



Words Matter

writing by residents

at San Francisco Campus for Jewish Living



Words Matter

Litquake's Elder Project 2020



CALIFORNIA
ARTS COUNCIL



BILL GRAHAM
Memorial Foundation

About the Project

Litquake sparks critical conversations, and inspires writers and readers of all ages to celebrate the written word with diverse year-round literary programming, interactive workshops, and a ten-day festival.

Litquake's Elder Project is a literary arts project focused on creative expression through writing and performance.

Litquake brings teaching artists to the elders in a classroom accessible to them. The class allows students to discuss and record past and current life experiences, resulting in personal empowerment through creativity. The goal is for students to find a new self-confidence using the creative process, writing, and performance as a means of generating a dialogue within and outside of their own community.

Writing from the Residents of the
San Francisco Campus for Jewish Living
Fall 2020

in memory of John Kuppinger

“The act of creation and writing makes
me feel on top of the world.”

—John Kuppinger

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Elizabeth Papke

If I Were President

You have to realize what's going to be on your shoulders. Is it easy? I think not! It's a heavy load! Rewrite the Constitution.

And to truly make things right, take care of the Native People of this land. The French can call France their motherland, the Greeks can call Greece their motherland, and yada yada, all the people on American soil can leave American soil and travel to another part of the world to seek their ancestral land. But how about the Choctaws, the Sioux, the Pomos, the Miwoks, the Arapaho, the Navajos? Bottom line: take care of the Native Americans who have lived on this land of America for thousands of years! Broken treaties! I would honor the Native People first. Let's look closely at the census and take into account how many Native Americans are alive, and let's take care of them.

I would like free healthcare for everyone. No more homelessness. No more hunger.

Judith Birnbaum

Seasons

Change: spring rain, flowers.
In winter, sledding.
Grass poking out.

Variations on Sound

Sounds of silence.
A memory of sound:
cute boys and girls.

Political Platform

Remember the poor. Make sure everyone gets counted in the census—I was a Romanian Jew. Make college free for everyone.

Gertrude Warshaw

Little Joys

Seeing a loved one. Sleeping on a freshly made bed. I like a danish and coffee and morning paper to start the day. I like taking walks in fresh air and taking the 5 bus to the beach to smell sea air and look out on the water, waves, and seabirds like friends.

Dreaming

It was a Hollywood look—
My dad was at the staircase.
I wish I could go back to being young,
Be a dreamer, make it all come true—
Now too old.
Write some music to match the color and mood.
Dreams could be drawing something,
Putting it down on paper.

Superstitions

Black cats, walking under ladders—you could get hurt. It would fall on you. I'm not sure if any of these things happen. I've never had any things happen to me, but I believe on knocking on wood to be safe.

Life is hard. You make your own future.

Moon & Sun

“I Saw the Moon,” 6 a.m. Thursday, October 29, 2020. The moon was small and full. I like a home where sun comes in. I like sun when walking in Golden Gate Park, sitting in the warm sun—not hot—near the lake. I’m thinking Stow Lake, a ripple on the water, the quiet song.

Dream Message

My father had this dream, an answer to how to finish something. He was a furrier, and had a problem with a fur coat. He couldn't finish the sleeve—figure out how to put a part of skin to fit. His dream told him what to do. Everything fit in place in the dream, and the next day, it worked out.

Sound

I like the sound of waterfalls and church
bells. And quiet: I can see and feel it.
A cat scream is a wild noise, and scary—
I like music, soft and mellow.

John Kuppinger

Politics

If I were president, I would close everything down—all the bad institutions. I would shut them down. I'd try to get out of wars. I'm a libertarian. I haven't always been a libertarian. My first election was 1968. I could influence something. I voted for Nixon. Then I turned libertarian. I came to California in 1979. This year, I felt like I had to vote.

Residents at the Home talk about politics—there are many opinions but no arguments. Discussions.

Romance

“My Funny Valentine,” a song I like, I sang to a girl when I was young. I was in Washington, D.C., where I grew up. I was in high school on a date with a schoolmate at a dance—her name was Sally, and she was cute. I sang into her ear as we danced, and she liked me romancing her. She was just a girl I knew and she danced with me again. I walked her home after the dance and kissed her on the front porch. Her sister and mother came out and told her to go into the house.

It was worth it!

Berenice Palmer

Dream & Memory

I dreamed that I was ill and dying. Then I remembered: it had been real. I had diphtheria—was in bed for a year.

Phyllis Koestenbaum

Alphabet Poem

Addled, adult (adults aren't usually addled, though sometimes they are, like now), age, advantage, bully, big, cookie, cranium, dog, danger, dramatic, dastardly, estuary, earnest, frank, fabulous, fool, good, great, grasp, hot, hell, headache, Iroquois, January, kitchen, loony, Monday, mixed, nasty, obsidian, perennial, pick, patience, queer, quell, quit, rose, rickshaw, rehearse, syncopate, sex, suicide, time, trouble, taxi, umbrella, unctuous, victorious, wick, wonder, zoo.

Shelter

One of my sons told me he and his partner were sheltering in the country. And I loved it because he used the word “sheltering,” and it connected me to him and my life. And I liked that. I didn’t like that he said it wasn’t safe in his apartment house, that there were people who had died with the virus. His using the word sheltering connected with my life because we’re sheltering here. I think he was using it as a negative word or a funny word: He and his partner were “sheltering” in the country. Which of course he had to drive to. That’s the downside of living in New York City. The upside is that there’s so much to do, and it’s so exciting. The downside is it’s less than safe sometimes, and was at the center of the virus.

Love & Ice Cream

I want coffee ice cream, always, morning noon and night, day in and day out. What I want is to find out where I could get it, and what I want is for someone who is willing to go to that place and bring me coffee ice cream. Dreyer's, Safeway, Häagen-Dazs, Baskin-Robbins.

The first food I had after my stroke when I came to, so to speak, was strawberry ice cream. Strawberry ice cream has to be perfect, and it's very hard to get strawberry ice cream perfect. It's either too cold or not cold enough.

Sometimes people are very nice to me and if they are, they always say, What do you want? And I say ice cream, and they bring it. They bring coffee ice cream if they have it, but first they have to have it in the freezer. You can't bring something that isn't there. My daughter never fails on my birthday and Mother's Day—I always get coffee ice cream.

I also like flowers, shoes, furniture, and I want a nice place—an apartment or a house—and I want company. I want to be with good people whom I love.

Luz Hilario

Wishes

I wish I were an angel so I could be anywhere I wanted to be, helping others who need help. I dreamed about being a princess who could make things happen and rules given and fulfilled.

Patti Navarro

Pastoral

When I think of a pastoral place, I think of idyllic countryside. This place has a pastoral sense, a spiritual meaning in our later years. I've lived in a city all of my life, San Francisco and Los Angeles—it's always been hectic and traffic and businesslike. So for me being here is pastoral in that it gives me time to think about my life, to think about what this ailment has done for me, good and bad.

Shelter-in-place gives me time to think, maybe even talk to God, say a prayer with God. I would never have slowed down if I were still out there. Luckily and unluckily, in this place I get to think about those things.

Red Dresses

I want a whole closetful, maybe two closets full of clothes because I had to give up my clothes in my SRO hotel room. There are times in your life when you lose almost everything, and you have to start all over again from scratch, and that's what I'm doing. I'd want clothes that fit me because I can't wear my red dresses flimsy and cheap anymore. I have to be age appropriate, to catch age-appropriate men! And to grow up to be a lady of the world, not just a girl of the world.

Listening

You never know how a person's life has been until you listen to their story. You don't know how they've lived, or how heavy their life is. There's a person here who goes through moods like she wants to give up, and I said, Don't get down on yourself; sometimes if you say something dark, it plays like a tape recording in your brain, and the more you say it, the more you feel it. It's like having the devil on one side and the angel on the other. Some days I'm down myself, and some days I feel more alive and more peppy and that's when I do my best work— when I'm alive. It's all about lifting people up.

What Dreams Tell Me

I have recurring dreams. Because in my past, in the Tenderloin and Hollywood, I was around drugs and prostitution and different things—not meaning that I’m the toughest girl on the street, but I’m a person who handled a lot of things—I feel that’s why I dream I’m running. In the dream someone’s chasing me, catching up to me. Those dreams, even though I’m clean and sober, keep reminding me where I’ve been.

I also dream about dancing. That’s an extravagant dream, because I wanted to be somebody. And in a sense I think I am, because I help my community.

Pride

Pride has always meant for me a time to be inclusive, and to bring love. I would like all of us to get along—lesbian, gay, straight, and trans. We have so much in common, but you have to find your own individual truth.

It took time for them to get used to me here and for me to get used to them. They had a Pride Day here the first year that I came. I said we should do a drag show. I think it changed a lot of people's notions, and my notions about how they were going to act. It was scary at first. I realized some people did get it, and some people wanted to get it, and some people already got it. Being a pioneer has its rewards.

I had this stroke and I'm in a wheelchair and I'm 60 years old, and life was nice and fabulous before, but I realized that I can make things fabulous, and live in a wheelchair and be positive.

Becoming an Elder

The main thing I've learned as an elder is that I need to step up for the younger generation, the ones who want to listen, who want to grow from my experiences as I learned from other people's experience.

Edie Sadewitz

Sneezing

Some superstitions in particular still stand out. I remember that when I would sneeze, my beloved mother would offer a comment which I heard for many years of my sneezing life—she would say kind words like, “May you live a healthy long life.” And “May God bless you.” They were welcome words, as my beloved mother wanted my brother and sisters and me to grow up to be healthy and honest. It was a comfort that she took notice of my off moments—by that I mean when I would sneeze.

A September Day

On September 21, the morning awake time for me was 7 a.m. That morning I went to the dining room for breakfast—a routine meal. When it was time for lunch, Key pushed me in my walker to the Rosenberg area, where several residents were present, as well as Frieda and Mediatrix. On Zoom was a screenful of friends who spoke to me with complimentary words and congratulated my achievement as a centenarian. What a great birthday surprise. I was moved, to say the least!

Four Wishes

I wish the presidential election will benefit our country.

I wish my few relatives will live longer and healthier lives.

I wish to help this facility in whatever way possible.

I wish to join my late husband as we planned.

Start of a Friendship

As good fortune would have it, at the beginning of my “new” life—my “other life”—that I began as a resident of the community, I was told to sit at an assigned seat at meal time. As it turned out, the person seated next to me began a conversation with welcoming words, encouraging comments—and it developed, thanks to her warmth, and yes we hit it off, and that was the beginning of a lengthy and dear friendship. I was blessed.

Sunny Days

Life as a youngster was blessed—as permission was given to play and enjoy the sunshine. Playing kickball, kick the can, and hopscotch always gave my face a sunny look, since many of my younger years were spent outdoors. Going to the beach was a treat but came with a sunburn. Ouch! From then on it was the beach or near the water with sun lotion. I enjoyed being outdoors under the sun that much more.

After the Dream

Most dreams I've experienced have left me with a serene feeling when I open my eyes. I soon forget that phase as reality automatically takes over and a new day awaits me.

Thanks to a variety of influential, compassionate, and forward-thinking donors, Litquake has thrived for 20 years as a nonprofit, producing fresh, engaging, and inspiring programming to fuel our diverse literary community of booklovers. Help us continue to connect readers and writers, encourage empathy and understanding, and create more informed, impassioned citizens of the world. Thirty percent of our annual budget relies on support from generous individuals.

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