

Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop

Advancement 2015

We seek funding to expand our arts-based community outreach project On The Same Page: Free Minds in the Classroom & the Community by producing materials that will allow instructors to replicate the On The Same Page program, either after one such session (thereby reinforcing the impact on their students) or in place of a Free Minds visit if we are geographically unable to attend. Free Minds has conducted, on average, one On The Same Page event per week, and sometimes as many as three. We have learned a great deal since starting the program. We are now requesting an Advancement Grant from the Ruddle Memorial Youth Foundation to provide more professional development training for our Poet Ambassadors who lead the On The Same Page sessions and to produce documentation, teacher guides, and a new teacher-friendly literary journal to improve the program outcomes with at-risk youth.

This project has multiple benefits. First, the Free Minds Poet Ambassadors--all of whom were incarcerated as adults when they were 16 or 17 years old--gain confidence, public speaking skills, an opportunity to give back to their community, and a sense of purpose and identity as change-makers. All of these factors contribute to greater mental and emotional health, and helps them find gainful employment and avoid recidivism. Second, On The Same Page benefits middle and high school students by introducing them to the therapeutic aspects of reading and writing as tools to cope with trauma and violence in their lives, and by educating these students and other community members about the root causes of youth incarceration and motivating them to effect change in their own lives and in the lives of others in order to stop the cycle of violence.

The new teacher guides and literary journal will not only help us deepen the impact of On The Same Page, they will also help us develop more partnerships with like-minded nonprofit organizations. Critical Exposure, a local nonprofit that trains youth to use photography and advocacy to create change in their communities, recently asked us to partner with them, and we realized our need for greater documentation to match theirs. When we have developed our teacher guides, we will be more effective in our partnership with Critical Exposure and other nonprofits. Pursuing these partnerships helps us in our mission not only by further empowering our members, but also by increasing our visibility and allowing us to find more funding to do more.

We will use RMYF's funding to strengthen and expand our Reentry Support Outreach project On The Same Page. Our program is designed to ignite a passion for learning and motivate our members to stop the cycle of hopelessness and violence that has engulfed their lives. Each phase builds on the previous one. FM members and community members are united through a shared accessibility to the arts and a love of reading and writing.

We have come to recognize the enormous impact that On The Same Page (OTSP) has not only on our FM members (Poet Ambassadors) but also on the students and community members who participate in the project. The Poet Ambassadors gain a sense of identity and purpose, and they develop important life skills, all of which contributes to reducing recidivism. For the audience members, they develop a greater sense of the root causes of youth incarceration, as well as exposure to the therapeutic power of reading and writing. After many successful OTSP sessions in schools, we've had teachers ask us for teacher guides that can be used in combination with our literary journal to replicate the experience and thereby deepen the educational impact.

We intend to develop a set of four teaching guides: one for high-risk middle schools, one for high-risk high schools, one for low-risk middle and high schools, and one for adults (including college students and community groups). These teaching guides will include short warm-up activities, personal stories from Poet Ambassadors, techniques to encourage sharing of life experiences, group reading and discussion, and collaborative poetry writing. The benefits of this formal set of teaching guides will be manifold: they will allow teachers to continue building on the lessons started with OTSP sessions by continuing discussions with their students; they will allow teachers who are geographically separated from us to replicate this program in their own schools even when we are unable to travel to be there in person; and they will allow

us to streamline our training and preparation process so that we can spend less time planning each On The Same Page session and more time conducting sessions.

We have recently been invited to Scranton University in Pennsylvania. This will be our first experience presenting On The Same Page outside of DC/MD/VA. This invitation made us realize the need for a curriculum that can be shared with teachers in other states. The curriculum will allow us to spread our message to new audiences outside of the DC area. This helps us further our mission to empower our members through books and writing to become forces for change in the community. On The Same Page is an opportunity for our Poet Ambassadors to create change at home and in the broader community of readers, writers, and thinkers.