

Dave Newhouse: Oakland kids open their souls in book form

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Castlemont High School students have life stories to tell. Some of their stories have shocking progressions, while other stories have prematurely tragic endings.

Their gripping stories once were internalized, as the Castlemont kids felt they had no comfortable outlet for their fears, their struggles, their remorse.

Then Marsha Rhynes provided them a much-needed release, a chance to exhale.

Rhynes, an English teacher at Castlemont's Leadership Preparatory High School, decided that her students needed a way to express their suppressed feelings. So she assigned them to put their lives and ambitions into story form.

Magical things resulted. Some deep, personal and talented essays and poems were turned in. Rhynes, who was moved beyond words, informed Castlemont principal Betsye Steele about the literary gold she had discovered.

Steele, who's as passionate as Rhynes about writing as a learning tool, read the students' collective work and was equally moved.

"I call this writing 'scholarly personal narratives,'" Steele said. "Through their writings, they're able to assess, reflect, analyze, connect -- put pieces together."

Rhynes then contacted Barnes & Noble Booksellers, seeking a donation to further the project. The company instead decided to publish the students' work, titled "Write To Live," in partnership with iUniverse.

So the Castlemont kids will have their own book-signing, book-release party at

Barnes & Noble's Emeryville store, at 5604 Bay St., sometime in late November as part of a fundraiser for Castlemont High.

Castlemont's Leadership Preparatory program is a college prep extension of the main high school. However, not every qualified student gets to go to college. Ditiyan Franklin Jr., 17, was shot and killed May 25 -- 15 days before graduating from Castlemont.

"Tears fall now, happiness fades away, cracked now, broken, pain sits in and stays," Tomas Alire, 17, wrote of Franklin's death. "Heart shatters into a million pieces, realization hits you as it becomes ceaseless. Your knees hit the floor and you feel like you can't go anymore. Your eyes become blurry, suddenly you can't see. You sit and question yourself: Why couldn't it have been me?"

The students' stories make you cringe, make you blink.

A stranger comes on campus and touches a female student in a bathroom.

A man pays a family so he can have unsupervised "personal time" with their daughter.

Someone asks a youth if anyone is at home, "so they could try to steal things from our house."

A woman grabs her grandchild by the hair,

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"demanding that she eat the garbage off the floor."

These last four stories were "so powerful," Rhynes said, that she granted the writers anonymity.

East Oakland offers up life with all its challenges: Prostitutes on the corner, drug dealers in doorways, crackheads in the park. Castlemont kids hear gunshots, walk by yellow tape on the sidewalk, watch neighbors cry over slain loved ones, and go to sleep listening to sirens wail.

"We're the survivor generation," a Castlemont student wrote of Oakland's inner-city teenagers, referring to those who do survive.

Dennis McElroy III, 17, finds an escape through his dreams.

"To everyone," he wrote, "dreams mean different things: possibility, mistakes, barriers, creation, solitude, confusion, emotions, memories and confessions. One thing to remember: Don't let dreams control your life; they won't come true unless you choose to make them a reality. You are the creator; you are in control -- not your dreams. Believe in them, but don't let them determine your future."

Elexys Lincoln, 17, thinks poetry will be the "door opening" to her becoming a writer.

"It is the pain in my heart and the thoughts in my head," she wrote, "that keep me going. ... I plant my thoughts in a pot of rich soil and hope that my mind's captivating flower will sprout and bloom into a strong vibrant flower. Now that I am writing, I feel free. My poetry is my voice; it is now my cry to the heavens. I am all alone in this world, but my pen and paper never left my side."

Inner-city kids just need a chance to be brilliant, and they can be with the enlightened guidance of someone such as Rhynes.

"This anthology is an urban song," she wrote as a preface to "Write To Live." "This anthology is a cautionary tale ... a tribute to resilience and fortitude. These are our children. These are their stories."

And we need to guide these children safely into adulthood.



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