

Dear Renee,

Please accept my overwhelming appreciation to The Aspen Institute for choosing me to attend the Aspen Words Workshop this past June as the recipient of the Ricardo Salinas Scholarship. The experience was engaging, informative and helpful in finding a voice I'd never heard before.

For almost 30 years, I've worked as a journalist and social justice storyteller. As a mentor, teacher and non-fiction writer I have emphasized to those I work with or teach that it is important for Latinos and Latinas to control their own voices. Many times our stories – both in the non-fiction and fiction setting - are told by writers, journalists and novelists who find the world we live in foreign or unknowable. In the non-fiction setting, my work and that of the organization I work at, LatinoJustice PRLDEF, is based on real stories and situations.

It was refreshing to be at a workshop where writers and novelists appreciated and drove me to find my own fiction voice. And they celebrated it! Ann Hood, Rowan Ricardo Phillips and many mentors and participants I worked with or listened too encouraged me take ownership of my fiction voice. Ann talked about clarity of goal and purpose and using fiction techniques in clear storytelling. Ann, in particular, was very enthusiastic and welcoming of a voice she admitted she didn't know very well. She drove me to write a fictionalized version of a stop and frisk story I heard from one of my clients at LatinoJustice. I used a fiction piece to tell a story about the rocky relationship between young Latino teens and police. Hopefully, in addition to being compelling fiction, the story educated some attendees of the struggles Latino teens face along the way. That's what I was going for! I am now expanding the 1,000 word story she assigned to a 4,000 word submission to a magazine that seeks diverse voices. I have also started another fiction piece on immigration and the struggles of immigrant families that I am also submitting to a magazine.

Last week Mr. Salinas wrote on his blog how the countries of the USA and Mexico deserved a more realistic and truthful narrative around their relationship. He talked about the silliness of the election season contrasting so strongly with the reality of the friendships mostly found between these two close countries. I believe that my time at Aspen Words improved my ability to tell fictionalized stories honestly and with a truthful narrative voice that will be engaging and effective.

My time at Aspen Words opened up a space for me where such narratives could be fostered in a fiction setting. I was searching for spot where I could be cheered for writing fictionalized stories based on real situations and people with real problems and solutions. *I was looking for a place where my voice was welcomed. I found it at Aspen Words.*

Please express my thanks and appreciation to Mr. Salinas and The Aspen Institute team for this opportunity. The level of organization of the workshops, the class of amazing instructors and the exposure to a great group of writers and editors highlighted

a holistic week that refreshed my literary bones. I have returned to New York with great energy, lots of mentors, many new friends and with an appreciation for my fiction voice. I am a confirmed Aspen Words team member; one who is looking forward to possibly attending again next year.

Un abrazo  
(there goes my voice again!)

John Garcia