from a group of writers who inspire with their passion and creativity.

Telling Room | 225 Commercial St, Portland | 207.774.6064 | tellingroom.org
Refugees' stories rivet students

Tales by teens who fled war-torn nations strike a chord with Yarmouth youth.

By TESS NACELEWICZ
Staff Writer

YARMOUTH — They live just about 12 miles up the road, but Yarmouth High School freshmen have learned that there is a world of difference between their lives and the lives of immigrant and refugee teenagers in Portland.

Earlier this year, the Yarmouth students read some "coming-to-America" stories written by the Portland teenagers, and were struck by how their experiences contrasted.

On Friday, during a day celebrating world culture at the high school, the Yarmouth students got to meet two of the young authors and hear them speak about the horrific experiences that drove them from their home countries.

"When we're thinking we're having a really bad day, compared to them, we're having a really good day," said Sierra Ryan, 14, after listening to Aruna Kenyi and Ali Mohamed read their stories and answer questions about their lives.

Keni, 15, read a part of "The Photograph," the story he wrote about how Arab militiamen swept into his peaceful village in southern Sudan when he was 5, burning the houses and killing nearly everyone. He and
REFUGEES

Continued from Page B1

his older brothers escaped and lived in refugee camps for years
until they came to the United States.

They arrived in Portland four years ago. Only after that did
they get a photo showing that
their parents are still alive, although their father is in a
wheelchair because soldiers
shot him in the legs.

Kenji, a student at Southern
Maine Community College,
said they have spoken by phone
but the family has yet to be re-
united.

Mohamed, 17, also was 5 when
men with guns surrounded his
village in Somalia, shot and
ekilled his father and 3-year-old
brother, badly wounded his
mother and took all of their
money and valuables.

Mohamed, too, lived in a refug-
ee camp. He came to Portland
just last year.

"It is peaceful here," wrote
Mohamed, a student at Portland
High School, "except sometimes
in my dreams.

Kenji and Mohamed's stories
are among 15 in an antholo-
ogy called "I Remember Warm
Rain."

All of the stories were written
by immigrant and refugee stu-
dents who participated in the
Story House Project conducted
by The Telling Room in Port-
land, a nonprofit writing center
for children and teenagers.

Writing mentors worked with
the students to help them craft
their stories, and The Telling
Room published the anthology
of their work this year.

Yarmouth High School teach-
er Josie Tierney-Fife had her
freshmen in this upscale sub-burb of Portland read the stories.

"It has been really wonderful
for my students to have that
kind of exposure and to hear
those voices and about those
experiences that, otherwise,
here in Yarmouth, they wouldn't
be able to," she said.

The students were so moved
by the stories that they e-mailed
the authors, Tierney-Fife said.

"Dear Aruna Kenji," began
Lexi Pelletier, 15, in an e-mail,
"I just can't imagine like run-
ing for your life, not knowing if
the people you love are dead or
alive... Your story was very eye-
opening to the troubles that our
world goes through. I am just
awed. I've read stories similar
to this kind of thing, but then
reading it firsthand from your
point of view. Wow."

The e-mail correspondence
led to the visit to the school on
Friday.

Gibson Fay-LeBlanc, execu-
tive director of The Telling
Room, said the goal of the orga-
nization is to get young people
to write, share their stories
with the community and make
connections. The authors in
the anthology have given talks
and readings at other schools
where teachers have had their
students read the anthology,
and plan to do so again.

At Yarmouth High, Katie
Hodgkin, 14, was impressed to
meet the writers. "To actually
hear them talking and telling
their stories was more, like,
powerful," she said.

After the readings, the Yar-
mouth students peppered Kenji
and Mohamed with questions
such as what the two young
men think of Maine.

"The only thing I hate about
here is the snow," Kenji said.

The students also questioned
Mohamed about killing hyenas.

He had read a part of his story
"Hyenas," about how he was
known for his ability to kill
them, even as a small child. His
story ends: "But I'm done killing
hyenas. At least I hope so. I'm
almost as tall as my father now,
and I've nothing left to prove."

The two young men spoke with
the same eloquence and com-
posure with which they wrote. But
when they were questioned
afterwards, they said it can be
hard for them to retell their
experiences.

"I cry inside, not outside," Mo-
hamed said.

They said they do readings
to meet their young American
readers, and hopefully to help
them.

"If they have never been to
Africa, they can learn about
Africa," Mohamed said. "And they
can learn how we came here
and how different it is to live
here and to live there."

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Scarborough students tell their stories

By Leslie Bridgers
lbridgers@keepmeupdated.com

Feeding off the stories of 15 teenagers who emigrated to Portland, 15 Scarborough students started telling the stories of where they are from.

On Nov. 28, the group of middle- and high-school students gathered at the Scarborough Public Library for a young writer's workshop, led by Gibson Fay-LeBlanc and Putty Hagg of The Telling Room, a nonprofit writing program in Portland dedicated to young writers and story tellers between the ages of 8 and 18.

Before sitting down to write, the students walked through the Story House Project exhibit, a visual representation of the stories of young immigrants told in a compilation called "I Remember Warm Rain," which was put together by The Telling Room.

"Through the immigrants' stories were ones of war-torn home-lands and their assimilation into American culture," Fay-LeBlanc said. "The students described land.

"Stories" see page 9

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| Name            | Age | Story
|-----------------|-----|-----------------------------------------------|
| Misha Linnehan  | 11  | From Linnehan and Murphy, Pinkerton and Samuels. They were with their parents and siblings.
| Emily Tolman    | 13  | From Edward and钤
| Andrea Tolman   | 13  | From Arabia and the marsh grass.
| Mariah Volk     | 13  | From Arabia and the marsh grass."

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**Footnotes:**
- "I Remember Warm Rain" is a compilation of stories told by young immigrants.
- The Telling Room is a nonprofit writing program in Portland dedicated to young writers and storytellers.

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The students described land.
"Storytelling from the heart"
Stories to tell

Teenagers from immigrant families are sharing their experiences through words and art in the Story House Project. The work will be on display this week at Space.

Hassan Jeylani did not see himself as a writer, and he never really thought he had much of a story to tell. But the 16-year-old had trouble reconciling his childhood in Somalia and Kenya with how his life was playing out in his adopted home of Portland.

There were the good schools his father wanted him to go to but also the everyday indulgences American culture offers, like top-shelf basketball sneakers and video games. More and more he noticed his prayer schedule was becoming erratic. His debate was quiet and internal. He never thought someone would ask him to put it all to paper.

Jeylani is one of 15 local young people from immigrant families who have written about their lives as part of the Story House Project, created by the nonprofit writing workshop, the Telling Room. Their stories, from places like Somalia, Sudan, Iran and Afghanistan, are almost unreal, especially for the residents of Portland.
"I'm done killing hyenas"

Excerpts from Portland teens' stories of migration to America

By: PORTLAND PHOENIX STAFF

5/2/2007 12:54:36 PM

These are excerpts from the stories of Portland high school students who have come here from other countries — including Somalia, Iran, and Iraq — and have worked with members of the Telling Room, a group of prominent local writers (including fiction writer Lewis Robinson; screenwriter Lance Cromwell; Telling Room founders Sara Corbett, Susan Conley, and Mike Paterniti; and poet Gibson Fay-LeBlanc), to record their experiences in their birthplaces, here, and the stops in between.

They illuminate the world inhabited by so many people who have found new homes in Portland — and across Maine — often seeking better living conditions, and freedom from fear of attack, but arriving to find new fears, and old ones, still arising.

The fifteen students' writings, photographs of them by local photographers Laura Lewis and Sean Harris, sculpture-like "story houses" the teens built with the help of Maine College of Art students, and audio and video recordings of the students telling their stories will all be on display at SPACE Gallery, at 538 Congress Street in Portland, starting Tuesday, May 8, with a 6:30 pm reception. The exhibit will be open only a short time — through May 11, from noon to 6 pm.

Admission is by donation ($5 is suggested). An anthology of the stories, published by Portland-based Warren Machine Company, will be available for $5.

HYENAS
By Ali Mohamed
My grandmother always told me that I should be afraid of the lions, but not to be afraid of the hyenas. My grandmother lived in our village and helped my mother cook. She died before my father died, but I remember the stories that she told me. She said that you should never run away from a hyena because they will kill you, but if you don't run away, they will not kill you. My brothers and sisters were afraid of hyenas, but not me. They had seen a hyena eat something down by the river once, and it scared them.
At night, we put our goats inside the fence that went around the house. One morning, a hyena jumped the fence, grabbed a goat by its neck, and jumped back out of the fence. My father said to me, "Wake up! Go get that hyena who stole our goat!" So I ran after him. I hid behind a tree and when the hyena went by, I hit his kidneys with a club and he fell down. My grandmother had told me not to bother hitting them in the head. You can hit them all day in the head and nothing will happen, but if you hit them in the kidneys they will die, she said. My father ran over to me with a knife, and he gave the knife to me. He was afraid of the hyena. Then my father said, "Kill him!" I stabbed the knife into the hyena's stomach. That was the first time I killed a hyena. It was before my father died, and he died when I was five years old.

My father was a kind man and he was very tall, he was maybe ten or eleven feet tall! Well, I don't know how tall he was, I never asked him, "How tall are you, father?" But when we walked together, while going to the ocean or to town, and he held my hand I looked way up into the sky to see him. My mother says I am getting tall like my father.

Nothing had ever happened in my village. It was a very quiet village. I don't think that anyone had ever been killed there before. It was a Sunday night. I remember everything about that night. It was in the summer of 1992. It was 12:30 am. We were all awake. There were men with big guns who surrounded our house. They looked like they were in the army. My mother said that we were the minority tribe, and they were fighting against us and that is why they were there. Or maybe they had seen my father coming from his store in the town and thought that my father had a lot of money.

One of them had a chopped off arm, there was no hand below his elbow. He seemed to be the commander and he was the worst of them. He told everyone to come out of the house and to lie down on the ground. He said, "Where is the father of this house?" My little three-year-old-brother told them that my father was in the outhouse. Then the commander without a hand, without saying anything, shot him. Just like that, without thinking, he just shot him and he died. The soldiers went to the outhouse and kicked down the door. The outhouse was up on the rocks and there was no way he could have escaped from it. The commander with the chopped off arm told my father to come out, and when he did, the commander then told him to get on the ground. Nobody was moving. A few minutes later, the commander said to one of the soldiers, "Why are you looking at that man, kill him!" Then they shot my father. He died. My mother screamed, "Why did you kill him?" The soldiers asked the commander if they should shoot her. The commander didn't care about anything and he said, "Look at her!" and then he shot her. The shot hit her leg. She was alive, but badly injured.

One time, my friends at the refugee camp and I were talking, and they said they didn't believe that I had killed a hyena. They were afraid of the hyenas. I told them to ask my mother if I had killed a hyena in my village. Then one morning, early, they took me over to the slaughter house where there were always hyenas lurking around. I told them to give me a club. I started running towards some hyenas, there were three or four together and then I dove on to the ground and grabbed the legs of one of the hyenas, then I hit him in the kidneys, like my grandmother had told me to. That's how I killed that hyena. Then I took a rope and tied his legs together. My friends said, "This is amazing that you can kill hyenas like that!" Then they said, "Every Friday we will come here and you will kill a hyena." But I said, "No."

I was fourteen when I killed that hyena and I lived in the refugee camp in Kenya. Now I am seventeen and I live on Merrill Street in Portland, Maine. It is peaceful here, except sometimes in my dreams. Coming to America has meant going back, again and again in my mind, to these stories I am telling. My mother wants me to forget, but I cannot. I would like someday to go back to Kenya, perhaps go to the university there. And I would like to ask my girlfriend there to marry me.

But I'm done killing hyenas. At least I hope so. I'm almost as tall as my father now, and I've nothing left to prove.
THE PHOTOGRAPH
By Aruna Kenyi
I will tell you now about the night everything changed. It was the hour just after dinner when families go to visit each other. Everybody gets up and wanders from place to place, saying their hellos. My tribe, the Bari — we're very friendly people. I was with three of my brothers, playing. I would have been five years old. Meanwhile, my parents had gone to our garden, to pick corn.

That's when the Arab militia attacked. Everything was peaceful, and then I heard a noise like an earthquake. I saw the plane coming, and they started bombing our village. Then they came in trucks. The soldiers were yelling at us to leave our homes, and they started killing people and burning everything.

Of course, everyone ran in a different direction to save his or her life. Some mothers and fathers even forgot their kids. That's how I was separated from my parents. My brother led us into a cane field and we hid there for the night. We could see the fires and hear the screaming. There were many mosquitoes and the grass was sharp and wet on my face.

In the morning there was nothing left. No houses, nothing. My oldest brother, who was 20 at the time, said, "It's no use. Our parents are probably dead, and we don't want to die here, too," so we got up from the field and started walking. "I'd rather die ahead," he said.

I just wanted my parents, that's all I remember. From that point on my life has been one of never getting to say goodbye.

PONCE DE LEON WALK
By Kahliye Hassan
It was common for my father and me to take a walk around Portland in those first weeks. We were like Ponce de Leon trying to find the legendary "Fountain of Youth." Our journey started on the October morning we headed out Danforth Street towards the Old Port. I had never seen so many dead leaves lying on the ground. The bright yellows, reds and oranges were like the sun lying on top of the earth. This was very weird to me because the life hadn't been sucked out of the leaves. When I snapped the edge off the stem of a yellow and red leaf, white fluid oozed out. The trees didn't look lifeless either. Their roots were healthy beneath the ground. The grass couldn't be any greener. The ground was moist because it had rained a couple weeks earlier. Not like in Kenya. When it rained there, it rained — for hours, sometimes days. Here the rain was about a five-minute thing, and there wasn't any sign of drought. . . .

One night, it just got really cold. My feet and my fingers for the first time were frozen. I went to bed seeing the stars, but the next morning, when I woke up, it looked like someone had covered everything up in a lustrous blanket, or had a
pillow fight. It was still cold. After eating jelly for breakfast, my father and I took our dirty clothes to the laundry. As we walked on this white pearl frosting, it felt like a sponge that didn’t keep its shape. The sun reflected on the blanket, making sparks. After we washed our clothes, we headed down State Street toward Danforth Street, and this white fragile puffy cotton came tumbling down softly from the sky. I wondered if it was raining, but I couldn’t hear it, and I couldn’t feel it. It just appeared. The atmosphere was getting warmer. I took my gloves off to reach for it, but it melted on my hand. I stuck my tongue out. It didn’t taste how I expected — it was just like water. My dad reached down, picked some up and threw it at me. He sprayed my face and put some more inside my jacket. I jumped up because it was cold — it felt like glitter was under my jacket. I tried to spray him, but it didn’t reach. This was how I first learned to make a snowball, pressing it together with my gloves. I tossed the snowball at him, hitting him in the back of his neck.