

A project of Community Works



WHERE WE'RE FROM

VISITOR AND STUDY GUIDE

“Nobody ever asks you to sit down and tell them about your life, and by the time they think of it, it’s too late.”

*From an interview by Bianca Charles with
her great-grandmother, Ruby Jean Fox*



Bianca Charles, her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother (right to left)

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The *Where We're From* project welcomes you to an exhibit of photographs and student writing, inspired by interviews with local families and community members.

Family stories give us a sense of participating in the world. We come from somewhere. We belong to someone. We want to tell our stories, and someone else wants to listen. Even the word "history" is literally his story. Well, his story is only one story. We are many voices, many stories.

We live in places rich with stories, some discovered and others yet to be discovered. We hope this exhibit will inspire you to ask your own family members where they came from, what your family names are, what life was like then, and if they left from somewhere to come here, what were the motivating reasons. Be sure to take notes so when a child in your family asks you where, how, when, and why, you already have some of the answers.

THE EXHIBIT

The *Where We're From* project is a collection of photographs and poems, inspired by interviews conducted by Richmond High School and Kappa High School students. Some of the interviews are with family members; others are with community members. Some were conducted by the students as a group; others one-on-one.

Past interviews were conducted and poems written by Jorge Argueta, Niko Brice, Tamika Brown, Bianca Charles, Marvin Click, Adam Doty, Stephanie Hernandez, Jessica Moreida, Francisco Navarro, Jennifer Rojas, and Adela Romero from Richmond High School; and DeAndre, Shapell Frelot, Crystle Harris, Perla Manjarrez, Jose Navarro III, Luis Rodriguez, Daniel Simms, and Derrick Vassey from Kappa High School.

In fall 2011, Richmond High School teacher, Jessica Price, wanted to include all 90 students in her three periods of English Language Development 4 as participants. Community members who visited the school were interviewed in each period by the entire classroom; and although only a few students were picked to do

home interviews (overseen by Summer Brenner and Ruth Morgan), the remaining students were required to interview a family member on their own. At the end of the semester, students submitted three poems each: "Where I'm From" (about themselves), "Where She's/He's From" (about one of the community visitors), and "Where He's/She's From" (about a family member). The project generated over 270 poems!

The portraits of the students and interviewees were taken by Community Works' Executive Director, Ruth Morgan.

Available to educators and interested parties are copies of the survey questionnaire and the *Where We're From* poetry template. Please contact Community Works at (510) 486-2340.

HOW TO GET STARTED

In this booklet are listed a few essential questions to help you get started with your own family history. No doubt, answers from your family members will inspire questions of your own.

Once you know the names of your family, you can start to search the genealogical archives on the internet. These archives may also connect you to relatives in other parts of the country and the world.

Genealogical Websites

Large databases of family histories include:

www.FamilySearch.org

www.OneGreatFamily.com

www.USGenNet.com

www.accessgenealogy.com, a large database that includes tribal records for Native Americans, census reports, and cemetery records

U.S. CENSUS records date back to the early 1800s in some regions of the country. Church records often hold a wealth of information, including baptisms and funeral dates.

For African-American families visit: www.afrigeneas.com

For African-American youth, there's also a Afrigeneas Juniors Genealogy Forum where young people can post questions at: www.afrigeneas.com/forum-jr/

For Latino-Hispanic origins, see www.lasculturas.com. This site directs you to many other sites, including The Genealogy of Mexico and the names of the Conquistadores.

For families who came by ship to Ellis Island in New York, see www.ellisland.org. If you know the ship's name, passengers lists, called "ship manifest," may be available.

For families who came by ship to Angel Island in San Francisco, see the National Archives: www.archives.gov/pacific/san-francisco

For additional information about Angel Island's immigration history, including the "paper sons" and "paper daughters" from China and the "picture brides" from Japan, see: www.angelisland.org

For information on Jewish origins, see: www.Jewishgen.org

The Regional Oral History Office (ROHO), located at the Bancroft Library on the University of California - Berkeley campus, contains a treasure trove of oral histories taken from residents in the Bay Area, including Richmond and West Contra Costa County. Visit: bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO

When looking for your own history, sometimes it's right in front of you.

Most cities and towns have historical societies and even museums. Be sure to visit the Richmond Museum of History, located at 400 Nevin Avenue in Richmond, CA.

If your family migrated to West Contra Costa during World War II, you may be especially interested in the Rosie the Riveter monument and other local Home Front sites in Richmond, including the *SS Red Oak* Victory ship.

WHERE I'M FROM

I'm from being born in Santa Rosa
from being raised in Richmond
from a small apartment in Reno
with one bedroom and everyone sleeping in the same room
my parents, my sister, my brother, myself
and when Angelica was born she had to sleep in the kitchen
I'm from eating apples and celebrating Thanksgiving
from listening to hard metal Black Veil Bride
from my favorite "Rebel Love Song"
I'm from hoping that one day the violence will stop
from reading books everyday but not doing well in school
I'm from never having confidence in myself
from telling people that I'm happy
and never telling the truth that I'm sad at times

– Maritza Azamar



Catalina Gonzales and Adela Romero

WHERE I'M FROM

I'm from seeing myself as an imperfect person
from people saying that I should try harder
even though I try my best
I'm from wanting more knowledge and courage
from being really blessed to have a wonderful family
I'm from making the smallest decisions
that have the greatest effects
I'm from Richmond High School
with my hopes to graduate and make my parents proud
I'm from a ten-year old brother who is really annoying
but I'm always learning lessons from him
I'm from my baby pictures and child memories
I'm from tamales, tortillas, and anything that sounds good
I'm from small parties but a lot of people
from going to the beach, the wind in my face, and sand in my toes
I'm from being born in San Francisco and raised in San Pablo
I'm from opening my eyes on January 4, 1997

– Astrid Flores

WHERE I'M FROM

I'm from Chris, Kao, Nai, Mark, and Russell
from North Richmond gangs and drug dealers
where there's violence in my neighborhood
from celebrating Halloween, Christmas, and Thanksgiving
from rice noodles and guava juice
from football, soccer, video games, and outdoor activities
I'm from getting a college degree
and moving my parents out of Richmond
going somewhere that has less violence
I'm from being peer pressured
into joining gangs and doing drugs
I'm from staying away from drug abusers
and getting straight As in 8th grade
I'm from getting into fights and coming home bruised
from bleeding from my mouth and nose
I'm from people seeing me go through tough times
and always getting through it
I'm from never giving up
and making a joke to rejoice myself when I feel down

– Steven Saechao

WHERE I'M FROM

I'm from a family broke up
from Gerardo and Gabriela
to my bonded Sister Angela and my loving baby Brother Lionel
I'm from San Francisco to Concord
from moving from Mexico to finally living in Richmond
I'm from knowing my little brother's birth
to the death of my loving grandmother
I'm from Chinese food
to my mother's homemade chicken soup
from celebrating los Dias de Muertos in Mexico
to Christmas Eve in Richmond
I'm from taking care of my sister
who's my best friend ever
to my mother as a part of my life
from my brother with another blood in his veins
to my father who forgives
I'm from a dream of being accepted in college
to getting a career in a hospital
from starting a new life with a new family and new dream
I'm from a decision to leave and sacrifice everything I love
to think about a better life and study in another state
I'm from the best thing in my life
the birth of a new baby brother
to the worst thing in my life
being alone with no one to share my dreams
I'm from people who see me as crazy, weird, nice
a person who makes good decisions
to seeing myself as different from other girls
from not caring about my makeup but caring about my test

not caring about a boyfriend but caring about a class
caring about words my mother told me,
"You're not weird or a crazy.
You're someone who cares about others.
Who doesn't want to be like other girls,
someone who's different.
You are unique and will always be like that..."

– Jennifer Rojo



Courtney Bulletti Cummings answering interview questions from students

WHERE SHE'S FROM

She's from Ana and El Salvador
from hearing grasshoppers and frogs at night
from red beans and tortillas
and eating all that delicious Salvadorian food
She's from going to church with her mom Saturday and Sunday
and dreaming my brother and I will have a better future than she did
She's from being raised by a single mother
from leaving her mother behind when she came to the US
from leaving her mother in a very poor world
She's from being a very positive person
even though she's going through rough times
someone who always has a smile on her face

– Virginia Beltran

WHERE I'M FROM

I'm from the ghetto streets of San Pablo
running from bullets and praying everyday I make it
I'm from being born in Children's Hospital
in San Pablo and being raised in San Pablo
I'm from trying to be a 2012 graduate
and go on to become a 5-star barber
become a wealthy man and go to UC
and be someone my little bro can look at
and set for him an example

– Jesse Cruz

WHERE I'M FROM

I'm from 1996 and 2011
from Evelyn and Jayden
and 510 Rich City

I'm from thugs walking around
and people smoking blunts back to back

I'm from tortillas and quesadillas

from parties with Jose Cuervo and Coronas

I'm from losing my friend who committed suicide

and hoping to get good things out of life

from making the right decisions and not choosing the wrong path

I'm from living good and having good friends

from fun, nice, helpful, lovable, and creative

from missing one part of me and not knowing what it is

– Jessyca Lopez

WHERE I'M FROM

I'm from parents
that are no longer together
but I still love them with all my heart
I'm from Richmond
from homeless people asking for money
from violence and gunshots everyday
I'm from spaghetti and pan dulce
from Chinese food and Sprite
I'm from all those Mexican traditions
from celebrating our cherished and sad moments
I'm from not letting myself fall
from giving it a try again although sometimes it could hurt
I'm from getting somewhere far through my education
and feeling that this time I'm proud of myself
I'm from letting things go
because I know I won't get to keep them forever
I'm from a free soul that lets my body flow freely

– Aylin Giron



Students from Jessica Price's English Language Development 4 class

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR FAMILY MEMBERS

With the Internet there are many amazing resources readily available to trace your own family history. First, interview all the relatives you can find. Family elders are usually delighted to pass down family history and lore.

1) What are all the names in your family?

Note: Remember to include the maiden names of your mother, your aunts, your grandmothers, and your female cousins.

2) Where are the places your family has lived?

Note: With a letter, phone call, email, or Internet search, you can investigate public records (birth certificates, death certificates, cemetery, and property records) in the towns, cities, and counties where your family lived. See "How to Get Started" section for tips.

3) List your family's favorite recipes:

Note: Now is a good time to record your grandmother's favorite cobbler, chile, and jam recipes. Maybe your grandfather has a special way to BBQ or pickle. Make a scrapbook of family recipes and copy them as wedding and graduation presents for other family members.

4) What are your family's favorite traditions?

5) If you could travel backwards in time, what would you most want to know?

6) List your own questions:



Jahahara Alkebulan-Maat and Niko Brice

PROJECT BACKGROUND

How did the *Where We're From* project evolve? In 2002-03 with a grant from the California Arts Council, Summer Brenner conducted poetry workshops at Gompers Continuing Education High School in Richmond, California. The students in Jamela Smith's class were already working with a popular poetry template called *Where I'm From*. The *Where I'm From* poems, tacked on her classroom walls, were revelatory and honest, filled with street grit and wistful longings.

Ms. Brenner also had the opportunity to see *On the Rez: Coast Pomo Youth Speak Out*, a documentary made by Amelie Prescott's Native American students, who interviewed family elders, asking for their stories, guidance, and the wisdom of experience.

In 2006, Summer Brenner and Ruth Morgan of Community Works collaborated to create a project that combined elements of both the poem and the film. The *Where We're From* project, supported by grants from The Christensen Fund in 2007, the Leshar Foundation and Target in 2008-2009, and the Leshar Foundation in 2010-2012, was designed to:

- * put young people in touch with their own past;
- * strengthen students' connection to time and place;
- * train youth to conduct interviews;
- * meet community members with diverse backgrounds;
- * use the *Where I'm From* template for writing poems; and
- * create a community exhibit of photographs and poetry.

Students designed a uniform questionnaire, reflecting what they most wanted to learn from the interviews. Community members were invited to visit the class for group interviews where students took turns asking questions, jotting down notes, and most importantly engaging in “active listening” by letting their curiosity override the questionnaire.

The group sessions were dynamic. Students heard from an African-American whose family fled the south under death threats and who himself was a draft resistor in the Vietnam War; a Native American whose parents left their reservations and relocated to Oakland; an Irish-American whose immigrant parents raised nine children in a nearby two-bedroom house; a Chinese-American whose parents were engaged at six months in a remote district of rural China; two women who participated in Civil Rights activities in the south; an African-American who engaged in sit-ins wearing his Army uniform; and a Latino, child of migrant farmworkers, who was imprisoned and tortured in Guatemala.

Following each group interview, students worked collectively on poems describing the subject in the format, *Where He's From* or *Where She's From*.

Afterward, it was time for the one-on-one home interviews, overseen by Ruth Morgan and Summer Brenner. Ms. Morgan photographed interviewer and interviewee. Students used interview notes to write poems dedicated to the interviewees and *Where I'm From* poems about themselves.

OUR APPRECIATION

Our grateful appreciation is extended to The Christensen Fund, Leshner Foundation, and Target for their financial support and to teachers Elizabeth Hirshfeld, Jessica Price, Byrne Sherwood, and their students.

A special thanks to all the community participants: Lynn Adler, Adana Browning, Dr. Henry Clark, Courtney Bulletti Cummings, Mike Driscoll, Valerie Estrada, Catalina Gonzales, Sammie Lee Hill, Elizabeth Hirshfeld, Fred Jackson, Rosa Lara, Jahahara Alkebulan-Maat, Leonard McNeil, Antonio Medrano, Jose Navarro II, Byrne Sherwood, Betty Reid Soskin, Ying Mei Tcheou, Armando Torres, Tony Williams -- and the family members of the students who so willingly gave their time and their stories to the younger generation.

YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

2007

Jorge Argueta
Niko Brice
Tamika Brown
Bianca Charles
Marvin Click, Jr.
Adam Doty
Stephanie Hernandez
Jessica Moreida
Francisco Navarro
Jennifer Rojas
Adela Romero

2009

DeAndre
Shapell Frelot
Crystle Harris
Perla Manjarrez
Jose Navarro III
Luis Rodriguez
Daniel Simms
Derrick Vassey

Fall 2011

Students in Jessica Price's English Language Development 4 classes
(Periods 1, 2, and 3)

EXHIBIT SITES

Addison Street Gallery (Berkeley), Berkeley Public Library, East Bay Center for the Performing Arts (Richmond), Hilltop Mall, Main Street Windows (Richmond), Richmond Museum of History

PROJECT LEADERS

Summer Brenner is the author of twelve books of poetry and fiction, including *Richmond Tales*, *Lost Secrets of the Iron Triangle*, winner of the 2010 Richmond Historic Preservation Award; and *IVY, Homeless in San Francisco*, winner of the Children's Literary Classics Award and the Moonbeam Children's Book Award. She is a board member of West County READS.

Ruth Morgan is the founder and Executive Director of Community Works. She has built a career as an artist/photographer, exhibiting locally, nationally, and internationally with one-person exhibitions at the University Art Museum (Berkeley), Museum of Photographic Arts (San Diego), Eleventh Street Gallery (New York), and Musée de Photographie (Belgium). She has won multiple awards and artist residencies. Her work is included in numerous public and private collections, including the Houston Museum of Art, SF MOMA, the Philadelphia Museum, and the De Menil Collection (Houston).

Community Works engages youth and adults in arts and education programs that interrupt and heal the far-reaching impact of incarceration and violence by empowering individuals, families and communities. CW believes that the arts and education can serve as valuable platforms for achieving this goal, incorporating personal expression, alliance-building, and public engagement. CW is particularly concerned with the effects of soaring incarceration rates on communities, impacting not only the offending individuals but also families, neighbors, and survivors of crime. CW links up with the institutions that most affect our constituents' lives, including the criminal and juvenile justice systems, the public school system, and other community-based organizations, in order to provide enriching, sustainable programs that work to bring communities together.

For more information about the *Where We're From* project, contact Community Works (510) 486-2340 or visit www.communityworks.org.

The *Where We're From* project was made possible by grants from THE CHRISTENSEN FUND, LESHER FOUNDATION, and TARGET.

A special THANK YOU to the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts for hosting the Spring 2012 exhibit.



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BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH ARTS AND EDUCATION

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