Dear Friends,

In our business, we know well the fervent spirit of youth! Our dedicated volunteer coaches at WriterCoach Connection see evidence of it every day; it helps to motivate and sustain the students as they work to develop the skills needed to shape their personal futures, and ultimately influence our world.

It is that spirit that we see reflected in our surroundings in Springtime – the burgeoning new life, the hint of greatness to come. It’s just that way with the young people we serve. They are brimming with potential. With your help, we empower them to recognize it, develop it, and set it free.

Working with our coaches, students learn to critically consume information, to see and evaluate two sides of an issue, to draw their own inferences, and to clearly communicate them in written form. They develop the ability to share their thoughts in their own voice – one that resonates with the confidence of a reasoned argument, a well-articulated conclusion, and the resulting desire to be heard.

Together with our supporters, we are capturing the potential, and unleashing the spirit, of thousands of young people in our community! We served 2100 East Bay students in the last year alone, helping them to develop the critical thinking and clear writing skills that are essential for 21st century academic and workforce success.

Thank you for standing with us. Together, we are making a difference, and there is no time to waste. In this complicated world, we need the collective wisdom of today’s youth thinking through problems, collaborating on solutions, and convincing others to join in the fight for a healthier, more just world.

It’s a tall order. But from where I sit, Spring holds just that kind of promise!

Spring is also bringing change in our daily operations. We are conducting our work in brand-new office space located in Preservation Park in Oakland, and soon we will be welcoming a wonderful new cohort of volunteers, who will be joining many longtime WCC coaches, some of whom will be receiving their 10 year and 15 year pins at our Appreciation Event on May 25th. We will also see some staff changes, as three longstanding invaluable team members – Lynn, Jayne, and Annie – will move on to pursue exciting personal opportunities. We wish them well and are so grateful for the work they have done to enrich the lives of the young people WCC has served over the years. Read on to learn more, including a few “free write” pieces by participants in a promising new program we are piloting at Kennedy High School.

And thank you for all you do to bolster our critical work with youth. We are honored by your trust and grateful for your support and investment in our collective future.

Wishing you a wonderful Spring!

Anita Templer
Executive Director

April hath put a spirit of youth in everything.”
William Shakespeare

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Steps to Success on the Learning Ladder

“What’s good for diverse learners is good for all learners,” declares resource specialist Kaitlin Marchesi. In an informative presentation to writer-coaches at El Cerrito High School (ECH) in February and in a subsequent interview, Marchesi discussed strategies for helping to support students with a variety of learning differences or academic challenges.

While currently completing her M.A. in special education, English language learning and autism spectrum disorder at Loyola Marymount University, Kaitlin works full time as the head of ECH’s Resource Specialist Program where she observes in the classroom, provides resources to students with special needs as well as their teachers, and collaborates with WriterCoach Connection.

Kaitlin explains that special needs encompass a wide range of neurological problems such as visual, auditory or mental processing disorders (dyslexia, for example). These manifest themselves when students work very slowly; have trouble adjusting socially; avoid reading and writing tasks; or have difficulty summarizing, answering open-ended questions or grasping abstract concepts.

Students who are especially challenged also include English Language Learners as well as students who have experienced physical or emotional trauma. The number of students exposed to trauma (such as witnessing violence, unstable living situations, physical or sexual assault) has increased and is not likely to diminish, said Kaitlin, and “students with trauma are considered diverse learners.”

Diverse learners can feel overwhelmed. She suggests breaking down the barrier of information overload into parts or steps; otherwise, she says, “the response might be fight or flight.” Take things slowly; don’t expect writing during each coaching session; and break writing tasks into manageable parts, such as brainstorming, outlining or preparing a rough draft, while giving needed support along the way.

“When we scaffold things, when we take the time, when we’re patient, it’s good for everyone. We break things down and make it easier.”

As with all students, a good strategy for English learners and other students who feel disconnected is to help them understand the connections to themselves or their communities in their reading or writing. Kaitlin also encourages coaches to help students who may be afraid of failure to understand the concept of the growth mindset: in effect, we learn from our mistakes and can grow and become more resilient when we take on challenges.

Kaitlin appreciates the positive impact of writer-coaches on diverse learners. Like other special education or English language development specialists, she subscribes to the theory in Maslow’s hierarchy. “Basically it tells us that if you cannot meet the most basic needs – health, safety, students having food to eat, help forming relationships – then you can’t reach those levels of learning,” she says. “And that’s one thing that I’ve seen with writer-coaches… They’re able to make these students feel safe, make these students feel in some ways, you could say, even loved, cared about, important.”

“A lot of my students who have gone through the Writer Coach program have come out not only as better writers, but as better academic students because of that relationship they’ve built with their writer-coach – someone who’s believed in them, an extra person who’s supported them in their writing. It’s really cool to see these kids that typically have a lot of difficulty forming connections feel connected to someone in a way that’s pushing their learning, that’s helping them to grow.”
A Few Words
with Marilyn Alberts

By Maureen Dixon, Board Chair

I first met Marilyn Alberts when I began to coach for WriterCoach Connection at El Cerrito High School in 2010. I was brand new to coaching and was hesitant as to what I’d encounter working with ninth graders on writing and critical thinking. Marilyn greeted me with a smile and a warm welcome. After watching her for a short time I could tell that Marilyn was a pro. She greeted her students with that same relaxed and welcoming attitude and had them writing in no time.

At the volunteer appreciation party that year I learned that I was correct: Marilyn was definitely a pro, and so much more. We spoke, and I learned that she was one of the first coaches, having started in the fall of 2001, just one semester after the program’s founder Mary Lee Cole, and a cohort of parents began working with students at Berkeley High School. “We were in only one or two classrooms at the time,” Marilyn recalls. “The training sessions took place in Mary Lee’s dining room.”

What I didn’t know at the time is that Marilyn had taught English for 38 years, mostly at Bethesda-Chevy High School in Maryland. She was such an exemplary instructor that she was awarded an honorary doctorate in Humane Letters from Georgetown University in 1990. Many of the things Marilyn enjoyed about the classroom are the same things she appreciates in WriterCoach Connection: the classroom interaction, the creativity of the students, and the ability to help students grow in their thinking and writing abilities.

“I love the one-on-one aspect of the program,” she says. “As a teacher, I never had enough individual time with my students. I also appreciate that every student in a classroom gets a coach; this isn’t just for struggling students or top performers, everyone participates. Plus, during my ten years as a coach and seven years as a trainer I was able to work with really interesting adults, including writers of all kinds, people who have a lot of respect for language and its possibilities for learning. It all made for a very stimulating and rewarding volunteer experience.”

Marilyn was presented with a WriterCoach Connection award for being an outstanding coach, trainer, donor and so much more.
Marilyn and her late husband Watson Alberts were, and she continues to be, dedicated supporters of WriterCoach Connection. They were both active in its social activities and became major donors as well. “We were fortunate to be able to support causes we believed in,” Marilyn recalls, “including the Astronomy Department at the University of California at Berkeley, from which we are both alumni, and WriterCoach Connection. Now that Watson is gone and I’ve moved to Southern California, we’ve created a family foundation so my contributions are part of his legacy, which I’m happy to continue as I can.” Her children and grandchildren have embraced philanthropy as well. For every birthday or holiday each grandchild can elect to receive a check or make a donation to the charity of his or her choice. “It’s become a tradition that now runs through the Alberts family,” Marilyn explains.

WriterCoach Connection has come a long way since 2001, and trained coaches have now worked with more than 27,000 students in the East Bay. But the principles are still the same: one-on-one time for coaches and students to work together on writing and critical thinking in a supportive environment. That this program has continued to grow and flourish and students in the East Bay continue to get individualized support from trained coaches is in no small part due to Marilyn Alberts and her loyal and generous contributions and support.
Every other Wednesday, Classroom 122 at Kennedy High School in Richmond hums with the sound of twenty-one students talking with ten writer-coaches as the young people organize thoughts and ideas for their personal statements. You can feel the energy as students work with their coaches towards putting those thoughts on paper with clarity and a thoughtful, strong voice.

The purpose of WriterCoach Connection’s Inclusion and Empowerment Writing Workshop is to help to level the college and career readiness playing field for high school students, especially those who may be high-need. The nine-week pilot program started in early January 2016, when students were asked to finish the statement “I Am” – here’s some of what they wrote:

**Aja**

…My education is very important to me because of my past. My family isn’t really the best when it comes to education. Although they went to high school they never pulled through and started college. Unlike them, I want to be the first person to graduate from college and start a great life with a bright future.

**Lea**

…I’m a person who has set many goals that I plan on reaching. As of right now my goal is to graduate high school and get accepted to a HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). I am someone who likes to be around people who are similar to me; from goals to previous lifestyle patterns. I love meeting new people and traveling to places I’ve never been before. I am also still figuring out more of who I am, but so far this is me.

**Alizia**

…I am a future lawyer that will have graduated from a prestigious college. I am someone that can be considered goal-oriented and analytical. I always believe that something I did could have been done better. I hold myself high because that is the only way I will be able to accomplish the life I see myself having in the near future. I believe to see life so I am the one to do their dreams and I want to have the dreams they have.

**Patrice**

…I am the person I am today due to my parents pushing for excellence at a very young age. I appreciate them, because without them I would not have built up the resiliency that has brought me so far.

**Mari**

…I am a shy, nice, and funny person. I have a big heart for the people I love. I’ve been through a lot for a (sic) 18 year old and I still keep a smile on my face. I push myself harder because my mom, brother and sister have not have the chances
Looking Back... Looking Forward

After 13 years, Associate Director Lynn Mueller has announced her retirement at the end of the school year. Steve Cohen sat down to talk with her.

How did you get started with WCC?
A friend told me about the program and I became a coach at Berkeley High in spring 2003. A few months later, program founder Dr. Mary Lee Cole hired me to work part-time; the work grew along with my responsibilities, and I became the associate director.

What has sustained you?
One of my first projects was taking photos of our program in the Berkeley schools to use for recruitment. I remember feeling a kind of awe walking into those classrooms or libraries, filled with the buzz of quietly intense conversations between students and coaches. Getting a broader view of the many students we were serving and the impact we were having was inspiring.

I also coached. Once, when I returned to get my second student, he had his face down, eyes closed and a red hoodie pulled over his head. The teacher spent five minutes coaxing him to come with me, and when he did, I gave him my undivided attention. He answered my questions thoughtfully while I acted as a scribe; then I gave him the pencil and asked him to write the introduction. He came up with such a powerful opening, it knocked my socks off. He wanted to continue working, even after we looked up and saw that everyone but the site coordinator had left for lunch. That really sold me on the power of one on one, and showed how much some students need and can thrive with the positive attention of a writer coach.

What’s impressed you about the program?
A coach once told me that with all the politics and controversies around education, education reform and testing, working one-on-one with students is consistently rewarding. “It’s the way I feel I can make a difference,” she said. And that’s how I feel, too. When I help a student think more deeply about his essay topic or tell a student, “That’s a great idea; write it down.” I know I’m making a difference, at least for that student in that moment, and that’s what has kept me going. Multiply that times a quarter of a million coaching sessions conducted in the past 15 years. That’s why I believe so passionately in the work of WriterCoach Connection.

How do you feel about retiring?
I’m proud of what we’ve accomplished. With our tiny staff working out of home offices and meeting in cafes, the program expanded from Berkeley to Albany to Oakland to West Contra Costa – to the present where we’re finally in a real office in downtown Oakland. In that time we’ve been able to bring encouragement and support to more than 25,000 students.

WCC attracts amazing, bright and generous people as both staff and volunteers. We seem to be a magnet for selfless people who care deeply about helping students. And now that our little program is growing up, I’m feeling fine about retiring in June, excited and hopeful about the possibilities that the next generation of WCC leadership will bring to the program.