

Passing It On: Notes From a Resident Artist.

She stands with a tray of fresh-baked blueberry muffins, dressed in pioneer garb -- long dress - shawl. "Do you want to try one of these?" She asks. I take one -- and continue sampling from the wonderful array of Washington foods displayed around the room: salmon dip, potato chips, salsa, rice dishes -- foods as diverse as the faces of the children. And I still have three more 4th grade classrooms to taste my way through as part of Sunny Hills Elementary School's Washington Festival. When I'm not rehearsing songs with the children for the assembly in the afternoon, I peak in on the presentations: each child has dressed in costume and prepared a first-person account of his or her life. Then comes the assembly for the parents and other classes. The children are divided into decades -- we see miners and loggers, Native and pioneer children; suffragettes and Japanese girls. And then there are the better known Washington natives: Eddie Bauer and Bill Boeing. Chuck Jones and Carol Channing. Judy Collins and Bill Gates. As the decades are introduced, I tell stories about each Washington song, and we sing together *Roll On, Columbia*, the *Goosey Duck Song*, *Apple Picker's Reel* and *Harry Truman* and others. At the end of the assembly, I begin to pack up to head home to Bellingham. I know that these three days have been the most successful residency I've yet experienced. I feel that something has been passed on -- something which is often lost in the large assembly-style sharing of the songs .

So what worked? What made this residency so successful - for the children, for the teachers, and for me?

I think there are lessons to be learned that can apply to a variety of artist residencies and that is what I would like to explore.

Preparation

For years I have performed through organizations which work hard to prepare the way for artists in the schools. But these organizations, and the school administrations, are hampered by overworked teachers and numbers requirements that demand that the arts be spread very thinly across the school population. So teachers seldom have the opportunity to review the music with the children, or to integrate the activities into their own full schedules. I was absolutely delighted to discover that the six songs I had requested that the children be familiar with were well known by the children. They had not only been listening and discussing them in their classrooms, but the music teacher had also become involved, and had worked with the children on the songs. This was the result of careful, long-range planning on the part of the fourth grade team who invited me and requested materials months in advance of my time there.

Grade Appropriateness

As an artist in the schools, I find that I am usually expected to work with the children of all ages during my time there. But the songs I do are most appropriate for upper elementary students. Sunny Hills invited me specifically for the fourth grade, because in Washington State, the fourth grade is the year that the children study Washington history. I met for 30 minutes to an hour with each class each day. The fourth graders were hungry for the stories, and our time in class was spent exploring issues of immigration and emigration: why people came to Washington and why some had to leave -- which led to conversations on discrimination. Another day we talked about the work people do, and unions, and the role music played in organizing people.

The children had come prepared with stories of their own about the work their parents' did, in and out of the home, and stories about how their families came to Washington.

We also did some vocal work, to give them tools to use their own voices. For our closing assembly, we did perform for other grade levels and parents.

Integrated approach

My performance was part of a much longer celebration of Washington history. My work with the children was thoroughly integrated into a well-thought out and well-prepared unit. The children read *The Horse's Tale*, edited by Nancy Luenn., created characters, and did other crafts and activities. The Festival day included classroom presentations based on their characters and a noon-time "Taste of Washington", to which parents were invited. My concert and residency were particularly effective because it flowed so easily with the work the children were already engaged in.

Hospitality

Any guest wants to feel special. My wonderful hosts left me feeling valued and respected for the work that I do. Lodging was thoughtfully arranged and reserved for me, well in advance, and I was treated to a dinner with the fourth grade team and the music teacher on my first day there. At the final concert, I was gifted with a bouquet of flowers. I felt honored and welcomed, and blessed with new friends.

For my work, a successful residency is one in which the children have had an opportunity to experience the power of art as it relates to their own lives, to empower them to see themselves as artists, and to enhance their sense of history and place. At Sunny Hills Elementary School, I think that happened. A few comments:

Your involvement with the Sunny Hills students illustrated, in a very real way, the immediacy of folk songs in people's lives! It helped them realize that real stories are preserved in many of the "old" songs. Nancy Ziebart (MusicTeacher)

--They have had a chance to look at themselves as artists & to use their voice. Singing is such an emotional expression that it allows them to connect with the emotions behind our history. They loved the songs and were very curious about the stories behind them.

Chrissie Rouse, Fourth Grade Teacher

Learning history through song is a powerful way to learn. The stories and words remain with you through the melody. We can't stop singing them!

Charisse Precht, Fourth Grade Teacher

It is my hope that these children have learned to value the story-telling traditions of their own families and that they will value their histories, and the histories of the place where they live. I hope that they have learned the value of their own strong voices, their own creative expressions, and the importance of hearing everyone's voice. I hope each and every one of these children see themselves as wonderfully unique artists, and know that it is imperative that they find a way to tell their own story. And they are now a part of my story. And so the circle goes around, and the stories go on. And so it always shall be.

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m a resident artist

During Washington's 1989 Centennial celebration, I served as Washington State's Resident Songwriter. I traveled the state, gathering stories and pieces of history, and turned them into songs. I had spent the previous two years collecting songs about Washington for the Centennial songbook. Always, my goal was to collect and create songs that could go back to the communities from which they came. I wanted to provide another way for people to understand the struggles and the joys of people who had lived and worked in Washington -- a way which might reflect voices which might have been lost had a song not been written.

During the years, I have had some wonderful opportunities to share these songs, in concerts held in museums and libraries and living rooms and in various school settings. I performed and participated in residencies through the Cultural Enrichment Program of the Washington State Arts Commission, and the Northwest Folklife Artist-in-the-Schools Program. But during my residency at Sunny Hills Elementary School in Issaquah, I experienced the best of what a residency can be...for the children, the teachers, and for me. I'd like to share some of what I learned during my time there, along with comments from Charisse Precht, one of the fourth grade teachers who helped to provide the structure that worked so beautifully.

So what happened at Sunny Hills that was unique? Here are a few things I discovered:

- 1) **Preparation!** I send out a contract with specific needs, including a minimal sound system, and provide pre-concert activities. These activities have included songs to be familiar with, and I supply a CD or cassette, and an activity guide. At Sunny Hills, the teachers were anxious to learn the songs. The 5 or 6 songs I suggested were very familiar to the children when I arrived. The music teacher's participation was key... she worked with the children to learn the songs.
- 2) **Hospitality** I had negotiated a price that included room and gas. Charisse had called with recommendations for lodging, and reserved that for me. She also arranged for a dinner out with the fourth grade team, assistants, and the music teacher. At the final concert, I was gifted with a bouquet of flowers. I felt totally honored and welcomed for my time there.
- 3) **Grade Appropriateness** As an artist in the schools, I find that I am usually expected to work with the children of all ages during my time there. But Sunny Hills invited me specifically for the fourth grade, because in Washington State, the fourth grade is the year that the children study Washington history. The songs work beautifully for fourth grade, and not as well for K -2. The fourth graders were hungry for the stories, and our time in class was spent exploring issues of immigration and emigration: why people came to Washington and why some had to leave -- which led to conversations on discrimination. Another day we talked about the work people do, and unions, and the role music played in organizing people. For our closing assembly, we did perform for other grade levels and parents.