

Children at the Well

Project Description

The Interfaith Story Circle of the Tri-City Area (Albany, Schenectady and Troy, NY) celebrated 13 years of interfaith telling in September, 2006. Our mission is to be of service to people of all spiritualities and faiths, to use storytelling to honor the richness and diversity of our traditions, to break down the barriers which sometimes divide us, and to build up that which we have in common.

Each month, from September to June, we are hosted by a different faith community. We meet in synagogues, mosques, Buddhist centers, Christian churches, Hindu temples and a local interfaith sanctuary. We are always seeking new people and new groups with whom we can share. For a long time now, we have been especially desirous of involving young people more fully in our mission.

It was with this in mind that a committee from our circle developed “Children at the Well: an Interfaith / Intergenerational Storytelling Venture”. Its purpose was to involve youth in learning the art of storytelling, and in using this art to:

- * Deepen their knowledge and understanding of their own faith tradition and that of others
- * Get to know people of other faiths
- * Participate in the local Interfaith Story Circle meetings and its community events
- * Promote peace and understanding among all peoples

Our written proposal for this venture was given the 2006 Brimstone Award for Applied Storytelling by the National Storytelling Network. This award takes its name from the elusive element medieval alchemists believed could transform base metals into gold. It focuses on the transformational properties of storytelling and aims to increase understanding of the ways that storytelling can promote change in individuals and communities.

Our program, ‘Children at the Well’ brings young people (and their families and teachers) of different faiths together in a subtle way, by developing and sharing stories from each young person’s own tradition, rather than by trying to change minds politically.

We used the informing metaphor of a well in our title, and in the development of the project, because we envision this process to be similar to the age-old custom of young people gathering at a well to draw water to bring back to their families to sustain them. The image of well water, drawn from the depths, is particularly powerful for us as an agent of sustenance, growth and change. These are precisely the effects that we wish our program to have.

Children at the Well (2005-2006) involved:

***Contacting diverse area religious schools and education programs, and enlisting a commitment to our project from them.** This past year, 28 teachers and 13 students from Notre Dame-Bishop Gibbons Catholic School, An Nur Muslim School, The Heritage Class of the Hindu Temple Society of the Capital District and from synagogues in the Community Coalition for Jewish Education took part.

***Interfaith teacher workshops involving teachers from the above mentioned schools and programs.** Workshop content included information on their participation in the project and how the art of storytelling could enrich their classrooms, as well as a sharing of the teachers' gifts for story, and the unique ways that they already use story in their teaching.

***Teacher nominations of responsible and capable students.** For the first year we chose students from grades 6-9 who expressed a high degree of interest in interfaith storytelling. (In our second year, some returning students are in grade 10).

***Submission of letters from students;** in which they introduced themselves, explained their interest in the project and stated their commitment to its goals and to the time and effort necessary for acquiring the skills of storytelling.

***Storycoaching of students** by two professional storytellers, who guided the young people toward the goal of a community telling. During the first year of our project, the stories to be presented were chosen and retold, or crafted by the youth themselves. The participants were encouraged to delve into the wisdom of their own faith traditions to find stories that spoke to them which they wished to share. They were also asked to consider using other arts they were skilled in to enhance their story performances. During the first year of our project, the students met with their coaches for 6 weekly sessions.

***Other opportunities to learn about story.** The students were invited to attend monthly interfaith story circles, and had the opportunity to visit diverse religious education programs to perform together. They also were visited by adult storytellers from the Hindu, Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths who shared on the role of story in their traditions. Parents were invited to attend these sessions which were often followed by thoughtful questions and lively discussion.

***A festive youth interfaith storytelling event** involving students, coaches, teachers, families and friends, was held on April 30, 2006. It was publicized in local story circles, churches, mosques, temples and synagogues. Invitations were issued to the broader community by way of mail, local print, radio, and TV. media. The event, which was attended by approximately 125 people, included the young people's story performance, finger foods and an interfaith mixer activity, a Hindu story dance performance and a pot-luck supper. Storytellers at each table facilitated informal story sharing during supper through the use of story prompts.

***A Children at the Well “kit”.** It has always been our hope that the Children at the Well project will become the first of many; here in this area and elsewhere. From its inception, we have been developing this guide to help other storytellers and interfaith organizations in the U.S. and abroad who want to develop their own Children at the Well project. Hardbound copies will also be available.

The administrators and coaches involved in this project are now embarking on our second year. We have set a timeline for our 2007 Children at the Well coaching sessions and youth interfaith storytelling community event, and have invited the 2006 students to return for one more year. Six from last year have accepted the invitation. We reached out to new school communities, and gained ten more students for a total of sixteen.

We have already seen some of the differences that this project has made:

- Teachers, parents and students from the Hindu, Muslim and Jewish traditions were invited to address classes at the Catholic school. The seeds for teacher / student exchanges were sown.
- Two of our students (Jewish and Muslim) together attended a storytelling workshop weekend this past summer, financed in part by scholarships from the project.
- We have been given the opportunity to present our program at the National Storytelling Network’s conference in St. Louis, Missouri in the summer of 2007. We are excited to be reaching a national audience!
- Many of the students, teachers and families have stayed in touch with us and with each other, attending community storytelling programs and interfaith circles (such as the October 4th meeting described in the accompanying press release.) It is a joy to have them with us. They are bringing new life and vibrancy to our mission. They are modeling for us the way to live together in peace.

It is the shared stories that are breaking down the barriers and building community among us.