

If You Want to Empower Someone, Listen to Them

Youth Storytelling: The Journey

By Kevin Cordi

I come from mainly a traditional teaching background. In school I had to listen to the teacher, spit back the information on the test, then hope for good grades. Rarely was I ever asked my opinion or my ideas on a subject, and hardly ever, if at all, was I asked to tell my story.

However, I had stories to tell. I learned them by the people who told me stories. My mother and father would retell stories of the mountains of West Virginia, the day my grandfather killed the blacksnake or my aunt chopped off the fingers of our neighbor. I would listen to those rare teachers like Green High School's Mildred Taylor who would introduce President William Howard Taft as "a president so fat that it took six men to take him out of the Presidential bathtub." I was hooked to the story and that is how I learned history.

In the year of 1993 a young student by the name of Jennifer Wooley at East Bakersfield High School said to me, "Mr. Cordi, you love stories so much and you always tell stories to teach us, why don't we start a storytelling club after school?" Not knowing how to get started, but seeing the energy in young Jennifer's spirit and eyes, I decided to move forward.

Now looking back I have realized the students have helped me not only develop my curriculum but my vocation. Put simply, I have the greatest job in the world, I teach youth to tell stories. I am according to the National Storytelling Network, "the first full time high school storytelling teacher in the country." I currently teach at Hanford High School where I have over 200 students per year involved in storytelling related classes. This includes an Advanced Storytelling Class, Interactive Creative Writing and Telling Class, and a beginning storytelling class. I also have the distinct honor of coaching Voices of Illusion, a high school traveling troupe of storytellers. My students study over 5 to 25 hours a week the art of storytelling after school. They don't tell for credit during this time, but they tell because they want to tell stories. They tell because it is a place they can belong.

I have watched football players reroute their schedules to accommodate their storytelling needs. I have watched reluctant readers become avid tellers and consequently, better readers. I have seen a whole world develop for others by having a non-competitive storytelling environment. Basically, I have learned that once you listen to student's stories, students are empowered to not only tell stories, but to build a community of storytelling.

However, after securing a Master's Degree in "Using Storytelling As A Primary

Means of Teaching," from the University of Akron, I have also realized that in this day of "high stake testing," storytelling helps not only teach the standards, but builds standards for helping others. Active listening, telling, and believing each other achieve this.

Imagine a community of student tellers. This is what we have built not only at Hanford, but a worldwide and nation-wide effort to unit storytellers. We have produced four tapes, two CD's, one video, written a handbook and have built a website to help foster the youth storytelling renaissance. Our website at www.youthstorytelling.com and <http://members.cnetech.com/kctells> has registered in a little over two years over 50 student storytelling clubs, from pre-school to high school.

The real proof is by listening to my students. They are truly the ones empowered to teach others by storytelling.

Sonia Guecho, freshman, states, "Telling stories helps me express my feelings that I can't or will not express to anyone. It also makes me feel good to see people appreciate my stories because it shows that my feelings do count." I have watched students use story as the vehicle to talk about how they feel when their sister ran away, what is like to have Downs Syndrome, and how important their grandmother's wedding ring is to their lives.

I especially enjoy that Sonia does not see storytelling as an activity to be feared. Unlike many adults she has not been conditioned to fear public speaking. Instead, she sees stories as gift giving. Whenever we tell kids that they were brave to speak in public, we perpetuate that attitude that this activity is something to be feared and worse yet, neglected. However, if we listen to student stories, we empower them to become capable and competent speakers. Sonia states, "Before I got into storytelling I felt alone and when I joined I met people like me. Storytelling helped me belong."

Students come to storytelling for many reasons. Sometimes it is just comforting to be a place where you can listen or tell stories. Cody Henderson, freshman, said, "Storytelling relaxes me and allows me to think of less stressful worries. It allows me to feel happy, put simply, it does just that."

He states, "Storytelling is the art of becoming free inside and releasing your emotions in many ways. I love storytelling and there is no story that can change that."

Dawn Escobar, Senior, and Chair of VOI reminds us of the value of telling stories. "Teenagers need to tell stories to express how they feel. This is a time in their life when they need someone who listens. It is what we need. Everyday we create stories that are locked up inside us. When we tell them they are unlocked. Then, not only the stories are free, but we are."

One of the major tenets I will always remember comes from Dawn. She wrote to me once and said, "Mr. Cordi, "You are the one who listens. You are the one who cares. When you tell stories you let us understand who you are. When we tell stories we show who we are on the inside. We are actually telling the stories of us. Stories are the metaphors of our lives."

On days that I am just too tired by the immense testing, the interruptions from those "all important announcements," or the endless night of grading, I remember Dawn's simple advice and this reminds why listening is the fundamental key to my entire curriculum.

Tamara Roberts, freshman, says she loves storytelling because "it gives youth a change to reach out to community and meet new and interesting people." At a time when youth don't spend enough time with elders, when hate crimes increase, when our world seems like it will collapse, it is a great comfort to know that we share the joy of telling stories together. It is refreshing to know that we share this commonality and we work on it together we can again achieve a community of listeners and tellers.

Nicole Devol, freshman, said, "I never thought about storytelling until this year. Storytelling has opened up a whole new world where I can create my own stories and feel great when they touch someone's heart."

And that is what it does, touches hearts. Imagine a world where we secure a place to tell our stories. If you are a grandmother, parent, teacher, storyteller, or librarians, consider building a youth storytelling club in your community. There is no greater tool to help children and young adults listen to each other. There is no greater tool to remind us that our words can change lives, that our imaginations can build character, and that our appreciation for each other can set direction for our community.

As Ann Marie Cano, senior, often reminds us "write and tell from the heart, people will connect once you do." Building a youth storytelling club is connecting others with your heart. It is reminding others that you care what they have to say and that you will always listen to them.

Help us build a legacy of tellers by providing a place for kids to tell stories. Help us remind kids that adults not only are listening, but we want to help them find their voice. Let us help them raise their voices in a positive way so that we need not worry about the community that we will leave to them.

Kevin D. Cordi is the current Chair for "Youth Storytelling" for the National Storytelling Network and the Director of the National Voices Across America Youth Storytelling Project. He, along with Judy Sima, will have a book entitled Raising Voices: Storytelling Youth Groups and Troupes scheduled for release by Teachers Ideas Press in 2002. Feel free to contact [Kevin](#) for any questions or information about working with story and youth.