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When Nora Ephron Is Your Pen Pal

By Joy Resmovits

When the misbehavior of her classmates caused the cancellation of a field trip, Krystal, 10, turned to letter-writing to vent her anger. On the receiving end of the screed was Julie Martin, a writer for "Law & Order: Los Angeles."

A few days later, Martin received a new letter in her mailbox. Krystal apologized for firing off the mad memo. She was fine, Krystal wrote, so Martin shouldn't worry.

Case closed.

Martin and Krystal are two participants in PencilPALs, a program of the Screen Actors' Guild Foundation in partnership with the Writers' Guild of America East Foundation, which matches Janine Esposito's fifth graders in the Gifted & Talented program at P.S. 16 with well-known writers like Nora Ephron, Elisa Zuritsky, and "Brokeback Mountain" screenwriter James Schamus. PencilPALs started in a Florida school in 2002, aiming to inspire students to love reading and letter-writing in an increasingly digital world.

It was pencils down in the Corona, Queens school last Friday when students met face-to-face with their writer correspondents for the first time after exchanging letters about their lives, writing, book preferences — and in some cases, manuscripts.

"I have a feeling it meant more to us than it did to the kids," says Ephron, who met her pal Angela in May. "The kids were super brilliant, completely charming."

When Ephron came to class, she brought her sister Delia's book, "How to Eat Like a Child: And Other Lessons in Not Being A Grown-Up." As they heard it read aloud, the students sat mesmerized, sharing a "joy of reading," Esposito says.

For TV writer Jacquelyn Reingold, the correspondence became an epistolary book club. At her pal Grace's suggestion, she picked up Ingrid Law's "Savvy" and a Meg Cabot "Airhead" book, which they discussed by mail. "I wanted to make sure I wrote honestly but appropriately for her age," she said.

Reingold has written for "Law and Order" and "In Treatment." Here's how she wrote about herself to a fifth grader:

"I'm a playwright and a TV writer. When I was your age, though, I wanted to be an actress, and I hoped to be a celebrity. A lot like you!

Now, though, I don't think I'd enjoy being famous: I really like my private life. I don't think I'd enjoy strangers following me around, staring at me, or trying to take my picture. I do like it, though, when people tell me they appreciate the work I do."

Mark St. Germain, who has written scripts for "The Cosby Show" and the movie "Duma," says he grew up reading but never had anyone to tell him that being a writer was a career option. "I thought it was something people on another planet did," he says. He says he wanted to help the students learn about the possibility early on.

For St. Germain, the correspondence has been a source of new material. While exchanging letters with his PencilPAL, St. Germain found himself writing more family scripts. "I hadn't done anything like that, and all of a sudden I had the urge to do something that would appeal to a family audience," he said.

Some students got an inside look at professional writing. Schamus says his pen pal had the chance to see his Feature Focus

group's writing process. "I sent her pages of a screenplay we're making here based on 'Jane Eyre'," he says. "That book caught my attention in fifth grade."

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