



Courage to Become



STORIES FROM YC ALUMNI
EDWIDGE DANTICAT & ORUBBA ALMANSOURI

*Courage
to
Become*



Edwidge Danticat



Edwidge Danticat is the author of several books, including *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, *The Farming of Bones*, and the novels-in-stories, *The Dew Breaker*, *Claire of the Sea Light*, as well as *The Art of Death*, a National Books Critics Circle finalist. She is also the editor of *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States*, *The Beacon Best of 2000*, and *Haiti Noir*, *Haiti Noir 2*. She has written seven books for young adults and children, as well as a travel narrative, *After the*

Dance, *A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel* and a collection of essays, *Create Dangerously*.

She is a 2009 MacArthur Fellow, and a 2020 winner of the Vilcek Prize. Her most recent book, *Everything Inside: Stories*, is a 2020 winner of the Bocas Fiction Prize, The Story Prize, and the National Books Critics Circle Fiction Prize. She is a Member of The American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Orubba Almansouri



Orubba is a doctoral candidate in Urban Education at the CUNY Graduate Center. She holds an M.A. in Near Eastern Studies from NYU. She is an author, educator and researcher. Her interdisciplinary research experience, and her own experience as a language learner and immigrant youth, prepared her to work as an educator across disciplines with students from various cultural, linguistic, and academic styles.

As a researcher and educator Orubba's work explores cultures of care in school sittings that are co-created by the community members – including its students. Her recent book chapter focuses on the experience of schooling for Yemeni youth. She holds the Provost Enhancement Fellowship from the CUNY Graduate Center and has held multiple fellowships including the FLAS Fellowship from NYU and the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship.

Through her work, Orubba aims to highlight the importance of multicultural education to create academic settings where immigrant students are able to connect and thrive. She is currently teaching at Barnard College of Columbia University and at Baruch College.



An Introduction from Keith Hefner


Edwidge Danticat


Edwidge first wrote for *Youth Communication* as a 15-year-old student at Clara Barton High School. She had moved from Haiti to Brooklyn three years earlier to rejoin her parents who had left her under the care of her uncle.

The first story Edwidge set out to write concerned the vilification of Haitian immigrants. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, tens of thousands of Haitians fled to Florida on small boats to escape violence and political repression.

At that time, AIDS was beginning to penetrate public consciousness. Some commentators, exploiting anti-immigrant sentiments, blamed Haitians for bringing AIDS to the U.S.

Violence and repression at home, the dangerous journey to the U.S., and the AIDS libel, was traumatizing for Haitians. At the most personal level, because so many Haitians arrived with very little, their children were often teased about their unfashionable clothes. Some Haitian teens we worked with began to claim they were Jamaican.






Edwidge talked about these issues with her editor, but putting them together in a story was too difficult. Meanwhile, we were planning a holiday spread for the December 1984 issue of our citywide high school magazine. We asked writers if their holiday traditions might interest their peers. Edwidge quickly wrote "A Haitian American Christmas: Cremace and Creole Theatre."

That essay, her first published story, showed her courage in publicly identifying as Haitian at a time when that could bring ridicule and shame. Prefiguring her later work, it combined descriptions of folk traditions, insight into cultural practices, and an appreciation of how people can experience the same event quite differently.

She wrote, "The elder members of our family may go to a play spoken in Creole, while the younger ones go to a disco or party. Some families spend Christmas night in church praying that God will be lenient toward the world and all of its problems."

Then life intervened. Edwidge turned to her schoolwork and her family.



Three years later, we were planning an issue on immigration. Many teen writers and their families faced exploitation, discrimination, and humiliations big and small. Parents often worked two and three jobs as they struggled to support their children.

Edwidge, then a freshman at Barnard, wrote a story about her immigration experience, "A New World Full of Strangers."

In that story, too, she showed her courage—this time by exploring the challenges of immigration instead of painting the rosy picture people often expected. She wrote about the contrast between the happiness of her Haitian relatives as she was leaving for the "rich and prosperous" city of New York and the immeasurable sadness she felt leaving the people who had raised her for the past 10 years.

And then she described her confusing and bittersweet arrival at Kennedy airport: "Since I did not remember what my parents looked like, I was very frightened when a tall, bearded man started to hug me. I was even more afraid when a chubby woman placed her arms around me and exclaimed, 'At last my little girl is home!' I felt like an orphan who was being adopted against her will."

*Edwidge later wrote that this story felt unfinished. She "completed" it by writing her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.*



Edwidge has twice been a finalist for the National Book Award. Once was for Brother, I'm Dying, an investigation of the circumstances of her elderly uncle's death at the Krome detention center in Miami.

Shortly after it was published, I asked Edwidge why she had not condemned the prison guards at Krome for withholding medication and for ignoring her uncle's condition. I said it felt like misplaced compassion.

She replied that, as sad and angry as she was about how her uncle died, she had not been able to interview the guards, and could not get inside their minds. She did not know, for example, whether they were callous and uncaring, or were simply too overwhelmed to give him the attention he needed.

She also said that her motivation for writing the book was change, not vengeance against those guards. She even hoped that her investigation might improve the training and support of guards.

That is an extraordinary level of restraint and respect. It goes back to her first story about Christmas celebrations and her keen observations and lack of judgment about the many meanings of the holiday for different people, from religious reverence to a chance to party.

And in her immigration story, Edwidge avoids telling a



fairytale about reuniting with her family, or the conditions in New York City. She doesn't blame people who have made her life more difficult.

In her work, Edwidge explores hard questions. She complicates our assumptions. She does this with humility and compassion—in her novels, her nonfiction, her children's books, and her essays. Those are the qualities that I have found most captivating in her work from the beginning.



Orubba Almansouri

Orubba first wrote for Youth Communication as a 15-year-old student from Brooklyn International High School. Though she briefly lived in the U.S. as a child, she had spent most of the previous 10 years in Yemen.

She was an immigrant. She was an English language learner. And she wore the hijab, which immediately identified her as Muslim in a post 9-11 world.

When she first came to YC, she was reserved and talked mostly with her editor. But beneath that reserve there was a spirited personality that she was discovering and developing through her writing.

One important theme was her relationship to Islam. In her story, "Wearing My Faith," Orubba described her pride in wearing the hijab and her graciousness in answering people's sometimes respectful (and sometimes ignorant) questions about it.

She also wrote about politics and her family's excitement when Obama—the son of a foreign-born father—was elected president. She said that her father, who ran a small deli, was so excited that the next day he offered "free butter rolls and coffee" to all of his customers.

Though Orubba was outwardly quiet at the office, she was churning under the surface. She wrote a deeply reflective story in which she explored her own



personality. She was pleased that she was friendly and talkative. But in describing a reaction to being slapped by an uncle for talking too much, she questioned her willingness to let things slide when she found them disagreeable or hurtful.

She also wrote two stories that both foreshadowed and changed her future. In one, she described her love of children and, consequently, her desire to become a teacher.

The other story—titled “University of Kitchen?”—ultimately helped to ensure that she would achieve that goal. She noted that in her tribe’s tradition young women usually moved straight to becoming wives and mothers without getting an education.

On the one hand, she was respectful of tradition and of her father’s role as its keeper. On the other hand, she learned that there was no prohibition in Islam itself for women to become educated leaders.

In her story, she made the case that she—and other girls like her—should have the option to finish high school to go on to college. Her argument was respectful and compelling. After much thought, and at risk of ostracism among some of his friends, her father agreed. Orubba took full advantage. She earned an honors degree in English and history from the City College of New York, and a master’s degree in Near Eastern Studies from NYU. She is now working toward her PhD



in urban education at CUNY. Many of her readers—including a dozen of her female cousins—are now studying for high school and college degrees a result of her example.

In her scholarship and in her work with her own students Orubba continues to draw on her experience an immigrant, an English language learner, a Muslim woman, and as a writer and storyteller. She has written, “As a practicing Muslim who is passionate about writing and literature, I was not surprised to learn that Allah’s second creation was the pen. The pen has grown to become my number one companion.”



A NEW WORLD FULL OF STRANGERS

*I moved to the U.S. at 12,
and was not ready for my
new life.*

BY EDWIDGE DANTICAT



I could hear nothing over the deafening engine of the airplane, but I certainly could see their faces. They waved wildly as though this was a happy occasion. They seemed so thrilled that I was finally going off to the rich and prosperous city of New York. I was sad beyond the limits of my 12 years of life.

One of the stewardesses grabbed me from the doorway and quickly led me inside. Their waves. . . their smiles. . . their cheers were no more. I solemnly followed her to the seat I was to take. She flashed her smile and I was left alone for the trip.

The tears that I fought so bravely before fell uncontrollably into my lap. I was leaving my aunt, uncle, and countless cousins to embark on a mysterious trip to be with parents I barely knew and brothers I'd never met.





Jean Sassine

A CROWD OF CARETAKERS

The stewardess woke me when the plane landed. Before I knew what was happening, she and I were filing down an endless tunnel toward what seemed like a crowd of caretakers.

First the people who made alien cards pulled me aside and snapped my picture. Then the people who handled the bags rushed me through a line to grab my suitcase. Soon, ahead of the other passengers, I was out of the airport.

Since I did not remember what my parents looked like, I was very frightened when a tall bearded man started to hug me. I was even more afraid when a chubby woman placed her arms around me and exclaimed, "At last my little girl is home!" I felt like an orphan who was being adopted against her will.

The ride home was no more comforting than the meeting with my parents. I was uncomfortably squashed between my three brothers in the back seat of the car while my parents and uncle were crowded in the front seat.

My American brothers, who had given me timid hugs before piling into the car, were now curiously staring at me. I imagined they were as anxious to know where I'd come from as I was to know where I was going.

Perhaps if they had asked me who I was, I would have explained that it was not my fault at all that I was entering their lives.

A STRANGER TO MY FAMILY

To feed and clothe our family, my parents had to desert me so early in life that now I did not even know them. The boys had probably heard about the problems in Haiti: the poverty, the oppression, the despair. I wanted to plead with them to accept me, not stare at me. But I suddenly realized that they had every right to stare. I was, after all, a stranger—even to my own family.

To avoid their glares, I turned to the car window. There must have been hundreds of thousands of lights speeding by.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered that water was somehow responsible for lighting. In Haiti, one could pay as much as ten cents for one gallon of water. I tried to imagine how many millions of gallons of water it must have taken to bathe the city in such brightness. God, I thought, this must be the richest country on the planet.

Our home was a great disappointment. It was a two-bedroom apartment on the sixth floor of a graffiti-covered building. In Haiti, homes were almost always open and spotless. In my new building, the doors were shut and dusty.



When we reached the apartment my parents lived in, I hesitated before going inside. The door looked like a cage. When my father fastened the filthy lock, I felt like I was in prison.

My parents did not wait long to enroll me in school. I could barely tell the difference between “hi” and “high” before I found myself in the car heading for IS 320. The school building had even more graffiti than the apartment building.

In Haiti, schools and churches were treated with utmost respect. Here things were obviously not the same. I wanted to run back to the car as my father and I walked by a crowd of hysterical students. In my pink cotton dress and yellow sneakers, I was sure they were laughing at me.

As we entered the building, I held my father’s hand so tightly one would have thought that my life depended on it. In my school back home, I had been the best memorizer and the most articulate student. I had never given any teacher reason to hit me. Here I was sure that I would fail no matter how hard I tried.

Fortunately, there was a Haitian gentleman in the office. He had a brief talk with my father and made him sign some papers. Then the gentleman walked me to my homeroom class. As I left my father to go fight my way past the shoves of the hurried students in the halls, I felt as though I had been abandoned once again.

A NEW FRIEND HELPS

The Haitian gentleman introduced me to the homeroom teacher and then to one of the many Haitian girls in the class. He told me that she was one of the most respected girls in the school, mostly because of her roughness. The first day, my new friend kindly escorted me from class to class and made me sit next to her in every one.



Despite her help, I could not understand what was being said around me. As far as I was concerned, the teachers might as well have been hitting spoons against the blackboards. I understood nothing. The classes all blended into one long discouraging day. To make things worse, each time I stepped into the halls the thought of being abused by the other students scared me.

“In the same way that my brothers glared at me my first day in this country, people often glare at me as though searching for some sign of my nationality.”

My fear was not realized until the last period when our class would eat lunch. One of the girls on the lunch line lifted my skirt up in the air and began to laugh. During her fit of laughter, she managed to spit out the word “Haitian” as though it were the filthiest and funniest word she’d ever said in her entire life.

Because my friend intervened, my humiliation that day was brief. After everyone found out that I was always with her, no one tried to touch me again.

Unfortunately, the verbal abuse did not stop. “Haitians are filthy. They have AIDS. They stink.” Even when I could not understand the actual words, the hatred with which they were expressed hurt me deeply.

DIRTY LOOKS

Now that I’ve grown to understand every insult, they hurt even more. In the same way that my brothers glared at me my first day in this country, people often glare at me as though searching for some sign of my nationality. If I don’t fit their particular stereotype, they challenge me. They ask me whether I am sure that I am really Haitian.



Being any kind of immigrant isn't easy. Nevertheless, the view of Haitian immigrants has made us ashamed among our peers. The boat people and those few stricken with AIDS have served as profiles for all of us.

If only those who abuse us would ask, perhaps we'd explain that it is not our fault that we are intruding on their existence. To avoid brutal deaths and lead better lives, we are forced to leave our homes.

We'd plead with them to accept us and accommodate us, not make life miserable for us. Because, yes, we are strangers. Unfortunate strangers in a world full of strangers. ■



UNIVERSITY OF KITCHEN?

*My dad's decision will
determine my future.*

BY ORUBBA ALMANSOURI

“We’re halfway through the summer. Are we going to New York or what?” I asked my older sister Yasmin. She had come to visit us at our house back in my country, Yemen. We were in the room we’d shared until she got married and moved away.

“Do you really want to go?” she replied, opening the Kit Kat bar she had in her hand.

“Yes and no,” I answered as I lay down on my bed. “I want to stay here for you and all our extended family, but I also want to see Dad and New York City.”

“What’s the rush, then? It’s not like you’re going to school when you get there,” she said.





Illustration by John Jones - published with the original version of this story for YCTeen.

In my family, most men believe that the best place for a woman is in the house and the best job for us women is to cook, clean and raise a family. Many girls in my family—including Yasmin—stop going to school before high school, and none have gone to college. Girls live with their families until they are 15 or a little older, then it's time to say goodbye to being single and hello to marriage.

AN UNBROKEN TRADITION

My religion (Islam) is not against girls being educated. In fact our Prophet Mohammed, may peace be upon him, said that we should seek education even if we have to go to China for it. The problem isn't my culture either, since many Yemeni girls are educated and have jobs. Where my family's tradition came from, I don't know. But so far, no one has broken it.

I never imagined my destiny would be any different. In my country I was an excellent student and teachers loved me. In 7th grade, I was first in my class. They put my name in big letters on a piece of paper and hung it up in the main hallway. I felt so proud of myself.

I didn't mind leaving school at any time, though, because I knew the path girls in my family followed and I didn't expect anything else. When we came to the United States the first time (when I was 5—we stayed for a few years), my older sisters were teenagers and they didn't get a chance to go to school, even though they really wanted to go and learn English. So when I was 14 years old and I heard that we were moving back to the US, I figured I wouldn't be going to school anymore.

THE BEST THING FOR ME

Then we got to New York, and my dad announced he was planning to enroll my sister Lebeya and me in school. I was surprised. From what I used to see on TV, American high schools were another planet compared to schools in Yemen. I wasn't used to going to school with boys, or talking to them. In fact, I was a little worried: I'd heard that many Yemeni students who go to American high schools start to do what the other kids are doing, like having relationships and even drinking, neither of which is allowed by my religion. I'd expected my dad would want to keep my sister and me away from this environment. (My mom wants us to be educated, as she never had the chance to be, but like most Yemeni women she follows her husband's decisions.)

But my dad was determined. When my oldest sisters didn't go to school in New York, that affected their lives and his. They couldn't go out alone because they didn't understand English and couldn't communicate. My dad had to translate for them at doctors' appointments. When we moved to New York, he said putting my sister and me in school would help us become independent so we could help ourselves when necessary.



For my part, I decided that since I had the chance to go to school, I would definitely take it. Today my sisters are both married and have children sweet as honey, but they still wish they had gone to school here and learned to speak English. I saw from my sisters' experience that education was the best thing for me, and I felt that going to school might be fun and a way to get out of the house. I had no idea what it would become to me.

'WAY TO GO, DAD!'

While we were getting records and report cards sent from Yemen to New York so my sister and I could enroll here, the men in my extended family started telling my dad that we would get ourselves into trouble and hurt the family's reputation. They thought that high school in America would Americanize us, causing us to drop the traditions we'd been learning our entire lives and pick up others.

One day my dad was on the phone with one of my cousins and I heard some of my dad's replies. (It's not my fault he thought that I was sleeping when I wasn't.) They went like this:

"They are my daughters and I have raised them right. I know what is good for them."

"It's none of your business."

"I don't care what they say, I have listened to you guys once and I won't make that mistake again."

After I heard that, I was saying to myself, "Way to go, Dad!" I saw my father as someone who is ready to make a change and someone who really cares about his daughters' education; I saw him in a way that made me feel proud to be the daughter of Ali Almansouri. I knew that my dad had put all his trust in us and this made me want to be on my best behavior.



IN LOVE WITH SCHOOL AGAIN

My first day at Brooklyn International High School was scary because I was starting 9th grade at the end of September and I was the new girl. I felt lonely at first, but luckily my English was OK from living here as a kid. By second period I'd talked to two Hispanic girls and we became friends. My teachers were so nice to me; they helped me when I needed help and they always asked me how I was doing. I began to love school once again. I worked hard and got excellent grades. My classmates started telling me, "You're so smart."

I don't believe that I'm as smart as they say, but I do believe that I am clever. Because I did well, ideas of actually graduating started coming into my head. My love for school grew, especially when I learned new things, went on trips or met new friends.

"You know that I will be the first girl from our family to actually go to college," I said one day to my sisters and a group of other girls, while we were sitting together talking.

"Yeah, and you'll go to the University of Kitchen," my younger cousin said.

"And earn your cooking degree," my sister added.

Then they all started laughing, including me. "You'll see when I become the first Almansouri girl to go to college and break the 'girls don't go to college' rule," I said. "You'll see what I will do."

FUTURE IN QUESTION

The truth is, though, that there is always a question mark over my future. In spite of the things I overheard my dad say on the phone, his decisions about my future are not all made yet. My dad doesn't really follow up on my schoolwork, and when opportunities come up—like leadership programs, after-school activities or writing for Youth Communication—it's not easily that he lets me participate.



I think that even though he put me in school, sometimes he still thinks the way other men in my family do. This worries me, because it makes me think he may not allow me to finish the path that he let me start. However, if I give him a great speech about why he should let me do some extracurricular thing, and if I'm persistent, he usually gives in. I think that when I put it in his head that I can benefit a lot from these things, he sees it, and that gives me hope for the future.

My being allowed to finish high school and go to college depends on two people: Dad and me. I will never disobey him because he is everything to me. My basic hope is that we don't go back to Yemen before I graduate from high school. Then, if my dad lets me, I'd prefer to put off marriage until I am settled in college.

HOPES AND FEARS

What will actually happen, I don't know. My dad hasn't told me what he's thinking. Even though I hate not knowing what's going to be next, in another way I don't want the topic to come up yet. I'm afraid of the answer I'll get, in case it's a "no." Anyway, as they say, you have to walk up the ladder step by step or you'll fall down.

When I'm feeling hopeful, I think my dad will let me go to college. I want to attend a good one like Columbia University, major in English or journalism and also study biology. I see my future as a finishing line with red and white stripes, and I see myself crossing the line, then getting my prize—in other words, working in a career and feeling true power and independence. I also want to feel useful to the world and to people around me. I want to learn more and be an educated person.

Sometimes, though, I feel that everything I do is for no reason and that I will never be able to go to college or even finish high school. I worry that if I do graduate from high school, my dad will say, "I already let you finish high school and we don't have women who go to college in this family." I worry about the pressure that will be on him if he does let me go to



college. Our family made such a big deal about us going to high school, I can't imagine what they would say about college.

NIGHTMARE OF ONE FLAVOR

When I hear things like, "Look—girls your age are getting married and soon it will be your turn," those comments are like rockets landing in my ears. I find a place to be alone and think to myself, "All this hard work, these top grades, these compliments, for what? For me to remember when I'm seasoning the soup. Why did they put me in the race when I had no interest in participating? They put the idea in my head, made me like it and actually work toward something—all so that when I reach the finish line they'll tell me I can't cross it."

I imagine watching others cross the line without me, and hunt myself down for all the time I spent dreaming of things I want to accomplish. "Maybe it's not time, Orubba," I think. "Maybe the girl that will break your family's record hasn't been born yet."

With that I cry myself to sleep. Sometimes I even have nightmares about not finishing high school. A lot of people think that it's no big deal; I'll get married and my husband will give me everything I need. But that's not enough for me because I want my life to have different flavors and taste them all, not just repeat the same flavor over and over every day. I also want to feel that I'm prepared if something happens to my husband. How will I feed my children? I want to have a weapon in my hand and education is one weapon that never hurts anyone, but actually helps.

SEEING THE POSSIBILITIES

In Yemen, I always thought that going to college was a good thing for girls, but I didn't feel envious of the girls from other families who could go. Since I came to the US, though, I have been thinking more about my future and I want more out of life. Because I see college as a possibility for me, but not a sure thing, today I feel envious toward Yemeni girls who know they can go to college.



Sometimes I get mad that my family keeps on pushing boys to go to college, even though most of them don't have any interest, while some of us girls are ready to work for it and never get a chance. Other times, I tell myself that whatever education I end up with is better than nothing. I'm even a little afraid of going to college in case I fail. I'm torn between two things, but the tear is not straight down the middle. I'm happy that my obsession with success is greater than my worries.

I'LL REWARD HIS TRUST

Now I'm a junior, my grades are still excellent, and my desire to live my dream is greater than ever. I agree with some of my family's traditions, like girls not going out alone and not sleeping at anyone's house outside the family. But the education issue is too much. If they give all us girls a chance and support us, we can help our family reach higher than ever before. If I go to college, I'll open a path and be a role model for future generations of girls in the family, teaching them not to give up.

If my father's decision is for me to go to college, he will raise his head high and tell everyone who wanted to stand in my way that they were wrong; that he is happy and proud that he gave us a chance that a lot of parents in my family took away from their girls. I want him to be really pleased with what I accomplish.

Everything I become will be because of the trust he gave me. I will keep my religion and my traditions, but I will follow my dreams as long as I know that what I'm doing is right. I have no problem with cooking and cleaning, as long as it is a side order with my dream. But if my dad doesn't support my dream, then everything that I have planned for won't be. That's what causes me nightmares instead of dreams. ■



YOUTH COMMUNICATION

OUR MISSION IS TO ELEVATE TEEN VOICES TO CREATE REAL CHANGE.

Through the power of true stories written by youth, we create more supportive and successful learning communities.



REAL STORIES. REAL CHANGE.

WE BELIEVE

Young people often know exactly what they need.
Adults just need the tools to listen.

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Youth Communication elevates youth voices to create that change.

Our young people are not being supported to succeed.
Our institutions—schools, after-school programs, child welfare and juvenile justice systems—are struggling to engage and support our kids. Our stories provide staff with the tools they need to understand and meet their young people's needs.

The experts are already in the room.
Our education partners have the opportunity to be an influential and affirming adult in a young person's life. We give them the youth perspective and expertise they need to do so.

ENGAGEMENT + BELONGING = IMPROVED OUTCOMES



ABOUT YOUTH COMMUNICATION

Since 1980, Youth Communication has worked with youth facing systemic challenges—including youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth who are recent immigrants, living in foster care, unhoused, and economically struggling—to tell stories that support their peers and help adult professionals provide more equitable and effective services.

In our award-winning writing program, NYC teens work one-on-one with professional editors to write true stories about how they manage challenges and achieve their goals.

We use those stories in curricula and training to provide teachers, after-school workers, and other youth-serving adults with culturally responsive, social and emotional learning programs. By centering youth voice, these programs engage students and inspire their confidence and feelings of self-worth. They help teachers and other adults become more empathetic and effective.

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