



BY CAITLAN ROSSI

PAGE TURNERS: BRINGING AUTHORS INTO INNER-CITY SCHOOLS

I GOT INTO THE FIFTH GRADE because of comic books,” confesses author and illustrator Eric Velasquez. He’s presenting to a class at Guardian Angel School in Chelsea. Eight-year-olds in plaid uniforms seem to grow taller without leaving their seats as they study the image on the screen—a black-and-white photograph of the building in East Harlem where Velasquez grew up. Learning English as a second language, it was the pictures, and not the words, that inspired him to write.

Page Turners, a volunteer-based program of the Archdiocese of New York, brings celebrated artists like Velasquez into inner-city schools where enrichment offerings like author visits are a challenge to implement without outside funding. The one-time workshops are no more than ninety minutes, built on the simple

premise that students can enhance their lives with just a pen and paper. Some artists, like Velasquez, keep the presentation informal. He chooses a student to model for an impromptu portrait—his easy sketch so vivid it could walk off the easel and take a seat in the classroom.

The unique and unstructured setting of each Page Turners class allows students to approach writing with a new understanding. Creative Director Lynn Pitts introduced eighth graders in the South Bronx to the basics of copywriting, challenging them to collaborate and make tag lines. Laurie Calkhoven encouraged kids at St. Ann School in East Harlem to make nonfiction cool by transforming history. Other classes consider the creative process, experimenting with language, and how to confront and convey our feelings through writing.

Some artists come to Page Turners from the greater New

York area. Others are returning to the neighborhoods where they first began to explore the world around them—a possible starting point for every young writer. “Don’t be afraid to draw a character that has your hair,” Jerry Craft tells students at Incarnation, just ten blocks away from his childhood home in Washington Heights. He even shares his vision for *The Offenders*, a book about bullying (with a twist): “If you were to write a story about a superhero in Washington Heights, would he really want

with Kevin Pilkington, who taught students to energize their writing with similes. The New York poet then prompted the class to stage their own reading. Seventh graders on the Lower East Side were empowered to become contemporary poets who wrote about God, basketball, and birthdays. Left with the tools to create their own writing community at St. Brigid, students wrote their own poetry collection—then sent a copy to Pilkington as a thank you.

In Spring 2017, Page Turners will welcome

writers at every level to find their own voice.

Additional support for Page Turners is needed to bring more artists into inner-city schools in the upcoming academic year. For more information about how to donate or volunteer, please contact Danielle Forsythe at (646) 794-3343 or danielle.forsythe@archny.org



TOP TO BOTTOM: ERIC VELASQUEZ;
JERRY CRAFT DRAWING

OPPOSITE PAGE: JERRY CRAFT
OFFENDERS COMPOSITE

to come outside in a long cape?” The gym fills with unadulterated laughter. “Maybe he wears a hoodie or some nice sneakers.” That’s Page Turners bringing motivation into the classroom on two feet.

Page Turners celebrated poetry month

Annabel Monaghan, who will discuss choosing writing as a career, publishing, and her suspenseful young adult novel, *A Girl Named Digit*. Todd Strasser, author of over 140 books for teens and middle schoolers, will teach young students exercises that help

Back in Chelsea, Velasquez begins to dance the merengue. As the congas come through the classroom speakers, he reveals that the little boy who learns to dance in his book, *Grandma’s Records*, is based on him. Writing about his family and his culture helped him to erase the question mark in his identity; becoming an artist was a natural choice. When the song ends, students wave their hands in the air with questions, and a new rhythm. *

Caitlan Rossi’s work has recently appeared in The Louisville Review, The Westchester Review, Yellow Chair Review and Distraction Magazine.