

Writing *is* exploring

The students of Gray School campus deliver a new literary magazine for the community

In the fall of 2014, I met Alexa Knutsen, lead teacher of Astoria High School's alternative school located in the old Robert Gray School overlooking Youngs Bay.

Alexa and I discussed the idea of me visiting her Gray School campus students and teaching a weekly nonfiction writing workshop to supplement the school's online English instruction. She wanted additional writing opportunities for her students, particularly if they called for personal exploration and reflection.

Astoria High School Principal Lynn Jackson allocated resources to support my efforts and gave me complete freedom to work with a student population that often suffered significant imposed and self-imposed barriers to educational success.

The workshops were nonfiction and thematic in nature, covering such topics as Faces, Time, Dreams, Paths.

The students responded to my face-to-face, interactive approach and produced outstanding, searing and wholly original writing that deeply impressed me. I wanted to hear more of their stories, a lot more, and that surprised me.

Here I was, almost a quarter century into my secondary teaching career, having read millions of words of student writing, and I thought I had heard it all from young people.

I was wrong. There is always something new to learn from young people — if you listen.

My wish to learn more came true for the 2015-16 school year when I assumed all writing instruction duties at Gray. A month into the semester, after reading dozens of essays, memoirs and cultural critiques, I felt these

pieces needed to reach a wider audience than one teacher. Astoria needed to hear them. I thought, why not produce a magazine with the students to get them out?

I pitched the idea to Alexa and Rachel Rollins, the school counselor, and they agreed. Principal Jackson approved, and Godfather's Books and Espresso in Astoria donated the money to print the publication, which we named Alternative Overcast.

Having advised publications such as Alternative Overcast, I know some people in the communities they originate from don't want to hear what youth have to say — whether it be questioning the existence of God, examining the relationship to their hometown, or reflecting on past transgressions.

I guess I'll never understand this "I don't want to know" impulse. My response to it has always been the same: "Why?"

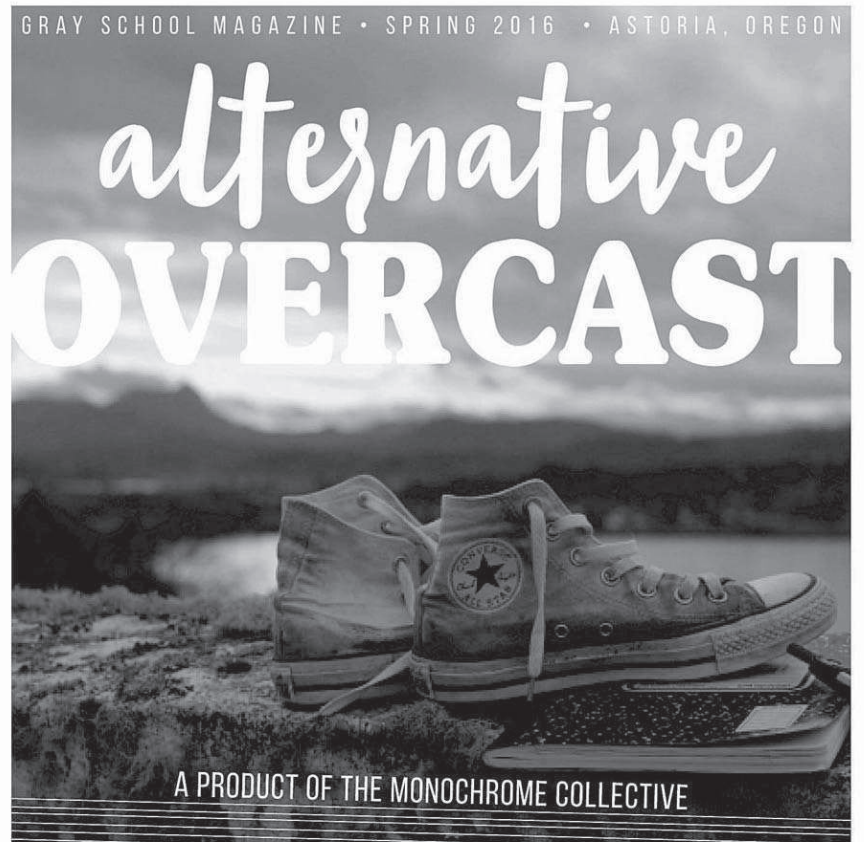
What is there possibly to fear? The more we know about our youth, the better we help them."

Writing is exploring, asking questions, trying to figure things out.

In Alternative Overcast, Gray School students are doing exactly that with remarkable candor, originality, humor and a special lens trained on the vastness and minutiae of pop culture. Join them on their journey and support. You won't be disappointed.

The Gray School magazine is free and available at the following locations: Gray School, Godfather's Books and Espresso, Three Cups Coffee, Street 14 Cafe, Fort George Brewery, Coffee Girl, Downtown Coffee Shop, Astoria Co-op Grocery, Astoria Coffeehouse & Bistro, Seaside Coffee House and Jupiter's Books.

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Submitted photo

Alternative Overcast is the new literary magazine produced by students at Astoria High School's Gray School Campus Alternative Education Program.

An excerpt from
'To Take on The World'
an essay in *Alternative Overcast*

By AHS student ALLISON McMILLAN

To tell you about the worst moment in my life, I have to prove the severity of how bad it was by telling you what all didn't make the cut for the worst.

It wasn't when my mom would leave for months to party with random people on a reservation. It wasn't when my parents got divorced. It wasn't when my mom had us pack up everything after she got in a fight with our dad or when she made us leave our pets there.

It wasn't when we lived in a trailer with little to no insulation during winters where it snowed so much we practically had to dig our way out every morning.

It wasn't when we didn't have water and had to walk three miles to the closest water pump in the four to six feet of snow. It wasn't when we had to do that in the scorching summer hoping to God a rattlesnake wouldn't bite one of us on the way...

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