

Youth Stories

'Dream Catchers' features poetry and prose from kids impacted by incarceration

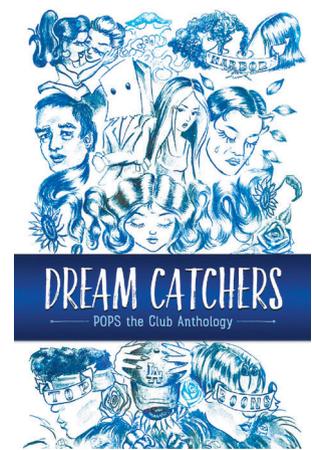


COURTESY OF POPS THE CLUB

POPS the Club is a nationwide school-based program that offers a safe and supportive space to kids whose loved ones are incarcerated.



POPS the Club was founded by author and prison rights activist Amy Friedman.



PAINTING BY JANINA RAE NIETO. COVER DESIGN BY MONICA THOMAS, T.L.C.

'Dream Catchers' is a collection of poetry, stories and artwork created by members of POPS the Club.

By Kamala Kirk

Almost 3 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent which puts many of these youth at higher risk for psychological and behavioral problems, antisocial behavior and depression, among other challenges.

In 2013, author and prison rights activist Amy Friedman and her husband, Dennis Danziger, founded POPS the Club, a school-based program that offers a safe and supportive space where youth can share their feelings and support each other in recognizing their strength and resilience.

The program launched at Venice High School and has expanded nationwide to 19 schools in five states, and continues its mission of helping kids whose loved ones are incarcerated.

"What inspired POPS was a personal experience," Friedman said. "I was previously married to a man I met, fell in love with and married while he was incarcerated. I raised his daughters, and although he and I eventually divorced, my daughters remain my beloveds. But throughout their young adolescence and well into adulthood, I saw the way they hid who they were – cowed and bowed by the stigma they had experienced as a result of their father's incarceration. Years after we divorced, I remarried Dennis who is a high school teacher, and he and I began to understand how many of his students were coping with the same trauma, stigma and shame my daughters had. For years we talked about how we could change that stigma and shame to hope and healing, and eventually we landed upon the idea of creating a club for these kids."

POPS builds engagement through a curriculum focused on writing, creating art and mindfulness, in addition to a guest speaker series. The club supports its members to voice their fear, anger, sorrow, dreams and plans through community engagement and acts of self-expression.

Every year since 2014, POPS publishes

an annual anthology of art, prose and poetry created by the club's members and alumni. In January, it released "Dream Catchers", which represents the work of students from POPS Clubs in Los Angeles, New York City, Atlanta and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. This year's book features contributions from more than 75 individuals with 103 stories and poems.

"By far the best part of working with these young artists is seeing how much they already know – how wise they are, what deep thinkers they are," Friedman said. "Each time I receive a submission, I am amazed again at the talent and truthfulness they possess and their ability to express themselves so openly without guile. I think what the kids love most is that moment when they see their work between covers and understand that their voices and visions matter. Some of them love the process of revising work, others are less inclined to push themselves that way, but all of them, whenever they see the book in finished form, feel inspired to create again."

The book was published by Out of the Woods Press and retails for \$17.95. It is available through the publisher's website, POPS' website, as well as at Barnes & Noble, Amazon and local independent bookstores.

"What people will love about the book is the honesty in every piece, the vivid illustration of what it's like to be a teenager today – the ups and downs, and what it feels like to love someone who is in prison," Friedman shared. "It brims with dreams and beautiful images. The artwork will dazzle. And readers will come away feeling hopeful and more knowledgeable."

Katherine Secaida, a graduate of Venice High School's POPS Club, added, "'Dream Catchers' is a true testament as to how pain and hardship bring people together. But it also goes to show how art creates a space to heal."

popsclubs.org ■



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