

Walk in Another's Shoes

by Judy Thibault Klevins

The trim, silver-haired man sits ramrod straight, a legacy of his former military training. Sitting close by, not quite as still or straight, his eight-year-old *Swapping Stories* partner's smile reflects his own. After the storytelling session, the former Mr. America finalist states, "Even though there's a 75-year difference in our ages, we've had very similar experiences." His young African-American female partner describes their exchange as "talking to him like he was my father."

How did two former strangers build a bridge of understanding that spanned their cultural, racial, age, and gender differences? They participated in *Swapping Stories*, an intergenerational/intercultural project I created for our city's bicentennial to link 4th graders and seniors who participate in programs at a center near the elementary school. My inspiration came from seeing how my high school students developed empathy with each other during an acting exercise. I wanted to see if the process worked with groups who were different.

Swapping Stories participants receive training before meeting face to face. At their group encounters, each person tells a story to a partner, then retells the other's story as if it happened to him or her. By seeing the world through their partners' eyes, they understand the other's point of view on the world.

What can deepen our tolerance for others more than empathy? Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, in *Understanding by Design*, describe empathy as the ability to get inside people's feelings and worldviews. We can see others' points of view and have empathy for them or their situations, yet not agree with them. When we have empathy, we find what is plausible, sensible, or meaningful in the ideas and actions of others and our understanding improves

immensely. Point of view exchanges such as those in *Swapping Stories* encourage this type of tolerance and empathy.

Preparation is Essential

Asking people to share their stories requires preparation. Seniors expecting children to dress and act like they did 70 years ago will be surprised and perhaps uncom-

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fortable. Participants without training may tell stories that are too long, inappropriate, or unintelligible. In a *Swapping Stories* project, two or three workshops prepare participants to choose and structure stories, improve speaking and listening skills, and practice storytelling.

In initial sessions, participants are introduced to the other group through pictures, writing, and consensus-building exercises. In one project, students were eager to meet the senior who used a walker in a line dance and the professional artist whose works they admired. Seniors were touched by student artwork and writing and wanted to know more about the creators.

Prior to meeting, the groups agree on

suitable story topics, such as "Talk about how you successfully handled a scary situation" and "Describe how your family celebrates your favorite holiday." Whatever the topic, it's important for the story to be about a specific incident, not a general description of a person or place. This helps seniors to focus their stories and students to be specific in answering questions.

To retell stories in the first person, a listener must visualize the storyteller's world. Listeners learn how to ask clarifying questions until they can see the other's point of view. Using this process, storytellers are more likely to suspend judgment, not interrupting or giving advice.

The interviewing and story retelling take place during a meeting of all participants. Interviewing in groups solves logistical problems and reminds participants of good practices experienced in the preparatory workshops.

Additional Benefits

In addition to promoting empathy and understanding by bridging cultural and generational gaps, *Swapping Stories* celebrates local oral histories and folklore. The stories tend to be archetypal—stories about saving lives or being saved, finding love, and overcoming fear or adversity. Stories have been recorded, edited, broadcast on local cable, and archived in community libraries. School and senior groups have sponsored video premieres for family, friends, and the community. Response has been at times amazing as audiences view the depth of what pairs of storytellers shared as each spoke in the other's voice.

One *Swapping Stories* participant reported, "When another person tells your story in the first person, they have more emotional distance from the overwhelming feelings of the event."

One professor reported, "My students found this experience to be not only one of the most meaningful and helpful experiences in the course, but also in their entire teacher preparation program."

Judy Thibault Klevins, creator of Swapping Stories, is a former drama teacher and arts education specialist for Arlington Public Schools in Virginia. She also conducts workshops for the Kennedy Center and other educational institutions. Learn more at www.swappingstories.org.