

Young writers:
a teacher digs for buried talent

NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS

By Ben Joravsky
When Bob Boone got tired of teaching high school English in the suburbs, he started his own business teaching students how to take college entrance exams. He still wasn't satisfied, so he switched to tutoring teenage inner-city hoop stars at summer camps, where they also honed their basketball skills. And that pushed him closer to achieving his goal of running a year-round program for fledgling inner-city writers.

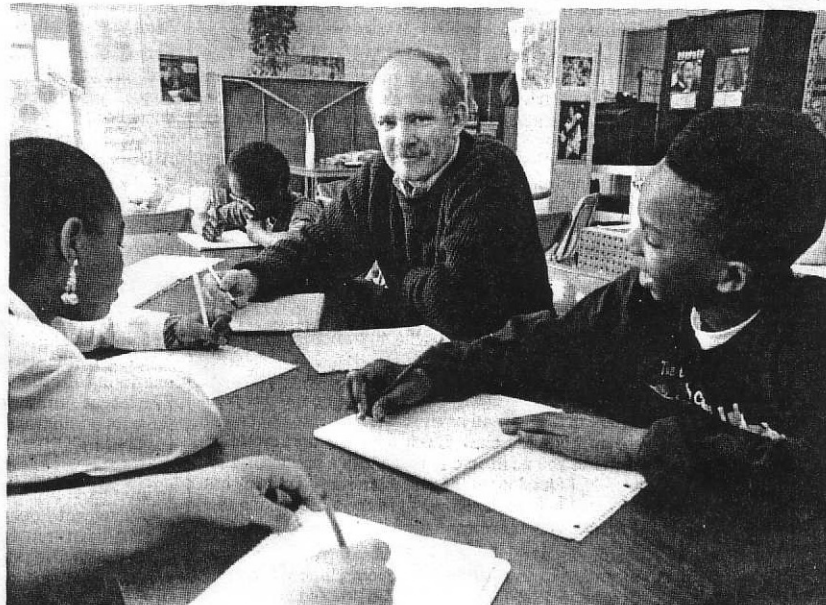
If all goes well, the not-for-profit enterprise, called Young Chicago Authors, will be off the ground next fall. Fifteen sophomores from public and parochial schools across the city will meet every weekend to read, write, and comment on each other's work. They'll see plays, listen to lectures from leading local writers, and tutor other students who have trouble with writing. The program, which will be funded by contributions from individuals and local foundations, won't cost them a thing. In fact, if they're still enrolled after three years, they'll receive as much as \$8,000 for college tuition.

"I see tremendous writing talent out there in the public schools," says Boone. "I don't want it to be wasted." It's a sound idea, long ignored by a system that doesn't seem to value good writing. Not all high schools in Chicago offer writing courses, and most children are allowed to proceed through 12 years of education without realizing that writing is a skill they need or a talent they possess.

Teaching writing is apparently not even a priority among the country's leading educational reformers, who talk more about upping test scores and cranking out engineers and scientists to compete with the Germans and Japanese. It's no wonder that so few of our leaders—let alone high school graduates—can express themselves in clear, straightforward language.

"Bob is giving us a chance to nurture individual talent that has never been appreciated," says Ted Fishman, a free-lance writer and member of the board of Young Chicago Authors. "This is a great opportunity for inner-city kids to get hooked on writing."

Fishman was Boone's student in the mid-1970s at Highland Park High School. "It was a typical creative-writing class—descriptive assignments, character sketches, that sort of thing," says Fishman. "But Bob also did something different that made me realize how special he was. He put the whole class on a train going north from Highland Park, and he let each of us get off in a different town. Our assignment was to dig out some story from our day in whichever town we landed in, and then get on the train and come back to school. I went into a



Bob Boone

Photo/John Renedolph

store and asked what was going on, and found out about some petty corruption in Fox Lake involving parking tickets. I called it 'Watergate on Main Street.'"

In the mid-70s Boone and a friend, John Amberg, formed the Glencoe Study Center, which offered North Shore residents GED classes and counseling on how to take college entrance exams, among other things. It wasn't long before Boone was asked to tutor inner-city athletes at a summer basketball camp partially run by former Chicago Bulls forward Bob Love. "The camp died, but I stayed close with people I met there," says Boone. "And the program kind of re-emerged as the Foundation for Student Athletes. I was a cofounder along with Forrest Harris, who was the first black to referee in the NBA. Our idea was to run a summer league in Avalon Park on the south side in which the kids would get basketball and academic training."

Harris hired the refs and coaches, and Boone oversaw the academic tutoring. Basically he taught the students a writing course. In 1985 he published some of their better work in a book called *Hardwood*, which received a favorable write-up in the *Chicago Tribune*.

By then he was spending more time in Chicago, offering creative-writing classes at several high schools and social agencies. When the National Collegiate Athletic Association adopted Proposition 48, which required certain academic prerequisites for incoming college athletes, the demand for his tutoring services

grew. "The NCAA increased the ACT test-score requirements to 17 and SAT to 700," says Boone. "If a graduating high school senior didn't score that high, he would either have to sit out a year or attend a junior college."

Boone began teaching some of the city's finest athletes—including such prep basketball stars as Toni Foster, William Gates, and Juwan Howard—how to take the ACT. "I have mixed feelings about these tests," says Boone. "On the good side, they are commonly accepted. It's something that colleges place value on, and if you do well you can feel you accomplished something and you should feel good. On the other hand, they don't measure creativity. The reading portion of the ACT only gives people 35 minutes to read and answer questions. There's a lot of good readers who won't do well on this test because they happen to read slowly."

Despite the success of this business, Boone is more excited about his creative-writing classes. "I teach creative writing in the inner city much the same way I do in the suburbs," he says. "You start with narrative, first-person things—lessons learned, places seen. Then we move on to more expository papers, where we analyze problems or review a movie."

In general, Boone says he is struck as much by the similarities between affluent suburban teenagers and their low-income Chicago counterparts as by the differences. "They live in two strikingly different worlds that can be measured simply in terms of what they see from the moment they get up

and what kinds of fears, thoughts, and ideas occupy their minds," he says. "And yet the old cliché holds—kids will be kids. They all show a dislike for authority and a slight cynicism as they learn that the world isn't what it ought to be."

They also all enjoy seeing their works in print, as Boone discovered again last summer when he compiled the poetry and stories of a class he taught to teenagers at CYCLE, a social-service agency in the Cabrini-Green housing complex.

One fable by Terry Lamont, "Sherrell and the Three Dogs," is a takeoff on "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," with Goldilocks replaced by a girl named Sherrell, the three bears by the Hound Family, and the bowls of porridge by plates of greens.

"Once upon a time there was a girl named Sherrell, who was walking in the woods because she was tired of people mugging her," Lamont begins. Eventually, Sherrell comes upon the house of the Hounds, who are out watching the movie *101 Dalmatians*.

"She had to use the washroom so she went and sat on the biggest toilet. 'Too hard,' she said to herself. She sat on the other one and said it was too soft. So she went to the baby toilet and said it was perfect. She had a copy of *Ebony* in her hand so she read for an hour until the Hounds came back. They saw the greens were gone and got angry except for the baby, who didn't like greens anyway. They checked the other parts of the house and went upstairs to the washroom.

"Papa hound said 'Somebody been

sitting on my toilet.'

"Mama hound said 'Someone been sitting on my toilet too.'

"The baby hound said 'Yeah and, uh, somebody is still sitting on my toilet!'

"Sherrell had fallen asleep on the toilet. When she heard all this noise, she got up and ran and said, 'I'll be back next time, but please have more tissue.'"

A more sobering piece by Christine Hamilton is called "Speak Now or Forever Be Rested in Peace." Boone had told the kids to "write about an experience in which you were changed." Hamilton told the story of an 11-year-old girl who started having seizures during the hot and violent summer of 1987, when her best friend, Leheta, was shot to death in the cross fire of a gang war.

"I swore she was still alive even after I saw her in the casket," Hamilton writes. "I loved Leheta more than anything. We were so close, and even after her death we stayed in touch. Everytime I had a seizure Leheta was there. We would play rope and talk and then I woke up—not knowing what had happened. Each time Leheta visited me, she stayed longer. . . . On August 27th I had a seizure. As soon as I was out, Leheta was there. She took my hand and we went for a walk. She told me she was going to take me to meet some people that had been asking about me. When I asked who, she started naming relatives of mine that she didn't know. This didn't dawn on me 'til I realized all of them were dead.

"I started to panic. The white clouds we were walking through started to tremble under our feet. I heard my mother calling me loud, 'CHRISTINE COME BACK!!' She was crying and shaking me. Then Leheta began calling me. I decided to run away from Leheta, luckily. . . . I miss Leheta and there are so many things I want to tell her and ask her. I figure that that is why I was having seizures. Nowadays, I try to make sure I tell people how I feel while they are alive."

The success of Boone's young writers at CYCLE—all of whom live in Cabrini-Green—fuels his belief that there's a need for the Young Chicago Authors program. He hasn't filled all his slots for the fall, but expects that eventually he'll have to turn applicants away.

"I suspect that most kids who show a talent for writing are steered to one or two special schools, like Whitney Young," he says. "It's frightening, because it feeds the notion that writing is a foreign talent that only a handful of high achievers have. Nothing could be further from the truth. The writing talent is buried in a lot of kids all over the city. I want to do what I can to dig it out."