ASHLAND DAILY TIDINGS

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By Joe Zavala

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Students learn by telling personal truths

Jenny Steiner doesn't like the stereotype, but the truth is that the boy was a jock.

"Kind of defensive," she said, "kind of too cool for school on the front."

But like many children navigating the choppy waters of adolescence, the seventh-grader at Ruch Community School had another, more sincere, dimensional self just a scratch or two below that carefully crafted "front," and months after that fall class concluded Steiner still relishes the discovery.

"Once we showed that he cared, he was amazing," said Steiner, a senior in Southern Oregon University's education department who worked as a student teacher at Ruch, a kindergarten through eighth grade school in Jacksonville. "He actually became a team leader. His (digital voice-over project) was actually focused on parkour (training developed from military obstacle course training), and he wanted to have a very strong ending of not having a meaningful ending. That was his focus, that sometimes sad things happen for no reason.

Students interviewing each other about their personal strengths. Photo by Abram Katz

"I think he expected us to turn him down and when we didn't, he flourished in that program. He even was showing the students parkour moves and he was helping other people. It was quite a transformation."

That was only one of many transformations Steiner said took place during the eight-week Truth be Told digital storytelling workshop. Developed by Organizing New Teaching Approaches in School Communities program director and SOU teaching consultant Abram Katz, the program partners colleges with low-income schools to bring "quality education services to the students who need them the most." Steiner, who will graduate from SOU's school of education in June, worked as a student teacher in two Truth be Told workshops this school year, at Ruch and at Talent Middle School, and Katz is hoping to bring one to Walker Elementary next fall.

He's set up a GoFundMe page (www.gofundme.com/ontasc) with a target of $16,000 to pay for the Walker project, which would lead two fourth-grade classes through Truth Be Told's digital storytelling class, during which each student produces their own audio or video voice-over short story. Working twice a week with SOU education majors credited with practicum hours, students write and edit the stories from their life experiences and digitally present those stories.

The subject matter for projects of past Truth be Told workshops cover a wide range, from light fare such as video game preference to heavy.

In one audio clip titled "My Dream," a girl opens up about a vision that's so honest, it's jarring.

"It was dark," she says. "I could feel the beating of rain against my face, along with my tears. I could feel something cold and wet in my hand. What was it, though? I did not even bother looking down, but I knew what it was. It was a gun. I finally looked down at the gun, but there's more. I had scars on my arm, a blade on the ground next to me. Why did I do this? Why am I doing this?"

In another, titled "Bullied," a boy confronts his own demons.

"I weigh 195 pounds, which is a lot for my age," he says. "Oh yeah, I get bullied for it almost every day and every week, but hey, it's better than last year, when I got bullied 24/7."

He goes on to detail the steps he's taken to lose the extra weight — eating healthy, spending a summer exercising, and so on — and concludes on a defiant note, staring down his tormentors.

"People don't respect bullies," he says. "Not that I know of. And if you think that will get you anywhere in life then you are wrong. Times 20, that's how wrong you are. So stop."

Another boy takes a playful jab at classmates who mistakenly conclude that his hobby of choice is a childish waste of time.

"So for all the haters and the people who don't understand Minecraft," he says, "Minecraft isn't just a bunch of blocks."

Many more examples of Truth be Told projects are available at www.ontasc.com.

Katz, who graduated from Ashland High School in 1995, designed Truth be Told with four objectives in mind which he laid out on the GoFundMe page: to provide a self-empowering experience through creative writing and art; to engage students with one another in a positive, cooperative way that raises self-esteem; to create a structured container where students feel safe to express their emotions and address real-life issues; and to build trust and lay a foundation for active listening, self-worth and dignity.

In many ways, the most crucial step in the whole process, he explains, is the first one. After Katz and his cadre of SOU undergrads take a group of students under their wing, they must first build trust. Until that happens, the children will not feel comfortable enough to write with the kind of honesty and vulnerability that make a Truth be Told project sing.

"We really want to create these safe opportunities for them to express themselves," Katz said. "Everyone says at the end of the digital storytelling program I realized it was OK to express my truth in a community and now I have more friends and I actually like writing."

To get there, students spend the first two weeks of the program working on "community-building" and self-awareness exercises, as well as writing. They start writing their rough drafts in Week 3 and edit, revise and listen to peer feedback in weeks five through six. Over the last two weeks the students complete their final drafts, produce their audio recordings and take part in a "student showcase."

Besides being a catalyst for self expression, Katz said, the program meets state standards in writing, reading and technology. An eight-page analysis of Truth be Told's 2015 Ruch workshop by the Oregon Writing Project seemed to confirm its academic value, as both the students' "skill and confidence in writing" and their "confidence in expression through visual art" spiked after completing the course.

"At the outset of the project, just 25 percent of the students said they felt 'very confident' in writing," read the report, written by SOU professor Margaret Perrow. "After the project, that number had risen to 54 percent. Likewise, the percentage of students who felt low confidence as writers dropped from 40 percent to 20 percent. ... As one student wrote, 'The digital story helped me realize how much I love writing. I think that digital storytelling would help people realize how amazing writing is!' Because engagement and confidence are linked to a willingness to practice writing skills and to revise writing, this is a significant shift."

Those numbers, Katz believes, show that both students and teachers are "starved" for authenticity of expression and human connection. He can lean on the data, but Katz also has personal experience to draw from. As a middle schooler he wanted, like most kids, to be popular and to fit in, but instead felt like he stuck out. It was a painful time in his life, but one that now helps him connect with kids going through similar hardships.

That history at least partially explains why Truth be Told targets low-income schools like Walker, at which 52 percent of the students come from economically disadvantaged families.

When asked for few success stories, Katz, whose program he estimates has served more than 1,000 children, struggled to zero in on only a few.

"Specifically I'll say that many of the students I work with aren't given the opportunity to shine and there are lots of factors that go into that," he said. "But honestly I feel like I'm kind of reaching into some muck, some mud and pulling out these diamonds, polishing them off and saying, 'Hey everybody, look how beautiful and capable this student, this person is.'

"And when they get that positive reinforcement back from the community, it really changes their life path, regardless of their socioeconomic status."

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