

Hearing the ancient drums

Posted by Elizabeth Badovinac, Pioneer Newspapers, on February 10, 2014

Storyteller brings tradition to St. Peter's students

BIG RAPIDS — Throughout the ages, the human experience — a collective, shared knowledge of the world, spirituality and life — has been passed down through the art of storytelling.

Ancients would pound their drums and sit around their fires, fighting off the cold, dark night with tales of magnificent beauty and happy thoughts; jesters would frighten and amuse young children by telling stories of evil creatures; medieval entertainers would stand in front of their lord's court and tell the tales of chivalrous knights and gallant heroes.

Eileen DeLorenzo, a professional mid-Michigan storyteller from Mount Pleasant, brought the tradition of storytelling to St. Peter's Lutheran School yesterday, weaving a web of imagery, energy and — of course — the collective human experience.

The program, made possible by a collaborative effort between Ferris State University, Artworks and the Festival of the Arts board, brought traditional world folktales as well as contemporary stories to the students, who listened and interacted with DeLorenzo to create an ever-evolving story.

"I love the interaction," DeLorenzo said. "I love the fact that we are co-creating the story together, and that even though I tell the same stories over and over, the story never comes out the exact same. Even though it's the same story, the audience is different, the time of year is different, I might be different. We're co-creating the story together in the moment. It's pretty magical."



ORIGIN OF OGRES: DeLorenzo showed students picture representations of how some of the original "ogres," fabled creatures, looked to the people who dreamed them up. Some countries, explained DeLorenzo, take handfuls of soy nuts to shield them against the ogres' evil. (Pioneer photo/Elizabeth Badovinac)



Eileen DeLorenzo, a professional storyteller, shows St. Peter's students an instrument from west Africa, made from a hollowed-out gourd. DeLorenzo's presentation featured props from many different countries, as did her folk tales. (Pioneer photo/Elizabeth Badovinac)

DeLorenzo uses interactive props, physical examples like pictures and the gift of spoken word to infuse her stories with life, bringing energetic entertainment to the students. Her favorite part of telling stories to children, she said, is the imaginative energy that they can create together.

"The story breathes with me as the teller, and it also breathes with the audience," she said. "For example, giggles might be different or louder. Today I told a story about a donkey, and for some reason, every time I said donkey the kindergartners laughed — they thought the word donkey was funny, and that's never happened before. That's just thrilling to me, because I get vibes from that too. It gives the story energy and it loosens us all up so we're laughing."

Preschool through the fourth grade enjoyed DeLorenzo's first session, in which they acted out parts of folk tales themselves. Fifth through eighth graders also attended a session, listening intently as DeLorenzo began her presentation with the origin of ogres.

According to DeLorenzo, storytelling is an interactive process for both children and adults. She tells stories to both age groups on a regular basis, and also teaches students how to become their own storytellers.

As a freelance performer, storytelling is not only a way of life for DeLorenzo, but a way to learn about life as well.

"In creating images through storytelling we exercise our imagination," she said. "In listening to our ancestors' stories, our stories, we can be strengthened by characters who tried and failed but tried again and finally succeeded.

"We hear how these characters, both wise and foolish, face life and make sense of the world. Their experiences become our dress rehearsal for life. In them, we hear again and again of courage, humor and hope. In the shared experience of storytelling we come to know a sense of belonging, self-awareness and the creative muscle to better imagine solutions to conflicts or problems in our own lives."



St. Peter's fifth through eighth graders check out some of the original representations of ogres, fascinated by the imagery that DeLorenzo creates through her stories and through the use of props. (Pioneer photo/Elizabeth Badovinac)

St. Peter's students seemed to agree, watching DeLorenzo just as intently as a television show or video game.

"We're in the moment, together," she said. "We're creating the images with our imaginations, so those images aren't created for us. Our regular entertainment now is visual, it's provided for us. In storytelling, we're creating the same thing in our imagination but imagining it differently. It's a shared human connection and experience. Storytelling is valued, but I don't think people know enough about what storytelling is. They don't know the true value of it, because their entertainment is based on television and movies."

"If we hear enough stories, our hearts and minds and our words and actions reflect that sometimes gentleness can be stronger than force, ogres can be outsmarted and in our array of experiences, we share a profound connectedness with other human beings."

To learn more about DeLorenzo and her craft and services, visit her website: classroomstoryteller.com, her blog, classroomstoryteller.blogspot.com or email her at eileenstoryteller@gmail.com.

"Many students have moms and dads and grandparents who tell stories. Others have never heard a storyteller before," DeLorenzo added. "It is my hope that they have many more opportunities to hear many more stories from many more storytellers — and perhaps become storytellers themselves."