Editors' Pick

for **Non-Striking Writers**

Telling Room

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-corpspeak 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

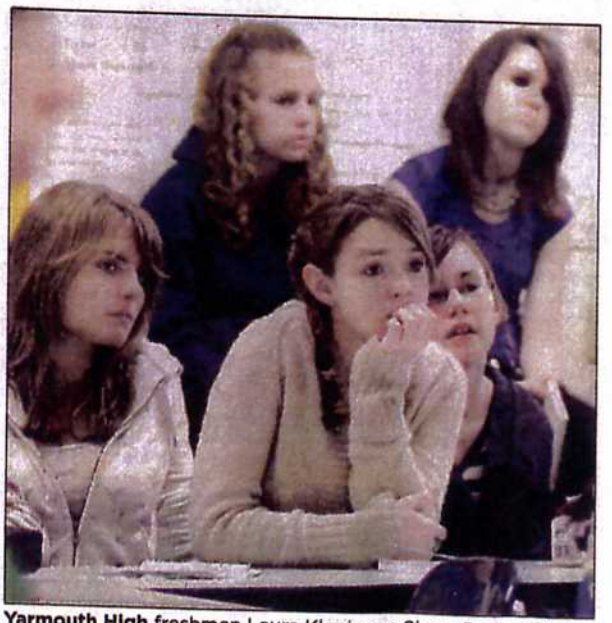
Aruna Kenyi, from Sudan and a student at SMCC, and Ali Mohamed, from Somalia and a junior at Portland High School, visit Yarmouth High School Friday to participate in World Culture Day.

Photos by John Patriquin/Staff Photographer

"I just can't imagine like running 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."

Lexi Pelletier,
in an e-mail to Aruna Kenyi after reading his story

Refugees' stories rivet students



Yarmouth High freshmen Laura Klepinger, Sierra Ryan and Emily Mitchell listen to Ali Mohamed and Aruna Kenyi Friday. "When we're thinking we're having a really bad day, compared to them, we're having a really good day," Ryan said.

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.

"I Remember Warm Rain" is a book of stories written by immigrant students participating in a Portland writing project.

Kenyi, 18, 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

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REFUGEES

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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.

Kenyi, a student at Southern Maine Community College, said they have spoken by phone but the family has yet to be reunited.

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

Mohamed, too, lived in a refugee 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."

Kenyi and Mohamed's stories are among 15 in an anthology called "I Remember Warm Rain."

All of the stories were written by immigrant and refugee students who participated in the Story House Project conducted by The Telling Room in Portland, 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 teacher Josie Tierney-Fife had her freshmen in this upscale suburb 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 Kenyi," began Lexi Pelletier, 15, in an e-mail, "I just can't imagine like running 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, executive director of The Telling Room, said the goal of the organization 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 Yarmouth students peppered Kenyi and Mohamed with questions such as what the two young men think of Maine.

"The only thing I hate about here is the snow," Kenyi 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 composure 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," Mohamed 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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'I am from...'

Scarborough students tell their stories

By Leslie Bridgers
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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 Patty Hagge of The Telling Room, a nonprofit writing program in Portland dedicated to young writers and storytellers 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.

Though the immigrants' stories were ones of their war-torn homelands and their assimilation into American culture, Fay-Leblanc and Hagge told the Scarborough students that their own thoughts and memories were just as important.

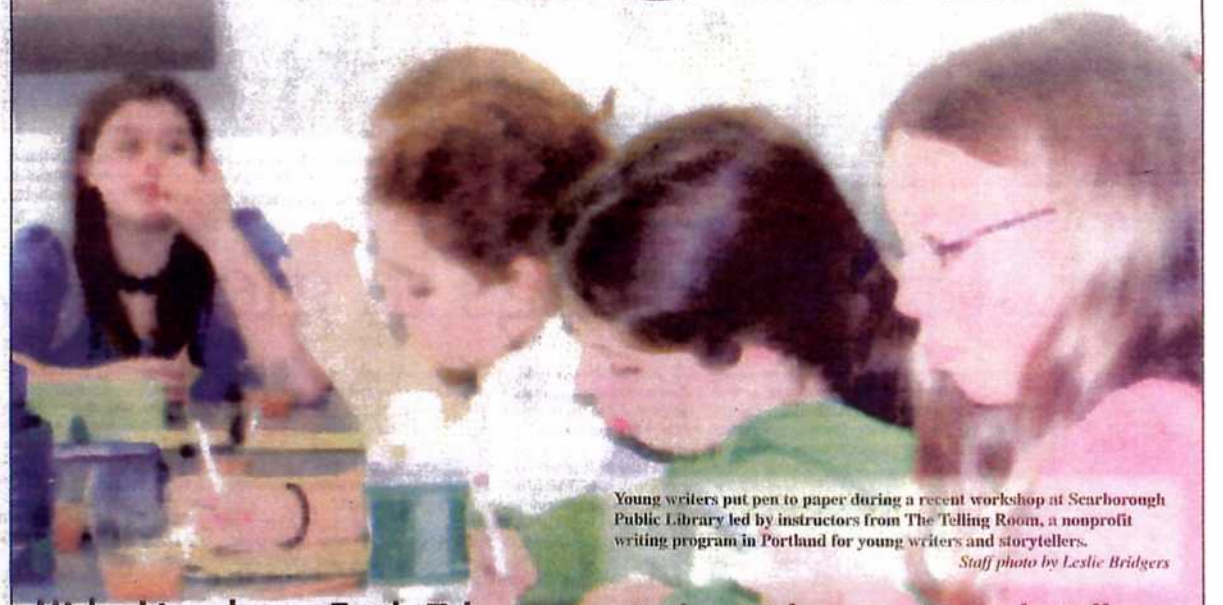
"Those people have very powerful stories," Hagge said. But, according to Fay-Leblanc, when the immigrant students first sat down to write, they didn't think they did.

"We all have them," he said. "It's just about finding the right ones to tell."

Building off the exhibit, the students were asked to write a poem about where they were from and, Fay-Leblanc said, that doesn't just mean Scarborough, but "all the things that make you who you are."

The students described land-

"Stories" see page 9



Young writers put pen to paper during a recent workshop at Scarborough Public Library led by instructors from The Telling Room, a nonprofit writing program in Portland for young writers and storytellers.
Staff photo by Leslie Bridgers

Misha Linnehan
age 11

I am from Linnehan and Murphy,
Finkelhor and Samuels.
I am from synagogues and chapels
both, rabbi and priest.
I am from marsh stretched to crack,
and Suburbia pressure.
I am from the monopolies of
American freedom.
I am from a worthless pigsty of
propaganda, and a mansion of
words and letters.
I am from relations of the age of fear
and lies.
I am from grease and salt, and
dashes of soda and flavor.
I am from the cafés and stores of
smalltown suburbs, from malls and
markets.
I am from baseball and football, and
Brady and Ortiz.
I am from tightly sketched roads and
vividly written highways.
I am from history and future, from
this world and others.
I am from a nation of allegory, but

"Misha" see page 9

Emily Tolman
age 13

I am from the sandy beaches,
Their shores lined with green paint
I am from the grey lines that follow
my pencil everywhere,
I am from the lakes and the songs of
the loons,
I am from the beam of light erupting
from a lighthouse,
I am from the crazy contraption that
works in my head,
I am from the stories untold,
The amber flames that lick hungrily at
the timber,
From the role of film capturing movies,
To the blue oceans its companion
black islands,
I am from my pencil which is hard at
work right,
From the long walks to Angel Falls,
I am from Brandon, Cameron, Abby,
To Maggie, Anna, Ellie, Zach and Jill,
And Nani, Papa, Kathy, Greg, Gema,
Gempa,
I am from the from the mountains of
chocolate I wish to own,

"Emily" see page 9

Andrea Tolman
age 13

I'm from Scarborough Maine,
I'm from Nani, John, and
the little girl Emi
From aroma of the marsh grass
From the solitary cry of a loon in
Rangeley.
I am from the the strange
mummichugs that one would
believe as fantasy.
I am from the vast expanse of
ordinary,
And the white chalk of the baseball
diamond underneath Scarborough
High.
I am from the breakfast casserole,
From the "quick hide it under the
table!"
I am from the ecstatic and
unpredictable,
From random bliss
From random depression
From random nervousness
I am from the writing in the middle
of the night when my parents think
I'm asleep.

"Andrea" see page 9

Mariah Volk
age 13

I am from Amy and Derek, Nana,
Papa, Mimi, Grampie
I am from Maine: the rocky coastline
to the "skyscrapers" of Portland.
From vacations in Florida, Red
Sox games, Lee and back to
Scarborough.
From singing and acting, going to
church, and family dinners.
I am from softball: the hot dirt field
with no shade.
I am from waterskiing and tubing,
ice skating and sledding, from the
s'mores to the cocoa.
From Broadway plays, Thanksgiving
with the family, and four-wheeler
rides getting lost!
I am from "Try your best," "Never
give up," and "Good work."
From comedy and "rock and roll."
From Volk Packaging and Pa Ben and
boxes.
I'm from robins and huskies.
Marlee, Winnie and Boomer, Carly,
Little Jerry, Stella and more
From love and happiness.
I am from ME.

Adventures with PhenomeMom...

A story for writers and cat lovers

Most of the activities I suggest are immediately shot down by the little critic. So you can understand my utter shock when I announced Winter was attending "Wharf Kitties," a writing workshop — and she was ecstatic. Thrilled, even! I'm not sure if it was the kitties part, as she is a cat whisperer, or the writing part, as she is an avid writer — she even refuses phone calls while working on her "book." Either way, I found an activity that needed no coaxing and I was on top of the momming world.

Winter hurried home from school giving us just enough time to walk down to Commercial Street. The Telling Room's new space is adorable — exposed brick walls, view of the harbor, steel bulletin boards, writing areas, shadow boxes with profiles of noteworthy people.

The kids filed in and sat around the table, ready to write a quick story using the starter sentences given. They were instructed not to worry about spelling or whether the story was true, and to use only their young imaginations.

They enthusiastically wrote and read their little stories, discussed last week's kitty finds and prepared to head to the wharf in search of kitties and inspiration. Before leaving home base, the Cat-O-Meter was brought out, which allowed the kids to reveal their motivation for being there — love of kitties, love of writing, parent's made them attend, or somewhere in between. Winter was smack in the middle of loving kitties and writing — just as I suspected.

On the way to the wharf, we discussed kitty respect, which meant we were to move slowly and quietly, because the kitties are skittish, and we shouldn't stare because it is taken as a threat. The kids were given goals to name the kitties they found, think about the setting using their five senses, put themselves in the place of the kitty and write their thoughts in the little notebooks they were given. Imagination reigned and they were not to allow anyone else's ideas to infringe on theirs.

Stepping quietly, we searched through the mostly silent wharf behind Sapporo. The distant buzz of electric tools, kid whispers and seagull cries were the soundtrack to our adventure. We all crept around until a black kitty lounging inside a lobster trap, one sunbathing in front a purple shed and another lying on top of a stack of lobster traps were discovered. Winter informed me that the cat on top was a Scottish fold, which I thought was something she made up — like her Spanish-Canadian math system — until I Googled it later and found out she knows her breeds. Whoa!

After tip-toeing and note-taking, the kids discussed what their stories would be as we walked back to The Telling Room. Winter formulated a thriller where kitties were chased and captured by animal control and other kitty-catchers. She began writing as soon as we returned. All the kids were scribbling the beginnings of their wharf kitty adventures.

I was in awe. I'd never seen children so excited about writing. I might've squeezed out a little tear of joy. Here, pride in writing and confidence in storytelling is cultivated. The Telling Room fosters free thought within programs that develop good writing skills — pre-writing to get the juices flowing, reminders to use all senses for inspiration, note-taking and writing while experience is fresh. (The public school systems might learn a thing or two from the Telling Room!) I couldn't be more excited about this organization and it's benefit to children in the community.

"Wharf Kitties" is a five-week workshop for ages 8-11 at The Telling Room, located at 225 Commercial St. in Portland. The last class is held Nov. 7 from 3-4 pm. For a schedule of other programs, go to www.tellingroom.org.

Amy and her 9 year-old daughter, Winter, explore activities that are fun for both mom and kid.

Sun Journal
Lewiston, Maine, October 16, 2007

Storytelling from the heart

JOSE LEIVA/SUN JOURNAL

"When I got hurt playing soccer yesterday, I didn't worry because I knew that if I needed to I could go to the doctor without having to bribe the police. I wanted people in Portland to know how bad the police are in Kenya. And I wanted them to know that the police here are helping the people. ..." Thus reads one of more than a dozen coming-to-America stories in the "Story House" project on exhibit at the Lewiston Public Library through October. Fifteen Portland-area students originally from Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Sudan worked with professional writers to preserve in text their tales of struggle and hope of getting to the United States, and the challenges they faced upon their arrival. The teens then collaborated with Maine College of Art students to design and build sculptural "story houses" for their personal stories. Viewing the exhibit, from left, are Bengi Saban, Kiim Elmoge and Rahima Deqow.