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# Teaching Tolerance Through Tales

How one middle school media specialist uses stories to connect kids

by Judy Sima

One of my goals as a storyteller and media specialist at Chatterton Middle School in Warren, Michigan, has been to provide my students with a participatory activity that doesn't relate to social standing, talents, or academic abilities.

That's why, 10 years ago, I created the Chatterton Talespinners, an after-school storytelling group in which students learn stories, practice storytelling skills, and take field trips to share narratives (See *Yarnspinner*, December 1989). Each year, these students tell at nursing homes, book stores, school board meetings, and at the school's annual Fitzgerald Family Storytelling Festival.

I knew that storytelling helped build my students' confidence and self esteem, but I wanted more than that. I wanted them to have contact with youngsters different from themselves and to learn lessons of tolerance and acceptance through those experiences.

My dream became a reality in 1992, when I and fellow storyteller Karen White decided to organize a co-operative storytelling project geared to building understanding and friendship between inner-city and suburban kids.

My school (Chatterton Middle School) is located in a suburb north of Detroit, where students are primarily from blue-collar families of European backgrounds. Karen's Keiden Elementary School is located in inner-city Detroit and predominately African-American. Like me, Karen had organized a storytelling group (hers consisted of fourth and fifth graders).

The idea, of course, was to bring the two groups together periodically in friendship and for building a greater understanding of the social differences.

When the two groups met for the first time, our first objective was to increase the comfort level. The second was for each club to share something meaningful with the other. We

felt the best way to accomplish the first objective was to pair the students off. Then we used an ice-breaker activity to initiate communication: Each student had to find a partner from the other group whose birthday was close to his or her own, who liked the same TV show, and/or who had the same family birth order.

With more than 60 kids, this was a bit hectic, but once the students were matched, they interviewed each other, asking questions such as: What is your favorite school subject? What is your favorite color? What do you like to do in your free time?

After this session, we formed two circles of chairs, then went around the circles and had each student introduce his or her partner.

Before sharing a pizza lunch, the Keiden group introduced the African-American holiday of Kwanza to the Talespinners. The Talespinners then gave their partners a string and taught them the Hawaiian string story of "The Mosquito." We found we had much in common, especially later on, when



each group did its version of a fairy tale rap, "The Jazzy Three Bears."

Amid the confusion of teaching, learning, and sharing, both groups became friends and looked forward to Chatterton's return visit a month later. When we arrived at Keiden in February, old partners found each other and sat down together at the cafeteria tables. The students were

given a paper and told to write down five facts about themselves. One "fact" was to be a "lie." The groups shared their facts and guessed the lies. Lots of giggles, looks of disbelief, and stories took place.

Next, the Keiden tellers entertained Chatterton with an African tale told by the whole group, then four tellers from each club told a story. Sharing continued after lunch with a presentation about the African thumb piano, the Kalimba.

When it was Chatterton's turn to take the stage, they sang, then taught their partners two sign language songs. The exchange ended with both groups singing and signing. Before The Talespinners caught their bus, many of the students exchanged phone numbers, addresses, and promises to keep in touch.

The Keiden Storytellers and Chatterton Talespinners met once more the following year, but when Karen White left Keiden to take a district reading position, I had to find new schools with which to share. The following year, we invited Communication and Media Arts (CMA) High School from Detroit and Lowery Elementary from Dearborn. The Lowery students are primarily of Muslim Arabic background.

To prepare for the exchange, we learned stories from many cultures. Prior to the visit, the Lowery storytellers brainstormed things they wanted to know about their coun-

terparts—kid stuff, such as favorite colors and foods, TV shows, sports, books, or school subjects. They wanted to know how long they'd been telling stories, where they were born, and their ages. They made up an information sheet and filled in the blanks along with their home addresses and a school photo. The sheet was then exchanged with a partner from one of the other two groups.

Each storyteller also prepared a "Me Bag" or Story Bag, which is a paper bag that contains four or five personal items. The students' names were written on the outside of the bags, and part of the assignment was to find out the story behind their names from their parents.

When the three groups were brought together, the students sat at tables and shared the contents of their "Me Bags." After about 20 minutes, we asked for volunteers to tell something interesting they had learned about their partners. They found they had many things in common—collecting key chains and Troll dolls, pictures of pets, musical instruments, favorite authors and books, sports, and music.

Next, three or four students from each group told a story to the rest of the group. Our favorite stories included an African folktale about why the sky is far away, a Jewish tale about a wicked king, and a Puerto Rican tale about a squeaky bed.

We had the most fun when each group taught or demonstrated something to the other storytelling clubs. The Chatterton Talespinners taught the mosquito string story. The group from CMA talked about its experience telling stories for a local radio show. The students from Lowery told a group participation story, *The Wizard, the Fairy, and the Magic Chicken*, then presented the book and a set of props to the other clubs. Group photos were taken.

Our morning ended with the 60-plus storytellers sharing a lunch of pizza, pop, and cookies. Partners exchanged their information sheets and promised to keep in touch.

Through these storytelling exchanges, as well as other field trips, my students have learned that although others may look different and come from different backgrounds, we all have many things in common—and we can learn from the differences. As the Talespinners move from sixth to seventh to eighth grade, along with the confidence they gain, they find that storytelling is a skill and a talent meant to be shared with others. ■

### Talespinners' Story Sources

"The Bed" from *The Tiger and the Rabbit* by Pura Belpre (Lippincott, 1965).

*Why the Sky is Far Away* by Mary-Joan Gerson (1992).

*The Wizard, the Fairy, and the Magic Chicken* by Helen Lester (Houghton Mifflin, 1983).

"Debate in Sign Language" from *Sea to Shinning Sea* by Syd Lieberman (Scholastic, 1993).

"The Mosquito." from *The Story Vine* by Anne Pellowski (MacMillan, 1984).

"The Pain and the Great One" from *Free to Be You and Me* by Judy Blume (McGraw Hill, 1974).

From *Sea to Shinning Sea* by Amy Cohn (Scholastic, 1993).

## Storytelling Games And Activities

### Pick A Toy Game

- Put various small toys in a bag. Have each student pick a toy from the bag that could be a metaphor for who that student is or how he or she is perceived.
- Arrange the students in a circle and have each student tell why he or she picked that particular toy.
- Separate into groups of three and have each group make up a story using all three toys.

### Hot Seat

- Send three volunteers out of the room.
- Choose another three to five students to create a story; have each of the three add to the sequence and plot. (The crazier the better.)
- Allow one of the volunteers to return to the room and sit in the 'Hot Seat,' where he or she must listen as one of the story-creators relates the new tale. The listeners can not interrupt or ask questions as the story is told.
- The first volunteer is then required to re-tell the tale to the next volunteer who returns to the room.

### Park Bench

- Put two chairs side by side in front of the room. Select a student to sit in one of the chairs and to begin doing a natural, reasonable habit.
- A second student then takes a seat in the second chair and slowly begins doing the same habit, subtly at first, then slowly amplifies it until the action drives the other person away.

*Millions of Cats* by Wanda Gag (Coward McCann, 1928).

*Zinnia and Dot* by Lisa Campbell Ernst (Viking, 1992).

*Children Tell Stories* by Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss (Richard Owens, 1990)

*The Guniwolf* by Wilhelmina Harper (Dutton, 1967).

*The Wolf's Chicken Stew* by Keiko Kasza (Putnam, 1987).

*The Fat Cat* by Jack Kent (Parents, 1972).

*Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock* by Eric Kimmel (Holiday House, 1988).

*The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by John Scieszka (Viking, 1989).

*Caps for Sale* by Esphyr Slobodkina (Harper, 1968).

*The Judge* by Harve Zemach (Farrar, Strauss, 1971).



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