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## **Immigrant High School Students 'Struggle to be Strong'**

**Teenagers from over 50 countries share stories about the struggle of being immigrant in America.**

By Karen Yi

Teenagers from over 50 countries share stories about the struggle of being immigrant in America.

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Photos by Mark Bailey

Sixteen-year-old Yasmin Siddig is a Sudanese immigrant balancing a culture different than her own: in America girls can talk to boys in public.

Fifteen-year-old Albert Chakjalyan knows what war means: the loss of his friends in the Georgia South-Ossetia conflict.

Fourteen-year-old Linna Banna wonders why people are treated badly in Palestine: her father lost his job and had to flee to America.

At the International High School at Lafayette, in Besonhurst, Brooklyn, 86 immigrant high school students shared their stories of courage and strength in their self-published book, *Struggle to be Strong: An Anthology of Empowerment*. In the project, developed by teachers Christina Zawerucha and Leah Hamilton, each student wrote a personal memoir and interviewed their hero.

"The kids were highly motivated," said Zawerucha, "they are talking about things they genuinely care about as teenagers and that they want to hear about one another. And it's really cool to have somebody from Yemen making friends with somebody from Haiti about some sort of experience."

Teachers and parents attended the student-organized Café Night on Mar. 12, celebrating the book's release. Students read from their work, performed, and sang. "Struggle is," said a student in a dramatic performance, "being judged by the color of your skin." Meanwhile her classmates huddled behind her, pointing and whispering. "Struggle is," said another performer, "being immigrant in America."

Tailoring to students who have been in America for less than four years and have limited

English language proficiency, the International High School at Lafayette houses students from over 50 countries. And on this Café night, students from Haiti and Dominican Republic, Egypt and Palestine, came together.

"Every single person in the world has a struggle, no matter what religion you are, what race you are, what language you speak," said Zaverucha, "everybody connects on that level with each other and I think one of the ways of telling a great story is to look at your life and the struggles that you've had and how they've made you stronger."

The 172 pages of the stapled together book pour out stories of abuse, violence, discrimination, relationships and empowerment — and include a personal anecdote by Zaverucha. "I wrote my own struggle story," she said, "I'm a survivor of domestic violence." Knowing her students were experiencing similar situations, and not wanting her students to feel alone like she did, Zaverucha began the Struggle to be Strong project.

For over three months the students organized from the bottom-up, writing stories, drawing illustrations, putting together performances, interviewing, making phone calls to promote Café Night — all the while, practicing their English.

"They are not perfect, and there are errors," said student Maria Velez, but this shows the development of their English and the ability of "finding the power of their personal voice."

"Even if they don't know good English," said Polish student Sandra Staniszewska, "they did a great job, I'm proud of all of them."

But sharing those hidden struggles wasn't always easy. "Sometimes in class, they would be crying," said Zaverucha, "I'd take them outside and I'd tell them, you don't need to write this, you can write about something else, and then they'd say, 'No Miss, I want to write about this.' And they'd keep on writing."

"No two stories are alike," said Georgian student Albert Chakjalyan, "but the courage is consistent."

Staniszewska, who wrote about stereotypes said, "it was inside of me for a long time, and when my teacher Ms. Christina said 'don't be shy' I was like 'O.K. Miss, I can do that.'"

"[The students] have just opened up so much," said drama teacher Ms. Hamilton -- a spirit that was evident throughout the night. While two students on stage sang-along to artist Akon's "Freedom," more than one voice joined in during the chorus. It was the epitome of diversity: swaying side by side, a Polish, a Pakistani, a Georgian, a Sudanese and a Haitian student sat in the front row, waving their arms in the air, pointing and smiling at their friends and family in the audience. At the top of their lungs, they sang: "Everything I have, everything I own. All my mistakes, man, you already know, I wanna be free, I wanna be free!"

<http://nyc.indymedia.org/en/2009/03/104187.shtml>

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