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“The positive feedback we receive from the participants each and every time we complete a program makes us desirous of continuing it on a regular basis. I’ve been told…that learning new ideas about new lands, new cultures, and varying viewpoints is what makes them…come back for more.”

That quote comes from a letter we recently received from a rural library that regularly holds Maine Humanities Council programs. It highlights something that many of our library partners mention, but also connects with our other programming: new ideas and varying viewpoints. What better way to describe the MHC’s impact.

If you’ve been involved with the MHC over the years, you’ve no doubt noticed a flush of new statewide programming that takes our cherished vision of sharing the power and pleasure of ideas to entirely new heights—Veterans Book Group (our reading and discussion program for Service Members); and Think & Drink (our public happy-hour discussion series), to name just two. That said, it’s all grounded in the equal exchange of ideas and viewpoints.

In this update mailing, we delve into the ideas and viewpoints of several important programs within the MHC roster: our Letters About Literature contest (and what it taught its most recent winner, as well as what his experience can teach the rest of us), our reading and discussion groups for those who work in domestic violence prevention, and, on a lighthearted note, a new library program that gives a statewide linguistic nod to Shakespeare.

Join us for an upcoming program and let us hear your ideas!

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For more information about the MHC programs described herein or to subscribe to our online newsletter for monthly updates, go to mainehumanities.org.

LESSONS LEARNED: LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE
BY LEAH KUEHN

It’s no surprise that a student fascinated by the news would read all the behind-the-scenes stories he could. That fascination and the deep thinking alongside it took one Maine student to Washington, D.C., late this summer as a guest of the Library of Congress.

Earlier this year, Gabriel Ferris of Winslow, Maine, won the Library of Congress’s Letters About Literature contest on both a state and national level, earning a $100 state prize and a $1,000 national prize. The contest is open to all students in grades 4 to 12 and asks them to write a letter to any author, living or dead, whose work greatly affected their lives or changed their ways of thinking.

Gabe wrote his insightful letter to Walter Isaacson, authorized biographer of Steve Jobs. After speaking with Gabe, it’s easy to understand why this is the text that struck him.

Gabe is a Scholastic News Kids Press Corps reporter—one of 32 in the world.
He loves news; more specifically, he loves “what it takes to get the news from the studio to the sidewalk.” Ultimately, he wants to be a news anchor: to be the “face of reality to those in the grasp of horror.” This interest in the process behind the face of things, which informs many of Gabe’s interests, is perhaps what primarily got him to open the biography.

Steve Jobs is a 656-page tome dedicated to chronologically exploring Jobs’s complex life: his work, his colleagues, his employees, his influences. The book, based on interviews not only with Jobs but also with people from many places in Jobs’s world, is brutally honest and exploratory, sparing nothing of Jobs’s occasionally aggressive, confrontational, and contradictory life. In some ways, the book explores exactly what Gabe wanted to pursue: what goes on behind the scenes? Who is the man behind the face of Apple?

Gabe, who was 13 when he wrote his letter, initially picked up the book (which he happened to read on Apple’s own iPad) hoping to find “technical nuggets that could broaden my horizons”—but he was ultimately moved by something far deeper than the conception and production of computers.

Gabe’s letter is primarily concerned with the cost of a life like Jobs’s—he writes that he found himself “questioning if Steve’s high level of business success was worth the price he paid on a personal level.” At the end of his letter, Gabe writes:

Is excess a requirement for extreme success? Your story leaves me wondering if this is the case—and struggling with the balance between still wanting to do something great while still being someone great. Consequently, your story created more questions in my life than it answered.

Gabe’s letter probes at one of the most compelling themes in the humanities: what it means to be human. It is addressing not only the cost of “greatness” but its composition—and there is, of course, no easy answer.
As a facilitator for the Maine Humanities Council’s Domestic Violence Prevention Initiative, my visits to the Family Violence Project in Augusta begin the same way—at a locked and reinforced door. I press a buzzer and wait for someone to let me in. This reminds me that I am passing into a world where we cannot take safety for granted.

In Maine last year, there were 21 murders. Fourteen were related to domestic violence. Six of the dead were children. Domestic violence accounted for about half of all assaults reported to law enforcement. In 2014, Maine’s domestic violence resource centers provided 49,768 face-to-face meetings with advocates, answered 40,022 helpline calls, and sheltered 727 adults and children for a total of 29,814 bed-nights. And still it is not enough.

Once inside the door, I find myself in a large house-turned-headquarters in the campaign against domestic violence, one of the state’s eight headquarters in such a campaign. The work of these resource centers neither begins nor ends with emergency shelter or transitional housing: organizations sponsor prevention programs, advocate for legislative change, and support survivors on the long road to recovery with nonresidential services, including legal advice and counseling.

With mugs of coffee and paper plates of snacks, we gather around a table strewn with novels, memoirs, and print-outs of poems, short stories, and essays about domestic violence. A group might include advocates, social workers, therapists, health care providers, board members, volunteers, and survivors. Here is a male counselor who runs a batterers’ intervention program for women; there is a female specialist in trauma-sensitive yoga. Our participants are compassionate, committed people who volunteer for reading and discussion after a long day.

THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PREVENTION INITIATIVE: A FACILITATOR’S VIEW

BY SUSAN F. BEEGEL
What can a novel or a poem contribute to the struggle against domestic violence? Carol Zoref writes in her essay “Visual Anguish and Looking at Art,” “It is through our thoughtful attention … such as engaging with art … that knowledge acquires meaning. Events … often resist our predilection to comprehend because they feature action and reaction ahead of reflection, analysis, and insight.” Reading helps participants to reflect—from a safe distance—on traumatic events that in reality would require rapid, high-stakes decision-making.

Reading together creates a chance to experience community. There is warmth and laughter around the table as participants challenge or validate one another’s views. In the “real world,” the need to protect the privacy of victims often precludes full discussion; in the world of domestic violence, confidentiality is often a matter of life and death. The necessary silence can leave people who work in this stressful field feeling isolated. But fiction gives us fully imagined cases to discuss, while in memoirs strangers freely offer us their stories. Literature, then, creates freedom to talk and to grow ideas in a safe, supportive space.

Reading develops empathy. Through fiction, poetry, drama, or memoir, we can step into the minds of victims and abusers—take their perspectives, feel what they feel, and connect with aspects of ourselves that help us to understand. Literature has answers to complex questions about other people’s motives. Why does she stay? What is he thinking? One participant wrote after a program, “The intimacy offered in the literature was most helpful to me. I’m not a survivor. To experience this through literature gave me a safe, visceral view.”

Reading lets the mask of professionalism slip. Emotions emerge for sharing and examination. Fear. Survivors live with it daily. Advocates live with it too, as the recent murder of Vermont social worker Lara Sobel reminds us. Anger. At batterers. At a society that fails to hold them accountable. Sadness. For families torn apart. Grief. For loved ones and clients who have died.

But we do not stop there. Our literary readings also explore the work of healing and recovery. We celebrate resilience, nourishing love, and the thousand delicious simplicities of daily life included in the adjective “domestic.” Our participants are experts in domestic violence; we cannot teach them about their field. Literary reading offers something else instead. As John Steinbeck wrote, “It is the duty of the writer to lift up, to extend, to encourage.” We see this when a participant writes, “The program served … as reinforcement, reaffirmation, validation of existing practice” or “Thoughtful consideration … of these issues leaves me with a sense of gratitude for how hard we work and for what we know.”

Our session over, I pass back through the locked door with renewed gratitude of my own. Without fear, I can decide what to eat for breakfast, walk my dog on a crisp morning, soak in a hot bath, tuck a child in at bedtime, read a book in a favorite armchair. Thousands of Mainers cannot do these things in safety or without overwhelming fear. It’s an honor to support the remarkable people who serve them.

Susan F. Beegel, independent scholar, is a long-time MHC facilitator who is currently facilitating this program at the Family Violence Project in Augusta and Safe Voices in Lewiston.

Readers at the Family Violence Project were so taken by Allan G. Johnson’s book, *The First Thing and the Last*, that this MHC selection is now recommended for all FVP staff and volunteers, and at least one member of our group is even considering reading it with survivors. It’s a beautiful, compelling novel that proceeds from the beginning of an abusive relationship through terror and tragedy, conflict with a legal system that privileges abusers, and finally through healing and recovery. FVP’s adoption of the book illustrates how the MHC’s Domestic Violence Prevention Initiative is making a difference—and if this article’s interested readers were to pick up the book, that could make a difference, too.
When it comes to Shakespeare, some people get downright gloomy. They rant on about how well-read you need to be to understand him. But use restraint in your yelping. You may not know that Shakespeare wrote for everyone from the well-bred to the uneducated; from the successful manager to the most foul-mouthed kitchen wench. In other words, Shakespeare's for you!

In 2016, the Maine Humanities Council and the Maine State Library will join forces to celebrate the auspicious occasion of Portland hosting Shakespeare's First Folio (an original copy of the 1623 collection of many of Shakespeare's plays, lent by the Folger Shakespeare Library) with a touring program aimed at turning the most quarrelsome Shakespeare hater into a bold-faced fan!

Shakespeare's wit, humor, and linguistic style will bedazzle you with a fun and informative celebration of the language of his plays including Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, King Lear, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, and more. To your amazement you’ll find that Shakespeare is as relevant today as he was 400 years ago. Whether you are part of a workaday world, in retirement, or the most untutored schoolboy, you will discover that Shakespeare is indeed priceless and accessible for all. Please accept our invitation to join in the fun by visiting mainehumanities.org.

[THE BOLDED WORDS ABOVE WERE ALL INVENTED BY SHAKESPEARE.]
“García Márquez is painting this picture on purpose...in using magical realism, he wants us to take seriously a different culture. This novel is not only autobiographical, but is more generally about Latin American history. This is a narrative that talks about how a small community increasingly becomes more integrated into the Western world, not just economically, but culturally.” – Professor Allen Wells, Bowdoin College

In 2016, Winter Weekend, the MHC’s big book gala, will feature Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude. The program includes scholar presentations, a themed meal, a musical performance, and two days of camaraderie with other excited readers.