"Raised by Women":
Celebrating Our Homes

When I first read "Raised by Women" by Kelly Norman Ellis, I knew the poem would be a hit with my students. I love Ellis' celebration of the women in her life, her use of home language, and the wit and wisdom of her rhythmic lines. And from reading student tributes to their mothers over the years, I knew most of my students would relate to the topic. "Raised by Women" also had qualities I look for in poems I use to build community and teach poetic traits: a repeating line that lays down a heartbeat for the students to follow, delicious details from the writer's life that could evoke delicious details from my students' lives, and a rhythm so alive, I want to dance when I read it.

Part of my job as a teacher is to awaken students to the joy and love that they may take for granted, so I use poetry and narrative prompts that help them "see" daily gifts, to celebrate their homes and heritages. Ellis' poetry provides a perfect example. As she wrote, "I was just lucky enough to have been born into a loving southern, black family. I want these poems to stand as witness to the beauty and abundance of that life: a black southern woman's life, a good life, a proud life, a life as rich and sweet as the pies I bake with Mississippi pecans. There are others like me, folks raised in the brown loving arms of family."

I also use poetry to build relationships with students and between students. Ellis' smart and sassy poem helped launch our yearlong journey to establish relationships as the students and I learned about each other, but also their journey in developing their writing.

In each stanza of the poem, Ellis lists the kinds of women who raised her—from "chitterling eating" to "some PhD toten" kind of women. Ellis' poem follows a repeating but changing pattern. She writes that she was raised by women, sisters, and queens. She includes both description and dialogue in most stanzas:

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Type of church folk

How you done baby

dear neighbor, seems som'
some adrift, joy jumping.

Kind church folk

...thru' the 1st God first 'baby'

...number to keep on after(from)

.whose the beaded, kingdom's

'scattered' any before, the departed, kingdom.

I was again by a random talking

I loved how you wrote about your church:

and that's to appreciate each one in him, but they especially

and broke. He dismissed once how she said, 'God's,
which my cousins,


even告s' were a sign to each other and father.

enjoyed were a sign to each other, was there.

of the occurrences, gave us a glimpse into their lives.

and ran those things the spirit and assistance

a special mind that was over, that the mind, same.

pay more attention during the read-around. Is the same.

when they learned about each classmate through their

they had to fill out a piece of paper to show an

instructor to pull out his paper to show an

instructor to pull our his paper to show an

instructor to pull her paper to show an

when they learned about each classmate through their

The read-around and collective letter:

The read-around and collective letter: when you write

a thought in the poem, see if you can create a heart

boredom in your poems. Also, note this, get your

this, experiencing. Bring in your classmate to their

of these occurrences. I know some of your speech another

of these occurrences. I know some of your speech another

the readers, the one that we're, please, please, please.

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"Raised by Women": Celebrating Our Homes

Ellis' poem provided an opportunity for us to celebrate the brilliance and linguistic richness of my students' cultures. Destinee Sanders, who also chose to write about a variety of people in her family — mother, aunts, sisters, and "abuela" — switched languages throughout her poem:

I was raised by Mi Abuelita,
Ese mi abuela favorita,
Ella es mi corazón, mi amor, mi amiga
Mi noche, mi todos los días, mi siempre.
Yo amo a mi abuelita

[I was raised by my Grandma,
My favorite grandmother
She is my heart, my love, my friend
My night, my everyday, my always.
I love my grandma]

Like Destinee, students shared information in the poem that helped us know their family and backgrounds. Jessica Chavez wrote about her "tortilla making/Grease usin/cumbia dancin'" family. Adiana Wilmot wrote, "I was raised by that/curry goat and chicken cookin'/'Eat your vegetables, pickney,'type of Jamaican woman." Kirk Allen wrote about his family — the Allens — rather than selecting out individuals:

I was raised by the gas, brake dipp'n,
Cadillac whip'n, Wood grain grip'n,
Old school, big body, pimp'n,
Ain't you bullish'n Allens

I was raised by the show stopp'n,
Hater droppin',
Hat tilted to the side,
Look like a bad mutha,
Shut yo mouth Allens

In this and all class writing, I encouraged students to abandon the prompt and my suggestions and find their own passion and their own way into the assignment. Shona Curtis did that and forged her way to a poem about music instead of people:

I was raised by smooth jazz
Make you want to sit down and
Cry kind of music
Some move your feet and shake
Those hips feel like you dancin'
Down the streets of Argentina
Kind of music

When students wrote at the end of the assignment, many pointed to Shona's straying from the prompt as a strength in her poem.

Details from poems brought shouts of laughter or nods as students recognized their own family in Destiny Spruill's description of her family's "Found Jesus/Church goin'/You mouth can get you in trouble" and "Gumbo makin'/Hat wearin'/Mother of the church/Kinda grandmothers." They understood Ebony Ross' "I was raised to get the belt/If I was talking that lip." But it was Jessica's repeating line, "I wasn't raised by my daddy," that brought the most affirmations from other students.

Framing Reflection: Milking the Learning

After students shared, I handed out note cards and asked them to look back over their notes and write about what they learned about each other and poetry through our lesson. Kayla Anderson wrote that she learned "that you can completely change a poem but still keep the meaning. Shona made her poem fun by using words like 'hip-hopin', pop lockin', shake your dreads.'" She noted that many students used strong verbs and imagery. Shona pointed out that "when you say your poem with attitude it sounds better."

But it was students' revelations about each other that made me realize this poetry assignment is a keeper. Students wrote about how much they learned about each other in a short amount of time. "I learned that Adiana is from Jamaica, that Bree was raised by foster parents, and that a lot of us have been let down by our fathers."

Destinee wrote:

I learned that I have something in common with every single person in this room. I realize that we have all been through a lot of the same things. I learned that most of us weren't raised by our dads. I learned that Shaquala loves soul food. I learned that although Bree is Latino like me, she was raised by different types of Latinos, and I can relate to that. I learned that we're different... yet we're the same.

Out of the 30 students in the class, the majority were raised without fathers. This became a repeating "aha" for most of the class. Virginia Hankins, for example, wrote that she "learned a lot about my classmates that I would have never known. I was surprised that so many of us were raised without our fathers."

Knitting together poetry that teaches about our lives as well as the craft of writing builds the kind of caring, risk-taking community I hope to create.
My horizons were certain, sure.
I was taught by a tongue talkin',
Grandpa.

"Study hard now!,
Fist fightin', lotta happen, lotta happen, lotta happen.
A polite lovin', money givin', pipe smokin',
I was raised by a Jesus lovin', behind teachin',
Grandma.

I got da back,
Football, playin', and track runnin',
Crib sandlin',
By some double decker, house planin',
What a friend we have in Jesus, music
But joy comes in the morning.

By Alaini Rhodes

I was raised by a lovin',
Non-stop children, beanin',
Church goin', home cookin', belt whoppin',
I was raised by a lovin',

HANDOUT: "I was raised by..." Poems
Music
by Shona Curtis

I was raised by smooth jazz
Make you want to sit down and
Cry kind of music

Some move your feet and shake
Those hips feel like you dancin’
Down the streets of Argentina
Kind of music

Some hip hop and you don’t stop
Movin’ to those beats feel the energy
Comin’ out of the radio
Kind of music

Some hit right where you need it soul
Music make you think of the old days
When that was all we had
Kind of music

Some jump up and down slam to
The beat of the rock
Kind of music

Some poppin’ pop grab your
Best friend and put on your
Favorite costume and dance
Kind of music

I was raised by music

I Was Raised by Video Games
by Seth Lee

Some x tappin’
Joystick swirlin’
“Drive me crazy til I
throw my controller”
type of videogames.

I was raised by cuts and bruises.

Some knee scrapin’
bone breakin’
fallin’ out of trees
and landing on my head
kinds of cuts and bruises.

I was raised by roughnecks.

Those country music listenin’
playing football on the gravel road
pickin’ blackberries from the neighbors
wrestlin’ in the mud ‘til dinner’s ready
kind of roughnecks.

I was raised by transformers.

Some Decepticon terrorizin’
optimist prime ass kickin’
Megatron losin’ day in and day out
transformers.

I was raised by sports.

Those ball kickin’
ball throwin’
ball hittin’
stick fools so hard they cry
for their mamas sort of sports.
Say it loud
Boogaloo dancing
Some fingerpoppin'

Type of sisters
"Better say yes ma'am to me"
In just the nick of time
Divorce
Got married too soon
White glove warning
Some tea sippin'

Type of women
"I know I look good"
Groovin'
Dancing dainties
Hip huggers huggin'
Whistle while we huggin'
Hip shakin'
High yellow, mocha brown
Some big legend

Sorta women
and let me scratch yo head
"Girl, lay back"
Angela Davis diggin'
Some thick hatred

Kind of women
"Go on girl, get yo self a plate"
Cookin' Vegetarian cooking
Cheatin' eatin'
I was raised by

Raised by woman

By Kelly Norman Ellis

HANDOUT: Celebrating Our Homes