

The Flint Color Line Project: Connecting Civil Rights Movement Stories to Teaching, Organizing, the Arts, and Change

SESSION DESCRIPTION: An inability to sustain dialogue around issues of color and racism persists in American society. The national Color Line Project is a response to this dilemma. The Flint Color Line Project (CLP) is a collaboration between Junebug Productions, the Flint Cultural Center Corporation, and Flint community/educational organizations, artists, educators, students, and organizers. Entering its third year, the project has centered around the collecting of community stories about the Civil Rights Movement and the use of those stories by educators, artists, and organizers to promote civic dialogue about persistent issues of civil rights and inequality. During this interactive session, high school students will share poems based on stories they collected, and local artists who are creating a performance piece based on Flint Civil Rights stories will read from the work in progress. Artists, CLP Core Committee members, and Junebug Productions staff will offer perspectives on the benefits and challenges of this community story project. In the context of the national CLP, they will examine a new type of "artist residency model" that combines O'Neal's story-circle methodology and plays with the creation of new artwork highlighting local interests, all working toward establishing structures for dialogue and education devoted to catalyzing action for social justice. The session will have ample opportunity for participant discussion.

PRESENTERS: *Artina Sadler, Flint Color Line Project, Kendall Reaves, local artist, Northern High School Project; Lee Bell, Flint community organizer; Alfreda Harris, teacher and artist; Sterline Lacy, Flint Color Line Project; John O'Neal, Junebug Productions, Theresa Holden, Junebug Productions, Jim Randels, education specialist, Curtis Muhammad, National Color Line Project.*

SESSION FORMAT:

- Introduction by Artina Sadler and Theresa Holden
- Presentation of the evolution of an idea—a project that started to have action and realization across the U.S., and specifically in Flint
- Understanding of how the project is being carried out in Flint
- Presentation of some poetry/performance work-in-progress from the Flint Color Line project
- Reflections from participants

Theresa Holden: The Color Line Project started seven years ago. Junebug Productions, Inc. (JPI) looked for national partners who wanted the challenge of moving a story project into a themed project—moving stories from the Civil Rights Movement, from the past into the future. Junebug has finished its active part getting community partnerships going, but the projects are not yet complete. The Color Line project in Flint sees a vision for itself in the future of Flint. Other projects have happened in Lake Worth, Florida, and in Camden and Glasboro, New Jersey. All projects have been approximately three years long. When projects start, they had to have a planning year, or year-and-a-half, with the communities that invited JPI to conduct a community story project. We don't know what the project is until we undertake a year of planning. The second year, to year-and-a-half, is active collection of stories. The third year moves into whatever the community does with the stories—the event year.

After pilot projects in Lake Worth and Camden, we envisioned not only the need for collaboration between visiting artist and local host, but one that also asks for a community collaboration between artists, educators, and organizers. By activating that from the beginning, we saw where we wanted to go—deep into the community. It has a far greater reach than if we, as artists, came in and collaborated with other artists only.

It's taken us the full seven years to come to a place where we just now feel fairly confident that we have moved from having a good model of how to move stories with artists—a model we've been developing for 20 years about the use and effect of stories in an artist's life—to the dream of evolving this model for educators. We're finding what reaching

into community for story has to do for educators. We use a broad definition of what it means to be educated. We're lucky to bring Jim Randels onto the team, a classroom teacher from New Orleans. We discovered that the educators we were working with paid a lot more attention to other educators. It immediately notched up where we were going when Jim came on board.

The third component is a desire to *move* the project. We always said there was a need to be organizers in a community in order to move this project forward. We've been struggling with that in our own fledgling project in New Orleans, where we've been looking at it as a model for going into other communities. Curtis Muhammad is an organizer from New Orleans who is also out in the field as a national organizer for the Color Line project. Hosts in past projects have been arts organizations. They have brought us in. Either presenters, or university theater departments, or community-based arts organizations—in this case, the Flint Cultural Center. We're hoping for a day when we could see it broaden to not necessarily being arts projects that see the value of what we're doing.

We were happily one of the first organizations to receive an Animating Democracy grant. We were in our second year of the projects in Florida and New Jersey, and it made a great difference to have funding so that the project wasn't entirely on the backs of JPI or the local hosts. That enabled us to contemplate a more far-reaching element in those communities, using organizers and teachers. Two major pluses of Animating Democracy have been incredible for us:

- We set up funds that teachers could draw from to carry out their story projects. Local artists could have funds to pay for productions that came out of what was collected.
- Because we're looking at a particular methodology of dialogue, we got to have real reflective time. Cheryl Yuen worked with us to develop a case study about what we are doing. That had real value for the company, because we were deep into it, with no time for reflection and less time for documenting.

When we started the Animating Democracy project, we had to argue the point that our story circle method was in fact a form of dialogue. We had lots of interesting arguments. Who's the facilitator? What's the technique of dialogue inside a story circle? We knew for 15 years that the story circle method was an absolute equalizer, a table-leveler, a way to dig deep into a community and hear their voices—people you wouldn't hear from even in other forms of equal dialogue. We're happy to use the case study to formalize how, in fact, this works. We knew how it was working to help build community through the arts. We're learning about how it's working for educators, and are happy to learn more thoroughly how this work has related to social change.

Two years ago, we started the project in Flint, had a full planning year, had a story collecting year, and now we're at the top of the third year: the event year. Other projects have had lots of performance events in which they took the stories of the civil rights movement and turned them into performance pieces. We're at the beginning of that in Flint.

I want John to talk about where we are internally, and other projects nationally. We're still trying to work on this idea that the Color Line Project, which started as an arts project, is moving to have a much larger umbrella, which really has to do with organizing, coalition building, and deep community consensus building. The techniques that we've used with artists are starting to be applicable to that larger movement we'd like to dream about. We're facing challenges with that, and with this project here in Flint.

John O'Neal: I want to start by saying how important the circle is. Can we open it up? The circle itself is symbolic of the community we're trying to develop. We had a saying in the old movement days—part of that new theology that was abundant in the 1960s, of the beloved community. The idea is that in a tortured situation, the best way to work to realize some ideal is to *be that ideal* as you work toward it. The circle is symbolic of that idea of democratic participation. We want everyone to be in the same place, in relationship to everyone else. We're all in this together.

This circle thing is probably as old as campfires. Can you imagine the first campfire? People sitting around (never did that before), come draggin' in from the hunt, leg broke, arm half tore off, everybody hungry for three weeks, and all he's got is one little rabbit. "That rabbit tore off your arm?" No, and he starts telling the story. And then he gets up on the wall of the cave with some blood and shows how it went—"If I'd just stood a little like this I'd have gotten that sucker." That was the first painting. Art, the story, and as he's explaining what happened, he's moving and ducking—that's dance. All of that stuff happened in the circle.

The object is not so much to be pretty while you're moving, although if you move well, people can see the buffalo. The object is to eat. And live better. The more complicated society gets and the more professional the artists become, the more we get separated from these ideas. We start to think the object of art is art. But the object is to eat, and to live better.

That's how we arrived at this collaboration between artists and organizers. We struggle with it. When we were working on the Environmental Justice project in New Orleans, I called Curtis Muhammad up and sent him a two or three-page paper. And Hollis Watkins, I called him up, and he said, "Well, brother, you got a good idea here, but in order for this to work, you're going to need an organizer." I'd been in SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and I'd been an organizer. MK Wegmann was the director of JPI at that time, and that project kicked our collective butts, because of the lack of an organizer. What do we need an organizer for in an arts organization? But the object is to eat. As we go through these projects, that lesson keeps coming back.

Nobody funds the work of the organizer because they don't know what that work is. So we have to redefine things to pinch pieces of money together. We have a plan to get a team of organizers together in New Orleans. We found an opportunity for a Ford program that's doing business development with arts organizations. I wrote the proposal, but I forgot about the organizer. We're still trying to find a way to make that work clear, and we continue to have internal and external confrontations around this.

Mat Schwarzman: What's your definition of an organizer?

John O'Neal: It's the one who makes the difference between a mob and group. A mob is chaotic. In order for an assemblage of people to become a group with common aims and organization, it takes someone understanding the objectives, condition, the people who are trying to get together and do that work, and the process that is required to do it. It's an art in itself.

It's not administration or facilitation. It's what do we need to get this job done. We used to have a saying as SNCC organizers that our job is to work ourselves out of a job. Get the people together so that they can do it themselves. If we do our work, we can go somewhere else and do it again.

There's no doubt about the need for justice in this country. We need to get focused on that work. Most people want it, so why don't we have it? Because we're not organized to achieve it. The people who don't want it are very organized, organized enough to tell big lies so that we stop trusting the validity of our own experience.

Theresa Holden: Let's move to specifics about the Flint project. We come into town and we help people gather their community together using story circles. Adults, high schools, colleges. We tell stories about the civil rights movement, and capture them on video and audio. We ask educators, activists, and artists to figure out how they want to use those stories in their work. Local artists have worked in schools to make performances.

Artina Sadler: I'm the local project manager for the Flint Color Line project. All projects take on their own flavor, and Flint doesn't do our project like anyone else. We've been collecting stories for a year-and-a-half. We're archiving the stories here at the library, at the Sloan Museum across the street, and also at the Amistad archive at Tulane.

Artina introduces core committee members: Reverend Jones, Rev. Deborah Kohl; Dr. Lee Bell, local organizer; and Sterline Lacy, artistic director for the final production.

These are people who have helped us put this project together over two and a half years, and we're not done. The culminating event will be February 5, 6, and 7, 2004. Come back! I'd like Rev. Kohl to tell a little history.

Rev. Deborah Kohl: I had heard about it through an article in the newspaper, and said, "This is something that's for the whole community." We're doing a lot of work in Flint to reinvent ourselves and find a sense of identity as a community, in the wake of the shift away from being a one-company town to being something we don't know yet. As an average citizen interested in the welfare of our community, I became interested in this project and was invited to become a member-at-large. This was a very long-term project, and we laid the foundation quite slowly to understand how we were going to move into the school systems. We set up a program so that the funding included artists-in-residence in four different schools. We interfaced with artists to vision for multi-faceted artistic expression. We did

arts pieces—including the school students’ expressions—along the way leading up to the culminating performance, which is designed so that pieces of it can be taken to different places in the community. So it’s not over on February 7.

By self-definition, I’m an artist, educator, and organizer, and I think that’s the appropriate role of the faith community in the larger community. We worked with Rev. Jones and other people who had large spheres of influence in the community to help advance the work. It took us a year before we started collecting stories because we laid the foundation for all these components and focused on what’s happening in the school system. Then we geared up for story collection, which has been real intense for the last four to six months. That’s ebbing a little as now we’re gearing up for the performance piece.

Artina Sadler: This project is divided into committees. We have an education committee with its own goals and tasks; marketing, story collection, and archiving committees; and an artist presentation committee which has turned into our production team. With all these components, the goal is to make this a true community based project. As coordinator, I have to back up and say, “Marketing is your job, if it doesn’t get marketed, that’s on you.” We have to let the community be responsible. Sometimes I get the panic call, but for the most part our committee has been really responsible and followed through.

The chair of the education committee is a teacher. The education committee worked with four schools—high school, middle school, charter school, and elementary school. They assigned artists to work with students to collect stories and turn them into some form of artistic presentation. We’ve had a newspaper, a poetry slam, and a play that was created by students. The other task of the education committee is to create a manual for teachers to take this project and start implementing these things in their classrooms. It has lots of strategies we found in the work, others that Jim contributed to us, and we’re going to make a book that others can use.

Lee is chair of the story collection and archiving committee.

Lee Bell: The story collecting process is important to the whole. We funnel information to the library, museum, and artistic teams. We’ve gone to a lot of different groups. Rev. Jones opened the door into the faith communities he’s familiar with, Rev. Kohl helped organize story circles around her church history, which had been passed down verbally. She knew who to go to. One of the events we held at Rev. Kohl’s church had about 50 people in four circles, and helped celebrate and patronize a local soul food restaurant. We have lots of transplants from the South or other places. When we were starting to do story circles, we said, “Tell us your remembrance of the civil rights movement here.” We often heard, “I wasn’t here, but I have a story.” That shifted the criteria. No matter where you were, the civil rights movement made you who you are. Since opening up to the bigger instruction, some very powerful things are coming from people.

I like to call one story the *Tale of Two Dianes*—one white lady who experienced the movement in 1968 outside Detroit and one black lady who was in the midst of the riots in Detroit. We heard two different stories—white outside, black on the front line. As people tell these stories, relationships are built.

Many of the young people’s parents aren’t talking to them about the movement. The young people interviewed people—parents, teachers, anyone with a story. The students did a story circle where they recounted those stories. They wouldn’t have heard those stories, because they’ve been repressed. These kids found some true living history, and then they made it theirs.

We have people who come to circles and say “I don’t have a story.” We say “get in the circle, a story will come.” Many times people come up with three, four, or five stories. One of the rules is to listen and a story will come to you. Sometimes it takes two or three weeks.

The story collection process is great in other ways. Young people wanted to do research about the city of Flint. They came to a story circle where an icon of the 60s came to talk. Kids are connecting to adults, relationships are being formed, and that’s organizing.

Artina Sadler: I want to tell a story about the night we went to the Community Prosecution Summit. They were in a big room talking about how they were going to have someone from the prosecutor’s office working in the community. They allowed us to come and gave us a room in the back. We took a group of people into the room, and

they didn't want to come out! We were supposed to do eight groups that day, but we only did four because people didn't want to leave. They kept telling stories.

One story stuck with me. An older white gentleman, the only white person in the circle, told the story of coming back to Flint. He had a job working with African American males. He told how it made him sick to think of working with these men. Finally he went to work, and it became the most enriching thing in his life. It meant a lot to me that he was willing to be that vulnerable in a circle full of black people. We heard stories people have never told to their families, and we create a safe place where they can tell these stories.

The project Community Connections lent itself to lots of ways for people to do their work. We trained the YWCA staff to incorporate story circles into their racial justice project. They trained people from New York City working with them. My sister's a science teacher: if you can't show it to her, it doesn't exist or mean anything. I wanted her on the committee, and compared it to teaching the circulatory system—get them to tell some really gory blood stories. After they tell their stories, relate them to the science. Then go over the vocabulary lesson. She tried it, and has seen a huge improvement in how well the lessons are sticking. I believe in engagement before information. Get their minds thinking about what you're talking about before you give them info they don't want. It becomes a much easier process.

Sterline Lacy: The finale for the project will be the beginning of a production that will be going through the community and expanding from that point. We now have some of the performers who will be part of the stage performance in February. It is called *Stand Up*, based on the stories collected through this process.

When I first came into the project, I hadn't been in a story circle. My first job was to view all of the stories that had been shared. To give you an idea: we have 20 videos, on the low end, with at least three sessions in each one. Sixty sessions. In each of those sessions, ten to 20 people told their stories, and they told at least two stories each, so now we're up to 1,200 stories. And I can still see! I was able to hear each and everyone of these stories, and to embrace each story. The hard part is that I hadn't participated, so a growing thirst was happening to be in the story circle myself. I was able to be in one for the first time yesterday. Being a playwright, my mind is going to things I can do with my creativity, as an artist, to take it into other areas of my work.

In collecting these stories, the main directive was to keep the stories intact. Not to change them. Use the exact language of the storyteller. When we first put out the call to the community to find a cast, our main objective was to get people at the grass roots, to give them the experience of working in theater, with the objective of connecting to the civil rights movement—using folks who were in and out of the story circles. We have people from the homemaker, to the teacher, to a postal worker, someone who works for the city, an 80-year old white woman with her little pitch pipe who sang *Summertime*, to an eight year old who's part of Williams school. I came to the audition thinking I'd have 20 people in the cast. It turned out to be 40, plus 15 people from the William Edison School.

The 30 people who didn't make the cast we were able to shift to a local cable television show where they can be showcased, so no one felt like a loser in these auditions.

We have also used community members whose stories we got to have a workshop, where they could help script out what we'll be doing onstage or showcasing. Everyone from Flint—from government leaders to Mercedes, the cheesecake lady—is doing cameos, pointing out some way that they were impacted, and saying what they will stand up for in terms of justice, intolerance, prejudice, or positive things. Saying what we stand for.

In integrating all of this, we have seen that the community members themselves are getting first-hand experiences in working behind the scenes. We have a rapper who's our lighting engineer. We have a young student who's taking fashion design, and she's our costume designer. We are able to use teachers, activists, educators, to be part of this production. Those who don't want to be onstage have actors portraying them. It's a very rich production.

We selected stories that brought the greatest diversity but had that underlying sense of the movement. It ends in a celebration of people coming together, black and white. Someone asked me how diverse is the production? Only as diverse as the stories that were collected, which turned out to be a black and white thing for the most part. We have dance, we have people who participated previously in the Urban Bush Women residency project. It's a very rich program.

We're going to do a tiny preview, a reading from the script, based on one of the statements John made in a story circle—"dropping like flies"—and one of Curtis' contributions, which was "huh." Before we hear the excerpt, I want Kendall to talk about her experience working in the schools and introduce Katrina.

Kendall Reeves: I am a mother, a father, a factory worker, but then somebody told me that I was an artist. They approached me with going into Northern High School and working with a group of kids on this Color Line project. I was confused, and it's still confusing sometimes, but it's fun. It's all fun, and it feels good. I went to NHS and had a tenth grade class with a teacher named Charlene Taylor. The process was for the students to go out and collect stories and bring them back into the classroom, and then I had to make a final presentation to the funders for this project. Curtis came in and had the kids do a story circle, and they grabbed hold of the idea and really got interested in it. Katrina interviewed her father and put it all on video tape, and I wanted her video shown during our final project, but that didn't work out. The students brought their stories back and did the story circles in class, then we got the auditorium for the presentation at the school.

I am a poet, so our final presentation was what the students had learned about injustice, race, and freedom in poetry form. Katrina was one of the shining stars and she's going to read one of her poems, and I'll read one of mine.

Katrina read her poem, "Many Problems."

Kendall Reeves: Another student did an excellent poem called "Hear Your Mind," designed the book, and designed a t-shirt. The kids read with such passion, they overwhelmed me. In fact, I'm trying to get on the school board now.

Artina Sandler: Kendall called me a lot, and asked for a lot. Finally it came down to having a meal at the end or having t-shirts. "You can have chicken or you can have t-shirts." We ended up with t-shirts and they're beautiful. And we created a book of poetry from all their pieces together so they can have it at the end. I think this is a reward for our young people. The book is something they can always keep.

Showed a sneak preview from STAND UP.

Theresa Holden: We want people involved in this project to comment on what it's doing in their lives, professionally and personally. We want you to talk about the use of story in your work, and the function of collaborating between artists, teachers, and organizers.

Artina passed out a newspaper from an eighth grade English class, created after the students interviewed seniors at a home near here, and introduced Jim Randels.

Jim Randels: I'm a public school teacher. I would like to talk about the state of education. One of the things we heard here was about Artina's sister, the science teacher, using storytelling in her classroom. Edmund Wilson has said if we're really going to do science education well, we need to use narrative—because people think in narrative. Another important thing you heard is Kendall talking about the class that gathered stories and brought them back. This is what we're really trying to measure in education—we're looking at how people really think. That happens in dialogue, which is more important than a list of facts on the board in social studies.

Three quick points about the reason I'm here. I'm part of a collective in New Orleans that leads to being able to work with artists who are about movement building. We work with about five artists regularly in our New Orleans classrooms who are about feeding folks, as John said. The second thing that's been really helpful—if we're getting away from factory models of education—is that we do have to change the way schools are structured. In New Orleans, community people have been willing to come up with funds to pay for classes with only 15 students. That becomes a platform through which to do some of this work. Finally, back to the Flint Color Line project. If we're going to talk about accountability in education, it's on us all, as artists and community educators, to see ourselves fulfilling all three roles. To begin to think about a circle like this, where the young people in school present their work and have dialogue about it. This is an accountability and evaluation component.

Curtis Muhammad: Here's an overview of the importance of organizers in this project. This has been a very very hard struggle, because part of the tenor of this discussion is working with people outside your sphere. This idea is an old idea for our movement, artists and educators working together. Where John and I come from, in Mississippi, these are people who taught us that organizing was bottom-up organizing, referring to the grass roots, the most excluded

voices. When you go among those people, you must educate and you must entertain, because they're going to be excluded from plays and songs and dance. And then there's the organizing. It's all one center.

The Free Southern Theater plays enhanced and promoted the work we were doing in organizing. The literacy classes were about how you register to vote, how you run an election, how you get elected to office.

We know the story of diamonds and gold in Africa, and we know Africa is poor in spite of its gold. Our stories have been like that to us. Others come in and take these jewels. And that's what art has been. They take our stories and they get rich. When I looked at the blues series on PBS, and saw blues singers happy that a white boy would sing one of their songs so that someone would know about it, and all they would get out of it is a Cadillac and \$200 a week. This thing is about taking charge of our own stories—to educate, to create our art, and to build a movement. Let's think about classic organizing—the act of creating, maintaining, and nurturing organization. Union organizing, for example. Unions say, “go to that factory and organize it.” The first thing you've got to do is get the assets in the community, find out what's already there. Get the stories—what's happening at that factory? How much do you get paid? Do you have insurance, safety rules, redress for firing? We collect that. Then we find out who seemed like they were the most pissed off, and then we would start an organizing committee.

Now, the coalition builds in the factory, between the machine shop, factory floor, shipping and receiving. Look at the data we collected. What do you think we ought to do? Is there a theme in these stories that everybody's pissed off about—a little, a lot, a whole lot? We're organizing. We've collected data carefully. An organizer is an artist-scientist. The difference between a scientist and a layperson is that the scientist collects data carefully, analyzes the data carefully, and then applies it. People who are not committed to organizing just can't stand this slow process. Go and hear stories before you jump in with an agenda about what you want to do. Don't sit up in Harvard thinking about what you want to do. Here we are saying we want the agenda for the organizing to be informed by the stories.

The rate of children dying in car seats was so high because the instructions for the car seat had been written at a tenth grade level. They discovered that 70 percent of the population reads at below the eighth grade level. If that's true, then Harvard thinking ain't gonna save poor people. It hasn't. It's coming from somewhere other than where we can feel and see and touch in order to solve problems. So we study organizers, a little Marx, Lenin, Lumumba, Mao, and that's all good, but we don't want to have the patience to study the stories of the people who are oppressed, and to derive an agenda for organizing from those folks.

To think about studying some ignorant, poor-ass mothers to find out the agenda for eliminating poverty just seems to be crazy. We don't have a respect for the genius of the poor. That's a problem, and you're going to run into that in your work. Even us, we're guilty internally, of not having enough respect for the poor and oppressed to be guided by them to do our work. And we don't have the time for it, because we got to get the grant written on time. So this is a work-in-process, and you're all invited to help. How do we take the stories to inform and direct the work, so that it is owned by the people we serve?

Lee Bell: We've heard a couple of times today about taking time to plan, taking time to get the stories, analyze them. In organizing, one of the most important tenets we often have to remind ourselves about is this is not rush-search. It's about relationship building, and it takes time. The name of the play is *Stand Up*. To stand up and have someone else's back, there has to be relationships there. The story circles were the beginning point, so that we can stand up with one another and do what's right.

Artina Sandler: Also, take time to listen and collect and archive. I always hear them twice because my son transcribes them. Some stories catch me. I've gained a much deeper respect for the community I live in. I have a degree in African American history, but I didn't know anything about Flint. I've been here 34 years, but I didn't know this was the first city to pass an open housing referendum. People all around me—that I've been looking at forever—I now understand there's a lot more to them than they're able to bring out every day. This project has given me knowledge of where I live. There are great people in this city that gets trashed every day in the media. I would hope that everybody takes a few minutes to get to know where they are. And not just a few people, the Rotary, the artists, but the real people you probably don't even talk to.

Sterline Lacy: In viewing these stories, I knew Mercedes as “the cheesecake lady.” But then I heard her story of the first time she was called “the N word” walking down Saginaw Street, and how she picked cotton when she was five

years old, and her nose is flat because “so many doors have been slammed in her face.” Now I look at her in a whole different way. And because her story, intact, is going to be on that stage, she’s making sure she’s there every night, and all her friends and family. People who haven’t heard her story will know that these people are deeper than we realize. They will all go out saying “I never knew that.” I never knew about Steve’s Filipino/Japanese wife and the prejudice heaped on her. Steve’s story is being told. He can’t do it, but another community member will. In little ways, without rushing, it’s happening. Those seeds of understanding are being planted. The dialogue that will follow—people taking more stories to another level—we expect this to bring out more. Everyone’s knowledge is becoming a little bit broader, and it’s making a difference.

Jim Randels: I remember, as a Flintsonian, people were trying to do positive things in the community, like the Panther party was trying to do in LA. Those people were something I wanted to be a part of when I was small. They had a red fist on the back of their jean jackets. I remember in 1968, during the Olympics, that same fist was on the back of the jacket. I feared that some of the churches weren’t with them, because they were a community-based group of people. They were shunned because they were trying to put the community spirit back into the community, so that you could take a walk at night and not be robbed by your own people.

Rev. Deborah Kohl: I’m conflicted about how to say this. I believe in the separation of church and state, but I already know that faith-based communities are communities based on narrative and on the kind of trust building we’ve been talking about. Your own faith-based community might be a place to live out some of this stuff. If you can’t do it in the public school, if you’re active in a faith community, don’t rule it out. My conviction comes from being a child during the heart of the civil rights movement, and I remind people that Martin Luther King was a reverend; his activism came from his religious tradition. I can go deeper in history to talk about the relationship between Christianity and the arts. Someone once pointed out to me that anywhere you look where there are countries functioning under oppressive governments, the first thing they do is silence the creative voices of the artists. In our culture it’s being done insidiously. But you all know that part of that systematic silencing is to eliminate funding for the arts in public schools. There are other low cost ways to live out that expression and not allow repressive governments to silence that creative voice. That campfire, that drumming, that dancing, that storytelling—that’s how we stay alive.

RESPONSES

Jan Cohen Cruz: How do the stories tell us where to go? How do we solve it?

Isao Fujimoto: I think it’s important to have a variety of ways to get a point across. Conversation alone is not enough: people hear things wrong. Having newspapers is very helpful. We have to try a variety of ways.

MK Wegmann: I am being reminded again of how long and how difficult this work is. It was more than our lifetimes that these systems of oppression were put in place, and it will take more than our lifetimes to change them. Recognizing incremental achievement was reinforced here today.

Comment: What happens to the stories? Do they get transcribed? Where do they end up?

Artina Sandler: They’re being archived—some as video, some will go back to make text—at the library. We will transcribe these so we can make a book of stories.

Theresa Holden: Funds have been set aside in other projects to transcribe 25 percent of tapes, stored in local libraries, and to go to Amsted.

Sam Jones: When Kendall called the name Eugene V. Debs, I had just written something about him in the local newspaper because George Fall came to my home in Terre Haute (Debs’ home town) a labor pioneer, and introduced himself as an admirer of Debs. They had both been socialists. He was bragging ‘cause the FBI followed him around the country, and I asked, “Why did you bring them to my doorstep?” I got involved in this project because I’m in a choral ensemble from the Flint Cultural Council, and we do a piece in February called *Oh Freedom*, as the background music for whatever’s taking place. She asked me to portray an MLK-type character during this presentation. I got something together and was holding forth, and I put into it an incident where we were organizing a demonstration during the 60s. The minister from the Episcopal church downtown called and said, “this is going to upset the town and the powers-

that-be: would like you to call it off.” This was part of my portrayal, but it was based on a true-life incident. She asked me to get involved.

Bob Lynch: Sometimes my work at Americans for the Arts is to listen to stories, and take what I hear and do something with it—turn it into some kind of position, or policy point of view to create some good action, much like the union example, but in a different arena and for a different purpose. I’m struck by the listening skills of the story process, and how much you can learn. I was thinking about the whole Animating Democracy project. It took going with a group of people to Northern Ireland and going to Derry and finding that there was only one place where Catholics and Protestant kids could actually talk. That epiphany helped me think about the development issues here. I appreciated hearing about the methodology.

Carolyn Morris: I want to thank John and Curtis for moving this work forward. I’m from Mississippi, and I’ve been encouraged by my grandmother to live without regrets. But my number one regret was that I was not involved in the civil rights movement. They gave their lives so I could have opportunities and my children could have opportunities. My hope is that this work not be forgotten, that it become a catalyst for change. In Mississippi, where slavery was taken off the books in the 1990s and people still have trouble voting, I’m just grateful.

Comment: Thank you, for encouraging me to take ownership of my own stories and the stories of my family, because they are dropping like flies, and you have to get it while you can.

Maryo Ewell: I’m thinking about the degree to which democracy is messy, time-consuming, and story-based, and the dominant world is tidy, efficiency-oriented, and quantity-based, and what we’re trying to do is change the terms of social evaluation and how we judge what’s worth doing.

Comment: It’s many-layered. I’m getting a sense of the way this project works. It’s almost like a light that attracts pieces from the community that you many not expect or know, and something very rich is being built. I’m interested to know more about how it got started here. Where did the impulse come from? Junebug coming here? Flint going to Junebug?

Cheryl Yuen: Having had the opportunity to work with John and Theresa on earlier projects, it was a great chance to reflect on the struggles starting this. Oh man, you guys have come a long way!

Sandy Agustin: It feels like systemic change. To hear your stories, to have you present, to have young people here.

Lisa Mount: (*notetaker*) Trying to capture the brilliant things that people have said, there is poetry in these notes. Addressing the Color Line and addressing racism is a broad process. People who are not organized try to use our stories against us. Nearly the first thing you hear is “Stop, you’re trying to divide things.” I applaud you and the work you’re trying to do to fight racism. Thank you.

Ron Butler: It brings out the important differences between perceptions and reality. In an age of decreasing face-to-face communication between people, where movies and TV are creating perceptions that are not reality, how important it is that we listen to these stories and tell our own stories, communicating with one another so that that perception doesn’t become reality.

John O’Neal: I believe profoundly in stories. But I also believe our lives are comprised of lots of stories, that we have to patiently go through, go through and go through again, exploring the way stories represent things. I do think that as we tell our stories, we identify the most salient things in our lives. As we repeat those stories, we discover what they teach us. If we didn’t have the stories of the people from the WPA project, that collected stories of the slaves, we wouldn’t have the slightest idea about what it was like to be a slave. And that project only lasted a few years, as long as we’ve been here in Flint. We got a long way to go, and this has raised lots of good questions.

Comment: As an educator, each time I spend time with young people, I’m overwhelmed at their urgency to get their stories told, and how they’re disappointed in us as adults, that we haven’t created a better environment for them to live in. We have an incredible opportunity for them to get their stories told. We need to expect school systems to do that. We have to expect our educators to be responsible to our needs, and if we can’t advocate for young people, we don’t have any business being parents or elders. I just moved to Flint five years ago from a rural community, and we were excited about the city for its rebirth and energy. I want to thank Mr. Junebug, I went to his performance and it

made me proud to live in the city of Flint. It's amazing. We have to work with each other to support each other, and to be proud of our environment, because people will take notice.

Comment: It's been exciting to hear your process, the powerful sense of place that you created, and the time that you gave to creating a sense of community. I'm sitting here amazed at how powerful this is, and terrified that we're dealing with the Patriot Act and we're *still* living these stories! How much these stories affect us as we tell them, and as we don't know them.

Jean-Marie Mauclet: A technical question: How do you go from stories that stay in the circle, then make them into a play?

Artina Sandler: We have waivers, and if we use people's stories, we get a second waiver from them. Permission is explicit.

Sterline Lacy: We also make sure that we hear the story, so that I'm not making mistakes with what they said and the way they said it, so it's told the way they want it told. "No, it wasn't minister, it was an administrator." Some people said "Yes, say my name." Others said, "Tell my story but not my name." We had a hard time when we did the recruiting for the cast as we had not one white male show up for this audition. We had to go into the community and ask them, and I was at the meeting saying, "I got one white man. How can we portray the story of civil rights with all black people?" We have to have that component to tell those stories in the circles.

Rev. Deborah Kohl: People are dying to tell their stories, and they overcome the inhibition about being videotaped. People have never left because they have to sign the waiver.

Kendall Reeves: I like the circle, and the community coming together. But sometimes we need to come together and archive stories as a race, because so many times black people don't get along with other black people. We need to sit in the circle. White folk who don't get along with other white folk need to sit in a circle. You need to get your own folk together before we can come together across races. There is so much dissension in my church sometimes. We need to do circles. Teachers need to be trained on how to do circles, because they'll get a lot more teaching done. I would like to see this branch off into something even bigger.

Artina Sandler: We do offer story circle training for whoever wants it, free of charge.

Theresa Holden: I want to respond to having come a long way. It has to do with a mystery, too, that's somewhat spiritual. It has to do with a deepening understanding of the process. When we're first in the early stages, we struggle to explain it. There's something that happens, akin to growing a child, you start to release and watch it feed back to you. By the time we got to this project, we were able to let go enough to watch the incredible people here make what they were going to make of it. It's a little bit of a dance, and it's very circular.

Rev. Deborah Kohl: Circles are inherently organic, and if you're meeting in a circle, you're going to get a better outcome.

Lee Bell: Circles have a lot of meaning in the African-American community. And for the people who say they are sad because they didn't get to participate in the movement, folks, it ain't over!

Curtis Muhammad: Thank you. This was a long time to sit. People are confused about organizing. Imagine you're an archeologist, digging. The young lady studied our stories. If we would start collecting stories and studying them, as a way of informing our work, then we're talking about story-based organizing.

The group ended by singing: "Hold my hand while I run this race, 'cause I don't want to run this race in vain."