

Mining Values in the Montana Heritage Project

by Renee Rasmussen

THE THERMOMETER reads 5 degrees, but the howling wind drops the impact to a frigid -25 . It's Friday night, the dead of winter, in any small Montana town, and finding most of her citizens is easy. Just locate the local school gym, pay \$3, and join the tradition of attending a basketball game.

Not only can the players and their parents be found here, so can the pep band kids, their parents, most grandparents, aunts, uncles, former basketball players making their living in the community, nearly any business person who wants to make contact with community members, teachers, the rest of the kids (everyone else is there, so they all come too), and even local law enforcement pops in to see how the game is going.

As a teacher and a firm believer in the necessity of local heritage education, this phenomenon has intrigued me for some time. I was an active participant in a nearly exact scenario as a high schooler, and I see that the ritual has changed very little in the almost 30 years since.

Yet it is nearly impossible to convince any teen in my classes that the experience of being a participant in a home court basketball game is one that anyone but someone of their generation could possibly understand.

Two years ago a heritage education grant from the then newly created Montana Heritage Project provided my junior English class a chance to investigate the history of a local building that had, in its early days, served as the high school gym.

Students interviewed community members who had played in that less than ideal facility as part of their class research requirements. They heard stories about great basketball players, ones about the guy who developed a flat shot just for the low ceiling on the home court, about using the wall just next to the sideline for a bank shot pass, as well as tales concerning the age-old rivalries still carried on in the present. That led them to news accounts of those basketball games, reported with unashamed hometown bias in the local paper.

Instead of rehashing the last weekend's ball game, students started sharing these "new" sports stories with each other. A deeper relationship with and respect for older community members developed as unbelieving students listened to tales involving people they usually dismissed as having no comprehension of their world. Students began to see elders as people who really had been teens, as athletes, and as people who did understand.

For the final project, the usual ten-page research paper, the student writers chose to relay the information collected through the structure of a basketball game. They visualized the roar of the crowd, the pride of the town, and the sense of

accomplishment on the part of the athletes, all concepts they understood well, for a time and a community with whom they were beginning to feel a connection.

It is that connection, that sense of belonging, which heritage education cultivates. This connection happens not only for students needing roots to grow from, but for older members of a community who have fewer connections to the school and may even feel dismissed or ignored by both the students and the school itself. During the interview stage, one senior citizen confided in me that his interview, done in the school building, was the first time he had felt welcome in the school since his children had graduated many years previous. He felt important and needed because the students wanted to hear about what were, to him, just the average days of his life.

Once all the research papers were turned in, I compiled them into a book and offered it to the community. I was amazed at the number of takers. And their comments. Many expressed delight in having their heyday remembered and valued by my students. Some were pleased that long-practiced community values were being communicated in the school, and that community members were active in the process.

And that, I have discovered, is the joy of using heritage education in the classroom. While the classroom product can be customized to fit nearly any curriculum need and content area, what is learned goes beyond both content and curriculum learner outcomes.

The traditions and values the community holds are automatically communicated to the current generation through the telling of its stories.

Renee Rasmussen teaches high school English and is advisor to the school paper and yearbook in Chester, MT. She is in the Montana Heritage Project, designed and implemented by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress in cooperation with the Montana Historical Society and other state agencies and funded by the Liz Claiborne and Arthur Ortenberg Foundation. Project teachers guide students in taking their own communities as the subject of serious inquiry. For information contact Project director Michael Umphrey, Box 546, St. Ignatius, MT 59865, 406/240-5425, www.edheritage.org.