

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Mentoring at Girls Write Now

by Nan Bauer-Maglin



MENTEES AND MENTORS OF THE CLASS OF 2017 CELEBRATE THE START OF A NEW SCHOOL YEAR AT THE 2016 FALL ORIENTATION!

Part One:

Girls Write Now: The Mentoring Project

Founded in 1998, Girls Write Now (GWN) mentors underserved high school girls from throughout New York City's five boroughs—over 90% high need and 95% girls of color.¹ GWN runs two programs for mentors and mentees: the Writing & Mentoring and Digital Media Mentoring programs. The Writing & Mentoring program currently has 180 people (90 mentees, 90 mentors) and the Digital Media Mentoring program has 100 people (50 mentees, 50 mentors). This article is about the writing program as that is the one I volunteer for.

When I fully retired from CUNY after 27 years in community college developmental writing and composition classrooms, I knew I did not want to teach in the traditional sense—large classes of students whose writing needed a lot of attention and no time with my teaching load to do that. I had had it! But with mentoring in GWN, I have returned to a form of teaching that is not only rewarding but also stimulating. At my age (75), it probably makes more sense for me to be on the board or on one of the advising committees, but I really wanted to work one-on-one with a young woman who was enthusiastic about writing and whom I might help.

To communicate the complexity and the richness of mentoring at GWN, I asked six mentors a series of questions. These mentors range from brand new this year, like Lucy Frank and Sara Radin, to those who have mentored for ten years, like Heather Kristin; their ages are from 25 to 69 (not including me). Most are not retired, but work at a variety of jobs and, typical to these economic times, many balance more than one job to survive in NYC.

Nicole Counts, 25: I am a book editor. I write short stories, poems, vignettes, and some journalistic pieces.

Sara Radin, 27: I am the Youth Culture Editor for WGSN, a trend forecasting and consumer insight publication. In that role, I consult brands and write about upcoming trends for Millennials and Generation Z. Additionally, I teach the precollege program at the Fashion Institute of Technology and I also run a passion project called *It's Not Personal*, which is a growing anthology and collective inspired by the female dating experience. Outside of all of that, I do memoir writing, often for Bust Magazine Online.

Rachel Cohen, 38: I was a sports reporter for more than 16 years, the last nine-plus at AP. I am currently studying computer programming

Heather Kristin, 40: I'm a memoirist, blogger for The Huffington Post and violin teacher.

Stacie Evans, 54: I work in city government. I taught for many years, but I'm not teaching now. I do write, seemingly all the time.

Lucy Frank, 69: I am a young adult writer.

Despite busy lives, they volunteer to mentor.

Heather: For the past ten years, I've been a mentor at Girls Write Now because growing up in New York City, I had no one to guide me. So I decided to be the mentor I never had. It's thrilling to have sent three young women off to college, and know that I am making a difference in their lives.

Lucy: I never had a mentor when I was young. I want to share what I've learned about writing over all these years with a young woman looking for her voice -- yes, the nuts and bolts, but also the value of discovering what you think and feel, and what it is you want to say, through the process of writing, and how you then nurture the courage, patience, and hope to stay with it.

Girls Write Now asks that mentors and their mentees make a big commitment: for ten months they meet once a week for at least an hour and once a month on a Saturday they attend a genre workshop. The writing genres are the same each year: fiction, memoir, playwriting/screenwriting, poetry, and journalism. However, the sub-genre or specific skill changes each year so that participants in Girls Write Now programming are getting extensive and unique workshops that introduce them to types of writing they are not typically exposed to. Each workshop features a guest speaker who is a professional expert in the genre that is being introduced that day. The workshops are a platform for subsequent sessions between mentee and mentor and are used to motivate the creation of new writing pieces throughout the year. Over the year mentees complete six genre pieces for their online portfolio. In addition, they submit a piece for the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, read a piece at a public gathering at the end of each year, and publish one piece in the GWN yearly anthology.²

For their weekly meetings, mentors and mentees meet throughout the boroughs in libraries, coffee shops, or offices and, when weather permits, outside in parks.

Nicole: We met once a week at a bookstore for a while. When the weather was nice we'd adventure throughout Brooklyn—to Prospect Park, the museum, the botanical gardens. We'd meet for pie and tea.

Sara: We usually meet at a coffee shop in her neighborhood. She lives with her parents in Jackson Heights, Queens, which is a neighborhood I had not been to before meeting her.

Rachel: My current mentee is a senior at Bronx Science; this is our second year together but her fourth in the program. We meet at the Whole Foods on the Upper East Side in the upstairs seating area.

Heather: I meet all my mentees at Starbucks in Union Square. First, we chat about our week, then our lives, and write our dreams.

At these weekly meetings, writing is the first priority. How a writing topic emerges differs with each mentor/mentee pair. Often what was started in the monthly genre workshop will be developed over the subsequent weeks. I would bring in short pieces like the prose poem "Girl", by Jamaica Kincaid, to stimulate my mentee's writing. Often the mentees would have a subject



TASNIM (MENTEE) AND NAN (MENTOR) AT PAIR CHECK-IN, PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

they wanted to write about or a form they wanted to explore. My current mentee said she wanted to work on fantasy flash fiction. I searched Google as I knew nothing of the form (flash fiction) nor did I particularly like fantasy. I found samples that we read and advice on how to write a successful fantasy flash fiction, so it became an educational experience for myself as well as my mentee.

Heather: My mentee and I were struggling with what to write about when I found essay prompts on *The New York Times*. 100 of them!

Stacie: I have an arsenal of them, both from teaching and from my work with my first mentee, but none of the ones I've tried so far really click with my second mentee. What I've found instead is that our conversations spark her writing.

Lucy: We've settled into meeting at a cafe on W 145th St, where we have tea, she fills me in on her week and then, after half an hour or so, she, in an "oh, by the way," sort of way, pulls out her phone and says, "So would you like to see what I did on the . . ." and we work intensely on whatever piece she's preparing.

For an extended description of the writing process—from reading a piece of literature, to freewriting, to first draft and then several subsequent drafts to polished piece—shared by my second mentee and myself, see the second section of this essay.

If the mentee is a junior or senior, often some of the writing time is spent on college essays and scholarship applications. My first mentee and I visited Hunter College together, and we worked on her scholarship applications. She was accepted to a selective arts program at Hunter.

I asked each of the mentors I interviewed to talk about an assignment or moment that especially worked for her mentee. For me, what began as problem turned into success: My first mentee felt blocked about her submission for Chapters (the end of the year public reading). I suggested she free write about why she was blocked. So she wrote about how she is not your normal 16-year-old writer; that she likes dark subjects rather than the usual high school girl obsessions with boys or clothes or even family. We refined her piece for a few months until it was strong, descriptive, and somewhat shocking. Besides gasps from the audience, one audience member put her in touch with Gillian Flynn, as my mentee had referred to Flynn's writing style and subject matter as akin to her own. This published author emailed her and encouraged her to keep following her own unique sensibilities.

Nicole: The first time one of my mentees read at Chapters was, as cliché as this word can be, magical. I have mentored before, and felt pride at watching someone accomplish something, but to sit with someone for months, working and reworking a piece, and to watch them feel

immense pride while performing, it was astounding.

Rachel: Last year, she suggested we attend Cringe Fest, a GWN event in which mentors and mentees read aloud pieces they wrote when they were younger, and we all cringe (in a light-hearted and supportive way) at how bad they are. It was a great bonding experience that strengthened our work together going forward.

Stacie: My mentee struggled with the travel writing portfolio piece. She hasn't traveled and couldn't wrap her head around writing about something close to home. In the end, she decided to try writing something about the coffee shop where we meet, but she wasn't finding her way into the piece. We talked about some of the writing other mentees had shared during the workshop and what we liked about them. And I asked her to tell me why she likes our coffee shop, why she likes it enough to come there with her friends when we're not scheduled to meet. She started to talk about how she feels when she walks into the shop ... and there was her piece! The same method worked when she was finding her way through to the end of her Scholastic story: questions, conversation, inspiration. I don't know if it will be a fool-proof formula, but it's definitely working right now.

Lucy: We went to the Museum of Arts and Design to see their crocheted coral reef exhibit because I am a crochet-er, and she did an internship last summer where she studied the effects of climate change on coral. The replica coral reefs were crocheted from plastics dumped in the ocean. They were very beautiful, and it was fun to see them together, but she also enjoyed that we had an outing together, and that

she had so much to teach me about coral and about climate change.

In terms of what was difficult or problematic, for many mentors the primary problem is scheduling and keeping to the weekly meetings. As Sara says, "Scheduling can be tough—both of us have a lot on our plate on top of school and work." These mentees are ambitious, often taking AP classes and participating in many afterschool activities. For Heather, it is "Geographic issues! For example, my latest mentee lives far from the city and can't always meet."

Other, more subtle, problems are personal and cultural; for example, my two mentees came with their mothers and sisters to our meetings as their family was reluctant to let them travel from Queens into Manhattan by themselves. I felt a bit constrained by this arrangement. The constraint was timewise. One of the mothers assumed the session was for an hour and would hover near us when the hour was up; whereas we needed to let the writing determine how much time we needed. The constraint was more subtly emotional. I felt our exchange was not as free as it could be as it felt less private than it should have been. Both times, their mothers gradually learned to trust me; I think my age was helpful in that. Also, I found particularly safe spaces to meet in: with my first mentee we met in a college and with my second mentee we used Girls Write Now offices. In addition, I suggested I accompany my mentee to the subway and make sure I saw her get on the subway on her way back to Queens. After a few months, they agreed to let their daughter venture out on her own.

There are no rules for developing trust and intimacy among mentee and mentor, especially when the two often are so different in experience, ethnicity, age and social class

There are no rules for developing trust and intimacy among mentee and mentor, especially when the two often are so different in experience, ethnicity, age and social class. Trust is developed over time, fostered by the regular meetings every week and every month as well as the sense of community so carefully constructed by the staff. Also, most mentees come in to the program with a strong sense of commitment—they want to succeed, they want to express themselves in writing. But it does not always work: some mentees or mentors request a different person to work with and some mentees drop out, but that is not the norm.

Stacie: The hardest thing for me is my own worry about whether I'm doing a good job as a mentor. My mentee and I have a fabulous time together (and I always feel re-energized when I leave her and go back to work), but I always wonder what more I could be doing, or how I could be more effective. The mentor manual is helpful, and talking to GWN staff and other

mentors is helpful, too. I still worry. I want her to get the most out of this experience as possible.

Lucy: We come from very different worlds, in almost every way. I sometimes worry that I am assuming I understand what she means when I don't, and that there might be times when I don't even know what I'm not getting. And because she is polite and eager to please, it's sometimes hard to tell what she's feeling.

Each mentor/mentee relationship is different and develops in its own way. What works to motivate your first mentee might not work for the second. This is one way in which mentoring differs from teaching a traditional class. It's true that each such class is different and adjustments need to be made, but the one-on-one experience of mentoring makes those adjustments more immediate and intense.

Stacie: I worked for three years with my first mentee, until she graduated . . . Seeing the change in her writing over the time we worked together was great. I take a tiny bit of credit for that, but mostly it was her growing comfort with writing in English, and her growing comfort with poetry—the genre she most wanted to write but had never tried before she started GWN.

With my new mentee, our meetings are often much more talk than writing. It surprises me how much we have in common considering how very different we are. I loved working with my first mentee, and I was apprehensive about starting over—wouldn't it be weird after how close I was with Mentee #1? But it hasn't been weird at all.

While the main aim of the weekly meetings is to work on writing in the genres, mentors take their mentees on trips to museums, poetry readings, or movies. Stacie is thinking of taking her mentee to see *Hidden Figures*; "I'm already thinking of writing prompts for post-movie work!" My second mentee and I went to the Rubin Museum of Art where she wrote about a sound exhibit and about a print, "The Demoness of Tibet". My first mentee and I walked along the Highline, explored Greenwich Village and the Garment District of Manhattan. My mentee grew to feel comfortable in and have a love of the city.

Besides field trips and the central focus on writing, we work on encouraging our mentees to feel more confident, especially in presenting their writing. At the monthly genre workshops, my first mentee was very quiet. So we made it an aim that before the end of the year, she would speak up in one of the small groups where we shared ideas and writing. In preparation for the Chapters presentation, I had my mentee practice reading aloud over and over again. We were lucky to get a private office—and when we were not lucky we used a long hallway. She would stand up and I would stand as far from her as possible and counsel her to go slow, to speak loudly, and to look up at the audience after ends of lines or at pauses. Girls Write Now currently offers practice sessions for all mentees before they are scheduled to read at Chapters.

Mentors see their role as something wider or deeper than teacher. They are the mentees' supporter, friend, advisor, and guide to the city and beyond. I got to know my first mentee's mother and sister because they would accompany her to meetings. I sat with them at my mentee's Chapters reading and I went to her high school graduation, celebrating with her family. As Rachel says, "The greatest challenge can be striking the balance between being a friend and a teacher."

Nicole: We always started off with a summary of our weeks—we'd catch each other up on hallway drama, and class room goings-on. I'd tell her about work and my weekends. We talked about the easy things—school and friends and boys, and we'd talk about the hard things—parent's deaths, and feelings of loneliness, when we felt worthy and when we didn't. We treated each other like family. It wasn't instant. We built trust over time. Every time we met, every text in between, we revealed layers of ourselves.

Sara: My mentee and I immediately clicked— our relationship is very fluid and natural. I don't only consider her my mentee, but she is also my good friend! We start off most sessions by giving each other a life update—I like to ask about what's going on at school, what kind of projects she's working on, how she's feeling about her work for Girls Write Now, and what would she like to work on with me. I want to be there for her as a support system, outside of her family, friends and teachers. Seeing where she lives and how she's being raised in this incredibly creative, tight knit family unit has opened my eyes to a whole other way of life. I like to joke that I wish her parents would adopt me!

Mentees gain a lot by participating in this program, but mentors do as well— after all, at the best of times teaching is a two-way street. I asked mentors how they have been affected by the mentoring or the workshops at GWN. I, for example, particularly liked the genre workshops. When asked to "write a persona poem from the point of view of someone you do not know," I wrote from the voice of my adopted daughter's Colombian mother, someone neither of us knew anything about. An unexpected creative moment! From my mentee, I learned about beauty practices such as eyebrow threading, and I read her favorite teenage novels.

Sara: I've learned a lot from my mentee. She may only be fifteen but she is very wise beyond her years. She's humble but pretty confident in everything she pursues. She's not afraid to use her voice and put herself out there. I was nowhere near that confident at age 15. It's inspired me to feel more secure in the things I do as a 27-year old. The workshops have been equally beneficial for me. They're an opportunity to learn about and explore new genres I haven't been previously exposed to—for example, the sitcom-writing

workshop was especially helpful since I'm working on a concept for a screenplay.

Rachel: One of the most effective parts of GWN is that at the workshops, mentors and mentees work together as equals. In that environment, we're not professionals and students but simply fellow writers.

Lucy: As someone who lives most of her life around



HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS SHARE ESSAY IDEAS WITH MENTORS AND FACILITATORS AT THE GIRLS WRITE NOW SCHOLARSHIP-A-THON, PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

older people, lively and interesting as they might be, I've been delighted to be around a young woman just coming into her own. It's been a total pleasure to watch her blossom and to feel that I've contributed to that. Kicking around ideas with her has energized my own writing as well, which is an unexpected bonus. And the energy and enthusiasm in the workshops is irresistible and contagious.

Why is this such a successful program for both mentors and mentees? Girls Write Now has developed over its nineteen years a careful and caring structure. It has a rigorous process of inducting mentors and mentees: first with an application and then an interview. At the start of each year, a GWN program guide for mentors is distributed, covering everything from suggestions for pair writing exercises to information about the GWN College Bound Panel to FAQs like "What do I do if I find my mentee's writing extremely dark and disturbing (morbid, violent, etc.?)" Together mentors meet twice a year to talk about the how-to and what-if of mentoring. Mentees have their own twice-a-year meetings to get to know each other and share their experience in the program. And throughout the year, care is taken to keep track and support the pairs. Mentors submit a monthly report. There is a midyear pair check-in where the two meet with a staff person. Psychological counselors and college advisors are available for consultation. GWN mentees' success rate at college speaks to the value of the program: 100% of senior mentees go to college armed with writing and multimedia portfolios and a strong sense of self — more than half with awards and scholarships.

While this article is about mentoring, including mentee voices on similar topics gives the reader a fuller picture of the mentor/mentee relationship and mentees' sense of Girls Write Now. This sample of quotes was recorded at mid-year pair check-ins.



HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS BUILD CONNECTIONS AT THE GIRLS WRITE NOW SCHOLARSHIP-A-THON'S NETWORKING SESSION, PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

What do you love about your mentor?

--Although we started off as two totally different strangers with different stories, we clicked immediately and are creating one in GWN history.

--She doesn't think I'm weird or crazy and she takes me seriously. We talk about writing and school and life, which is really helpful. She's not just a writing mentor to me.

--She shows me new writing styles, pushing me out of my boundaries and inspiring me.

--She challenges me with new writing prompts and inspires me to be an empowered girl.

--Whenever I am stuck, she knows exactly what to say or do to give me that push again and continue writing.

How would you describe GWN to someone who's never heard of it?

--GWN is like a paradise of writers. A community that helps you dream and also makes your dream come true.

--a safe space for every young writer and feminist.

--GWN is a program that exposes young women to different genres of writing and helps expand their skills and blow their minds.

--A cult you would want to be part of . . . a good cult maybe like witches with writing magic.

What's your proudest accomplishment at GWN?

--Finding my voice and using it.

--My proudest accomplishment at GWN was making a blog and taking that first step to put myself "out there".

--My poetry is getting better with every month that passes by.

--Not nervous about speaking English anymore.

What's one thing you love about the Saturday workshops?

--I love the craft talk

--The collective calm in the room right before the freewriting segment. The feeling that the possibilities for the blank page in the front of you, for the wonderful writers around you, are endless.

--I get to hear from women and girls from different

backgrounds and who have different perspectives.

How can GWN provide better support?

--More ways for mentees to support each other, in addition to the support I get from my mentor. More mentee-only work assignments—structured, writing-focused opportunities, and break-out groups/activities for mentors and mentees.

--More ideas about different genres. Option to submit ideas for workshops and writing prompts.

--Maybe making it clear that GWN can help with LIFE. One thing that GWN really helped me with was learning that being a writer isn't just about writing; it's about building a network and reaching out to a bunch of people. I feel like mentor/mentee pairs don't have as much of a chance to meet other pairs. It would be nice to get to hear what other people are doing.

I'll conclude this section with two comments from mentors, which sum up the power and potential of the GWN writing program for both the mentor and the mentee:

Rachel: My involvement in Girls Write Now influenced my current career transition because I want to do more to empower young people like our mentees.

Sara: There are so many life skills we don't teach in the classroom or school setting. For this reason, alternative educational platforms like Girls Write Now are so necessary, now more than ever. This program teaches fundamental skills the mentees will use for the rest of their lives. Not only that, empowering young women is at the core of this program. This idea isn't revolutionary, and while it should be the norm, it unfortunately is not. We desperately need more platforms like this to help educate and inspire the next generation of women to help firmly believe in themselves and be leaders in everything that they do, against all odds. It's an honor to be a part of this community and help foster the GWN mission. I wish I had been a mentee in this program when I was in high school!

woman who is on her own, while Kincaid's piece is set in a rural community addressing a Caribbean daughter. "How could you turn your more general poem into one that is much more specific to your experience?" I wondered aloud. While I suggested she make it more specific, incorporating rules and advice about being a Bengali-American girl in 2016, I did not want to pressure her to reveal or say more than she felt comfortable saying. I am cognizant that not every culture enjoys confession and self-expression as much as my own.

Part Two: A Glimpse into the Mentee/Mentor Process

Writing and editing together is a process of back and forth which is hard to capture in time and words. Tasnim Tarannum, my mentee, wrote a poem entitled "Don't Forget: From Mother to Daughter." I will recreate our process of writing and revising this piece as best I can.

In our first meetings in the fall 2016, we both looked at the 2016 Girls Write Now anthology, *(R)EVOLUTION*. I asked Tasnim to dip into the book over the next week and pick three pieces she really liked, choosing writings in different genres. I would do the same. In the next two meetings we read our choices aloud and discussed them for content and style. One of Tasnim's choices was a poem, "Rules for Being a Modern Woman," by Lauren Hesse, a GWN mentor. Hesse's poem rings with Don'ts: "Don't take up space on the subway.... Don't speak too aggressively in your meeting; you don't want to come off as scrappy to executives...Don't take an Uber alone...Don't text him first...." A poem of warnings.

At a subsequent meeting, I added to our discussion "Girl," by Jamaica Kincaid. I like to bring in literature that gives us a jumping off place. In this prose poem, the mother gives the daughter all sorts of advice: how to grow okra, how to iron her father's shirt, how to smile and to whom. I suggested that we free write about advice/warnings—positive and negative—given by a mother, father, or relatives to a girl. Tasnim free wrote for about seven minutes and then read it aloud to me.

The following week Tasnim turned her free write into a poem. We talked about specificity and universality. We talked about how Lauren Hesse's poem is situated in an urban environment addressing a young single professional



A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT DEVELOPS HER ESSAY WITH A WRITING COACH AT THE GIRLS WRITE NOW SCHOLARSHIP-A-THON, PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

This is from an early draft of Tasnim's poem:

Don't forget to study hard.
 Don't forget to wear a hijab.
 Don't forget to cover up your rear with a long dress.
 Don't forget to wear loose pants; others should not see your figure clearly
 Don't forget to study hard, but don't forget to help others,
 Your sister for example.
 Remember family is of utmost importance.
 Don't forget to be in bed by 11, by 10 you are a sweetheart.
 Don't forget to bring all your appliances to school, we did not buy all of those for you to leave collecting dust while you idly waste time without a pencil
 Don't forget to study
 Don't forget your MetroCard we want to make sure you abide by the rules at all times.
 Don't forget to comb your hair you don't want someone thinking you come from the slums
 we did not raise you like that.
 So don't fret over little things but always remember to look your best

so at least the illusion
that nothing is wrong with you
is always
there.

To this draft Tasnim added details. I asked her to think about repetition. In "Girl" what was most important to the mother was repeated or emphasized: ". . . is it true that you sing **benna** in Sunday school?; . . . on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the **slut** you are so bent on becoming; don't sing **benna** in Sunday school; . . .this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the **slut** I know you are so bent on becoming; . . ." That her daughter not be a slut (or not be thought of as being a slut) and not sing benna was of great concern to the mother. I asked Tasnim what was most important to the mother in her poem; what was she most worried about? Tasnim decided it would be the wearing of the hijab and how it is an important part of the Muslim culture; for sure, the mother did not want that tradition to be lost just because they lived in another country. We had talked about current anti-Muslim feeling; I had brought in a *New York Times* article on the issue to discuss. I asked if she encountered hostile comments at school or on the subway because she wore a hijab. She said no; her school was quite diverse and accepting. This concern was unfortunately timely as Trump had just submitted the 'Muslim Ban.'

Over the period of about a month, from her first short version to the final version, she penned maybe five drafts, tightening it up, making it more concrete, working on capitals and periods. She added a second reference to the hijab. Now that she had added more specifics so we could see the girl she was writing about, I asked her to look at word usage, sentencng, and some punctuation. I gave Tasnim feedback on her use of the repetition of "study hard" as I felt that took away from the emphasis on the hijab.

Don't forget to study hard.

Don't forget to wear a hijab. . . .

Don't forget to study hard. But don't

forget to help others, . . .

Don't forget to study

Don't forget your MetroCard

And I suggested that the final lines needed work:

So don't fret over little things

but always remember to look your best

so at least the illusion

that nothing is wrong with you

is always

there.

We discussed possible titles for the poem and the need for a footnote to acknowledge the two poems she was influenced by.

I hoped Tasnim would read her poem aloud at Chapters, but she chose a different poem. She did, however, decide to submit "Don't Forget: From Mother to Daughter" for the 2017 Girls Write Now anthology. She had wanted to submit her fantasy fiction piece, but it was not crafted well enough yet, and there was a word count restriction. So we worked some more on the poem. She added an introduction: she was concerned that this not be thought as something her mother had actually said to her. She wrote: "This is not inspired by my mother, but by words I hear around me from the stranger filled streets of Manhattan to my own community. It's a satirical piece that might speak for many women."

Tasnim also changed the reference to the hijab. Here I learned something about myself and my ability to read and edit. She felt the reference to the hijab seemed negative—as if the girl did not want to wear the scarf—and that definitely was not the impression she wanted to give. She therefore changed this line, which was repeated twice, from:

Don't forget to wear a hijab.

to:

Don't forget to tuck in the loose strands of hair
poking out from your hijab.

and:

Don't forget to wear a hijab
that actually goes with your clothing
and skin tone.

She changed this to show how there is a lot of thought put into the maintaining and wearing of the hijab, as it is an integral part of the Muslim culture for many women. Tasnim did not want her poem to disrespect or misrepresent anyone. I had not picked up on the issue of the hijab as I was reading from my own blinkered cultural eyes. I was glad to have learned from Tasnim.

Here is the final version:

Don't Forget: From Mother to Daughter

Don't forget to study hard.

Don't forget to tuck in the loose strands of hair
poking out from your hijab.

Don't forget to read the Holy Book,
it's your saving grace.

Don't touch that sliver of meat,
you don't know where it's been.

Don't take that first sip,
you don't know where it might lead.

Don't forget to cover up your rear with a long
dress.

Don't forget to wear loose pants; others should
not

see your figure clearly.
 Do not wear close fitting shirts,
 you don't want someone gaping at you.
 Don't forget to wear your glasses,
 you know
 you can't see without them.
 Don't forget to study hard.
 But don't
 forget to help others,
 especially your sister.
 Remember family is of utmost importance.
 Don't forget to be in bed by 11,
 but by 10 is ideal.
 Don't forget to bring all your school supplies with
 you,
 your notebooks and binders -
 no matter how heavy.
 We did not buy all of those
 for you to leave
 collecting dust
 while you idly waste time
 without a care in the world.
 Honestly do you think the world
 is so forgiving?
 Don't forget your Metro Card.
 Don't forget to be courteous
 to all those around you,
 yes, even the annoying kid who
 stole your class notes.
 Well all I can say is I am glad
 you took
 your binder with you.
 Don't fret over little things.
 We want to make sure you
 abide by the rules at all times.
 Don't forget to wear a hijab
 that actually goes with your clothing
 and skin tone.
 You know you can't pull
 that white hijab off;
 you're not pale enough.
 Don't forget to comb your hair,
 you don't want someone thinking
 you came from the
 streets.
But I don't look that bad!
 We did not raise you like that.
 Don't tell little white lies,
 they may come back to bite you
 when you least expect it.
 Remember to look your best
 so at least the illusion
 that nothing is wrong with you
 is always
 there.

*Inspired by "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid and "Rules for Being a Modern Woman in New York City" by Lauren Hesse from the 2016 Girls Write Now anthology *(R)EVOLUTION*.

And so in May of 2017 her poem and all the other mentees' and mentors' writings were published in the 2017 Girls Write Now anthology, *Rise Speak Change*.

Notes

I thank the six mentors who shared their experiences with me; special thanks to Emily Yost, Senior Program Coordinator, who helped facilitate this article and to Yael Ravin and Pam Annas for their astute editing. Thanks to mentee Tasnim Tarannum for her generosity in sharing her poem and her work on the several drafts leading up to its publication in the GWN anthology. And thanks to the mentees who allowed me to quote their comments about their experiences in the program.

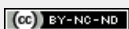
¹ Demographics are for the program year 2015–2016:
 74% White; 14% Bi-Racial/ Multiracial ; 5% Asian/S.Asian/Asian Am./Pacific Islander; 4% African; 4% Latina

Mentees: 31% African/African Am/Black; 19% Asian/S.Asian/Asian Am/Pacific Islander; 27% Latina; 15% Bi-racial; 4% White

Girls Write Now has built a record of achievement and innovation, distinguished three times by the White House and the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities as one of the nation's top after school programs, twice by the Nonprofit Excellence Awards as one of New York City's top ten nonprofits, and three times by the New York City Council as one of the city's top girl-focused programs. NBC Universal recently awarded our Digital Media Mentoring Program its grand prize 21st Century Solutions grant for social innovation through media arts. Girls Write Now has twice been named by *Time Out New York* a top place to volunteer, as we are covered by major news outlets like the *New York Times*, *NBC NightlyNews*, *Newsweek*, *Buzzfeed*, *Glamour*, *Forbes*, and countless others. In fall of 2016, Girls Write Now received the White House Champion of Change Award for creating opportunities for girls from marginalized communities so that all young people can reach their full potential.

For more about GWN, see:
<https://www.girlswritenow.org/who-we-are/>.

² The Girls Write Now anthology has been recognized as the Outstanding Book of the Year in the Independent Publisher Book Awards, and has earned additional honors from the International Book Awards, National Indie Excellence Awards, Next Generation Indie Book Awards, and the New York Book Festival. <https://www.girlswritenow.org/what-we-write/anthologies/>



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