*Promising Practices in Social and Cultural Interaction*

**CREATING** **COMMUNITY** **ACROSS CULTURES**

**THE POWER OF** **PERSONAL NARRATIVES**

**by Amy E. Skillman**

Institute for Cultural Partnerships

**www.culturalpartnerships.org**

An unlikely group of women sit comfortably in chairs around the rehearsal studio of a local theater. For several months they have been gathering regularly to share stories and create a performance piece about their experiences of coming to America from Vietnam, Colombia, China, India, Ecuador, Guinea, Cambodia, Turkey, and Trinidad. What brings them together now is their struggle to make a new life and their desire to share their stories with new neighbors in central Pennsylvania. The artistic director jumps up and says, “Okay, I am going to leave the room and I want you to create the Statue of Liberty with your bodies.” The women discuss how do to this. Should they stand side by side, each one in the pose of the Lady? Or, can they create a single living statue using all of their bodies together? After short deliberations and a few practices, they take their positions and call the director back into the room. She walks through the door and stops in her tracks, hand to her mouth, a single breath caught in her throat.

Tears fill her eyes as she begins to understand what Lady Liberty means to these women. This camaraderie wasn’t always there. While the play was created and staged in a mere six months, the trust and community that made the play so successful were four years in the making. Since 1992, over 30,000 refugees and immigrants have made Pennsylvania their home, resulting in dramatic demographic shifts. Unfortunately, these changes have given rise to unprecedented levels of prejudice and hate crimes. It is hard to hear newcomers talk about the prejudice, misunderstanding, and stereotyping they face here after many had made such difficult journeys to escape that very experience in their homelands.

At the Institute for Cultural Partnerships (ICP), we believe that attention to new comers’ stories and traditions might ease their resettlement and build better awareness and tolerance among the

general public. To that end, I sought refugee and immigrant women to collaborate on a project with ICP and found a perfect partner in the Pennsylvania Immigrant and Refugee Women’s

Network (PAIRWN). Led by Ho-Thanh Nguyen, herself a Vietnamese refugee, PAIRWN works with refugee women to develop leadership skills, self-confidence, and fellowship

to help one another make a successful transition to a new life. Since 2001, ICP and PAIRWN have worked closely together on many projects. The first, a cookbook, gathered over 100 recipes

as well as stories from each contributor about the meaning of food in her life and family.

The interest in stories associated with food paved the way for the Story Circle Project.

Around 30 women with a diverse range of experiences, histories, and cultures participated in individual interviews, and many also attended monthly Story Circles where they had the opportunity to practice their English and share common experiences.

Each month, we picked a topic, including the role of women in community life and the changing roles of women in diaspora; the ways women recreate their material culture and artistic traditions

in a new world; their experiences of emigration and resettlement; and their perspectives on diversity in Pennsylvania. One story led to another, as this circle of women drew closer in friendship and understanding. Eventually, we invited a licensed therapist to be on hand at

each meeting to handle any especially difficult situations that might arise when the women talk about leaving their homeland, facing prejudice in the workplace, or losing control of their

children. As the women read transcripts of each other’s interviews, they identified

important themes and explored how best to present what they were learning. A curator, filmmaker, and theater educator offered recommendations about how the stories might be pre-

sented in their respective media. The women became particularly excited about doing an exhibit and a theater piece—so we did both! The women titled the exhibit, “Our Voices: Refugee and Immigrant Women Tell Their Stories.” The exhibit opened at the State Museum of Pennsylvania

on September 11, 2005—a date whose significance was not lost on these women. Blending artistic sensibilities,oral history, and ethnographic perspectives, Our Voices offered an understanding of the ways that refugee and immigrant women have rebuilt their lives in

Pennsylvania. The exhibit put a face on newcomers through their stories, which

drew on several themes:

**• Humor:** especially stories about language and confusing behavior patterns.

**• Acculturation:** getting used to the way that Americans do things.

**• Personal transformation:** adjusting to changing roles as women.

**• Courage:** overcoming incredible barriers in order to escape terror.

**• Motherhood:** having babies without the usual extended family to help out, becoming invisible in their children’s lives.

**• The act of leaving everything** **behind**: the things they miss most.

An artistic quality portrait photograph complemented each woman’s story. A case of personal artifacts (e.g., a mother’s rosary, a cookbook, a family photograph) made a powerful statement

about what was most important in these women’s lives. There was a circle of chairs, each one hand-painted by the women with motifs and colors that she selected. A twenty-foot-long, life-sized group photograph hung along one wall with a quote from one of the participants

overhead: “Even from all our diverse backgrounds, we still find it easy to sit down woman to woman and just talk to each other.” The women’s real voices were brought into the room through a DVD, capturing the feel of the Story Circles. More than 750 people attended

the opening. At the same time, we worked together on a script for the performance while

taking diction and improvisation workshops with a theater educator. Those who chose not to act learned sound, lighting, and stage management. Story Circle: Coming to America in the 21st

Century re-created the Story Circle setting with women sitting around a table talking. Through music, movement, visual art, and spoken word, Story Circle dramatized the courage, heartbreak, and dreams of immigrant and refugee women. Created and performed by the women themselves, the play depicted the challenges and triumphs that new- comers to America have conquered and celebrated. Story Circle was presented for three nights to sold-out audiences as part of the local community theater’s Women Speak celebration of women play-wrights and women-centered theater, and again six months later to accompany the exhibit. The play and the curatorial process of creating an exhibit together provided a safe place for participants to practice their English and struggle with ways to present their feelings. They understand the challenges of expressing important ideas in a second language and often help each other find the right words.

During a planning meeting, one woman helped me understand when she said, “This project is making me feel important for the first time since arriving in the U.S. two years ago.”

The Story Circles have created an almost sacred space where these women, who have to hold back in all other aspects of their lives, can say what is on their minds to other women who understand, who share the experience. Whether refugees or immigrants, they have mourned their losses together, laughed at their mistakes, and shared ideas for dealing with insensitive attitudes in others. They have created new traditions and a new sense of community. Some have said that the PAIRWN community is even more important to them than their national or ethnic community. The daughter of one of the women in the play told us that the play “...saved my mother’s life, at a time when she was struggling every day just to get out of bed.” This project has been about much more than the exhibit or the play. It has also been about the process of telling stories to understand one’s own experience and translating personal narratives into powerful tools for social and personal change.

© Institute for Cultural Partnerships