

WOMEN WITH PURPOSE

stories from the
EMPOWERING ENGLEWOOD
writing group



THE WRITERS

ANGELA ECHOLS

KATRINA FALKNER

SHERRY HENRY

JOVONNA JACKSON

TALIBAH MOORE

FRANCES NEWMAN



About the Empowering Englewood Writing Group

The Empowering Englewood Writing Group is comprised of mothers on a mission to create a world best deserving for their children and their community. They have journeyed together, sewing seeds of hope and supporting one and other in their distinct endeavors: of owning a home, starting a youth program, creating a sacred place of art and peace for the neighborhood, feeding the family's soul with culinary gifts, and motivating parents to see themselves as leaders.

When Angela Echols revealed her love of writing and her desire to share her story so others would be inspired and draw lessons from it, Katrina Falkner, Sherry Henry, JoVonna Jackson, Talibah Moore, and Frances Newman were open to sharing their lives as well. They had been writers all their lives, but they had never before sought to share their stories with the community they love so much, up until now.

In fall of 2015 they came together with the intention of shining light on hopeful stories that too often get buried under the headlines of despair. Though their lives have struggle, they rise each day, stretching their branches of love, and reaching out to those open to listening. -- *Veronica Mercado, COFI organizer*

INTRODUCTION : WOMEN WITH PURPOSE

The *Empowering Englewood* writing group began with a small group of strong and determined women planting and then nurturing the seeds of an idea: If Englewood residents wrote, published, and shared stories about the ways they contribute to and enrich their community, they could correct the hopeless and dehumanized image Chicagoans have of Englewood — as nothing more than “a place of pain, misery, barrenness,” as Angela Echols put it in her story “My Safe Haven”; and replace it with an image of Englewood as a place of hope and humanity, the place in which these women live and labor, raise their children, and strive collectively to raise up the wider community. This issue of *Real Conditions* represents the first blossoming of those seeds.

In order to bring their idea to fruition, the Empowering Englewood writers have been meeting weekly, right in the middle of their Mondays, to compose and discuss writings about their lives — the stumblings and the victories, the teachings and the learnings. The stories they have put to paper and shared in workshop discussions brim with the wisdom, humor, and compassion that move them forward day in and day out.

Not every writer can attend every week: family, work, school, and community commitments pull them in every direction. But they come when they can, making use of every mode of communication and transportation at their disposal to get themselves and each other to the group. The remarkable resilience evident in their tightly woven web of support includes their appreciation for the need to take care of themselves “without guilt” as the writers discussed during one workshop session — a concept Sherry Henry plays with in her poem “Guilt,” and Frances Newman reflects on in her piece, “Putting Myself First.”

Of course, the *Empowering Englewood* writers rarely put themselves first; but fortunately they have rendered facets of themselves on paper, because their stories offer counsel about the intellectual and spiritual resources required to foster self-love, self-activity, self-determination in the face of every adversity. We have much to learn from these writers who, as their magazine title asserts, are “women with purpose.” — *Janise Hurtig, editor*

My Safe Haven

I moved back to the Englewood community because it was familiar territory. Englewood is where I had gone to school. Most of my peers still lived in the neighborhood. But for some years, the Englewood community was a place of pain, misery, barrenness. I still had scars from wounds and growing pains.

When I decided move with my family back to Englewood we were living in Gary and had become homeless. We were moving from house to house, staying with different family members. It had never been my intention to live with other family or friends, but we had no other options. The situation tore me apart, until I ended up having a nervous breakdown. And soon after that I lost my son to sickle cell. But even though I had experienced pain here, I believed that coming back to the neighborhood would heal me.

I found the safe haven where I could heal because in that time of great need it was offered to me by another person. This was my pastor. He had mentioned he had a place on Halsted that was vacant and available. I had reservations about whether to take it or not because I wanted to be sure I could pay my rent on time and have that total tranquility. But my mother paid for us to move in, which we did because me and my family were in distress.

Since that time I have learned that Englewood was my resurrection — from a miry place to my new home. I'm speaking into existence our new home and conquering my fears. It is time to say hello to the present and good blessed day to the past. We are about to live on another level, owing no man nothing but love. My Englewood community brought out that healing, deliverance and freedom that life brings every day, whether good or bad. When I needed to find a home I found it here — my safe haven.

ANGELA ECHOLS



The Process

For me coming together to support each other through this writing group — to see a group of women come into a room without prejudice, judgment, or stigmas — is very important. Our children and other children must see us working as a team of leaders. We share good communication along with creative ideas, brainstorming, building up families, communities, weaving them together with a healthy way of looking at life. Coming together in love, open-mindedness, and with a willing heart and spirit to accept others as they are. Love is the key to supporting others in their endeavors.

Giving support is very hard, due to our perceptions and how we see things. The heart has to be open to receive love, but one must also be willing to change. Until I can see God's reflection of who he says I am, I may be uninterested in helping others. But I'm going to triumph until victorious celebration comes. I know God is about to blow my mind and our writing group. So it's time to move forward in getting through the process.



My Experience of School Will Not Be My Queen's Experience

Growing up I learned to experience school as negativity. It all started in the 6th grade when our whole church moved from Chicago to an all-white community in Arizona. Early in the school year, and unknown to me, my teacher called my mother. While I was walking to Band class, I saw my mom walking down the walkway smiling at me. She had one of the church members with her; he was smiling too. I found out later that evening that my teacher had told my mom that I had threatened her and said she'd better pass me. Of course none of this was true. But I got in trouble, because my mother just took the teacher's word. That's how it was in those days. I tried to explain to my mother that I had no idea what the teacher was talking about. I always did my best to be quiet and very respectful. But I felt this teacher had picked me out from the beginning. She had me in special reading classes.

In the middle of that year we left that school and our church became our school. There I went through the same thing. I always struggled in reading and math. Even though I went every day and worked hard, I always got Cs. It made me feel like a failure. I grew up thinking that school sucked and I became very disinterested. Well, now I know it was a test. But until I knew my identity, being in school made me feel inferior, unlearned, rejected, and disempowered around the educated and the educators. I understood Moses when Jesus told him go tell Pharaoh to "Let my people go," and his response was "I stutter." Well, God reassured Moses: "I will give you what to say as you open your mouth."

Eventually I took on the challenge of college. But once again I began to doubt myself as a learner. Thankfully I had an English teacher who mentored me. That's when I started coming out of my shell and sought help from teachers who showed compassion and sensitivity. These teachers, along with my fellow students, gave me a sense of worthiness and the confidence that I could do anything. Now I have an Associate of Arts and Science degree in Culinary Arts, and a Bachelor of Applied Sciences in Hospitality Management, in Healthcare/Wellness. It was no easy task, but God helped me through it all.

My daughter Reginae is twelve years old, very intelligent, very smart. Her school experience has been very different from mine. She started out as a shy person, but has become more vocal, and is a good student. She has been reaping the benefits of a flowing abundance of support. Her teachers praise her and often hold her up as an example. But she doesn't like this, because her classmates tease her for being the teacher's pet. Sometimes she comes home in tears. I teach her to never accept anyone's words of negativity. She is a beautiful young girl whose future is bright. I'm preparing her with God's word, how to offer encouragement and empowerment to others. I also share, always be humble. But I let her know that her story and her future are going to be such a blessing. Her experiences will be great and manifest through her creator. His plan for his Queen is royal.

FRANCES NEWMAN



Putting Myself First

Putting myself first is something that has been a challenge for me for quite some time. I gave birth to my oldest daughter when I was just 17. Since then I had nine more children, and am now the mother of ten. About ten years ago, shortly before giving birth to my youngest daughter, I found myself in a situation that made me see that I had seriously been neglecting myself. And while it may have seemed like a negative at the time, it is something that I will always appreciate because it made me realize that not taking care of myself limited my ability to take care of my family, who depended on me greatly. I am so thankful that I learned that lesson when I did, because as I get older taking care of me is even more important.

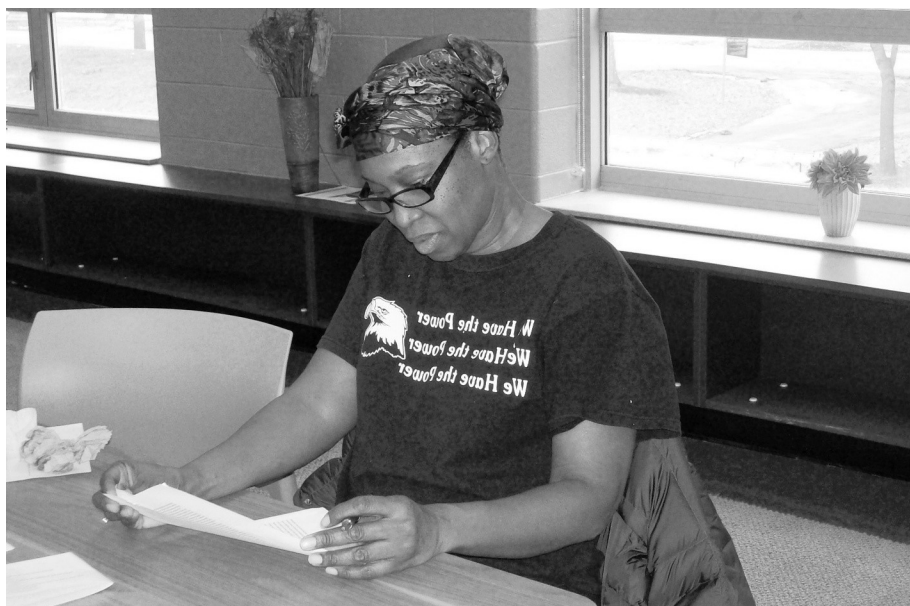
Presently, I am dealing with a very challenging situation. I am the caregiver for my husband who recently had a stroke. When I speak with his older family members they always say, “I’m worried about you. Don’t do so much that you end up sick.” And while I don’t necessarily say it to them, and I do love my husband dearly, there is no way that I am going to make myself sick taking care of him. It wouldn’t make sense. If I go overboard taking care of him and make myself ill, who will take care of both of us? My children? That would be crazy. So when I need to take some time for myself I do that. When I’m tired, I take a nap. I don’t care what else is happening. When I want to take a bath, I do that. I don’t care what is going on. When I just want to sit down and have a cup of tea, that’s what I do. And I don’t feel guilty either. I recently heard a quote on Facebook that I loved and share with other mothers and wives: “When life knocks me down, sometimes I just lay there and take a nap.”

Back to Normal

A significant thing I did today was drop my daughter off to school with my husband. While this is something that we've done together for the past seven years, it's even more significant now because in July of this year my husband suffered a stroke. And behind the stroke he had several complications that caused him to become very ill. He ended up spending six weeks in the hospital, four of which were in intensive care.

Since coming home three weeks ago, he requires total care. He has to be fed, bathed, dressed, and cannot walk without assistance. While he does receive in-home therapy, the responsibility of caring for him falls solely on myself and our children. As time neared for school to resume, I was faced with the dilemma of who would be home with him while I dropped the children off and picked them up from school each day. Then it came to me. We would take the kids together as we always did. Although it takes a little more time and preparation than it used to, staying with the routine that we had before has kept him encouraged, and he is making tremendous progress.

I believe that things will be back to normal before we know it. On the way home this morning, I was more tired than usual. I had done a lot of work in the house the day before and didn't get much sleep that night. My husband looked at me and asked, "Are you tired?" When I answered yes, he said, "I can drive." I know that time is coming soon.



SHERRY HENRY

Guilt

I don't see it as guilt

only guilty

I'm guilty of a lot of things

But no guilt

(Can't own that)

Guilty of loving everyone

Guilty of wanting the best

Guilty of wanting peace

in the world

Guilty of wanting change

Even guilty of a little sin

But no guilt

Can't own that

Only guilty.



My Childhood Bully



I have a lot of fond memories of my grade school experience. But one [not so fond] memory I'll never forget was a bully I had at school. When you should be glad the school day has ended, sometimes I dreaded that time because earlier someone would have said, "See you at 3:15." And not in a good way, like walking home together. "See you at 3:15" usually meant someone wanted to fight you after school.

My bully was named Gigi Phillips. I still distinctly remember that name. Gigi bullied me mostly inside school. She would taunt me, push me, make fun of my clothes and hair and make me cry. I lived across the street from my school but it was still a challenge to get across that street to the safety of my home because kids would be blocking the path just to see a good fight. Sometimes I even had fights in my own front yard.

I did get through all of that and graduated from eighth grade, with my bully. I was looking forward to going to high school now. But guess what? Lo and behold, on first day of school, who was there but Gigi Phillips. You know what I did that day. I made up my mind that day: I would not go through four more years of her bullying me. My brand new sneakers were stolen out of my locker on my first day, and I found out that Gigi had taken them. So guess what? We fought that first day. We had it out and I was victorious. I got that girl real good. I knew I would get a suspension and probably trouble at home, but I was elated. I felt good and thought, why was I so afraid all that time? After that day, I was never bullied again.

JOVONNA JACKSON

My Hair

For 29 years I have had a love hate relationship with my hair. Hating it for how nappy it was. Sitting on the side of Big Momma's stove to get it straightened down my back was "for the birds." My hair has been permed, has been fried, never dyed, and laid to side. Miss Jessie, Carol Daughter, and Soul Glow did nothing for me.

The wakeup call was having a trip to Washington D.C. to the White House to visit our first black president. Having the pressure to "represent our family image right," in my grandmother's words. After returning from my trip with blow dried hair I promised myself to never add heat to my hair again. A year later I visited my mother. She told me I scared her, and said, "You look like a wet squirrel." Whatever that looks like. And now I have the dopest hairstyle I ever had. Rockin' one piece of turquoise jewelry.





Don't Rush Me!

On a crisp autumn day in November I was helping my grandmother rake up leaves on our family building's yard. The four trees on our property were completely nude, which meant our yard had a blanket of warm colored leaves. This is the part of fall I never looked forward to, the clean up part. This day was already an important one because it was my little cousin's three-year birthday. Which meant my grandmother would be over the top with micro-managing me on cleaning the yard. For example, she sits on a bench in front of the house with a bullhorn saying, "Bend with your knees." As if she was a boot camp captain.

I started at ten in the morning, after enjoying a delicious bowl of perfectly cooked brown sugar oatmeal. After gathering my tools from the tool shed in our backyard, all by myself. I thought to myself how hard it was being the first grandchild. It was not helping my stress level that I had a project to finish for my high school class, due the following Monday. I had a list of reasons to finish this yard fast.

So my system for raking leaves is basically rake them in piles and then drag the garbage can to clean them up. But for some reason Grandma thought I was moving too slowly. As she was shouting out her orders through the bullhorn and I was following her directions, I suddenly found myself diving into this garbage can full of leaves, sticks, and germs. Wondering to myself if my mother or grandmother was going to try to help me get out of this situation. Feeling myself compressing further into the bottom of this can of germs, I could hear the laughter of my mother and grandmother on the outside of the garbage can. As my unplanned trick shocked and amused them, it also stopped traffic in front of our house. I couldn't see this, but I could hear people stopping to ask if I need any help. As I yelled, "Yes!" they continued to laugh. So I wiggled to make the garbage can tip and fall, and crawled out and with so much rage toward my mom and grandmother. At least they came to clean me off, and then pushed me back into cleaning up.

Walking into my cousin's birthday party was shameful for me, because I could tell everyone knew. But I just laughed with them.

TALIBAH MOORE

My Comfort Home



Tickets are paid for, bags are packed . . . on our way to the Greyhound we go. My children are super excited to go to Grandma's house. I'm keeping a serious look but on the inside I am more excited than my children to go back home.

Finally, the bus stops. Memphis, Tennessee. We are here. My mom picks us up and we drive to our home. As we get closer I get excited to see the new things my mom has been telling me about — new clothes, new appliances, new recipes. We made it! Soon as I walk in the door I spot the “couch” and off to dreamland I go.

I know you may be wondering what happened. I live to go home to my mom's house to sleep in peace, while my children are occupied with spending time with their grandparents. No, it's not the smell of the house (food cooking) or just the house itself that brings me to Memphis. It's the home I once shared with my mom. It's the fact that my children are able to ask Grandma for what they want.

Memphis is forever my second home and I enjoy the sleep I get whenever I'm there.

Bio of My Hair

It all started when my mom put a million (I'm exaggerating) plaits in my hair and everyone called me Spider Girl. I was maybe four or five and I literally sat on my hair. Everybody thought my hair was so beautiful, but the pain I endured getting it combed was horrible.

Flash forward to age 18. As my 18th birthday approached I decided I wanted to cut my hair off —well, not all the way off but a nice length. I couldn't wait until my hair appointment came. Although I knew my mom would be so mad I did not care. Finally, my day came and I went to the beauty shop super excited. I was finally taking control of my hair. As I sat in the chair my beautician asked, "How do you want your hair?" And I said, boldly, "Cut off!" She said, "Girl," in her southern voice, "stop playing now. What do you want?" I said, "I'm 18 now, work and go to school." She said, "You know your mom is going to be mad." (I should mention that she is my whole family's beautician.) However, I did not care. So she cut and said she would have my back if my mom went bananas. My hair style was the bomb!

Flash forward to the present day, thirteen years later, and oh how I wish I had my hair back. Sad face.



Giving Someone Hope

Today I was blessed to share my experience with other mothers on the I.E.P. (Individual Education Plan) process for their children. After hearing so much pain these parents have and are continuing to go through to make sure their children with disabilities have a good education, I was pleased to offer some hope. I have a son who had (yes, God is great) and I.E.P. for both speech delay and learning disability. But with the assistance of good teachers and just being an awesome, caring, and supportive mom, I was able to help my son through this process.

When I lay down tonight for bedtime I will be pleased with myself because I know I touched someone's heart. When you speak from the heart about life experiences it lets others know they are not alone and there is hope!

KATRINA FALKNER



An Important Day

This morning I woke up, got my daughter up so we could take our showers, get dressed, brush our teeth and rinse our mouths with mouthwash. After we finished eating sausages, eggs, and grits we hurried up the thirteen stairs from our apartment and went down eight more in order to reach the ground floor. She grabbed me by the hand and said, “Mommy I love you, and I don’t want neither one of us to be late for school or work.” We both were racing all the way to her school, which happens to be Benjamin E. Mays Academy. I stopped running and gave her a kiss on her forehead. She then asked me to bend down so she can “big doones” my jaw. It felt funny because she blew on it and it sounded like a very loud fart. Then she said, “I love you mom with all my heart.” I watched her as she went in the school.

Then I turned around and went the opposite way because I was trying to make it to the bus stop so I could make it to our South Side meeting. I really wasn’t in the mood, because my body was telling me to go home and go get in the bed. I thought in my head “Now you know this is very important so you definitely have to be there.” I made it to the bus stop and the first bus was right there. After going past other stops the bus picked up not one, not two, but three of my COFI friends.

I was so happy to see them because they all are helpful in many ways. I felt bad at first because I been through a lot this past last week. As soon as I got to the meeting it’s like they can read my mind. Each one of them gave me some great advice on what I should do next but the best thing that happened is when I heard them pray. It lifted my spirits and I almost shouted hurray, but instead I shouted, “Thank you Jesus! for sending them all my way.” Each one of them plays a different role in my life. That’s why I know it was important to make it to the South Side Parents United meeting. Because it all fell in at the right time, place, and moment. God does have a plan for me. And this I know — it shall come to pass when me and my beautiful daughter Myshayla will be moving to a very new place.



A Gift Down from God

I have a wonderful beautiful daughter named Myshayla Briauna Echols. She was given the name Myshayla because she is named after one of my first born nieces. Myshayla has a twin sister named Chevelle who was named after a Chevy car.

I say they were a gift down from God, because I was told a long time ago I couldn't have kids. I met their mother and became friends with her. She had three other children at the time and was struggling to take care of them. So as she became pregnant she asked me and my oldest sister Nookie, can we get the kids and take care of them? We both agreed to get one of the kids a piece. I have Myshayla and my sister has Chevelle. Myshayla is the oldest and Chevelle is the youngest. It's fun because I am the baby girl and I have the older twin, while my sister is older than me she has the younger twin.

Everywhere I go Myshayla goes with me. Some people think that Myshayla receives too many compliments and Chevelle doesn't receive as many. But Chevelle hasn't had a chance to really be around many other people. So she acts out for a lot of attention. She gets really upset and begins to scream and holler very loud. She even stomps her feet and shouts, "Leave me alone!" really loud. Myshayla and Chevelle are different because they are fraternal twins. They were born one minute apart from each other. Myshayla is lighter and taller than Chevelle. Chevelle is short, a little chubby, chocolate, and we called her "fat butt."

I try my best to take both Myshayla and Chevelle everywhere now because I want them both to know they are loved very much and that, no matter what anyone else tells them, to always remember they both are unique and made in a very special way. "So don't never let anyone steal your joy," I told them. After Chevelle heard this she grabbed me, gave me a huge hug and said, "Thanks Tree. I feel so much better and I promise wherever we go I won't act out again." Myshayla then said, "Thanks, Mom, for helping and taking both of us everywhere. You are the best."

The moral of the story is to always try to lend a hand to all the children because they just need a little love and support.



KATRINA FALKNER

Learning to Say No

As a child I was always taught to do what others asked of me. If I had to help clean I would always say, “Ok, momma. Where and what part of the house?” I never talked back to my mother or father. Not even other adults. Whenever I was asked I would jump up like a race horse and fly to their command. My big brothers and sister would just sit and stare, looking from side to side at each other then ask “Do you hear someone calling me?” After that they would laugh out loud and say, “Tree, go do this or that for me.” I never said no. Once again I would fly through the house like a race horse and say, “Okay, what do you need me to do for you?”

One day my father came home and brought six big penny banks full of change. He told my mother, “Put this up for my kids. They are going to need this in the future.” My mom put the banks inside of the big black dresser in her room. She pulled me to the side in the other room and said, “Tree, don’t tell your brothers or sister where the money is at.” So I agreed not to tell them, but really I thought to myself, “Hey, they are going to find out anyway.” Soon as my mom went out to the store for a few hours my sister called me in the game room and told me, “Hey, if you tell me what Momma did with the bank I will take you outside with me.”

So I took her in our mother’s room and said, “Mom put the banks inside of her black dresser. It’s behind all the clothes.” My sister said, “You climb in and get the bank.” So I did. She lifted the lid and took all the quarters out. She reached back in, gave me some nickels and pennies, and told me they were quarters. I thought I was on top of the world with all that change. Then my sister left the house.

When my mom came in she went straight to her room and opened the black dresser. Before you knew it she was hollering and screaming, saying, “Oh my God! Where is all the quarters? I needed them to pay on the light bills.” I felt so bad I had to tell Mom, “It was me and my sister Nookie.” She said, “Oh my God! Why did you let her trick you into telling where the money is at?” All I could do is say, “If I would have only kept that secret our light bill would be paid in full.” I should have just said, “No, I can’t tell you anything.”

Now that I have become older I have really found myself saying NO —not to be mean, but just not to put myself in any negative situation again.

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About the Community Writing Project and Real Conditions

The Community Writing Project offers writing workshops to people who ordinarily do not consider themselves to be writers, and publishes their reflections and stories about everyday life in *Real Conditions* magazines. Because only the collective efforts of ordinary people can make a better world, we are interested in the creative expression and unique understanding of those who have been relegated to the margins of society, including the poor, the oppressed, immigrants, and those who risk their privilege to join them. Their stories are found in these pages.

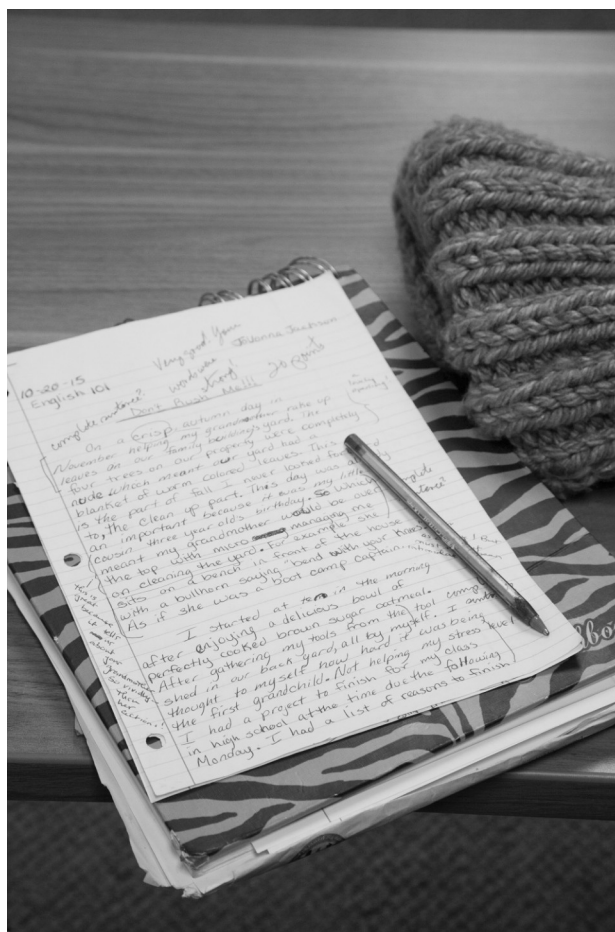
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For more information contact:

Janise Hurtig

jhurtig@uic.edu

312-413-3367



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