

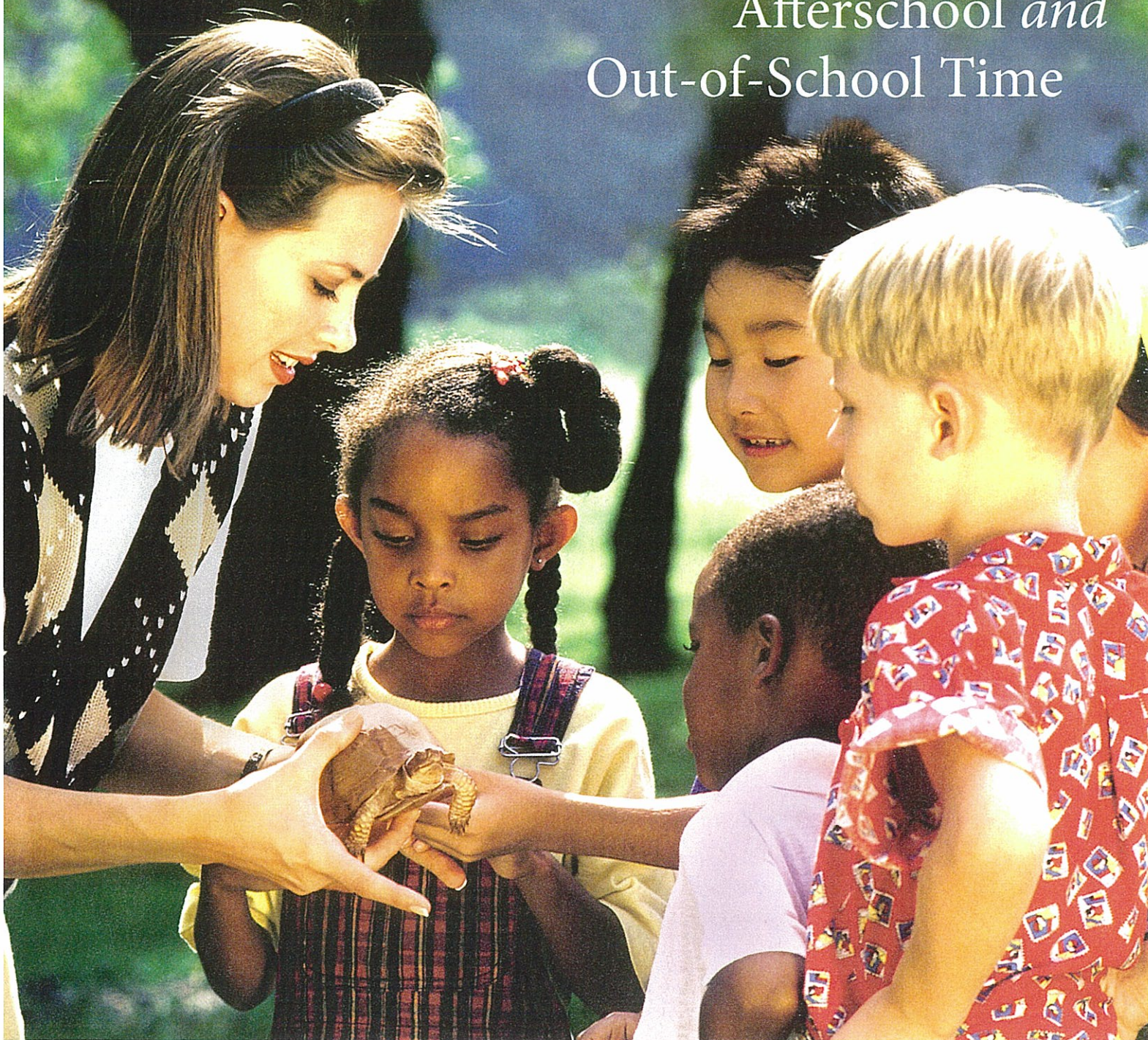
# SEDL Letter

SOUTHWEST EDUCATIONAL  
**SEDL**  
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## Time for Achievement

*Afterschool and  
Out-of-School Time*





# Out-of-School Program Breaks Boundaries, Empowers Students Through the Arts

By Shaila Abdullah

Aziza Hassan's<sup>1</sup> eyes light up when she talks about her art and the workshop that helped her realize her dreams. The young artist, a student at Lee High School in Houston, Texas, is a Somali refugee. She had been living in Houston for only a year when she participated in a summer art program hosted by Voices Breaking Boundaries (VBB), a nonprofit organization devoted to offering a platform for cultural expression through various art forms. The paintings she produced in the program were highly praised, and Hassan sold several of them and received orders for more. The publicity provided her with the confidence she needs to succeed in school. She had never taken an art class in Somalia and cherishes the buzz her work has generated.

In spring of 2003, Michelle Ramirez, also a student at Lee High School, was ready to drop out. Her grades were low, and she had been a low-performing student for too long. Through the VBB workshops and her participation in a performance at the University of Houston Downtown (UHD), Ramirez found new hope in the written word. Writing became a constant in her life as well as a coping mechanism. She is now a student at UHD.

"Although Ramirez was on the verge of leaving Lee because she had turned 20 and was behind in credits, I advised the administration to let her stay," says Anita Wadhwa, an English teacher at the high school. "Since the performance with VBB, I have seen a new determination in her to succeed. Several other students in the class who were also befuddled by the college process are now considering university options because of the mentorship provided by VBB and its volunteers."

## VBB's Beginnings

Concerned about the lack of adequate facilities and platforms for creative expression in the immigrant community, Sehba Sarwar, a Pakistani-American poet, writer, and teacher, founded Voices Breaking Boundaries in 2000. It started off as a collective literary reading organized by five diverse women poets and writers at a local bookstore. It soon became a series when Sarwar received a grant from Houston's arts council.

Today, VBB produces more than 10 performances annually at local venues and organizes regular exhibitions and events in its shotgun-style house on the Project Row Houses (PRH) campus—a site for the arts in Houston's Third Ward. VBB also provides a support network for writers to practice, publish, perform, and receive recognition for their work. VBB's mission is to cross borders, sustain dialogue, and incite change through living art. Sarwar and a group of volunteers provide a platform for artists from across the globe and showcase all forms of art, including the written and spoken word, performing arts, visual arts, and multimedia art forms. VBB has sponsored artists from as far away as Mexico, India, Pakistan, Argentina, and Brazil. In the past, VBB has featured such renowned names as Arundhati Roy, Anthony Arnone, Sarah Cortez, Mark Doty, Farnoosh Moshiri, Aradhana Seth, Sonia Shah, Donna Garret, Ruben Martinez, Soldier Blue, Mango Tribe, Tariq Ali, and Laura Flanders.

Among VBB's most notable work is that with Houston high schools. VBB works with teachers and administrators who demonstrate an interest in expressing cultural diversity through various art forms and provides educational residencies and venues for performances. VBB also offers intensive summer creative expression workshops for students. They assist in training students to perform on equal billing as professional artists.

"Once we establish connections with a community, we tend to stay there to nurture the students and provide them creative outlets for expression," says Sarwar. "We help students who are struggling to learn English acquire the language through creative exercises. We present them with role models and college options. We aim to create a path for students to remain in high school and go on to college."

Sarwar's association with schools dates back to the time when she was writer-in-residence with a Houston-based nonprofit organization, Writers in the Schools (WITS). She learned that she had a natural talent for teaching and thrived on sharing her passion for words with students. A published novelist, Sarwar went on to teach creative writing, journalism, and English in two Houston high schools. She left her



<sup>1</sup> Students' names have been changed to protect their identity.



teaching position in 2002 to work full-time at VBB but continues to work with schools through her connections in the school district.

Marcela Descalzi, a cofounder of VBB who is also a trained scientist and educator, is deeply vested in the program. "I feel that it is very important to provide a secure setting for students to explore their voice," says Descalzi.

"This means that we try to make it safe for them to seek self-expression through the arts and encourage them to tell their story."

Descalzi is also the director of the School Writing Project at Rice University. The project directs K-12 teachers in helping students find their voices as writers through weekly seminars and workshops. Descalzi is working on forming an alliance between that project and VBB.

## Breaking Barriers in Houston Schools

Lee High School is located in a densely populated area of southwest Houston where the residents are mostly immigrants. VBB targets such communities through their work and encourages students who are struggling to learn the English language. The goal is to help such students finish high school and go on to college.

Garrett Reed, an English as a second language instructor at Lee, has worked closely with VBB and Sarwar and holds the program in high regard. "The staff at VBB work to help students overcome the language barrier by bringing out the artist within each student," says Reed. "Most program staff do not have the patience or will to do what VBB does. They take the time and interest to interact with this forgotten group and value their art."

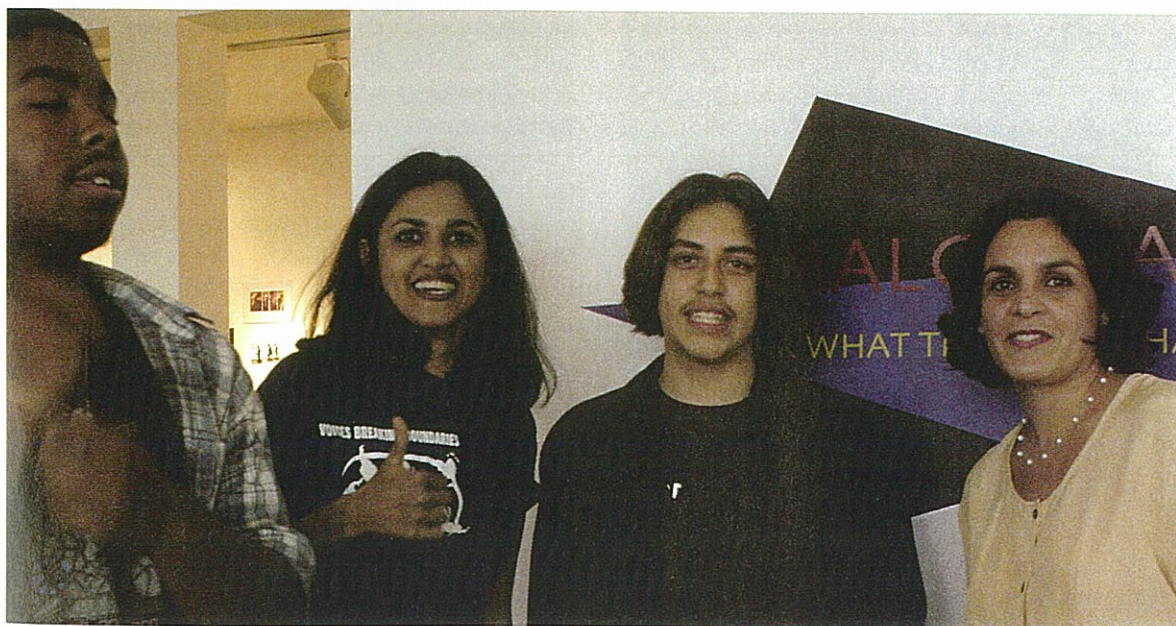
In the past few years, VBB has organized several programs for Lee High School. The summer workshop in 2005 was one such event. Students at the workshop were trained to produce videos and experiment with different art forms. After exploring these art forms, the students chose the medium they wanted to work with and expressed themselves through that medium. The workshop culminated in a final performance at DiverseWorks Artspace where students demonstrated talents in the visual and other arts, including break dancing and playing musical instruments. A poetry reading was also organized at DiverseWorks for students who choose to pursue the written word. In late 2005, Sarwar and other artists conducted an afterschool workshop, which ended in a poignant performance in the school auditorium. The format required improvisational performances between musicians and writers. Parents, administrators, teachers, and other students were invited to witness the collaboration among the participants. It was an inspiring event that was later used as a model for a performance for writers and musicians at Rice University.

VBB also involves teachers in the process of creative exploration. The reason, according to Descalzi, is to form stronger bonds between students and teachers. In a classroom setting, it is difficult to form such connections. VBB provides time for both students and teachers to share their stories and expand on how they view one another. This process breaks down the barriers, and teachers admit that it is a transformative experience for them as well.

"More often than not, teachers help us in the recruitment process," says Sarwar. "And we've found that our work is easier when the school is invested in the work we begin."



Through VBB, high school students have the opportunity to perform in public, often with professionals.



Sehba Sarwar (2nd from left) and Marcela Descalzi (far right), cofounders of VBB, with two students at a Furr High School performance at Houston's DiverseWorks.



## From Spark to Explosion

By Shannon Garth-Rhodes

My parents flew me from St. Louis, Missouri, to Houston, Texas, for a summer writing program called Writers in the Schools (WITS) when I was in sixth grade. My favorite memory of that summer was a woman of brown complexion, a little lighter than mine, who wrote backwards in her journal. She was from Pakistan and explained to me that that was the way the Urdu language is written. I had the hardest time getting started writing. I would stop and start, crumple up the pages I was writing on, toss them, and then peek at other people's work to see what they had written. That is when she instructed me to write. "Just write," she said. "Don't think, just put your pen to the paper and write." I obeyed, and the words started to flow. That writing instructor from Pakistan was Sehba Sarwar, a woman who ultimately became my mentor and guide.

In 2003, I applied to University of Houston-Main Campus because I wanted to study creative writing. I had been told that their program was one of the best in the country and was accepted. That spring I was asked to attend a reading at DiverseWorks Artspace as part of an extra credit assignment. That is where I met Sarwar again. After that second meeting, I volunteered several times for VBB while at college and established a rapport with Sarwar. When I told her that I needed to fulfill a field experience undergraduate requirement, she asked me if I would accept an internship with the organization. I agreed and spent the first few weeks getting to know the young organization's mission by concentrating on their literary workshops in high school classrooms. I also brainstormed and wrote proposals for grants to fund more programs.

Homing in on my interest, Sarwar invited me to a workshop to tape-record the students at Lee High School while they read their writing aloud to the class. I enjoyed watching Sarwar and Anita Wadhwa, an English teacher, work collaboratively. To this day I have never come across a more innovative or involved group of educators. Sarwar shares a reciprocal relationship with students that allow them to feel unique and talented when they participate in her class exercises.

I continued to work with VBB and Lee High School after graduation and independently led three more workshops within the next year. The performances toward the end always took place at public venues and were attended by a citywide audience. Working with VBB allowed me to see the potential of student engagement. Shortly afterward, I moved to Massachusetts for a teaching fellowship with Citizen Schools, a national AmeriCorps-sponsored organization that provides afterschool programming for middle school students. I was recently accepted in the urban education policy program at Brown University and in an education policy and management program at Harvard Graduate School.



In 2002 and 2003, Sarwar received personal grants to run education workshops at Furr and Sharpstown high schools. The Furr workshop was led by musician Isaias Degollado and by Descalzi. It resulted in *Amalgamation*, a rich presentation that combined different art forms expressed in unique ways. The event showcased hidden talents of Houston teenagers who curated and performed, and expressed themselves through various means.

"By working with VBB for the past 4 months, I've received positive feedback about my art," says 16-year-old cocurator Luis Guerro. "I've been drawing since I was 10 years old, but when I started the creative writing class that led to this performance, I got more into my art and talent."

## Empowerment Through Mentoring

VBB has an established mentoring program. Students who benefit from the programs go on to become arts facilitators and serve as role models for students. These students often give something back to VBB for its impact on their lives and remain involved with the work. Two students who have done so are Eric Hester and Shannon Garth-Rhodes.

Hester was in high school in 1999 when he enrolled in a creative writing class led by Sarwar at Jones High School. After VBB received nonprofit status, he became the first teenager to be on the board of VBB and remained there for 3 years. Presently, he is a sophomore at Rice University and changed his major from engineering to visual art after VBB conducted a successful exhibition of his photography at one of their events. Hester also co-facilitated the Sharpstown and Furr workshops and played a vital role in the success of *Amalgamation*.

Garth-Rhodes was in middle school when she first met Sarwar. (see "From Spark to Explosion" at left). She continued working with VBB throughout college and soon will attend graduate school on the East Coast.

"Especially for groups of students and even teachers who feel disenfranchised by society, it seems of utmost importance to hear their voice, to hear what they have to say," says Descalzi. "We hope to continue to work with teachers and students to provide the time and space for the kind of artistic initiatives that encourage dialogue and expression."

*Shaila Abdullah is a SEDL media design associate. She is the author of Beyond the Cayenne Wall, a collection of short stories that received the Jury Prize for Outstanding Fiction in the 2005 Norumbega Fiction Awards. You may reach Shaila by e-mailing [sabdulla@sedl.org](mailto:sabdulla@sedl.org).*