

Building a Creative Community: Lessons Learned from Efforts to Expand a Youth Social Justice Writing Internship in a Pandemic

Heather Murphy Sloane, Duvonna Goins, Amy Rowe, Nick Meuser, Dai’ja Banks, Lori Lux, and Tulani Black

Abstract: This is a firsthand account of efforts made to expand a social justice writing mentoring internship during the COVID-19 changes to universities and public schools that began March 2020. The Fearless Writers project was put in place to disrupt neighborhood segregation experienced in the United States by partnering university students with inner-city public high school students. This account incorporates creative writing produced during this time within the internship, with the permission of the writers. These small written pieces serve as evidence of thoughts and feelings shared by members of this unique creative community during a time of health and racial crisis. Reflections are shared about the challenges of continuing a social work internship, including the risk of not knowing what would happen to the project that was constantly shifting while local and state governments were scrambling to plan for community safety.

Keywords: COVID–19, social justice, disparity, advocacy

Fearless Writers: Brief Project Overview

The Fearless Writers (FW) project is a five-year collaboration between public high schools and a university social work program in Ohio. This project began with the assistance of an MSW student who was an intern with the primary author at another setting and oversaw an afterschool program with one of the city high schools. The Amherst Writers and Artists writing group method (Schneider, 2003) was utilized with a pilot group of freshman high school youth from Toledo public schools. It was this original group who named the project Fearless Writers (Sloane, 2019). The majority of these middle-school students went on to write throughout their four years of high school. Originally, the project took place during the day at a time when students normally had a study hall. After the pilot year, the project was then made available to additional high-school freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors involved in an enrichment program at the school and was introduced to the students by their classroom teachers.

After the program’s pilot year, the older students received opportunities for autoethnographic research. In the first year of research, the FW were included in an exploration of neighborhood segregation with me (Sloane). As the result of previous research interviewing physicians about their understandings of poverty, I hypothesized that social separation was contributing to misunderstandings of race and economic status within health care practices (Sloane, 2015). After this initial year, high school students generated the research topics and led the discussions. The university students and faculty facilitator would create writing prompts based on research literature and popular media about the topic, inspired by discussions within the group.

I am a social work faculty member trained in Amherst Writers and Artists writing group methods created by Pat Schneider (2003). I also serve as the main facilitator of FW. The university students involved in the project are trained in the writing group method and write with the high school students using prompts. Both high school students and university mentors share their raw written pieces, often completed in five to seven minutes. All group members are encouraged to give strengths-based feedback about what aspect of another's writing they found powerful. This writing and feedback process can be very therapeutic, but the purpose of the writing isn't therapy; it is to recognize and respect each member as a writer and artist. This raw writing also serves as evidence of each member's thoughts, feelings, and perspectives on the topic of focus for the year. These written experiences then serve as field notes in a collaborative autoethnographic investigation.

FW is intended as a social justice intervention. Everyone gives feedback because every member of the group has an important and unique voice. The group reminds each member that their perspective matters. This nurturing of voice then extends to high school students leading participatory action research (see Eubanks, 2011) using collaborative autoethnographic methods (see Lockford & Pelias, 2021). Participant researchers make observations about the world around them; these observations are put into cultural context through discussion with those of differing perspective and in conversation with other researchers (Ellis et al., 2010). The hope of FW is to encourage confidence in young people's voice and to nurture advocacy. Students involved in FW have investigated important topics like social separation, gun violence, and stereotypes. The students involved in FW have presented at the annual Human Trafficking & Social Justice Conference (HT & SJ Conference) (2017–2021) at the University of Toledo and the Black Issues Conference (2020–2021) at Bowling Green State University; in addition, these students have been published in the interdisciplinary journal *the quint* (Sloane, 2019).

The students of FW have been a part of the HT & SJ Conference at the University of Toledo since their humble beginnings in 2017. The conference has several exhibits each year to highlight the importance of art to social justice awareness. Local visual artists have been invited to create artwork to accompany the high school student and mentor writing pieces, and materials are presented about the theme of the research for the year (Sloane, 2019). Both the Amherst Artist and Writers method and autoethnographic research emphasize the importance of audience to the writing process and to the research process (Ellis et al., 2010; Schneider, 2003). FW has benefitted from the support of the HT & SJ Conference as an opportunity to get the students' work out to an audience for feedback—and as an experience seeing firsthand the power of their words, thoughts, and experiences in better understanding their chosen social justice issue.

Leading up to March 2020, the writing groups were facilitated in person; the facilitator and university mentors would meet at the high school during the school day twice a week. The university students were from professional programs including social work, physical therapy, nursing, medicine, and pharmacy. For students training to be healthcare professionals, the writing groups are an opportunity to learn about the realities of neighborhoods outside of their experience in order to dispel stereotypes and to increase empathy and understanding about how social determinants impact health outcomes.

Changing to a virtual format during COVID-19 restrictions allowed the project to consider the inclusion of multiple high schools, a hope of the FW members from the class of 2019 who had studied the cost of racial and economic separation in the United States (Sloane, 2019). Leading up to the school closings in March, several writing groups had been held with a rural area public school in hopes of bringing two high schools together to write as a combined group. COVID-19 was an excuse for the project to be in several schools at one time. This expansion would bring students from very different neighborhoods together to learn from each other and create connection despite social separation.

A social work internship was developed at the same time as the FW project after the initial spring semester FW pilot in 2017. The social work internship was developed with three education interprofessional interventions, FW being only one aspect of the student learning (Sloane et al., 2020). The internship started as part of a Medicaid grant program encouraging interprofessional healthcare students to work in underserved communities. Over the years, the internship had been attractive to a diverse group of college students, because the hours tended to be flexible and the experience had micro and macro-level learning opportunities. The internship allowed students a chance to learn more about the city the university is located in; several students mentioned this experience influenced their future goals to pursue community organizing and start urban agencies. Several of the student interns were from the Detroit, Baltimore, or Cleveland areas. We had only one intern who graduated from the high school where the initial program was started over five years earlier. Other students were interested in working with young people, and the social work program had limited opportunities to work with adolescents. Social work students with a love of creative writing were also attracted to the internship. The project has been fortunate to attract several university interns who are Black leaders at the university and in their home communities.

Inspired by Bobby Seale's opening speech at the Black Issues Conference at Bowling Green State University in February 2020, FW chose to focus on and create writing prompts inspired by the history of Black neighborhoods in Toledo for the academic year of 2020–2021. The internship team began looking for what we could find about Black life in Toledo from local newspaper archives and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. We found very little initially, save a picture of a child at a clothing closet with Black Panther posters in the background. We also learned of a Social Justice Community Day that occurred in Toledo July 1972 and was sponsored by the Black Panthers, where there was food and clothing distribution, information about voting, and sickle cell testing. As a writing community, the students involved in FW have always gravitated to topics that helped them better understand systemic racism. The majority of the original high school students involved in FW were African American. The hidden history of Black Toledo became our guiding light for the year. The book *Black Toledo: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Toledo, Ohio* (Alkalimat & Patterson, 2017) was a helpful map to our journey as a group—helping us learn more about the contributions of the Black community in the Toledo area.

The Screen Goes Blank

Nick Meuser and I (Sloane) stumbled into the high school out of the cold wind, our hoods and gloves hastily removed. We were excited to see the kids, but not super thrilled we were not taking every moment of our spring break to relax. We had heard whispers about COVID-19, mostly at the student-run free clinic, but it was still a far-off concern. The mysterious virus would be a storm we hoped would pass us by. We knew a health crisis was coming, but we had no clue of its impact, or how quickly our lives would be consumed with anxiety about what to do next. The children's written work had just been published in an interdisciplinary journal, and we had just finished presenting at the Black Issues Conference (2020) at another university; it had been a wonderful year for FW. Our triumph was barely celebrated when the university and the high school were abruptly shut down to prevent the spread of the virus, and the project jolted to a stop. During our last time together face-to-face, we attempted a poetry prompt with the juniors with no luck. The kids wanted to talk about the virus. I tried to reassure them, but I felt ill-informed. Nick, too, tried to give room for expression of anxiety without flaming fear. After that day, we put the students' notebooks into the storage cabinet, not knowing we would not return to the high school. Of our thirty writers involved in the in-person writing project, only seven of these original students would regularly participate in our virtual writing group opportunities. Excerpts from the writing groups over the time of the COVID-19 restrictions will be shared throughout this article.

Flashbulb

By Nick Meuser, MSW intern, February 2020. This piece was performed at the Black Issues Conference (2020).

Prompt: A video on social media of guns being fired at a local high school's football game (13 ABC News, 2019).

It's like time freezes. Everything still clatters at full trot but your brain's going that much faster, so you see it all at once. They call them flashbulb memories. Something so intense that you remember everything in perfect clarity, like it was a picture taken. That's why trauma hurts as bad as it does. It sticks with you, all the horrible details splayed out across your mind, creeping into your subconscious. And it sticks there, maybe forever. Our minds are a tapestry of these moments, some beautiful and some horrid. And I don't know what to do about that. These memories make our minds, and our minds make ourselves, but there comes a point when taking the bad with the good becomes unbearable. I don't blame the suicidal. They know things I don't. They've seen things and they know.

Shifting Gears

The university students involved with FW have been a diverse group, but the majority of those training to be professionals in health care are white and from suburban neighborhoods. In past years our group had looked at redlining policies and why neighborhoods are segregated for the most part in the United States (Anderson, 2019). We had also spent time looking closely at gun

violence in the city, including deaths due to police brutality. Looking back at Black Power movements in our community seemed a fitting next step in the project. However, maintaining a focus on the history of Black neighborhoods felt problematic as concerns about COVID-19 consumed us and as protests about police brutality brewed again throughout the nation. The thirty students that had originally inspired the investigation into the history of Black neighborhoods were no longer our main participants.

As a scholar well-versed in racial health disparities, I was not surprised that COVID-19 would hit the students involved in FW harder. As Tricia Rose from Brown University (2020) points out in her presentation about COVID-19 and systemic racism, the ways in which a serious illness like COVID-19 impacts neighborhoods of color are complex. Disasters—in this case, a pandemic—intensify inequality. In the United States people of color are 2.6 times more likely to have severe symptoms and die from COVID-19 (Brown University, 2020). The FW team had information about racial disparities in part due to legislative pressure to be transparent about how racial health inequality is reflected during a health crisis of this nature (Oaklander, 2020). The Equitable Data Collection and Disclosure on COVID-19 Act has put this information at our fingertips (Oaklander, 2020).

When I checked the state webpage during that 2020–2021 academic year for weekly status reports about COVID-19, the virus’s impact on minorities was visible. I also realized we were experiencing the added pressure of the political chaos going on in the United States with a national administration outspoken about its lack of concern for communities of color. The US was at a disadvantage in fighting COVID-19 because many citizens did not trust their government, there was no centralized way to distribute health resources, the US had little experience with pandemics, and our nation had gained a reputation of not getting along with other countries (*The Economist*, 2020). COVID-19 was only part of the difficulty the students and the project were facing; we were also living through a political storm.

Rose discusses how redlining policies have set up decades of inequality surrounding housing (Brown University, 2020). Black communities have more crowding, less access to sanitation, and more housing instability; therefore, Black communities experience increased homelessness during times of economic crisis. In addition, many hospitals close to neighborhoods of color have been closed over the past several decades, and this has decreased health access for many families. Living through regular experiences of discrimination also contributes to pre-existing conditions that put people of color at higher risk for poor outcomes of COVID-19 (Sloane, 2015). Rose mentions these communities’ fear of mistreatment due to noted health care atrocities endured by communities of color in the United States; Rose also points out that front-line health and municipal workers are disproportionately women of color (Brown University, 2020).

Even though I was aware that these challenges would be present for most of the project’s original high school students and the university students of color, I was not sure in what ways the project would be impacted. Hints might appear in the students’ writing, but their words would never fully give me a picture of their experience of COVID-19. It was a challenging time to figure out a way to properly empathize and to shift in ways that would be sensitive. Again, the

mission and vision of the FW project is to nurture students' voices and encourage advocacy, but not to use the project for a political agenda, even if an important political issue was unfolding in front of us. Because of these reasons, the FW team decided to stick to the original plan and learn more about the history of Black neighborhoods in our city instead of focusing on the current COVID-19 disparity concerns.

Get out the dirt

By Duvonna Goins, MSW intern, March 2020. This piece was a part of the virtual exhibit linked to the 2020 HT & SJ Conference.

Prompt: A discussion of the concept of the “shadow beast” created by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987).

I lay covered in dirt; I've given up on the ideas I've once had to be the best and to speak my truth. This so-called journey of self-discovery is too hard for me, too painful, too raw. I lay on my back covered in defeat and dirt trapped beneath the weight of their words. I close my eyes for a second. I thought I heard something it sounds so faint... Then I can hear it, I think I hear it again that old hymn my grandma used to sing in her kitchen... “nobody told me that the road would be easy, I don't believe he has brought me this far to leave me.” I hear it get brighter and louder as I force my feet to do what they had once stopped doing ...PUSHING. They pushed and pushed and pushed for me to rise over the boulder that once sat flat on my chest. I'm too close to my goals to give up now.

Virtual Spring

I (Sloane) remember reading through the thorough email . . . my mind racing with the new (seemingly impossible) expectations . . . my classes will go online, and I will do my best to serve my students remotely for the rest of the semester. Luckily, online teaching was not new to me. My bigger worry was maintaining an internship for three interns, two foundation students, and one advanced MSW student. Every aspect of the internship would need to be online. The students were not to be exposed to the virus, and hours of virtual social work experience would need to be generated with little to no time or guidance given by university administrators. When spring break was over, we would no longer be on campus. Fast and furious emails were sent to the high school: Could we go online? What format was allowable? Luckily, we had direct contact established with most of the high school students. We invited high school alumni and past mentors to join us in the virtual writing group as incentive for the students to rejoin us online. Our other hope was that FW online would support a creative community where people could connect and express themselves at a time of stress and isolation. Students came to the video camera from home, some rushing off to newfound jobs, others distracted by cries—we discovered which students were asked to watch their family's babies so that parents and aunts and uncles could go to work. Overall, attendance was slim. The dedicated group was the interns and the former students and mentors who came back to write and to share space. For many, their lives were uncertain and isolated. Our prompts focused on resilience.

Untitled

By Austen Allen (former high school student FW member) April 2, 2020. This piece was a part of the virtual exhibit linked to the 2020 HT & SJ Conference.

Prompt: “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou (1978).

So very in touch . . . Sorry but your words are my pages . . . I have nothing further to offer than the truth you share . . . we all can't hear . . . Most are still listening.

Internship Context

When looking at the resources generated for social work educators by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2020), our internship situation was not different from others across the country— according to the “pulse” survey of social work programs, over 99 percent of field programs underwent modifications to accommodate the adjustments made to the social work profession for COVID-19. We went remote and worked with the students using Zoom. The interns worked on projects from home, considered how to expand the program, designed the prompt plans for the following year, explored possible grant opportunities, and gathered student and mentor writing for the HT & SJ Conference for September 2020. Our supervision became virtual. The internship was now in great part learning to shift in a crisis. In reality, the students were a part of building something new. This shift required all of us. There was a demand for maturity that was not normally a necessity for students in their spring semester of their internship. Our team was living what it meant to be resilient. We were doing all it took to stay positive and to hold space. At times it felt like a sacred ritual; we were writing in honor of the students that could not attend for all the variety of reasons that came with COVID-19, including technology deficits that were slowly being addressed by the state and the public school district.

Untitled

By Heather Sloane, faculty, April 2, 2020. This piece was a part of the virtual exhibit linked to the 2020 HT & SJ Conference.

Prompt: “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou (1978).

Just like the moon,
I control the tide.
I can wash words,
looks, and cruelty from
my skin.
I am the water crashing against the rock of injustice.
Slowly sculpting, ripping away at it with salt and tenacity.
I can be counted on to storm and thrash into fear.
I cannot be killed by hatefulness.
Just like the moon

I control the tide.
Don't be fooled by my stillness, my calm, or moments when I appear defeated.
It is but a moment.
My rage will build into waves and waves into torrents.
My voice and actions will take their toll.

This Will Be Over

It was still early in what would be a long delay in “normal,” and I (Sloane) was still hopeful for an early end to the shutdown—and to the quarantine. By the second summer session, I thought, “This will be over, and we will return to all the fall things.” It motivated me to get through the days to be positive and believe strongly that this interruption would be temporary. This was also the attitude of my associate dean and chair, which matched the overall attitude in my college that this, COVID-19, would pass, we would get through this, we were there for each other. Motivation was still fairly easy to muster at this time.

Summer Prep: Should I . . . Should I Not?

The internship team had grand plans to attend our original FW graduation; in the end, graduation was a parade of cars for only parents and students. I reached out to the graduates about the possibility of participating in youth video stories being put together by a theatre professor at the university. Each student could craft a podcast using written pieces from the group or a memory of their time in the city as a young person. We had no senior takers, but two juniors rushed to the opportunity. I worked with the university to see if an op-ed could be published in the city paper with the writing of one of our graduating seniors. This was right before the Black Lives Matter protests began again across the county. The student was excited for the opportunity. I asked her to talk with her parents and make sure because she was no longer a minor, but her writing would impact her entire family once published. When the protests resulted in violent backlash in the city, her parents decided not to publish. The student’s writing discussed race and gun violence in our city. Her parents felt it would be too dangerous for her to voice her opinion so publicly.

Hanging On

By Amy Rowe, MSW intern, April 3, 2020. This piece was a part of the virtual exhibit linked to the 2020 HT & SJ Conference.

Prompt: An image of three animated characters hanging onto a piece of photographed wheat being whipped by the wind.

I am hanging on.
Though distractions may try to pull me away,
I am hanging on.
While death, disease, destruction and even desperation whip me about,
I am hanging on.
Misinformation threatens to send me off in other directions.

Anxiety seeks to cripple me.
Fear is tugging at me.
Still . . .
I am hanging on.
I cannot hang on to leadership—
Leaders are merely human and thus with inherent fault and flaws.
I cannot hang on to data—
The numbers change with the blowing wind.
I can only hang on to faith.
and hope,
and kindness.
I am hanging on.
I will not let go.
I am hanging on.

One Last Chance

With the lack of participation by the high school students and the teachers at the high school, I began to imagine a host of awful narratives. I wondered how many of the kids were facing added responsibilities when their parents were likely forced to work and putting themselves at risk of getting sick. At one point a student talked about missing his grandparents, who he normally saw every Sunday. As much as the kids had shared over the years about the importance of their grandparents, I guessed most were missing hugs and their grandmother's food. I worried about how the students were not participating in extracurricular activities that were enriching their learning and were valuable experiences to take credit for when applying to college. My one colleague's father died due to complications of COVID-19, and I was inspired by how she utilized her sorrow to highlight the racial disparities in our city surrounding the virus. Due to her loss, I dreaded the increased grief of the high school students in FW on top of the grief at the hand of gun violence that the high school students had already written about (Sloane, 2019). As time went on, the kids at least checked in with us, even if they couldn't write. Several of the kids wrote into the prompt given to them for the summer at the end of spring semester. The prompt was one last chance for creativity, and for students that chose to write based on the summer prompt, there was still the possibility of their voice being added to the HT & SJ youth art exhibit scheduled to be presented virtually in September 2020.

Untitled

By Jalyn Brewington, high school junior, summer 2020. This piece was a part of the virtual exhibit linked to the 2020 HT & SJ Conference.

Prompt: Look out the window... what do you see?

When the hole in your heart is no longer filled, when your family can't even tell that you're ill... I'd give it all away to fight for my dreams, but I realize that me and my emotions we're a team. I can't do anything without them cause all I write is how they feel. Every single damn piece, the

pain, the laughs, the smiles, and the tears. So maybe I'm a mess, I thought we knew that already but I'm the best mess that I've ever seen because each piece is from something left over. Each from a time where I was broken, molded together. I'm sick of pretending I'm fine, I'm sick of having to lie to people who I could inspire instead. Why is it so bad if sometimes, I wish I were dead? Or if my depression engulfs me whole, I still come out with a brand-new glow, it's a brand-new person who keeps coming out and they're ready to shout with the scream in their lungs. Staring at the sun, she's ready for whatever is thrown.

Holding Space to Build a Community

I (Sloane) received several requests from field directors over the summer to take a student, because the spaces for remote internships were few. I was not sure if it was a good idea to take interns. With the help of a social work administrator in the school district's newly created Department of Diversity and Inclusion, I was able to find three teachers committed to expanding the program with their students. As a team, we thought we could start there: We chose to take interns. I interviewed the teachers late spring and over the summer and let them in on the possibilities of the FW project in COVID-19 times. I was honest about what worked and didn't work in the virtual spring, and I shared what experiences I was hoping to provide the students and the teachers. I had no guarantees. I interviewed three students, and I was very honest with them about the risk we would be taking. I was committed to creating the best internship possible and would work closely with the field liaisons and field directors to make sure the social work students had a well-rounded internship. The students were willing to take the risk with me. The decision was made again with a new set of interns to stick with the focus on Black Panther activity in Toledo, and I found a book that would ground us, *Black Toledo: A Documentary History of the African American Experience in Toledo, Ohio*, edited by Abdul Alkalimat and Rubin Patterson (2017). Our fingers were crossed, and our intention was clear.

New Community

It was too late to back out—we were moving forward no matter what. There was a shift in my attitude. I needed to contribute to the solution. I was asking my faculty as an administrator to do more. I needed to do more. I was hopeful for the possibility of three new teachers involved in the project and the fruitful discussions over the summer with principals. I was grateful for a grounding text, *Black Toledo* (2017). Ideally, this would be a success, and the students would be a part of the expansion. Ideally, the students would be proud of their efforts. At the worst, I began wondering, what can be learned from failure?

In the beginning, however, we held onto excitement about learning more about the city and meeting new students. The interns worked early on curating the student writing from the academic year 2019–2020 for the September (2020) HT & SJ Conference. This allowed the interns to learn about the students' lives through the creative writing pieces. Before seeing a face (more likely hearing a voice) in the virtual classroom, the student interns were building a rapport through reading carefully and writing to parents and students about their excitement to be present for more creation in the writing groups. The interns were asked to read *Writing Alone and with Others* (Schneider, 2003) and *Black Toledo* (Alkalimat & Patterson, 2017) to be

familiar with the intervention model and the history of Black neighborhoods in the city. The internship team did some practice writing groups with students in the social work program and with each other; their resulting writings inspired me. Each intern had a unique voice, and they had varying levels of comfort sharing their writing gifts. All three interns were excellent at giving each other strengths-based feedback. We were ready.

Together United

By Dai'ja Banks, MSW intern, September 2020.

Prompt: Pictures of “community” curated by the interns.

Bring everyone that you can, get everyone together. Everyone is welcome to join. The broken, whole, used, abused, loved and unloved, just bring them all. Gather everyone you can so we make each other whole again. Feel the love that we have to offer each other. Make this a celebration where all hearts gather together and become one.

Teacher Allies

The internship team had several of the original students join in with technical difficulties. The teachers at the high school let us come in and sit in their classes virtually to get students excited to join us. Unfortunately, the teachers had very limited remote time with their students each week; and, since a writing group takes about an hour, none of the teachers were willing to sacrifice an hour in the hybrid limitations of their weeks. This was understandable but heartbreaking. We had some new students join us from other high schools who had been referred by two of the teachers and principals that I had courted during the summer, and we had initial interest from three other high schools outside of this grouping. There was also interest by an agency for homeless youth and the juvenile court system, but those possibilities did not materialize. Hope Bland, one of the administrators for Diversity and Inclusion for Toledo Public Schools, assisted us in reaching out to all principals in the district to see if other students would join us; and, after lots of effort on the part of the internship team, we were able to build a small, reliable writing community.

The joy for all of us seemed to be the powerful writing produced by our participants—both at the high school and university level—inspired by our exploration of the impact the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement had on our city. These topics were new to the participants, but the poets, artists, and activists we were honoring inspired us. It was clear that the Black community had created incredible contributions to the life and personality of the city. With all that was going on for all of us due to COVID-19 and the political storm, these resilient figures were an inspiration that triumph can come from disasters.

There was also shared anger and frustration with the regular demonstrations of racism in our country as the group faced the presidential election and rising COVID-19 numbers. I had taken on more responsibility as a teacher, as a supervisor... and it would take a toll on me over the

semester. When the interns doubted our possible success, I am not too proud to admit, so did I. I had to be resilient for all of us, and I am not sure I was (or am) capable of that level of positivity.

Speak the Truth

By Lori Lux, MSW intern, November 7, 2020.

Prompt: The poem “Speak Truth to People” by Mari Evans in our exploration of the Black Arts Movement.

the truth fell from the cosmos
landed with a glittering crash
on the sidewalks of subsidized housing
in the schoolyards
on the backs of immigrant workers
they felt the impact
grabbed jars and ran
scooped up what remained
holding in clutched hands
jars of sparkling truth
wondering
who let it go
and how do we find all the pieces

Interprofessional Mentoring

The internship teams of the past had struggled to involve interprofessional students from the university. During our program’s first full year, we were lucky to attract students from pharmacy and medicine, with occasional visits from nursing and speech pathology, but the project was held together by social work interns and social work volunteer mentors. This difficulty in recruiting students from other programs was in part due to drastic curriculum changes in the health professions that gave the students very little time for outside volunteer work. COVID-19 opened new possibilities with virtual volunteer options for interprofessional students. The FW project benefitted from dedicated volunteer mentors from medicine, physical therapy, and nursing. The project attracted students in health care professions who were concerned with disparities. These students saw the project as a helpful opportunity to engage with the community, and to learn from young people from neighborhoods that were known to be underserved as well as young people who also shared concerns for injustice. It was inspiring to learn about the commitment of these young professionals who volunteered their limited time and led their cohorts in considering ways to improve inequity in care.

Imparting

By Clair Scantling, October 2020.

Prompt: Photographs of peace protests and Black Panther protests from the 1970s.

how do you see?
the angle of a clothing rack
the elevation of her arm
the color of my skin my hair my clothes?
with gratitude?
in protest?
together, different.
each to each.
we mattered.
no, we matter.
do you see me?
we cry we leap we stumble we sing
hear our tunes
hear the marching of our feet
our vibrance our grief; together each
have carried us far
—we have swum with sharks
and waded in still waters—
can i trust you to hold?
that we have held utter heart-sinking tragedy
with ferocious empowerment
together in the same breath, in the same body
together with depth.
there lingers a frog in my throat
a gaping hole in my chest
a glimmer in my eyes
dear child, there is still time yet.

Truth

After several months, the strangest part of the remote internship for us was the experience of working all day combined other important aspects of life such as family. It was hard to determine where work started and ended. Keeping track of personal time was difficult, and the interns were encouraged to create a through-the-door moment each day walking in and a closing-the-door-behind moment walking out, wherein they would imagine leaving behind their distractions at the threshold. The internship team was working hard to maintain space for roughly seven students, and they regularly questioned if all the work and energy was worth it.

After discussing the prompts used throughout the semester, the internship team briefly discussed the feminist political idea of utopia. I had learned in my PhD program that critical thought surrounding discrimination often involved imagining a world without discrimination. The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement also used the political possibility of utopia, and many of the writers and artists we visited were writing from imagined spaces without discrimination. Tulani (BSW student) was the person to advocate for us reading the book *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (Zamalin, 2019). Looking to visual art and poetry inspired by Black utopia has been fruitful so far, and the high school students have found the prompts inspiring.

We chose you.

By Tulani Black, BSW intern, December 2020.

Prompt: Several artistic representations of Black utopia.

We chose you,
The time is here
Everything that you've worked for
Everything that you've manifested
It's here.
Step into the world of knowing
Step into the world of pure bliss
Drink from my magical pond,

Feel the magic that lives in the water move through you.
This is the perfect place for you.
It's what you've always wanted.
Listen to the animals of my Earth
They will guide you.
If you need direction look to the rainbow
Let the colors of nature be your guide.
You've longed for the perfect world your whole life.
The perfect world was already within you

Conclusion

COVID-19 is not the only crisis that social work programs have faced over the years, and it will not be the last national/global crisis. It is important to look for past examples of resilience for answers. When studying social work student recommendations about internships after surviving a hurricane, students point out how important it is to be sensitive to the loss of normal students' experiences (Loudd et al., 2018). It is also important to be flexible and to have weeks be as predictable as possible. Students also benefitted from regular opportunities to express emotion and regular reminders about deadlines and how to proceed. Students agreed that chances to lead and make a difference in the aftermath of a crisis were a unique learning opportunity.

Many publications have stressed the importance of this COVID-19 moment to prompt creativity and to build community (Felsenthal, 2020; Turnbull, 2020). An example of this is the statement of the new editorial board of *Reflections*; the board points out that, in this strange time, it is important to “remain hopeful that all of us discover new and even more meaningful ways to show up for one another in both our spaces of professional practice and our communities at large” (Bailey et al., 2020, p. 5).

FW is excited for the opportunities that are in front of our internship team for spring 2021, including a writing retreat for area teachers and the creation of a youth social justice community day to include speakers who encourage youth advocacy. The youth social justice community day will also highlight the writing of the students from the FW project and other area writers produced during the 2020–2021 academic year. We believe our writing community is finding new ways to show up for the university students and high school students this project serves. This can be a time to bring people together and create spaces specifically for individuals typically marginalized in a crisis to share stories of fear and discrimination as well as resilience and triumph. We are passionately striving for connection and creating opportunities to express feelings, stay connected, and have moments of mindfulness.

Untitled

By Amariano Williams, high school junior, October 2020.

Prompt: Images of autumn.

Should I let my emotions take the best of me?
Sometimes I feel as if I’m just a leaf on a tree branch waiting to be reborn.
As the seasons change so do my colors onto the leaf
but as winter comes my colors disappear and I begin to fall
I know that soon
I will be reborn as something much greater than my last leaf
More than a part of the tree branch.

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About the Authors: Heather Murphy Sloane, PhD, LISW is Associate Professor, College of Health and Human Services, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH (419-530-5188, heather.sloane@utoledo.edu); Duvonna Goins is MSW Student, College of Health and Human Services, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH (443-557-8230, duvonna.goins@rockets.utoledo.edu); Amy Rowe, MSW, LSW is Cofounder and Outreach Director for Monarch Grief Center, College of Health and Human Services, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH (419-509-3456, arowe@monarchgriefcenter.org); Nick Meuser, MSW, LSW is Clinical Therapist, College of Health and Human Services, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH (419-389-2998, nick.mueser@gmail.com); Dai'ja Banks, MSW is Student, College of Health and Human Services, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH (313-694-6614, daija.banks@utoledo.edu); Lori Lux, MSW is Student, College of Health and Human Services, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH (419-450-8244, lori.lux@rockets.utoledo.edu); Tulani Black, BSW is Student, College of Health and Human Services, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH (216-456-6263, tulaniblack0@gmail.com).