

*Note from Kevin Cordi

In September 2009, we lost the author of this article. I am proud to say that he was a good friend and a champion for youth storytelling. Please read this and help share his story and good work by working with youth in their storytelling efforts.

Then There Was HOPE

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Fiddlers Green: A Father and Son Storytelling Team

“There is power in stories and there is magic in storytelling unequalled by anything else!” Since establishing the Florida High Tale Spinners Club (a storytelling club for students in grades 2-12) at Florida State University School in September of 2003 this has been my mantra. When telling stories in front of an audience at our weekly meetings or public performances the majority of the students came to understand and believe in the power and magic I described so passionately.

Still, there was something missing in the hearts of the student storytellers. They were going through the correct storytelling motions, they were learning new stories, and they were delighting audiences every time they performed, but there was no fire or drive (intrinsic motivation). It didn't take me long to realize that these student storytellers struggled because there was no direct connection between storytelling and the community where the students lived: they understood the power but never felt they were truly making a difference in anybody's life. For the students it was simply another way to be in the “spotlight” it was a form of entertainment, not unlike being in a play.

In early 2005 The HOPE Community Center (a transitional housing facility for homeless families for the purposes of reestablishing their place in the community) opened in Tallahassee, FL. After the center opened The Coalition for the Homeless in Tallahassee put out a request through several different media outlets asking people or groups to come out and work with the youth at the center saying, “the biggest challenge they faced was finding activities for the youth of the community to participate in that were both fun and educational.” My first thought was, “Wow, the stories they must have...” then it hit me: teach them to be storytellers and people will know and understand them through their stories! It would have been easy for me, as a professional storyteller, to go to the HOPE center and work with the youth on my own, but I wondered if that was really what was meant to be. I pondered, how can I make this as meaningful for the youth at the center as possible? Would they learn from me as much as they would from students their own age? Though it was tempting to do it all myself, I knew in my heart that it would be a much more worthwhile project, for my students as well as the youth at the center, if storytelling came from other youth rather than from yet another adult who they don't know or trust. With that in mind, I started the wheels in motion to establish a relationship between the Florida High Tale Spinners and the HOPE Community Center. After I approached the HOPE center with the idea the directors at the HOPE Center thought it a fantastic project

and wanted to get started that day. When I brought the idea to the storytelling group they couldn't wait to get started, literally jumping at the opportunity to make a difference in someone's life. Everyone was in agreement; we needed to get started as soon as we could.

The next step was to establish some goals of what we, the Tale Spinners, needed to try and accomplish to make this project meaningful for both groups of youth. We decided that it wasn't enough just to go out there and tell the kids "a story or two," we were already doing that with other audiences and we felt we needed to do more. The group agreed the goals would include:

- having fun through improvisational games, storytelling activities and games, and telling stories (all genres)
- increasing both our self-esteem and the HOPE youth's self-esteem through the power of storytelling
- helping the HOPE youth to trust in the power of story enough to become storytellers
- telling our personal stories and listening to and learning their personal stories
- holding a storytelling concert open to the public to allow the voices of the youth to be heard.

As the sponsor of the group, I hoped that both groups of students would learn from each other (not necessarily about storytelling but about life experiences) and that bonds of friendship could be established between the two groups.

Help with the HOPE project was completely voluntary. Students could ask to receive community service hours for their help, but none did (Florida requires all of their HS graduates to have completed 75 hours of community service). For the first visit the Tale Spinners had 11 volunteer students. Those eleven students would eventually lead the activities and tell stories, but for the first visit I felt it would be best for me, as sponsor, to take the lead. There were 16 youth from the HOPE Community Center attending the first meeting; their ages ranging from 2 to 16 (the youngest were the children of the older youth). We met for an hour and felt as though we were successful but faced challenges we had not anticipated.

At the end of the meeting the HOPE youth were surprised that we were coming back the following week, we learned later many of the groups or people that came to the center only came one time thus adding to the youth's lack of stability. As we were leaving some of the younger children at the center warmly embraced many of the Tale Spinners not wanting to let go. It was as if they were afraid we were not going to come back as promised. As I was waiting for all of the Tale Spinners to be picked up by their parents two of the older girls, both 16, who had hung at the back of the group for three-quarters for the meeting slowly walked across the yard, stopped next to me, and quietly asked, "Are you really coming back next week?" When I replied, "Of course," their response was, "Cool." I smiled so big, we had made our first connection.

The hard part: the challenges. Challenge number one, I learned quickly that many of my students had no idea what to expect when they entered the HOPE Center. They needed a quick lesson in appropriate conversations and manners (They couldn't behave like they did in school; maturity was now key). Word spread like wildfire to other students at the

school about how much fun we had at our first meeting and soon we had more students volunteering than I ever imagined, well over 20 students from grades 7-12. I didn't want to turn anyone away, but I had to make sure the students knew what the project was about and what the expectations from me were of them. We needed to have a meeting to make sure everything was crystal clear. I needed to be very detailed on how they were to act, carry themselves, and what was and was not appropriate topics of conversation. The students needed to understand they were now role models; this was new to my students and they needed some instruction on how to respond to the situation. After I took the time and explained why we needed to act a certain way we were good to go.

Challenge number two, the vast age difference in the youth at the HOPE Center. They all wanted to participate (in fact, the directors at the center were quick to point out that this was the one event each month that the youth looked forward to) so we needed to figure out a way to involve all of the youth. The youth (all ages) at the center had no experience with sitting and listening to others tell stories. First thing we had to do was help the youth understand how to be good audience members and then practice those skills. The second thing we realized we had to do was have a hands-on activity prepared for the younger youth to keep them interested and focused. I decided that my wife, with her early childhood education experience, would be perfect to help us with this part of the project (up to this point I was the only adult in the room which contributed to the challenge). She, with the help of one or two of the Tale Spinners would work with the youngest youth while the rest of the Tale Spinners worked on storytelling skills with the other HOPE youth. We would then end with people from both groups sharing stories. Challenge number two was overcome, our plan worked great.

Challenge number three, the "alpha dog" syndrome in the HOPE Center youth. This was by far the biggest challenge of all. During our third meeting a new face showed up in the group. A young gentleman named Juan, age 16; he was there because someone told him he had to be there. His goal in life: to be a professional basketball or football player, he had no desire to do well in school or to listen to any adult tell him what to do. During the activities and stories he had no desire to participate. His goal was to try and get the others in trouble by poking them or talking. Some of the other older girls from HOPE would ask him to be quiet, but his response was usually to yell or slap at them. The bigger problem was the younger HOPE youth looked up to him as a father figure. If he did something nasty, it was funny and they needed to do it too, if he talked, they talked, etc. We overcame this challenge two ways; at the end of the first meeting he attended I told a story about a young man who needed to learn a valuable lesson, much like Juan. He listened and at the end of the meeting came up to me and asked if the story was about him. I said, "No, but it could have been." I then went on to explain he had the ability to be a great leader; he had the skills but was headed in the wrong direction. He listened to me and I told him that I believed in him and was proud of him that he came and talked to me. Secondly, one of the students helping me was a 16 year old gentleman and also a football player from my school; when Juan saw him having fun doing all of the activities and telling stories, Juan had a change of attitude.

Challenge number four, not enough time. As summer fast approached we ran out of time to accomplish all of our goals. We were able to meet with the HOPE Center youth 9

times before we had to stop for the summer. However, we have been in contact with the HOPE Center and have plans to continue our project starting in September. The voices will be heard.

Though we were met with more challenges than we expected we were also blessed with many accomplishments. First, the bonds of friendship that formed between the groups will always be remembered. Every meeting started and ended the same way; youth running across the yard giving high-fives, smiles, hugs, and shooting a few hoops before we started or had to leave for the evening. When we gave the sad news that we wouldn't be back for a few months tears were shed and more hugs given even by the oldest of the youth, including Juan.

Second, we learned to listen to stories better. During our second meeting youth from HOPE were jumping up to tell part of their story. They couldn't wait to share and impress the kids from the other part of town with their talent, enthusiasm, and voice. Usually, it was about a special pet they lost, but it was great and the stories came from the heart.

Finally, the HOPE youth learned that it is OK to act crazy and goofy and storytelling is the perfect outlet for all of that craziness. The Tale Spinners and I learned through the HOPE youth that there are people in the world who have a much harder story to tell than ours; that their one hope is a better tomorrow. And we all learned that no matter where you come from or how you got there everyone has value and worth and deserves to be honored.

Are the youth at the HOPE Community Center outstanding storytellers? Hard to say, but they are better than before. Did we get to put on our storytelling concert? No, but we will and the voices and stories will be heard. Did we discover the power in story? Yes. Are we better people for having participated in this project? Absolutely, and even though the faces may be different when we return in the fall we will never forget those lives that have touched ours so deeply.