

SHARING THE ORAL TRADITION

By Judy Sima

After discovering the joy and magic of storytelling over the past five years, I wanted to share my experience with my middle-school kids. They had all heard me tell stories, so they weren't strangers to the oral tradition. In the fall of 1988 I put a notice on the morning announcements, and 15 kids signed up, although the number later dropped to 10 committed Chatterton Talespinners. We began to meet for an hour each Tuesday after school.



The Chatterton Talespinners

The new tellers spent the first few weeks listening to my stories, watching professional storytellers on videotapes or filmstrips, learning some simple circle stories as a group, and making story-sticks—paper characters glued on tongue depressors—to use with familiar folk tales. Then we began in earnest to search for stories to learn and tell. To guide that process, I gave the students a list of "six quick steps to storytelling success":

- **Choose a story you love.** I provided the students with many fairy-tale and picture books and then asked them to choose their favorites from among them. The selection process took several weeks, but finally all the students had picked some stories they wanted to tell.

- **Read the story out loud.** The Talespinners read their stories to one another so they could hear how the words sounded and determine whether the tales appealed to others.

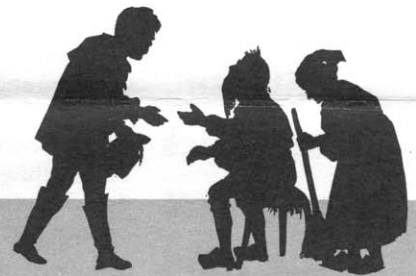
- **Visualize the setting, characters, and sequence.** I asked students to see their stories as though they were watching a television show without sound and to draw the story's scenes in sequence.

- **Map the story.** The Talespinners put down in writing their stories' order, key phrases, characters, and setting.

- **Tell it to yourself.** The students put their stories on tape so they could play them

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**THE CHATTERTON
TALESPINNERS CLUB
HELPS MIDDLE-
SCHOOL STUDENTS
LEARN, ENJOY, AND
SPREAD THE ART OF
STORYTELLING.
HERE'S HOW.**



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over and over at home. I asked them to tell their stories to themselves without the tape and to talk their stories through to an audience of one.

• **Practice, practice, practice.** Finally, the students began to tell their tales to their parents and siblings, teddy bears, and anyone else who would listen. I required them to tell the story once behind a closed door to see whether the person on the other side could hear. When the Talespinners told their stories to the entire story group, they critiqued one another's stories, focusing on eye contact, enthusiasm, preparation, use of the voice, and ways to improve the delivery. I find that students in their age group are sometimes overly negative, so we stressed positive criticism, and critics always first said what they liked about the story and its delivery.

The Talespinners' first performances

Our goal was for each student to have a story to share with visiting teller Jim May when he came to our school in January 1989. The kids had lunch with him and then moved into our circle and told their stories. The Talespinners were outstanding! Their tellings were videotaped so that the students could have the opportunity to observe, critique, and enjoy their own performances, and we watched the tape at one of our regular Tuesday-afternoon meetings.

Spurred by our success and Jim May's compliments, we took our stories to a local nursing home. Most of the tellers had rather involved 10-minute stories such as "The Little Mermaid" and "Snow White and Rose Red." As a finale, all the Talespinners worked the string figures for "The Mosquito" and "The Yam Farmer" from Anne Pellowski's *The Story Vine* while a single student told the stories.

The program was a little too long for the nursing-home residents, so when we were asked to present 17 minutes' worth of stories at a board of education meeting, we resolved to shorten and vary our program. I played for the students a tape by the Folktellers, a pair of tandem tellers. Inspired by their example, the kids found stories they liked and set about learning to tell them in

pairs and groups.

Now we had our variety. The kids found their own best ways to learn their stories, and our meetings became a place for them to practice and share. Teachers who were willing came and told stories to the group. Adults from our newly formed Parent-Tellers group practiced their stories too. We were asked to share our stories with MAME 17, a regional media-specialists' organization. By that time the students were so good that they could pinch hit for one another if someone was absent.

Endings and beginnings

Our final meeting of the 1988-89 school year was a pizza party, at which I presented each Talespinner with a notebook with the following "assignment" for summer vacation:

- List stories you know and where you told them. List stories, with author and source, that you want to learn.
- Interview adults—especially older people—to collect true stories about real people.
- Write poems you'd like to learn—both original works and those from books (listing author and source).



A Talespinner shares a story.

When we began meeting again in the fall of 1989, we had a broader base from which to begin our storytelling. We also had a larger group of 23 Chatterton Talespinners. We've already put on a Halloween program for a local Brownie troop and are at work raising funds for the Gift of Reading. The program, sponsored by the *Detroit Free Press*, provides books to local Headstart preschoolers. Each Talespinner will learn a book's story, tell the story to a Headstart group, and present the book to one of the children.

You don't have to be an expert storyteller to build a student-tellers' program. You can begin by showing videotapes of storytellers and giving the students a chance to explore their own abilities. Give the tellers some leeway, along with some structure, and they'll take off.

Judy Sima has worked as a media specialist for the Fitzgerald Public Schools of Warren, Michigan, for 22 years. If you have suggestions, please write her at 30053 Spring River, Southfield, Mich. 48076, or call 313-644-3951.