

Youth and Storytelling (The endless tale: storytelling: its events, tellers, stories, organizations, resources & points of discussion)(Interview)

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This issue I have asked three of the best known advocates of youth storytelling to talk about some of the issues and ideas that arise when dealing with storytelling with kids. Flora Joy is currently the Storytelling Professor Emeritus at East Tennessee State University. In 2000, she received the Lifetime Achievement Award in Storytelling from the National Storytelling Network. Kevin Cordi teaches storytelling at the high school level and created the award winning student storytelling troupe, Voices of Illusion. He is the 2004 recipient of the National Service Award from the NSN. Judy Sima has trained hundreds of young storytellers at the middle school where she is the librarian in Warren, Michigan. She started the Chatterton Talespinners, a student troupe and The Parent-Tellers, an award winning adult volunteer storytelling group. She is the co-author with Kevin of the new book Raising Voices: Creating Youth Storytelling Groups and Troupes.

What is the best way to attract students to be active storytellers?

KC: In order to encourage students to be storytellers they must first be aware of the value of stories and storytelling. We need to have a national and international mentoring program where older or seasoned storytellers can work with younger tellers. This apprenticeship program can work wonders.

JS: Expose them to good storytelling by professional storytellers as well as other youth tellers. Then, invite them to join a group and bring their friends. Provide active and engaging activities to teach storytelling skills and always have a performance goal in mind.

FJ: Youngsters must feel the power of story before they are drawn to the telling process. Sometimes this power occurs through the strength of peer approval (whether they're telling "stories" in a private group or in a more formal audience), and sometimes the power is emanated through the stories' messages. Adult leaders can provide venues for both of these situations.

In what way does storytelling fit into the curriculum?

KC: There is no subject material that cannot be taught using storytelling. In this state of standards, oral and written language are highly valued. What better way to teach them than through story? Storytelling is a natural method to learn any material.

FJ: All storytellers who are interested in connecting with school-age listeners (and potential tellers) should first check out . Massive listings of curriculum skills are given (and they are even broken down by individual states). Practically every story that is fit a teller's repertoire call relate to one or more of the skills listed. "Yellers wanting to convince academic personnel of the value of their programs should in advance prepare a written connection of their stories and these standards.

What is the value of storytelling in the classroom?

JS: Many stale objectives now include oral communication. Storytelling helps not only in communication skills but listening skills, as well as comprehension. By helping strengthen imagination, storytelling helps with writing and comprehension and even understanding of science concepts. Storytelling brings any subject to life; history, English--even math. In regards to reading it helps with comprehension, story structure and language development. Storytelling by students helps them develop self confidence, poise and strengthens their ability to organize and express their thoughts. My students also tell me it helps with their memory skills in all subjects.

KC: Since it has been observed that using narrative-based teaching or storytelling is the most effective style of learning, storytelling has a natural place in teachers' lesson plans. It can be used to teach effective skills such as group cooperation to cognitive work such as exploring the causes of The Civil War.

FJ: And the young learners themselves may become involved in the telling process. By so doing, they are developing all of the oral language arts skills--a "lifetime" communication enhancement.

Do young storytellers actually stay with the art form?

KC: We have a "Storyteller's Hall of Fame" on my classroom walls. Everyone in my storytelling group signs it at the end of the year. I see it everyday and just the other day I looked at all the names and was surprised that I knew where most of the students were over the years. Very few, but some, have become professional storytellers ... but countless others write or call me to share how they use stories as nurses, police officers, as guards in the military, or even how they now tell stories to their own family.

JS: Many of my former Talespinners went into the theater program and forensics in high school. They've told me that storytelling helped them in speech and writing classes. And one wrote that she tells stories now to her own child.

How do competitions figure into enticing young people in becoming involved in storytelling?

FJ: Oh how I wish "competition" would not be a factor in any of these events. How I wish the "experience itself" could be the sole driving force. Sadly--after nine years of attempting to get a youth storytelling program going in the late 1980s--I learned that the

competitive element itself could motivate such an event. The majority of young participants (and their parents) indicated they would not be interested without the competition. However, that was just for the event we were sponsoring not necessarily for storytelling experiences in the classroom.

JS: I do not believe storytelling should be competitive for young storytellers. Instead of awarding prizes for "best" storytellers, I have created a "Circle of Excellence" whereby students achieve different levels by their attendance, commitment, achievement, and mentoring of others. I think young storytellers should consider using their storytelling skills as a form of community service, telling stories for preschoolers as well as senior citizens.

Do you see a "next generation" of tellers in the wings? If so what are they like?

KC: I see the "next generation" of tellers testing the envelope of traditional telling. From NYC's "Story Slams" (competitive storytelling like Poetry Slams) to the fusion of hip hop, rap, punk and progressive telling. This is good, all arts need to grow. However, tomorrow's tellers need further direction. Some young tellers are learning the art despite having no teachers. We need to mentor the art. We need to nurture the art. We need to allow risks in the art and we need to provide safety for the next generation's telling. I have always said "with story comes responsibility." We owe it to the next generation to guide them as tellers. Too often arts can die out because others did not think of the next generation. We need to be concerned now that the light of story will continue to burn and not fizzle because we did not help the flame, it is simple; if we care about the art, we need to mentor at least one or two tellers in the art. Imagine if each storyteller nurtures at least one other storyteller per Year then I know we would not have to worry about the next generation.

FJ: We "older folks" view the upcoming generation often with a critical eye sometimes erroneously describing them as disinterested in the arts. The fact that most youngsters can't currently transform this performing skill into a viable profession definitely limits interest for many of them. I "see" professional storytellers as being in their last half of life generally after having been employed at 2-5 different earlier jobs.

JS: I think we have to actively seek out the next generation of tellers and encourage them to attend local, regional and national conferences. We need to set them up with mentors to encourage their growth and commitment to the art. At last year's national conference, I helped develop an Apprentice program to encourage young adults between the ages of 18-29 to attend the conference. I want to do more with this in the future. I also think we need to encourage those young people to think of how storytelling can be used in any profession they pursue--education, healing and helping fields, law, medicine, ministry, etc. I don't think we need to encourage more professional tellers (it's a hard way to go without insurance), they need to see how storytelling fits into their lives. If the professional free lance route is what they choose, so be it, but there are other ways to tell stories.

So there it is, some views on youth storytelling from some folks who have been involved for a long time both in introducing kids to storytelling and also mentoring and encouraging young folks to tell their own stories. Check out Judy and Kevin's new book *Raising Voices: Creating Youth Storytelling Groups and Troupes* (Libraries Unlimited; ISBN: 156308919X).

Like so many arts that we keep with us throughout our life storytelling needs to be practiced. Tell your children stories and then let them tell you a story. Listen to their stories about their day at school, the events that happen in their lives when you're not there to witness them, stories they've read in books or heard from teachers, even the stories their grandparents tell them about you when you were a child. You'll be surprised how much you learn about them and about yourself. Just think if you tell them a story while playing your banjo and step dancing you could be influencing the next generation of folk performers who do it all!

Until next time, keep your stories alive!

You can respond to veteran storyteller, bal lad singer and educator Dan Keding in care of Sing Out!, P.O. Box 5460, Bethlehem, PA 18015-0460, or by sending e-mail to et@singout.org.