

Issue Introduction

By Tina Collins, Raymond Gunn, and Leif Gustavson, Guest Editors

On July 11, 2009, a good friend, colleague, and scholar, Joe Cytrynbaum, passed away unexpectedly at age 36. Joe was a remarkable person and a wonderful scholar, who was frustrated and fueled by a diverse range of issues and passions: social justice, creative expression, and youth work. Joe's life was devoted to a blend of activism, scholarship, and the arts.

To commemorate Joe's life and work, we offer readers this special issue of Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education Journal. Our goal was to create a multi-media, multi-modal document that weaves together the many threads of who Joe was, honoring the complexity inherent in his life and work. Joe saw the connections between social justice, creative expression, and youth work, and understood that in order to tackle societal problems, these three issues must be in play. Our hope is to show how these themes are connected in interesting and surprising ways.

We asked Joe's friends, colleagues, and other scholars to explore some of the provocative questions that he himself engaged with: What does it mean to write with youth? How can art inform the practice of teaching? How can we work collaboratively to solve pressing social problems? How are these seemingly disparate questions connected? And how did knowing Joe shape your own perspectives and actions on these issues?

Above all, our goals with this issue are to bring together the varied spheres of influence that Joe participated in and helped to cultivate, and to create a hybrid work of art that pushes the work forward and would make Joe proud. We have collected pieces from the wide range of communities where Joe worked, including not only scholarly articles, but also reflections, remembrances, audio, and poetry.

When students, colleagues, and friends visited Joe at his office, they would see this Rilke quote taped to his door:

Be patient toward all that is un-

solved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will find them gradually, without noticing it, and live along some distant day into the answer.

Joe's passing, over a year ago now, is still an open question for many if not all of us who knew him well and loved him dearly. When reading these pieces, we sense his inquisitive nature, his boundless optimism, and his contagious humor. We can visualize him reading along, nodding, and interjecting with insightful comments. The work in this issue heeds the wisdom of Rilke to have our eyes and ears open in order to embrace the unknown and to ask the questions that lead us to distant answers. This is the way that Joe lived. This is the way that he will be remembered.

For his dissertation, Joe conducted his ethnographic field work at a large public high school in a Northeastern urban center. This school, renowned for its academic reputation, enjoys one of the most culturally diverse student bodies in the school district. Joe's study examines the (missed) opportunities urban public schools have for engaging in – and *transforming* – the highly contentious public discourse on racial, gender, class, and sexuality difference – to name a few reasons Americans often find themselves marginalized and disfranchised. In Chapter Five of the dissertation, which we have included in this issue, Joe examines two spaces within the school where students participate in cultural productions that both challenge and re-inscribe assumptions about youth identity.

We follow Joe's dissertation chapter with an essay by one of his intellectual heroes, Ralph Cintron, who responds

to Joe's piece by raising our concerns about the tricky social terrain modernity offers for youth identity. The two essays by Carolyn Ly and Erica Davila, respectively, were written by scholars who did not personally know Joe but whose work is in the spirit of Joe's scholarship and activism. Ly looks at the underappreciated role of public libraries in the lives of youth in low-income urban neighborhoods. Using resistance theory and life history methods, Davila discusses the experiences of Puerto Rican public high school students in Chicago who struggle to give voice to their cultural identity in the face of a school system that threatens to silence them. We placed a blank page in the middle of the issue to represent the pause, the emptiness, and the possibility that is Joe's passing.

These thought-provoking articles are followed by three reflections from colleagues who knew Joe during his time at the University of Pennsylvania. As gentle and loving as Joe could be when working with youth, he could be equally dogged and strident when he confronted those who stood in the way of social justice. Michael Janson's piece provides one with a sense of this side of Joe's multifaceted personality. Janson illustrates the pivotal role Joe played in the formation of GET-UP (Graduate Employees Together at the University of Pennsylvania), a union for teaching assistants at the university. Catherine Belcher then ushers in three personal reflections on praxis and social justice through her work in a teacher education program in Los Angeles. Kelly Wissman investigates the teaching and writing of poetry within public school spaces, illuminating how the *work* of poetry in an Academic Interventions classroom stirs new visions of who the students and the teacher can be.

Pamela Cytrynbaum, Joe's sister, provides an intimate glimpse into the writing work that Joe did with students from Manley Career Academy High School in Chicago. Pamela's discus-

sion of Joe's 'tactics of hope' is layered and brought to life by Joe's poetry and the poetry of his students. Erin, Joe's wife, offers her own insight into several of Joe's poems in this piece, revealing how these poems were indeed graphs of Joe's mind working, a mechanism for coming to grips with his everyday life.

Lila Leff offers a remarkable glimpse of Joe at work at Umoja, the Chicago youth advocacy organization Joe joined immediately after his graduation from Penn's doctoral program in education, culture, and society – a heady title, but Leff's portrait demonstrates that, for Joe, youth work was always about the (com)passion and the joy Belcher describes so eloquently in her commentary. Joe was a fearless advocate for youth and a mentor and friend to many. The powerful voices of the young people whom Joe worked with at Umoja can be heard in the audio file from the youth-focused memorial held at Manley Career Academy in Chicago in September 2010, which includes poetry, music, and remembrances from his friends and colleagues in Chicago. The energy and impact of Joe's work with young people is also captured in the video slideshow created by Umoja Student Development Corporation and Free Spirit Media as a way to honor Joe Cytrynbaum. The photos in this video capture Joe's time working at Umoja between 2003 and 2008, and illustrate Joe's great love of youth and community and his passion for life. Both of these media pieces can be accessed from the table of contents.

We end the issue, fittingly, with Kevin Coval's powerful poem that brings together all the many facets of Joe's complex and wondrous personality into a crystal-clear image of the beautiful, smart, and magnanimous (one of Joe's favorite words) individual Joe's family, friends, students, and colleagues all knew him to be.

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Leif Gustavson, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Education, Coordinator of Middle School Education programs at Arcadia University, and interim Chair of the Education department. He teaches courses which explore the acts of writing and reading, how teachers and students design learning environments, and the connection between improvisational play and teaching and learning. His research explores the creative practices of youth (zine writing, graffiti, and turntablism among other forms) and how the ways in which youth learn in the everyday can inform and influence the way teachers teach. Leif is also Executive Director of Qui Vive! The Center for Writing, Book Arts, and Performance. Qui Vive offers innovative, after school writing opportunities for middle and high school aged youth in the Greater Philadelphia area. Dr. Gustavson has published articles in *The Journal of Children's Literature* and *Field Methods*. His most recent book is titled *Youth learning on their own terms: Creative practices and classroom teaching* from Routledge.