Kentucky Remembers

by Meredith Martin and Caitlin Swain

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.*

Working with adolescent students to conduct oral history, community mapping, and the visual arts, Kentucky Remembers' mission is to "preserve our past, teach our present, and build our future." The project celebrates and documents our local human rights heritage while preparing young leaders for the work that remains to be achieved.

Each camp begins with teaching students how to conduct oral history interviews and having student teams interview a human rights leader in their community. Students conduct about fifty interviews during the three-week camp. The second week focuses on community mapping, partnering students with local community scholars 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 a vision for their community. Oral histories form the basis for all other creative activities. Student-created songs and murals draw heavily from these powerful stories.

Interviews with Human Rights Leaders

Students interview local civil rights and human rights leaders (well-known and not so well-known) and document the community stories that encapsulate the ongoing struggle for human rights in the state. Students interview citizens who remember both segregation and integration and listen to their stories growing up as children in segregated society. Students also interview members of communities who use art, music, and other forms of cultural expression to fight for human rights today. Through this involvement, students spoke with fair housing leaders, historical museum directors, Latino rights activists, members of the NAACP, and members of the Human Rights Commission. The Commission set-up an additional week-long leadership camp, "Voices of Conscience," in July 2008. Returning students continued their research and become co-authors of a forthcoming textbook and podcasts about the diverse history of human rights struggle will be researched and authored by the students themselves. It will include a companion web page with student-produced podcasts and oral history interviews for use in classrooms and after-school programs. The project's goal is to develop a statewide public outreach campaign, supporting community investment in Kentucky's human rights heritage.

Paducah youth delegates interview local historian Betty Dobson dressed as Maggie Sneed, owner of historic Hotel Metropolitan, an African-American hotel during segregation.

Photo by Meredith Martin

Interviews Connect Generations

To teach students how to conduct oral history interviews, community scholars present examples of successful interviews and organize students into teams to conduct peer interviews. Students consider different interview strategies, such as open- and close-ended questions, and challenges, such as dealing with awkward silences. They also learn how to operate the audio recorders.

Although the community scholars and folklorists were there as teachers, we often found ourselves in the learner's seat. Many young people are wonderful interviewers, unafraid to ask direct and important questions. Some that we heard included: "When did you first realize there was racism in this world?" "When you were living during segregation, were you ever afraid?" and "Who taught you how to register to vote?" Youth, who have a keen sense of life's inconsistencies, often ask "Why?" Although youthful curiosity may seem problematic in certain settings, it is an invaluable skill in the interview process. We soon learned that the best way to teach students interview skills was to encourage their natural curiosity. Human rights activists and youth have something in common: they do not accept the "that's just the way things are" approach to the world. This connection made for a powerful exchange.

Folklorists stress the importance of listening, but the project facilitators gained a newfound respect for the value of asking questions that get at the heart of human experience. One interviewee who worked in voter registration, for example, 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. She was still young when integration happened, but she admits, had she been old enough, she probably would not have joined those who marched in the streets. Yet, she added, she would have made food and cared for those who did. Stories like these provide a variety of perspectives on what it means to fight for human rights, reminding us that we are all part of the ongoing struggle. The oral history portion of *Kentucky Remembers* gives youth resources to investigate and interpret history through their own eyes, deepening their understanding of the multiple, often conflicting perspectives that thread together to make up one historical moment. They also build the young people's enthusiasm about history, human rights, and the possibilities for their own lives.

Kentucky Remembers shows that through cultural expression and the folklore of our daily lives we can articulate what is strong and beautiful in our cultures. We can also articulate what we hope to change, such as classism, racism, lack of opportunity, and poverty. Through storytelling we express our ideals, our relation-

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ship to others, speak to and about our communities and our collective struggle for justice. Intergenerational interviewing not only builds bridges between the old and young, it builds a bridge to the future, so subsequent generations can understand that the struggle for human rights is led by individuals working in their own communities to bring about a more just world.

Lifelong Lessons

The college students who served as staff for *Kentucky Remembers* also learned from the oral history interview process. They gained confidence, discovered huge gaps in their own knowledge about the past, learned to work as a team, and recognized the roles they could play as leaders in their communities. Several indicated a newfound sense of direction in their lives following the summer experience.

Kentucky Remembers is at its core a human rights-based curriculum. The goals of teaching and documenting the past link directly 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 multidirectional: teachers learn from their students and students learn from their interviewees and from each other. As folklorists working with youth to conduct interviews, we gained 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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