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## Salinas students take part in Day of Writing at National Steinbeck Center

*BY ANNE LISE KELLY  
For Off 68*

Sixty select middle-schoolers convened March 31 at the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas for the seventh annual Day of Writing. As part of the Steinbeck Young Authors Program, the Day of Writing paired students with volunteer adult coaches from the community, who worked one-on-one with the youths to perfect essays written that morning about John Steinbeck's "The Red Pony."

The Steinbeck Young Authors Program begins with an in-depth curriculum distributed to schools in Monterey County and selected other schools throughout California, in St. Louis, Missouri, and Solon, Iowa. More than 5,000 youngsters are participating this year by studying "The Red Pony" and engaging in class activities and writing exercises focused on the novella.

With 10-year-old protagonist Jody Tiflin at the heart of the stories, "The Red Pony" explores themes of growing up and personal responsibility - pivotal issues for all middle-school students. For Monterey County pupils, the Salinas Valley setting of the book can bring an even more personal bond to the stories.

Teachers of participating local classrooms each selected two students to join the Day of Writing at the National Steinbeck Center, during which they composed and revised an essay to submit for competition. The Young Authors Program culminates May 2 with an awards ceremony at California State University, Monterey Bay, at which the best essays from each grade level will be selected in three categories: Proficient Writer, Emerging Writer and English Language Learner.

On the Day of Writing, students toured the closed museum. They had a hands-on lesson in horse husbandry, illuminating facets of Jody's life on the ranch. A cowboy passed around handmade spurs and tack as he explained what was special about California ranch life: The "ranches were like kingdoms" because of their size and remoteness.

Next, the kids took out pencil and paper, spending an hour writing "an essay about the challenges of becoming more mature and responsible, as illustrated in Steinbeck's "The Red Pony" and by drawing from your own life."

### **Coaches get schooled**

While the students wrote their first draft, the coaches were in class, too. Natalie Bernasconi of the Central California Writing Project and co-author of the curriculum explained the Young Authors Program to the 60 coaches gathered in a large conference room. About half were repeat coaches, having served in prior years or at this year's previous session on March 16. The volunteers represented all ages and walks of life, ranging from real estate agent to newspaper editor, from retiree to young Americorps volunteer.

Bernasconi emphasized to the coaches that "just being here sends a powerful message to the students, by valuing them" and their education. Moreover, she said, "the best gift you can give is the gift of your full attention."

Coaches shared with one another an episode when writing made a difference in their lives. Jayanti

Addleman, head of Monterey County Free Libraries, recalled entering an essay contest sponsored by a cosmetic company when she was a youngster in India. She was proud to be selected the winner, although her parents forbade her to use the cosmetic prizes she won.

Tom Gray, a first-time volunteer and founder of the Santa Lucia Preserve estate housing development in Carmel Valley, reflected on the importance of writing in his long-term project: "I've spent 20 years trying to convey the meaning of the preserve - the culture, the landscape, the environment there. The importance of writing is that it can convey emotion in addition to all those factors. Writing can translate an experience into words so it can be shared."

Steve Hoffman, chief executive officer of the National Steinbeck Center, described the Young Authors Program as "our most mission-related, community driven program."

## 'A big difference'

Sharon Hoffman returned for her second year of coaching. How did she get involved? She's Steve Hoffman's mother. Sharon Hoffman said: "The major value is the one-on-one attention; I think that makes a big difference. Plus, looking around at the coaches, they all have different professions and different ages, so the kids get experience working with someone who isn't their teacher or parent."

Coaches and students then paired up for a photo and got acquainted over lunch - an organic, kid-friendly repast provided by Food FUNdamentals La Cocina Rusa. Pair by pair, they spread out throughout the museum, some sitting cross-legged on a bunkbed or in the back seat of a Model T, as the children read their drafts aloud to their coaches and the two teamed up to improve the essays. After an hour, the students and coaches parted so the students could complete a revised draft to submit for the contest.

"It's a huge self-esteem booster, being selected by their teachers to participate," Steve Hoffman said. In addition to receiving recognition and a sense of their own value to the community, these students each take home a special edition of "The Red Pony" and certificates of participation.

•Annelise Kelly is a resident of the Highway 68 corridor who served as a writing coach this year in the Young Authors Program.

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