



Photographs by LAWRENCE K. HO Los Angeles Times

TUTOR: Michael Guggenheim, 12, conquered dysgraphia, which impairs writing, by using a computer. He passes his knowledge on to Alicia Lewis, left, and Heaven Sanders.

Boy empowered by his weakness

Michael Guggenheim's learning disorder led him to open a nonprofit that teaches homeless kids to use computers.

By FRANCISCO VARA-ORTA
Times Staff Writer

Every Wednesday at the Sydney M. Irmas Transitional Living Center in North Hollywood, Michael Guggenheim teaches a handful of students how to type their names and basic phrases in Microsoft Word and how to work with math, vocabulary and typing programs.

At a recent tutoring session, Michael moved between the laptops used by shelter residents Alicia Lewis and Heaven Sanders, both 7. He coached them for 30 minutes on typing their names, then switched to a half hour of vocabulary and math games.

"Michael, I'm lost," Heaven said, resting her face on her hands.

He quickly went to her computer and punched the "load" button on the keyboard to get the software working.

Another student in distress, another rescue.

But Michael is not just another teacher. He is 12, a sixth-grader at Los Encinos School in Encino. He can't drive, vote or write much with a pencil, but he started a nonprofit when he was 11 and teaches computer skills to elementary students once a week.

He doesn't regard his dysgraphia, a learning disorder that severely impairs writing, as a disability. Instead, he has turned it into a driving force.

For starters, he was quick to discover that he could use a computer, and now he earns straight A's using a laptop for course



ONE ON ONE: Michael works with Alicia, 7, at a homeless shelter in North Hollywood. He teaches typing and software programs through his nonprofit, Showing People Learning and Technology.

work. Later, he started the nonprofit organization that takes laptops and educational software to elementary school children in homeless shelters.

Along the way he discovered his skills at pitching the project that is close to his heart: "Many disadvantaged kids and teenagers don't have the opportunities and access to learning and using computer skills," Michael said. "The tool that changed my life was a laptop, and it's a skill that's necessary to learn to get good grades and a good job so you aren't left behind."

Painful writing

Dysgraphia, a form of dyslexia, makes it difficult to write by hand. The disability is a lifelong condition that has nothing to do with intelligence, according

to Los Angeles-based educational psychologist Nita Ferjo, who has treated Michael since he was 6.

Like some people with dysgraphia, Michael experiences pain while trying to write. His written work is illegible after a few sentences, and even tying his shoes can be difficult.

"Michael used to feel very sad in the beginning, after being diagnosed," Ferjo said. "But he's a warrior of sorts, even a bit perfectionistic. He's been driven since I've known him."

Michael has had tutoring and physical therapy for his condition. When he was younger he sometimes dictated homework assignments to his mother. But when he entered third grade, he was allowed to use a laptop computer in the classroom.

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net service to help him prepare the necessary documents, Michael applied for and received nonprofit status from the California secretary of state's office and a federal tax exemption identification number.

In August, he decided to approach L.A. Family Housing, which provides temporary shelter and social services to homeless people, to launch his program. The organization, for which he had done his school-sponsored volunteer work, runs the North Hollywood shelter.

Cecilia Ribakoff, L.A. Family Housing's volunteer coordinator, said Michael "blew her away" when he interviewed for a volunteer position, giving her a written proposal and pitching his nonprofit for the organization's North Hollywood shelter.

"At first I thought he was too good to be true, but he's completely dedicated to his mission," Ribakoff said. "I just have found Michael to be a blessing for me and the organization. He pays attention to our younger kids that sometimes get overlooked."

Stephanie Klasky-Gamer, L.A. Family Housing president, said Michael's fledgling program helps fulfill a dream of bridging the digital divide that separates children like Michael from the homeless children he helps.

"It's very important that kids understand how other people and kids their age live, especially

if you have a comfortable lifestyle," said Lori Guggenheim, Michael's mother. "The kids here are just as smart and capable as the ones back at Michael's school. It's just a matter of resources and a support system."

Help for Heaven

Michael lives in Beverly Hills with his parents and his 8-year-old brother, Ryan. His mother, a former lawyer for Universal Studios, is now a stay-at-home mom; his father, Paul, is a regional manager for a dental supply company. Mother and son travel 45 to 90 minutes to get to the shelter from home.

Before moving to the shelter among 64 other families, Heaven Sanders called South Los Angeles home, along with her single mother and five brothers and sisters, ages 2 to 16. Heaven's mother, Taneshia Burson, 32, said they became homeless after her roommate moved out and she couldn't make rent payments. Now she is back on her feet and has found an apartment south of downtown. Michael is trying to get a donated laptop for Heaven so she can continue to hone her typing skills.

And he wants to expand SPLAT to other shelters in the city. So far, he's been able to acquire four laptops and about 20 CDs of donated software by writing to manufacturers and businesses, painstakingly signing each letter.

"Where I think some may see having dysgraphia as a disadvantage, I don't, because my computer skills and teaching these kids is helping me gain even more knowledge," Michael said. "And it exposes me to people I may have never met."

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For more information on Showing People Learning and Technology, go to <http://splatcharity.wordpress.com>.

AL MARTINEZ

Do we need to admire Charles Bukowski to honor his poetry?

Oscar Wilde went to prison in 1895 for flaunting his homosexuality. Ezra Pound was indicted for treason in 1943 for broadcasting on behalf of the Italian fascists in the Second World War. Dylan Thomas died in 1953 after proclaiming that he had just downed 18 straight whiskeys and wondering if it were a record.

I mention them to emphasize that not all poets are whispering pixies. Some are maniacs, some are drunks and some are general hell-raisers. Which brings us to Charles Bukowski, who was probably all of the above. Although those who knew him might agree that he was a raving, brawling alcoholic, the question has arisen: Was he a Jew-hating Nazi sympathizer? I knew you'd wonder.

The allegation was made by a one-time Bukowski friend turned severe critic who wrote a book suggesting that both might

be true. The observation became an issue when the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission proposed that the East Hollywood house in which Bukowski wrote much of his poetry be declared a historical landmark. The current owner of the home said, more or less, over her dead body, and hired a lawyer.

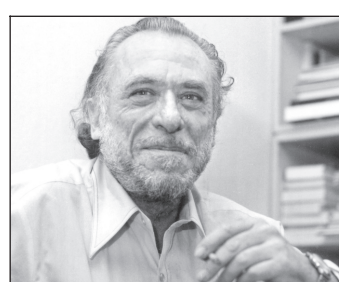
Victoria Gureyeva is quoted by L.A. Weekly as saying, "This man [Bukowski] loved Hitler. This is my house, not Bukowski's. I will never allow the city of Los Angeles to turn it into a monument for this man." But the commission voted to do just that, and now it's up to the City Council to confirm or deny.

Among those commenting on the issue — and there are many — is the poet FrancEyE, who lived with Bukowski for three years and bore him a daughter. She said that the whole thing was, to rephrase it into more acceptable terms, bull manure. "He'd get drunk and say any-

thing," she said, "but he wasn't a Nazi."

Her real name is Frances Smith, but someone told her that Frances sounded plural so she changed it to FrancEyE. A sprightly woman in her mid-80s, she lives alone in a small Venice apartment adorned with posters of Bukowski. They once occupied the ramshackle place at 5124 De Longpre Ave. that is being proposed as a landmark.

FrancEyE says that Buk, as she calls him, was never a Nazi but often made outrageous statements while drinking in order to drive away those he no longer wanted around. She recalled that he once physically threw a man in a wheelchair out of the house. "He was in a wheelchair," she remembered, "because he had thrown himself out of a second-story window in anger from people below calling him a beatnik." She added, somewhat wryly, "The guy just seemed to lend himself to being thrown out."



ECKARTH PALUTKE Associated Press
CONTROVERSY: Charles Bukowski's house could be declared a historical landmark.

Allegations of Bukowski's Nazi sympathies came in a book, "Visceral Bukowski: Inside the Sniper Landscape of L.A. Writers," by Ben Pleasants, a one-time acquaintance of the poet. Pleasants, who may have been one of those that Bukowski didn't want around, seems to be yet another guy who wishes he had been born with Bukowski's awesome talent.

Making it easier for him to pretty much say what he wants

is the fact that Bukowski has been dead for 14 years and can't defend himself, which is probably fortunate for Pleasants.

OK, so probably Buk wasn't a Nazi, but was he anti-Semitic? FrancEyE isn't sure but says he never made a public issue of it if he was. He was born in Germany, and his maternal grandmother, whose last name was Israel, was Jewish. It's difficult to imagine anti-Semitism evolving from that. Basically, he was a man challenging the world, both with fists and words, a provocateur of amazing abilities.

Bukowski's poetry is often powerful, emerging with explosive force. An admirer once described his work as "the spoken word nailed to paper." But he could also be reflective, almost mournful. In one poem he writes: "in the company of fools/ we relax upon/ordinary embankments, enjoy bad food, cheap/drink/mingle with the men and/ladies from/hell/in the company of fools/we throw days

away like/paper napkins."

I have been a Bukowski fan since moving to L.A. 35 years ago. I never drank with him and it's just as well because I can be argumentative as hell too, and being smashed in the face by another drunk is not my idea of a poetic evening. I may not even have liked him in person, but that isn't the point. Poetry is not to be judged by the manners of the poet but by the impact of the stanzas he produces.

Like Ezra Pound, Oscar Wilde and Dylan Thomas, Buk left us with the magnificence of words and images born in dark places of the soul, unfiltered by antipathies, refined by a chemistry that is beyond description. Forget his drunken bombast. We're not bringing Bukowski home to tea here, we're having a few ghostly beers with him on De Longpre Avenue. In the company of fools, we can all party.

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