

WHEN THE TROUPE TOLD TALES

By Robert Rubinstein

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"Storytelling is the most powerful way people organize life experiences

We cannot have peace until we know each other's stories."

"Storytelling is the single, strongest predictor of literacy. Those who hear
stories before the age of four, read the best."

- George Wells, the results of his study

For 32 years, I had the privilege of teaching in a totally elective curriculum
at
Roosevelt Junior High/Middle School in Eugene, Oregon. I had the opportunity to
create and teach classes such as "Sports History," "Medieval Times," "Play-
Writing," "Multi-Cultural Mythology," "Wild & Tame (animal literature - the
study of endangered species and pet care), "Through The Camera's Eye: American
History Through Movies," and "Storytelling." Each of these classes, as part of the

curriculum, incorporated reading, writing skills, oral presentations, research reports, and specific educational goals. Students elected to enroll in these courses, and I chose to teach them because I liked the subject and wanted to share that with students.

However, the Troupe of Tellers was my favorite to teach because those who became tellers learned skills they could readily use through their lives. The Troupe was part of the curriculum at Roosevelt: students traveled during the school day to other schools to perform. In 24 years, these troupes of sixth, seventh and eighth grade students performed for over 70,000 students in their schools as well as presenting for many conferences, community groups, and for the Eugene Public Library's summer storytelling program. In 1983, the Troupe of Tellers received one of the State of Oregon's "Great Kids" Awards in recognition of these young storytellers' community service, and, in 1993, members of that year's Troupe of Tellers presented a performance-workshop at the University of Washington in Seattle for the National Storytelling Conference with people attending from throughout the United States and other countries.

For many storytellers, the Troupe became a life-changing experience:

Jim came to Roosevelt just after Thanksgiving. A tall, gangly, black boy of 14, he had no friends and didn't fit in with any group. According to school records,

he had attended fifteen schools during the past ten years. As a result he could barely read and write, and lacked social skills to work with groups.

He was placed in my storytelling class, but how to have him learn to tell stories when he couldn't read them? . . . I chose two students and talked with them about Jim's skill problems. The two agreed to help. They sat with Jim, helped him select simple two-three page folk tales, and then read him a tale several times until he could learn to tell it. Each time he told a tale to the class, he improved and his confidence grew – as did his desire to learn to read better so he could learn the tales for himself. Performing before a group that enjoys listening to you is an incredibly powerful growth experience.

For those students “at-risk,” or who have not developed their reading and writing skills, storytelling provides a way for them to communicate successfully. If someone can't read or write, they must learn how to speak in order to convey feelings and ideas, or to have friends. . . What often happens, also, is that when they succeed telling stories and enjoy the experience, then they're motivated to find other stories to share in order to continue that success and great feeling. So they begin to read – to improve their skills because they want to and see benefit in doing so.

In other classes, Jim struggled or failed, but in storytelling, he succeeded and received a fine evaluation for his skill progress and personal growth.

The Troupe of Tellers would include twelve students each spring term. Two of these twelve places I would save for not necessarily the most accomplished tellers but for those who might benefit most from the Troupe experience. I chose Jim for one of those slots. Two to three times a week for ten weeks he performed with the others in the Troupe in for elementary, middle school and high school students as well as adults.

At the end of the term, we traveled on a two-day performance tour to Portland schools. For lunch, we went to a cafeteria in the mall. I stayed with Jim as we went through the cafeteria line. He stared at the food offerings.

“Choose whatever you want, Jim. I’ll pay for it.”

He stood – paralyzed.

“It’s okay. Whatever you want to eat.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know how to choose.”

“Well, how about a hamburger? Is that okay?”

He shrugged.

“A drink?” I took a Pepsi. “And some pie?” Apple.

We sat down together and talked a little. After a while, he confided, “Never been in a place like this.”

“You mean a restaurant?”

He nodded. “Never eaten in one before.” He munched on his sandwich.

Our tour continued. Jim's telling and success grew. He smiled, laughed, joined with the others in the Troupe. It was great to see!

That June, when school ended, Jim disappeared again. I knew his family must be running from something or someone. . . . I hope these twelve weeks performing made some difference in his life – provided some treasured and lasting memories.

. . . .

Jevon, severely hearing impaired, also performed with us for a term. His speech, because of his disability, was difficult to understand, but he also used signing when he told his tales. I would watch audiences at first be puzzled by his enunciation and then see them become captivated as his story evolved with his signing and intensity. After high school, Jevon performed as a member of the National Theatre of the Deaf. and later as an actor in Hollywood.

. . . .

Brothers Richard and Chris Leebrick began as tellers with the troupe and went on to become professional actors and playwrights, establishing the Lord Leebrick Theatre Company. Richard is now a drama and language arts teacher at Roosevelt Middle School.

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Here are some comments from past members of the Troupe of Tellers:

Lydia: "I think the ability to get up and perform in front of others helped instill confidence in myself, and the support of the group demonstrated how cooperation and positive interaction with peers can lead to success. Of all the classes I took, this is the one that always stood out as not only a favorite, but one that what I achieved in the class has helped me later in life."

Kathy: "I felt nervous -- the butterflies of performance. I felt excited -- this was fun and interesting: it stretched me. I felt important -- people looked forward to us coming; not everyone could say they were part of the Troupe of Tellers. I felt responsible -- for my material, for the audience's enjoyment, for doing my best. Among the gifts I gained: patience to listen to others' stories; enthusiasm to entertain and inform; esteem that I was worthy of being heard and by people who didn't know me before; a love of stories - the people who tell them, write them, and hear them."

Keri: "The Troupe was my first true self-esteem builder, much needed in junior high. It was a place where I could be steered in a positive direction. It kept me focused on doing good --not just for myself~ but also for others. It taught me to see a commitment through to the end. I learned most of all to stand up in a crowd -- be the total center of attention and not fall apart. This is an extremely important skill to learn, especially dealing with adults."

Kate: “Every time I performed it was another boost to my self-esteem. Somehow I knew that all those kids were watching me and enjoying it. They weren’t peers that I had to impress, but kids looking up to me. All the songs we learned came in handy when I worked with groups of kids at the YMCA the following years. Since the Troupe, vocal and physical expression come naturally. I can hold an audience’s attention much easier than the average person.”

Chris: “I loved it! I felt like I was part of something unusual and special, and I was! This was my first real structured experience in performing and I discovered I was a performer! I have come to believe that storytelling is the original theatre. It’s incredibly valuable in stage and commercial acting. I feel lucky to have been exposed to it.”

Kelly: “Performing in the Troupe meant a lot to me. I loved getting up in front of people and sharing stories with them. I loved the unity of the group and the friends I made. The Troupe gave me courage that is still instrumental in my life today.”

Kelly’s Mom: “Kelly truly blossomed in the Troupe of Tellers. I didn’t think there was another single class at Roosevelt Middle School that had as much impact on her. She grew in self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-expression. Her willingness to try new experiences increased. Her public speaking and acting skills, which she began in the Troupe classes, carried over in school work, choir, drama

and musical productions. If another parent ever wonders if the Troupe of Tellers is an important enough class, I would be happy to answer them.”