



In Conversation with Ruth Walker

Ruth Walker is a writer, editor, an internationally published poet, and an aspiring playwright. I first learned about her artist-in-residence appointment with the Durham Alternative Secondary School, for 2007-08, when I came across the announcement online at www.wcdr.org. Until that time, I didn't know that alternative schools existed in Durham, much less [programs](#) like this one.

Although Ruth and I belong to the same local writers group, we previously met through email exchanges only, as we did for this profile.

After reading her Q&A, I'm sure readers will agree that students at DASS were lucky to have worked with a nurturing, generous, artist like Ruth Walker, though she might say it was an even trade.

Tell us about your work as writer-in-residence with Durham Alternative Secondary School.

RW Working there is a gift: the kids are terrific and so willing to risk and try things, the teachers are encouraging and curious, and the Durham District School Board pays me for going there. Most artists would agree that being compensated for our work is a clear acknowledgement of the value of our art. It's a true affirmation.

As an artist in residence, I work directly with teacher of a range of subjects. I bring creative arts (in my case, creative writing and language play) into the classroom.

I am one of four artists in residence in a pilot project funded by the Ontario Arts Council—Jim Parker is our singer/songwriter/recording pro; Joanne Norman is our actor/stage and film director; Dorsey James is our sculptor/visual artist. It's a privilege to work with such outstanding professionals.

The students at DASS haven't been successful, for a variety of reasons, in the traditional classroom. Some have been in extremely difficult personal circumstances and some simply don't connect to regular classes. There is no single "Typical DASS Student" because their lives and circumstances are so diverse and complex.

The arts are a kind of bridge for many of these kids—creative writing, for example, can connect them to curriculum concepts in new ways. In a data management class—which is math and a subject in which I was a complete failure at in high school—we looked at the history of managing data. From paleolithic cave paintings in Lascaux, France to the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt, the kids made connections between the history of gathering and recording data and modern data collection.

They created their own surveys on a wide range of topics, and recorded and analyzed the material through graphs and descriptive paragraphs. Then they



inspirational Residents

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had to present their results to the rest of the class.

In one 6-week session we travelled through ancient history, math, and even did some sociology and cultural anthropology; researching skills were developed as well as oral presentation skills. They created a set of hieroglyphic cards to play a game of 'Concentration' and develop probability and deduction skills.

To help them gain a better connection to history, we had a trip to the Royal Ontario Museum to visit ancient Greece and Egypt and hang out with the dinosaurs.

For most of them, it was their first trip to a museum and they had a blast. As we left, I heard several making plans to return on their own. It was an incredible moment.

How did the position come to you?

RW I applied in 2006 for an ArtsSmarts placement with the Durham District School Board and was lucky enough to be picked by an English teacher at DASS, Diane Baker, to join her and Bonnie Peebles, the head of the art department in offering a creative writing project that combined mask making with writing poetry. Based on my success in that project, I was asked to serve as an artist in residence when the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) granted the Durham board the funding to offer a year-long artist-in-residence program. Sue Pidlubny from the Board coordinated the program with the OAC

You have previous experience as a writer-in-residence, but had you an interest in alternative school?

RW Other than the ArtsSmarts placement last spring, this was my first “gig” as an artist in residence in any capacity. I've been to other high schools as a guest speaker, but never took on such a direct involvement in the students. I was really nervous about DASS—I wondered what a middle-aged woman poet could bring to a bunch of street smart misfits. Boy was I wrong—about the kids, I mean. They are the same kids as you find in any high school—sure maybe some have attitudes, but under it all, I recognize who they are. They are me—40 years ago, just wanting to get it all figured out and trying to make my way through school and life—the same hopes and fears are all there.

What were your greatest challenges in setting up and/or running the program?

RW See above. ;-)

Also, figuring out what would work for each class. I had a geography class, and we worked on researching Australia and creating postcards from Down Under. I found them a contact in the Mitta Mitta River Valley who was willing to be their pen pal, so they did research via email.



What were your greatest joys of the last year?

RW Lots and lots of joys there. Reading and listening to the work of more than one young person who were already accomplished poets and writer. There are several at DASS who have writing and songwriting abilities that are quite strong.

I love to watch them laugh and just be kids. So many of them haven't been allowed—or allowed themselves—to simply be joyful and unguarded. Their shoulders relax and their heads come up and they are right in that moment. It's incredible.

I'm really looking forward to graduation in late June when more than 200 DASS students are scheduled to receive the high school diplomas. I'm definitely bringing tissues because I expect to cry.

What was the most surprising element of working with students in an alternative setting?

RW That I belonged there—for the most part, they accept me and my 'odd ways'. They are helpful and respectful—I've been to other schools where they just let the door shut on 'the stranger'—at DASS, the kids stop and hold the door for me. Not at all what people expect. Even so, some of the students are so willing to give up. That is the toughest part—trying to help them understand the value of persevering.

In what ways has the work helped you with your own writing?

RW I am much more willing to take risks in my writing. I will break rules and defy expectations more easily and I think this makes me a much better writer. I've always said the best writers subvert the text—the kids at DASS inspire me to do just that. And I've increased my vocabulary so much ;-)

In what ways has your relationship with students changed when comparing your first day to the end of the school year?

RW Most couldn't figure out what we artists were doing there—they had to learn to trust us. Many of them are now so easy and comfortable with me—even those who haven't been in any of my classes. They see all the artists interacting with one another and with the teachers, and their trust comes more easily because they see we are there to support their efforts to finish school and we don't judge who they are or why they are there. We have just heard that our project has received the overwhelming support of the Ontario Arts Council to continue for another year. If the Durham Board chooses to have us back at DASS, it will be interesting to see if that 'easy' carries over with enough of the students who return in the fall to influence the many new students who will come for the first time.



Do you have one, memorable, or inspiring moment in the past school year?

RW We did an end-of-the-year presentation at the school board as part of this year's ArtsSmarts/Student Success celebration. One of our students wrote a song—a country and western piece about the school. C & W is not his 'thing' but it was part of Jim Parker's approach to try on different sounds/approaches in songwriting. The student's mom came to see him, and two teachers and I served as his 'back up singers' with Jim playing guitar. This was such a great moment for him, for his mom and for Jim who'd work with this young man. I wish I could properly convey the look of self-pride and pleasure on his face when the applause started—it was a pure expression of delight and humility.

What books are you currently reading?

RW I just finished several books on Greek mythology and the plays of Euripides. I belong to a critique group, so I read my colleagues' works in progress. I read poetry when I have very little time. And I just started "The Birth House."

What are you currently writing/working on now?

RW I'm working on the final rewrite of a two-act play, and editing a manuscript for an Ottawa writer. I'll be offering a summer creative writing workshop for teachers and a workshop at the Whitby Public Library for teen writers this summer.

Is there anything you'd like to add? The name of your cat, the age of your kids? Your most secret professional desire?

RW My husband and I just celebrated our 35th wedding anniversary on the Victoria Day weekend—he's the love of my life and my dearest friend. Our four kids are remarkable young people—all making their way through life, and a source of pride to my husband and I.

One more thing. Writing is a solitary act—but I have never been alone with all this. My colleague writers—and I am blessed with many colleagues and dear friends who write—have been there to encourage and support me. The Durham Region community of writers is a fine thing indeed and, in part, the reason for much of my success as a writer.

P.S.

Valerie, the Durham District School Board has created a 15-minute DVD that features the work we've done with the students throughout the year on the OAC project. It is a humbling experience for me to see that DVD and I hope that one day you get to see it too.