

**100 Projects for Peace  
Final Report - Summer 2007**

**Title: Project Playwright**

**School: Dartmouth College**

**Student(s) Information: Jean Ellen Cowgill from Lexington, Kentucky  
Erika Sogge from Wrentham, Massachusetts**

1. **Project Summary:** Describe location, timeframe, participants, other funding involved, scope of work, and goals intended.

We, Jean Ellen Cowgill and Erika Sogge, worked with young teens at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Biloxi and D'Iberville, Mississippi. We wanted the students to learn to express themselves through theater, to learn about the elements of a play, and to think analytically about how people act and react in a given situation to create believable scenes. We first worked with ten students in D'Iberville for two weeks, eight of whom completed plays. We then worked with twenty students in Biloxi for three weeks, seventeen of whom completed their plays. During the first days of each program, we worked one or two large groups, discussing the elements of a play. After this, we began having sessions with the groups on character and plot in the morning, followed by individual sessions throughout the day with one or two students at a time, mentoring them as they worked through drafts and revisions. At the end of each of these programs, Hands On volunteers performed staged readings of the plays for the entire Boys and Girls clubs, so that the students could see their own work performed and watch their peers' reactions. Once the school year began, we worked with students in the East Biloxi Boys and Girls Club after-school program for two and a half weeks to perform one of the plays that had been written during the summer. Four students acted in the play and five students helped with set design and construction.

We stayed at Hands On Network for approximately three months (Erika for nine weeks, Jean Ellen for twelve). Just as Hands On volunteers helped us by acting in our students' plays and transporting set pieces, we helped them with their projects. During the periods of time when we were not working with our students, we volunteered at Hands On worksites. On construction sites, we hung drywall, patched sub-flooring, put up ceiling beams, lay tile and flooring, cased and trimmed windows, installed cabinets and painted walls, among other tasks. We also cleared trails, weeded parks, lay mulch, planted flowers and bushes, helped out at a local art camp, helped Mexican children with their English, and drove volunteers to different worksites and to the airports in Gulfport and New Orleans. We came to Biloxi with our own project for peace, but in the process we became part of a community of volunteers.

2. **Project Results:** Self-evaluate the project; your assessment should enumerate what goals were and were not accomplished.

When we arrived in June, our students were not necessarily as excited to see us as we were to see them. "I don't know how to write a play" was a common refrain during the first days of the program. "Yes you do. You just haven't tried." As they worked through drafts, our students' skepticism slowly gave way to frustration, and frustration eventually gave way to pride. They began thinking analytically about how people react to a given situation, recording their adolescence in the process. Devin, who still lives in a FEMA trailer, wrote about single-parent families surviving Katrina. Bianca wrote about her sister's teen pregnancy. Their plays represent their understanding of life in the post-Katrina Gulf Coast.

In this sense, we accomplished our goals: we taught our students to analyze and come to terms with the events of their lives through the arts. We introduced them to the world of theater, a world many of them had never before experienced. When we took our East Biloxi students to see a teen play at a community theater, they sat captivated. At the end, one student exclaimed, "I thought it was real! I forgot it was a play!" We also gave them the opportunity to create something in which they could take great pride. I will never forget when Aneeka, who had at first wanted to quit, finished her play. She ran around her friends and to the teachers, a huge smile on her face: "Read my play! Read my play!"

We were disappointed at D'Iberville with the scope of the project. We were not given as many students as we had thought we would, they were younger than we had expected, and the Boys and Girls Club there is not as organized, meaning we often lost the students to field trips, around which we could have scheduled sessions had we been forewarned. Similarly, during the after-school program at East Biloxi, we often lost our actors to dance rehearsal and abstinence sessions, so we did not get to work with them as often as we would have liked before the performance. We worked with these limitations as best as possible. During the East Biloxi summer program, we made our greatest mark. We had a longer period of time for more of the day with more, older students. These students also better represented our target group, as their neighborhoods had been more affected by Katrina.

3. **Implications:** What are the project's implications for peace? What are the future prospects for the project? What have you learned?

"Peace" can be defined as mutual harmony between groups, freedom from commotion and violence, and freedom of mind from annoyance or anxiety. By any of these definitions, our students' plays are not peaceful. They depict parents who fight with their children, students who bully and tease each other and families whose lives are endangered by Katrina. By seeking to understand the progression of "commotion and violence" through their characters and plots, however, our students can see the path toward "mutual harmony." In the plays, parents and children fight, but they also forgive; students tease but then become friends; and families protect each other as their surroundings fall apart. Finally, their plays are cathartic. By sharing their frustrations and fears through theater, our students can understand them and find freedom of mind; by presenting the plays to others, they spread that sense of peace. The program was so successful at East Biloxi that the Boys and Girls Club wants to continue it there, and Hands On volunteers hope to begin the program at other after-school programs that they run.

Through this project, we have learned so much about the effects of Katrina on individuals' lives, the progress of the rebuilding effort and the future of the Gulf Coast. We learned how to hold a hammer and how to help a student when she says, "I'm stuck." We learned that for many, the move out of a FEMA trailer seems a long way away. We began to understand (although we never fully can) the connotations and loaded meanings behind words like "FEMA," "casinos," "tragic opportunity," "mold remediation," "volunteers," "rebuild," "water line" and "Katrina." We learned that good teachers keep things fun for students while showing them that their work matters. Our students' plays teach the human perspective of Katrina's effects and life in the post-Katrina Gulf Coast, and that is what they and the volunteers at Hands On shared with us this summer.



Photo 1: Khardarius looks through the draft of his play.



Photo 2: Students critique each others' drafts during a small group revision session.



Photo 3: The audience reacts to the staged readings of our students' plays.