

Writing Stories to Reach Young Adults

‘I put more of myself in stories by integrating my experiences and my thoughts and preferences in what I write.’

By Leslie Koren

I devoured Anna Quindlen’s New York Times’s columns as a teenager. I knew which days they appeared and ran to get the paper. I read about AIDS, motherhood, politics and feminism—definitely not light topics. I don’t suspect they were written specifically for suburban high school students, but they helped me make sense of a world that seemed terribly confusing.

I am now a journalist working at the heart of my New Jersey newspaper’s effort to reach young readers. Last December I moved from The Record’s crime beat to its features section with the nebulous charge of writing for people in their 20’s and early 30’s. I often reflect back on what lessons I can learn from that young reader sitting at the kitchen table reading Quindlen’s words.

I wanted this assignment because, having just turned 30, I knew what an interesting and complex time this can be, especially with so many in my generation delaying marriage and families. We are searching in different ways for our right career path, our great love, and for a more complete understanding about ourselves. Along the way, we are creating new types of relationships with friends and parents, within communities, and in our homes.

Writing for Young Adults

As a reader and staff reporter, I didn’t see these issues reflected in our pages and, in the spring of 2002, I wanted a new challenge. So I proposed writing a column, profiles or features directed at my peers. Eventually our editor, Frank Scandale, combined all three and offered me a shot. Almost a year later, I am still trying to figure out how best to hone such a broad idea into specific

stories and how to incorporate these stories into a daily newspaper.

There are many days when I wonder what young readers want to hear from me and my paper, if anything.

Though I hear of many new publications offering short snippets to younger readers, my gut and some reader response instruct me to move in a different direction. So I try to craft well written, informative pieces in a com-

fortable and friendly voice. To do this, I address the reader directly. I put more of myself in stories by integrating my experiences and my thoughts and preferences in what I write. In my role as a feature writer, I want to speak to that part of the young reader that is still developing and coming into its own. I want to help them make sense of their world and encourage them to think for themselves.

Excerpts From Leslie Koren’s Stories

My editors told me I’d need to lose the formal newspaper tone and spice up my stories when I took on this assignment. Now I write using the first person, directly address the reader, and just try to have fun. Some excerpts from my stories:

- I don’t even remember exactly what my boyfriend had done wrong, only that it made me very unhappy. Now I can see that the relationship was regrettable from the start. But at the time, I was new to the area and desperate to be anything but single. And so I did as generations of females, faced with similar and not-so-similar quandaries, have often done—I asked a girlfriend what to do. A week later, after following her guidance and giving him the silent treatment, we officially broke up. Another girlfriend told me never to seek that friend’s advice again.

Women, it seems, are programmed to solicit counsel. Nature or nurture, I can’t say, but I’ve spent enough hours on both ends of the telephone to qualify as an expert on the issue. Apparently, so have doz-

ens of other women, many of whom also had the forethought to put their so-called expertise into a book proposal, land an agent, and get it published.

- More than 40 years later, the book, including [Helen] Gurley Brown’s advice on finding, attracting and enjoying men, is going back on the market. In a new introduction, she writes about the great strides all women, including those without a husband, have made since her tell-all was first published, particularly in the career world. It’s perfect timing. We modern single girls could use a dollop of this 81-year-old’s feistiness. We may have come a long way—and there may be a lot more of us out there—but being solo, especially in your 30’s, still means sloughing off friends, family and coworkers who pity you for the lack of a ring on your finger and self-help gurus proffering the quickest way to get one. In Gurley Brown’s world—where pink colors the walls and a needlepoint pillow proclaims,
Continued on page 38.

Some of my first stories were about notable young people—the 25-year-old photographer who'd become the star of the New York art world, a marketing guru who was Sean "P. Diddy" Combs's right-hand man, a young magazine publisher and a novelist who had struggled for 10 years to finish a short-story collection. I also wrote about more challenging and serious aspects of dating and sex and about books meant to help young women sort it all out.

Amid this kind of coverage, I also found myself veering towards lighter "fun" topics such as fake tans (probably the story that garnered the most response), style and shopping. I love fashion and think it's important to write about it—getting dressed is a big part of our lives—but I still struggle with

citing such stories among the main topics I use to connect with younger readers. They are a far cry from Quindlen's columns.

In late spring, top editors at The Record established a young readership committee to examine what additional steps the newsroom could take to reverse the ebb of young readers. A group of about 10 young reporters, myself included, along with one of our Internet content providers and three editors have met almost weekly to decide on our recommendations. In our initial meetings, as my colleagues talked about what young readers want, hard news was rarely included. Stories about state and federal budgets and school boards were shunned in favor of celebrity profiles and news about local bands.

So noticeable was the absence of

important issues that one of our editors asked if we had given up trying to make serious news appeal to young readers. Few were willing to accept this premise and, in fact, the paper is going to start publishing a weekly op-ed column in November, written by a rotating group of young staffers, about topics ranging from the high cost of housing to the future of altar girls in the Catholic Church.

Will this op-ed column—written in a young voice—appeal to young readers? I hope so, but then, I love news, and I like being informed. Newspapers didn't have to force news on me when I was younger because my parents read two newspapers, and social and political issues of the day were common dinner conversation. To take part, I had to be informed.

"Good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere"—there is glory for the bachelorette.

- According to the literature, the spray-on tan lasts for about five days, though mine faded significantly after three. But boy, were they three glorious days. "Did you go on vacation or something, you look nice and tan," said the first colleague I saw upon returning to the office post-tanning. "You're tan. What did you do to yourself?" asked my boyfriend as soon as I walked into our apartment that night. "You are sooooo tan. Where did you go?" asked my yoga teacher as she adjusted my triangle pose two days later. My response—"A new tropical island called Paramus"—was not entirely convincing. But the tan was. No one could believe it was fake. "You definitely have that glow," said another coworker.
- Near the end of the 25-foot catwalk, past the dancers in white hot pants and under the neon pink lights, Jameel Spencer clinks shot glasses with Sean "P. Diddy" Combs and

downs his tequila. Two large bodyguards flank the table. Hip-hop pulses in the Chelsea club. The time is 4 a.m., and Spencer's work is finally done.

It began at 8 a.m., 20 hours earlier, and in another four hours, he will wake again and drive his two children to school. But sleep doesn't concern this man. He'll do that when he dies, he says. Being well rested is not what got him where he is today—right-hand man to the former Puff Daddy, head of a lifestyle and marketing company, and ushered through velvet ropes from New York to St. Tropez. If he is tired, he doesn't show it. He follows his boss out of the keyhole-shaped door, onto a well lit Manhattan street, and into his sporty silver Mercedes, which he will steer across the George Washington Bridge and into his two-car garage in Closter. This is living life in the hottest part of the flame. Speak no excuses, offer no doubts, and show no fear.

- Well, fellow suburbanites, take heart. There's always Denny's. Otherwise, I'm afraid, our collective hipster in-

dex is—frankly, it doesn't exist. But there is hope. "I grew up in the suburbs," said hipster aficionado Robert Lanham. My, how far he has come. The 31-year-old Virginia native is now ensconced in a hipster's haven, Williamsburg, New York. He wears long sideburns, old-school mustard and burgundy Adidas (with a gray suit, no less), and suggests meeting at a café that offers free Buddhism classes. And he has come to the service of hipster wannabes everywhere. His new treatise, "The Hipster Handbook," is an unauthorized, tell-all ethnography of those stylishly evasive and elusive followers of indie rock bands. More than an anthropological study, Lanham's book offers vital information for the hipster in training. Besides eating at Denny's (it has enough kitsch appeal to qualify, says Lanham, who especially likes the menus), you have to be up on styles and then you have to pretend you aren't. No self-respecting hipster would ever admit he or she is a hipster. ■ —L.K.

What stunned me about our paper, once I started to pay particular attention to these issues, was how often we missed opportunities to connect with young readers. School-related stories are written for parents, not students, yet we write about teenagers in relation to school and to little else. Many of our stories are “traditional” newspaper stories, and those do not seem to acknowledge the needs, interests and concerns of a younger reader.

My editor, Barbara Jaeger, has been very supportive of my attempts to write less traditionally and with a different voice. But at times, these efforts came up against our style and standards. [See Koren’s sidebar on page 37 for examples of her style of writing.] I wanted to use the word “ladies,” for example, but our stylebook dictates we

use “women.” In the profile of a photographer, I described one of his more risqué photographs: semen splattered on a man’s pants. My editor deferred to the higher ups. I argued that it was a telling and important detail about his work and his willingness to push the limits. I also thought young readers want frankness. The editors heard my argument and respected it, but left out the line.

In the recent meetings of our young readership committee, we have been trying to come up with a more concrete definition of what we think young readers want. To help us, each of us was assigned a specific date of the paper to review for articles that might and might not be of interest. I was eager and nervous to hear what others thought concerning my work.

On the day when we shared our reviews, Tara Kane, my 24-year-old colleague, held up the front of our paper’s entertainment section. I saw the headline for a Q & A that I had written about Patricia Field, the costume designer for HBO’s “Sex and the City,” and my heartbeat quickened noticeably. When you are talking about younger readers, “Sex and the City” is a pretty safe bet. But Field is an older woman. Would Tara connect with her? She did, and I relaxed. She’s just one young reader, and it’s just one story, but at least it’s a start. ■

Leslie Koren, formerly a crime reporter, now writes features for The Record in North Jersey.

✉ koren@northjersey.com

Practicing Journalism in Elementary Classrooms

‘Could eight-, nine- and 10-year-olds, who had trouble sitting still for more than 10 minutes at a time, develop the skills to become reporters?’

By Leah Kohlenberg

“I’d like to speak to a doctor,” the young reporter said, biting his lip and rolling his eyes skyward as he listened to someone on the phone from the county public health department.

“What, you don’t have doctors there?” the reporter asked. Another pause.

“You’ve got what? Epi-what? Look,” explained the reporter, a little impatiently, “I just need someone who can give me a quote about the new flu going around.”

Welcome to the North Beach Chronicle, a monthly student newspaper not unlike other student publications around the country, with two exceptions: North Beach is an elementary school, and all the third, fourth and fifth graders—not a select journalism class—write, illustrate, photograph and sell advertising for the paper.

The all-inclusive newspaper program is the brainchild of Nakonia (Niki)

Hayes, a veteran administrator hired as principal three years ago at North Beach Elementary School, a small public school located in an affluent Seattle neighborhood with an active Parent Teacher Association. Despite strong financial support and parental involvement, Hayes was surprised to discover the school’s test scores were faltering, especially in writing: Only 36 percent of North Beach’s fourth graders had passed the writing section of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) the previous year, a test soon to become a requirement for students to graduate in Washington State.

Hayes, a former journalist, took a gamble that newspapering skills would boost the test scores and reinvigorate the school’s writing program. To get it done, she hired me, a former Time reporter/writer, as the school’s journalist-in-residence—a task I entered with trepidation and enthusiasm.

Could eight-, nine- and 10-year-olds, who had trouble sitting still for more than 10 minutes at a time, develop the skills to become reporters? And even more importantly, would those skills make them better learners and more likely to become sophisticated news consumers—or news consumers, period?

We had no idea, then, what was possible.

The Experiment Begins

September 12, 2001: I was in a North Beach classroom and had asked fourth graders to open The Seattle Times and point out anything they found interesting about the previous day’s devastating news that featured the terrorists’ destruction of the World Trade Center. The kids gravitated, naturally, towards photos, in particular, two that were on opposite but facing pages inside the A-