

## CREATING PEACE THROUGH THEATER: A PROPOSAL

### **Our Idea! — Why We Want to Do This**

We, Sarah Hughes and Erika Sogge, propose a five-week, intensive, integrated theater/playwriting program to be carried out with middle school students from areas on the Gulf Coast that were ravaged by Hurricane Katrina. We aim to create peace in this community by providing an opportunity for students to use their experiences with destruction in a creative manner. Our project would occur between June 15 and July 30, 2007.

Our experience working with youth and theater strongly shows that the combination of these two things can help to create peace. Theater gives children a chance to understand the emotions of others and to vibrantly express the range of human feeling. Many children come from homes and backgrounds where talking about emotions or problems is not directly encouraged. Theater (and especially writing) allows children to express these emotions in a safe space and to work through them. This is particularly important for many of the kids in Biloxi and other areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. Children there have lost their homes, their family members, their friends, their pets, their belongings. Many of these children feel powerless as they face the magnitude of what they and their community have lost. This is where theater can enter into the scene and create joy from loss.

Our plan is to create a program that will empower kids through theater. We will take kids who feel like they have lost everything, and we will start with nothing—giving them each blank pages to begin writing their own plays. Our work over the weeks will build into the creation of a production of *Charlotte's Web* at a local theater, building confidence and pride in their community. By showing students that there are positive and productive ways to deal with loss we will hope to affirm and encourage the entire area. We hope that these children will begin to recognize the role of art, theater, and other activities in helping them to constructively work through the depression and confusion they are dealing with.

Our ideas are buttressed by much research. Studies done of SEEDS (Stimulating Educational Excellence through Drama Standards), a playwriting residency done in California schools in 2001-2003, show this:

“SEEDS students gained confidence in their writing skills, as their peers’ [not involved in SEEDS] confidence declined...Teachers reported that the students participating in SEEDS grew emotionally as well as academically. They were more respectful of their peers, especially during readings. Students also reported that following the completion of SEEDS, writing was significantly easier for them and more fun.” ([www.playwrightsproject.com/seeds.html](http://www.playwrightsproject.com/seeds.html))

More examples of similar effects of art and theater on kids’ emotional well-being and stability are supported by information that can be viewed at the website for the American Alliance for Theater Education ([www.aate.com](http://www.aate.com)), and at the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Gulf Coast website ([www.bgcgulfcoast.org](http://www.bgcgulfcoast.org)); as well as by the theories of Brazilian Augusto Boal, author of *Theater of the Oppressed*, who writes extensively about using theater to enable and empower disadvantaged communities. We will be using many of his activities from Games For Actors and Non-Actors that will help the students to work through the destruction and oppression that their community has experienced. We feel that this type of project could be easily re-created anywhere in the world, perhaps especially in countries such as Bangladesh or India, where orphanages are quite common. This would be exactly the type of project that would give children living in an under-funded orphanage or attending a sub-par school a chance to grow and to express themselves positively. Another example of an overseas success of this type of program is Dartmouth Education professor Andrew Garrod’s development of a Shakespeare play put on by students in both the Marshall Islands (<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~educ/innovative/marshall.htm>) and Bosnia (<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~vox/0607/0821/juliet.html>).

### **Course of Action! — What We Will Do**

We plan to work with Hands On Gulf Coast, a 501(c)(3) volunteer organization that has been based at 2113 Pass Road in Biloxi, MS for the past 16 months, in order to identify the community of students that would most benefit from a project like this. We are currently looking at the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Gulf Coast ([www.bgcgulfcoast.org](http://www.bgcgulfcoast.org)) as the most likely candidates for involvement in our project. They run summer programs, and we are now in conversation with them about how we can fit in with their organizations in Biloxi, Gulfport, Pass Christian and Ocean Springs. Many of these organizations lost their facilities, so they need as much help as they can get. We would be in close proximity to all of these places, as we would be able to stay with Hands On Gulf Coast for a minimal fee in exchange for a few days per week spent doing work for the organization as a whole.

We plan to work with the four Boys and Girls Club bases, teaching groups of 40-60 students per day. These groups will be split into two 2-3 hour sessions per day of 20-30 children each. The program will last four weeks— we'll visit each base one day per week.

Over the course of the four sessions, the students will be introduced to the art and practice of reading, writing, and producing a piece of live theater. Lessons will be based around a play adaptation of E.B. White's beloved classic *Charlotte's Web*. Students will have the opportunity to read and discuss and analyze the text; then they will spend three sessions developing their own short plays with the aid of Erika and Sarah. In the final week of the program, all of the students will come together for the whole week to read short excerpts from their own plays to each other (acted out by Erika, Sarah, and classmates) and to learn about the process of bringing words to life on stage by helping with acting, costumes, props, lights, sound, and scenic design elements in an abridged production of *Charlotte's Web* directed by Sarah and Erika at a local theater (the Biloxi Little Theater— [www.4blt.org](http://www.4blt.org), or the Saenger Theater— <http://www.saengeramusements.com/theatres/biloxi/saenger/bisaeng.htm>). Please see attached curriculum for a more detailed description of the project.

We would also like to film our experience with the kids, both in the classroom and during the production process. This will allow us to share the kids' stories with the world (and especially the Dartmouth campus), in the hopes that more projects like this can come about. We hope to find someone at Hands On willing to help us with this, otherwise we will do it ourselves! We will edit and compile a mini documentary of the project when we return to Dartmouth.

### **About Us! — Experience Leads to Success**

#### *Sarah's Experience*

I myself recently spent two weeks in December down in Biloxi, and found that the community rebuilding efforts are at this point equally if not more important than the structural rebuilding going on in the area. I think we could reach a large number of families through a project like this, and I have experience in carrying out a large-scale program like this one. I wrote and planned the curriculum (included) myself, and implemented it in the role of teacher and assistant organizer during the winter of 2006, at Northern Stage Theater Company in White River Junction, VT. They have now adopted a version of this program called PROJECT PLAYWRIGHT, and are repeating the project this winter.

I am also a theater major and have done an extensive amount of work with children's theater. This year in Biloxi I helped put together a community production of *A Christmas Carol* at the Biloxi Little Theater, starring a cast of about 25 kids ranging in age from 4 to 17. I also took a class at school entitled Shakespeare in the Schools, in which I directed and stage managed a production of *Twelfth Night* at a local Vermont elementary school, starring 60 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. I've worked for three years at an arts and theater camp in my hometown called ArtsCamp, teaching and coaching kids in art, music, musical theater, improv, theater and dance. In doing all of this, I've learned that children are not only capable of incredible things, they need to be allowed to express these capabilities in constructive ways. I've seen shy kids take lead roles, bullies stop fighting and start learning lines, and divas learn to work together and share. This, and my passion for helping the Gulf Coast recover, is what brings me to this exciting project!

#### *Erika's Experience*

I am currently in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year as Assistant Director of a bilingual Shakespeare production in the Marshall Islands. In my first year I helped to produce *Romeo and Juliet* and currently we are working on *Much Ado About Nothing*. The play is 80% in the students' native language, Marshallese, and despite this language barrier I am able to work with students and get them to effectively communicate Shakespeare's stories. In my role as Assistant Director I coach individual students on their lines for at least 10 hours a week, teach students about Shakespeare and his writing, instruct students about strategies for working with others, memorizing lines, and create group activities to help the students with movement, voice, and group dynamics. In addition to this theater work I have also spent a significant amount of time working with youth, from mentoring a group of middle schoolers through outdoor activities once per week during the school year, to being a dorm counselor at an arts camp during the summer, to teaching high school biology and world history in the Marshall Islands (an English as a Foreign Language population). I believe that all of this experience working with youth will help make our peace project successful.