

How a Gannett Foundation grant helps the Young Writers Project practice journalism

Maleeha Syed, Burlington Free Press Published 6:00 a.m. ET Sept. 23, 2019

A Vermont program is encouraging young writers to try their hands at reporting with the help of a \$25,000 grant.

The [Young Writers Project](https://youngwritersproject.org/about) (<https://youngwritersproject.org/about>) and 15 other organizations won funding in June from the Gannett Foundation, a corporate charity that supports nonprofit activities in the communities where the USA Today Network operates. The Burlington Free Press is part of the USA Today Network.

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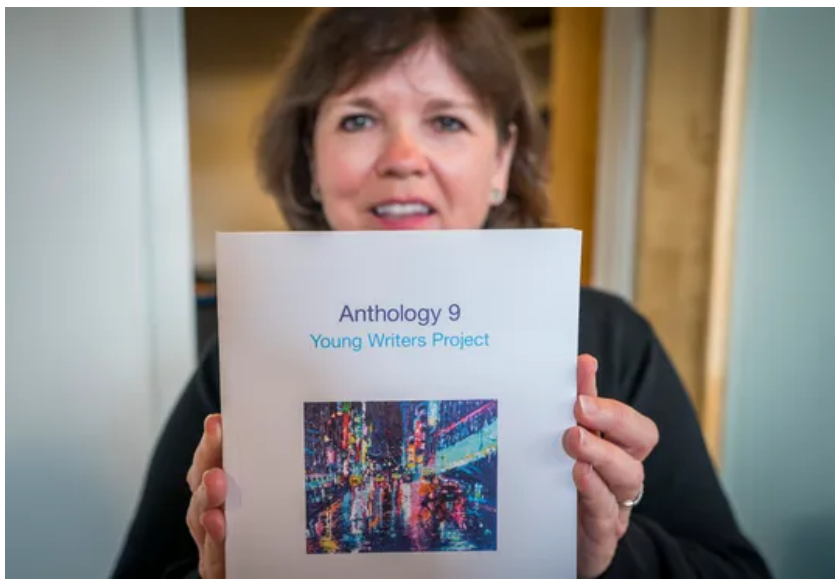
Narges Anzali participates in a writers prompt exercise during a workshop at the Young Writers Project offices in Burlington run by Bess O'Brien and the Listen Up Project on Saturday, Sept. 14, 2019. The two groups are collaborating to develop teen writers in Vermont with help from a Gannett Foundation grant. (Photo: RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS)

The Young Writers Project encourages teenagers to craft skills including writing, video and photos. The writers have seen their work published through the program's online forum and in local news outlets such as Vermont Public Radio, VTDigger and the Burlington Free Press. The recent grant is enabling the organization to kick off the school year with its Community Journalism Project, focusing specifically on writers' reporting skills.

More: [Young Writers Project, the Flynn Center and United Way of Northwest VT land Gannett grants. \(/story/life/2019/06/11/gannett-foundation-awards-a-community-thrives-grants-vt-nonprofits/1380690001/\)](https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/life/2019/06/11/gannett-foundation-awards-a-community-thrives-grants-vt-nonprofits/1380690001/)

"I have a real passion for journalism, so this project is close to my heart," said Susan Reid, executive director of the Young Writers Project. "I know how important journalism is for a healthy democracy and just to be in the world."

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Young Writers Project Executive Director Susan Reid has been awarded \$25,000 by the Gannett Foundation -- owner of the Burlington Free Press -- for the Burlington-based non-profit's new Community Journalism Project to explore topics that stir middle- and high schoolers, including social justice, climate change and violence. Young Writers Project was one of 16 recipients of top-tier grants through Gannett Foundation's A Community Thrives project, among 1,500 applicants in 46 states. (Photo: RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS)

Reid used to be an editor at the Free Press and a political reporter with the Toronto Star. She emphasized the expertise one gains through journalism, including researching and interviewing. The project will focus on issues important to the writers, like climate change, gun violence and immigration.

The organization started in 2006 and has had more than 110,000 young participants, according to its website (<https://youngwritersproject.org/about>). Reid said many pursue writing careers later in life and hoped this project could inspire some to become journalists.

"We need them," she said.

Four years with the Young Writers Project

One of the writers, Adelle Brunstad, just transitioned from student to mentor after participating in the Young Writers Project throughout high school. The 18-year-old recent graduate used to focus mainly on poetry through the program, appreciating the opportunities to get published.

"It was just very helpful and rewarding for me as a writer," she said.

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Teens participate in a writers prompt exercise during a workshop at the Young Writers Project offices in Burlington run by Bess O'Brien and the Listen Up Project on Saturday, Sept. 14, 2019. The two groups are collaborating to develop teen writers in Vermont with help from a Gannett Foundation grant. (Photo: RYAN MERCER/FREE PRESS)

Getting published is a "magic ingredient" that affirms the writers, Reid said. This newest project is yet another chance for writers to get their work out to the public. Workshops explore varying skillsets (like art criticism) and topics (like an event on climate change led by two participants), in conjunction with two writing challenges writers can participate in weekly.

Brunstad got a chance to take part in the organization's newest venture, which resulted in a [photo essay revolving around her town, Enosburg Falls](https://youngwritersproject.org/node/28876) (<https://youngwritersproject.org/node/28876>). The project included eight photographs of local spots including a library, opera house and farm.

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"This journalism project was one of the things that prompted me to get more involved with my community," she said.

Brunstad hasn't ruled out a career in journalism, but is also trying out other paths, like grant writing. Still, the experience has proved valuable and Brunstad said it offered her the chance to "reflect on what (her) town has to offer."

Writing runs in the family

Aimee Picchi started her time on the program's Board of Directors in 2017. Like Reid, she has journalism ties: Picchi worked at Bloomberg News for years and now freelances for outlets like CBS, Consumer Reports and USA TODAY. She also has two daughters who participated in the Young Writers Project.

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"I thought it was a great program," Picchi said, especially because it seemed there were fewer opportunities for creative writing in the core curriculum.

Regardless of the writers' future plans, she felt the grant would enable them to develop their skills like critical thinking, writing and even interviewing — which she said can be especially difficult for kids.

The project makes a conscious effort to tap into themes writers care about, Picchi said.

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"Kids are so enthusiastic and they can often just cut right to the center of an issue," Picchi said. "They know what really matters."

She hopes this project will breathe vibrancy into Vermont journalism. Regardless, she said developing key skillsets will be beneficial as the writers move forward.

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Reid was excited for the future of the Community Journalism Project.

"We want to hear what you have to say," she said. "Your voice matters. These are huge issues. What are you thinking?"



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