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LIFESTYLE

The Pittsburgh Press

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Photo by Tom H. Housley/Press

A stained-glass window at the Cathedral of Learning provides the serene setting for Coleen Eibling, 18, to work on her writing

A SUMMER OF WORDS

Students gladly skip vacation fun to work on writing skills

By Leslie Rubinkowski
The Pittsburgh Press

IT IS AN awesome sight: 20 third and fourth graders standing at the feet of the statue at The Carnegie, testing literary impulses.

The morning's assignment for members of the Young Writers Institute of the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project is to capture the essence of the statue in any style they wish.

One girl chooses to write a poem about Michelangelo. Another speculates in her piece that the small statue at the artist's elbow is her daughter, holding up her arm. Another girl writes a play about a girl talking to Gabriel, Messenger, a boy decides to write the astronomer a letter (his salutation: "Yo, Galileo").

This work is done with focused focus, creative pacing and much chomping of pencils. If a writer has a leak, these kids have it down.

"That's very important," says Georgann E. Peilberg, director of the Young Writers Institute. "They have to believe they are writers. They are writers, but they have to believe it, too."

One thing seems certain: The students who take part in the three-week program, held at the University of Pittsburgh, need little convincing to take their work seriously. After all, they are spending precious summer mornings four days a week working with other students who share their love of words, and learning from teachers who have lots of time to discuss major and minor. The instructors, usually writers themselves, are fellows of the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project, a group that works with other teachers to improve the quality of writing instruction in schools.

"We want them to walk away with a little more knowledge of writing than they had when they started," says Peilberg, who teaches kindergarten at Chartiers Elementary School.

This year 104 students are taking the three-week



Kira Botkin, 7, foreground, and other students seek inspiration from Michelangelo.

program, which ends Thursday. They are divided into five smaller groups by grade, and work with two teachers in each group. Students in grades 3 to 5 choose a specialty: fiction, poetry, journalism, playwriting or keeping a journal. Third through eighth graders sample a little of each technique.

Field trips, like the one to the Carnegie or to Phipps Conservatory, are typical, especially for the younger kids, and students like to help in the first-year books at the Cathedral of Learning to coincide with their thoughts. The writers end each week by coming together each Thursday for a "read around," a session where they share their work with fellow writers and their teachers.

By the end of next week, each student will leave with at least one finished piece. On Sept. 23, they will gather to celebrate their publications in the program's annual book.

The work is intensive, and, the writers say, fun. "It's not like writing too serious," says Andrea Sachdeva, 8, a fourth grader at Liberty School. "We also around a lot. And the teachers get along real well with the kids."

SHE'S RIGHT, judging from a look into the classrooms. In the class for fifth and sixth graders, led by an Hypertron T-shirt and Princes caps novel monthly in their seats as an instructor asks them the meaning of imagery in a poem she wrote about her grandmother. During one class for high school poets, a boy stands at the blackboard explaining a poem about relationships while a girl quietly passes one of her own poems to a friend. In another room, third and fourth graders giggle and write in careful cursive handwriting under a blackboard bearing the warning "Shut It, Don't Say It."

Sachdeva, one of the students in that class, says she's learned a lot about poetry, her favorite form, such as the fact that it doesn't always have to rhyme.

"The teachers give us a lot. They give us their opinions, if we should change it or not," she says.

Vivian L. Li, an eighth grader at Sherrill Classical

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