



East Cleveland Municipal Court

A Books@Work Community Program Case Study

Through professor-led literature seminars, Books@Work fosters critical thinking, community, confidence and lifelong learning in workplaces and community settings.

The Program

Partnering with the East Cleveland Municipal Court and From Lemons 2 Lemonade, we brought Books@Work to 27 women in a court-mandated life skills class in lieu of incarceration.

Sponsored with a grant from The Eva L. & Joseph M. Bruening Foundation, the Bronfman Youth Fellowships Alumni Venture Fund and an individual donor, college professors worked with the women for 3 months at a time, leading discussions about poetry and literature in weekly meetings with up to 8 women at once. At a ceremony celebrating their completion of the program, several participants chose to read favorite poems.

Participant Reflections

In interviews, participants reflected on the Books@Work experience, appreciating the way in which the program:

- enabled participants to have **confidence in themselves**.

"When I read these books, I was [struggling with] some words, and [the professor] taught me how to never give up and keep on, and just read. . .It actually motivated me a lot."

"The poems we actually wrote made me feel better about myself when I left here. I'm reading it in the car and thinking, 'You know what, I am strong.'"

- extended participants' **support networks**.

"We stick together. We've been through thick and thin. . . when we all connect together, we share about everything that's going on in our lifestyle and everything we read about. We communicate very well. It's feeling of joy, but then again it's a feeling like you don't want to leave."

- enabled participants to **better manage internal and external conflict**.

"I've been writing [poetry] a lot. It's very therapeutic to me, so when I feel upset, I'll just write certain things down instead of blowing up or getting upset. Because I do have a 1-year old. [. . .] Instead of spanking her, tapping hands, I just write and I let it go."

- fostered participants' ability to **understand and see themselves in others**.

"Some things I didn't relate to because everybody has their own story, but it did open my eyes up to other people's lives and say, 'Oh wow, that does happen. Oh my goodness.'"

"[The book] makes you think and it let's you know that there are other black women going through the same things that you're going through and that helps a lot."

- enabled participants to **express and accept themselves**.

"The part about it that I liked was the sharing, because I am not really a sharing person. This was like the first time I have shared, since I probably was a teenager. . . everyone slowly opened up to their feelings."

- **expanded participants' hopes and expectations for the future**.

"[The professor] had us do these 'I am' poems. . .Just start of a positive thing to make us dream more I guess, to let us know that everything is not always bad. I think that was fundamental. I was just hopeful that things are going to change or just try to stay as positive as possible."

Readings

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/*

When the Rainbow is Enuf

Jacqueline Wilson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Lucille Clifton, *Collected Poems*

The Participants

All participants completed high school and some college, but without attaining a degree. Surveys indicated that the group had the following demographics:

