

In the summer of 2007 the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights began a pilot human rights education project called *Kentucky Remembers!* Working in partnership with the Kentucky Oral History Commission, Kentucky Folklife program, Community Scholars Program, and local artists, a staff of Human Rights employees, college interns and volunteers conducted five youth human rights leadership camps across the state in the cities of Bowling Green, Paducah, Madison County/Berea, Louisville, and Covington. Working with students age 13-18 in conducting oral history, community mapping, and the visual arts, the mission of *Kentucky Remembers!* is to “preserve our past, teach our present, and build our future.” The Project seeks to celebrate and document our local human rights heritage while preparing young leaders for the work that still remains to be achieved.

Each camp lasts for three weeks. The first week focuses on teaching students how to conduct oral history interviews and concludes with student teams interviewing a human rights leader in their community. Fifty interviews were conducted this past summer and more will take place this upcoming summer as we partner with Appalshop to continue our work in eastern Kentucky. The second week of camps focus on community mapping during which the students partner with Community Scholars in their area to tour historic neighborhoods and explore the nature of *place* and storytelling. During the third week students partner with a local artist to create a mural depicting their vision for an ideal community. Staff members and volunteers did not anticipate just how much the oral histories would form the basis for all other creative activities in the camp. Songs and murals drew heavily from the powerful stories found in the interviews.

The focus of our work was interviewing local Civil Rights and human rights leaders (well-known and not so well known) and documenting the community stories that encapsulate the ongoing struggle for human rights in the state. Students interviewed citizens who remember both segregation and integration and learned of their stories growing up as children in segregated society. Students also interviewed members of communities who use art, music, and other forms of cultural expression to fight for human rights today. Additionally they spoke with fair housing leaders, historical museum directors, Latino rights activists, members of the NAACP, and members of the local their Human Rights Commission. Students became so interested in conducting oral histories, community mapping, and participating in forms of artistic expression that voice collective concerns for human rights, the Commission has planned an additional week-long leadership camp entitled “Voices of Conscience” to take place this upcoming July. Returning students who attend this camp will continue their research and become co-authors of the upcoming textbook and podcasts slated for publication in 2009.

The tangible product of the project is the textbook teaching the diverse history of human rights struggle in the state of Kentucky. The textbook will be researched and authored by the students themselves and include a companion webpage with student produced podcasts and edited oral history interviews for use in classrooms and after school programs. However, the overarching goals of the project are more process than product oriented. We intend to outline and develop the foundations for a state-wide public outreach campaign supporting community investment in Kentucky’s human rights heritage.

To teach the students how to conduct the oral history interviews, Community Scholars played examples of successful interviews, broke students up into teams to conduct peer interviews, and spoke about the difference between open and closed ended questions. Students were also shown the basics of how to properly work the Marantz recorders and provided with suggestions about how to deal with the possibility of awkward silence. Although the Community Scholars and Folklorists were there to teach the students, we teachers often found ourselves in the learner's seat. Many young people are wonderful interviewers precisely because they are often unafraid to ask some of the most basic and important questions such as "When did you first realize there was racism in this world?" or "When you were living during segregation were you ever afraid?" or "Who taught you how to register to vote?" Youth are notorious for having a keen sense of life's inconsistencies and are prone to asking "why?" over and over again. While this youthful curiosity may be seen as problematic in certain learning settings, it is an invaluable skill in the interview process. We soon learned the best way to teach students to conduct interviews was to encourage them to follow their own natural curiosity. Youth often do not see the 'that's just the way things are' approach to the world. Neither do human rights activists and leaders. The combination of these two components made for a powerful exchange.

We folklorists know and stress the importance of *listening*, but what we gained from working with these youth was a newfound respect for the necessity of *asking* questions that get at the heart of human experience. One interviewee who worked in voter registration spoke about attending a protest in nearby Nashville where he and many

fellow marchers were beaten. That day he chose nonviolence, he says, because in staring up at his attacker's face he realized he never wanted to become like him. Another woman spoke of growing up during integration and not knowing why there were certain stores her family never entered. Integration came while she was still young, but she admits, had she been old enough, she probably would have never joined those who marched in the streets. But, she added, she would have made food and cared for those who did. Stories like this provide a variety of perspectives on what it means to fight for human rights and remind us that we are all part of the ongoing struggle for human rights if we choose to be. The oral history portion of The *Kentucky Remembers!* project gave youth the resources to actively investigate and interpret history through their own eyes and allowed them to start to understand the multiple, often conflicting perspectives that thread together to make up one historical moment. They also built up the young people's enthusiasm about history, about human rights, and about the possibilities for their own lives.

*Kentucky Remembers!* believes that through cultural expression and the folklore of our daily lives we articulate that which is strong and beautiful in our cultures. We also articulate that which we hope to change in our culture such as classism, racism, lack of opportunity, and poverty. Through storytelling we express ourselves, our relationship to others, speak to and about our community, and collectively struggle for justice. We believe that intergenerational interviewing not only builds bridges between the old and young, but also builds a bridge to the future so that subsequent generations can know that the struggle for human rights is made up of "regular" people who work in their own communities to bring about a more just world. We believe these stories are not only

inspirational but also necessary in the telling of an encompassing and truly representative history.

The oral histories were also very influential in the experience gained by college staff members. Not only did staff gain valuable technical skills in the same way as the youth delegates, they were opened up to a new way of teaching and learning through the oral history process. One of the unanticipated consequences of using college students as staff members—serving as bridges between a younger generation and an older generation—was that the staff went through many of the same experiences as the youth. This included gaining a new found confidence, having anger and sorrow over the huge gaps in their own knowledge about the past, learning to work as a team, and recognizing the roles they could play as leaders in their communities. It would not be surprising if several of these staff continued on a path that was directly related to their work this summer, as many of them have indicated a new found direction following the summer experience.

Without exception, the interview days at every camp were the most celebrated by staff and delegates. The training that youth received through this program was invaluable, not only in terms of technical skill, but in the realms of team-work, confidence, and social interaction. On several occasions, a very shy delegate became the most talkative and lively of her peers when asked about her interview. We also believe that the interviewing process gave students encouragement to explore their own diversity of cultural backgrounds and current life situations

The *Kentucky Remembers!* Project is unabashedly a human rights based curriculum. The goals of teaching and documenting the past are directly linked to the

struggle for justice in the present and the desire for a more just world in the future.

Through the interview process learning becomes multi-directional. Students learn from their interviewees, teachers learn from the students, youth learn from each other. We folklorists and teachers were there to show youth how to conduct interviews, but we left the summer camps with a deeper understanding and greater respect for the power of the interview process to build bridges and communicate not just the stories of the past but hope for the future.

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