

Youth Arts Project Focuses on Racial Hatred

Every year NAAC extends a different "arm" of fine arts to the schools of McHenry County. This year's Youth Arts Project was the product of a partnership between NAAC and the Illinois Storytelling Festival. This partnership resulted in the performance of "Tribes & Bridges" at 12 different schools throughout the county during October 1999. With the financial assistance from an Illinois Arts Council grant,



La'Ron Williams, storyteller and member of "Tribes & Bridges" entertains his young audience at Coventry School, Crystal Lake.

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Regional Superintendent Donald Englert, and the private sector, the schools receiving this exceptional program were charged only a minimal fee.

Creating racial harmony is one of the most pressing needs in our society today. Yet, teachers and community leaders ask, "How do we talk constructively about race?" Dialogue is only possible when we move from a "who's right" stance to an "I care" attitude. Through humorous and touching real life stories our hearts as well as our minds are opened. Dialogue and connection begin. This hunger for the right inspiration and setting for racial discussions is the primary force behind the success and continued demand for the story theater performance, "Tribes & Bridges".

In November 1997, three storytellers (Susan O'Halloran, Irish American, La'Ron Williams, African American, and Antonio Sacre, Cuban American) came together to create "Tribes & Bridges", a story theater performance which explored diversity and race relations. The piece was commissioned by a grant from the Roman Catholic Order, The Society for the Devine Word (SVD), and Father Derek Simons (Angels Studio, a communications ministry of the SVD). In 1998, "Tribes & Bridges" was brought under the promotional and administrative wing of the Kaleidoscope group, an affiliate of Bea Young Associates. The Kaleidoscope Group is a diversity consulting firm working with major national and international corporations. Together with Susan O' Halloran, the Kaleidoscope Groups is currently piloting an original diversity curriculum for high schools. In November of 1999, the Northern Trust Bank and Steppenwolf Theater are joining the Angels Studio and the Kaleidoscope Group to make a videotape of "Tribes & Bridges". The videotape will be available separately and as part of the curriculum, "Kaleidoscope, A High School Course For Valuing Differences."

The story theater performance of "Tribes & Bridges" was designed to promote interracial understanding, cooperation and reconciliation. Each teller (Irish, African, and Cuban American) reveals some of their racial history - how they were taught prejudice and when they were on the receiving end of other people's ignorance and hate. In addition, the piece explores some of the larger causes of racial conflict such as politics, economics and immigration.

According to Holly Emrich, NAAC executive director, "the Youth Arts Project was an enormous success. I am so pleased we were able to offer much more than just an art form to these young people. We provided them with a potential healing solution to the violence and racial hatred that is plaguing our schools."