

The Mississippi Young Person's Cultural Exchange Program

By Nayo Watkins

Description of the Project

The Mississippi Young Person's Cultural Exchange Program (YPCEP) was a two-year project which utilized intensive, high quality art instruction to help create and cultivate the language and skills essential to a dialogue and awareness about self, culture, and community. The project was carried out by a collaboration of four Mississippi organizations. Two of the partners, Madison County Cultural Center (Madison) and Mississippi Cultural Crossroads (Port Gibson), are local arts organizations with considerable experience in providing arts activities grounded in the life of their communities. The other two partners, Moore Community House (Biloxi) and Operation Shoestring (Jackson), are well-established community service organizations providing a range of services in their communities. Together, they planned and implemented the project of hands-on art and dialogue that served 142 young people, ages 10 to 17, over the two years.

With its formal beginning in December 1999 and a year's buy-in and preparation prior to that, the four organizations shaped the project around the following goals:

- ◆ Provide high quality arts experiences, instruction, creation, and exploration.
- ◆ Broaden community exposure to art that reflects the cultures, perspectives, and experiences of young people. Strengthen the possibilities for creating positive change individually and collectively through the arts.
- ◆ Develop and/or strengthen a positive self-image and deeper understanding of self.
- ◆ Help youth explore a sense of community through artistic expression, skills-building and shared experiences.
- ◆ Increase understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of differences and similarities in each other and in the American mosaic.
- ◆ Develop skills for bridging differences and barriers among youth and adult participants in their immediate and/or larger communities.
- ◆ Increase parental involvement and investment in children that lead to stronger organizations and communities through shared artistic experiences.
- ◆ Build a sustainable capacity for carrying out similar programs.
- ◆ Advance existing work of each organization.
- ◆ Develop a high quality model that can be disseminated with confidence.

At the core of the goals was the desire and intent to use art and exchange as vehicles for helping young people gain deeper understandings of, first, themselves as unique individuals and cultural beings and second, to broaden their understandings of differences and similarities in a diverse society. Within that context, the project involved black and white children from urban, rural, suburban and inner city communities and from low- to upper middle-income families.

Within each organization, site teams were formed consisting of the director, a visual artist, community resource persons (staff and/or volunteer) and support staff. The site teams then formed the statewide team responsible for conceptualizing, planning, coordinating, managing, documenting and evaluating the project. Team Planning Meetings (TPMs) – six in all – became the backbone of the project. While each site team adapted the work in ways most appropriate to their organization, the TPMs plus additional workshops and frequent conference calls helped to maintain consistency and accountability across the project. TPMs also served as learning and bonding vehicles for the

adults who were leading the project, they themselves being from different backgrounds, orientations, communities and cultures.

If the TPMs were the backbone, working with the young people was the heart of the project. They came to the four centers, twelve to twenty young people per site, two to four days a week to explore themes and make art based on what the theme meant to them. The site teams developed lesson plans around the nine chosen themes:

WHAT MAKES ME? (or Who am I?)
 FAMILY and FRIENDS
 PLACE and NEIGHBORHOOD
 FOOD
 CELEBRATION and SPIRITUALITY
 SCHOOL and WORK
 PLAY and RECREATION
 SICKNESS and HEALING
 OUR PAST, PRESENT and FUTURE

The teams were responsible for introducing each theme in ways that would create dialogue, sharing, and learning as well as inspire thoughtful artwork. Being careful not to impose didactic instruction on what art must be, the artists helped the children develop artistic skills for improving their artistic expression and in turn, helping them express their ideas and feelings with greater confidence.

Again, careful not to impose adult values and language, the resource persons encouraged them to write a brief caption about each piece of art they produced. In all, the young people in the four sites created nearly 800 pieces of artwork over the two years.

The artwork was created during the fall and winter months. By late spring, each site had developed a sizable collection which was then sorted by themes or media, catalogued, photographed, and shrink-wrapped. The collections were split into four parts – one to be exhibited in the local community and the others to be exchanged with the other three sites. The arrival of artwork from “different” kids in “different” communities provided opportunities for more dialogue about similarities and differences and for practicing openness, acceptance and appreciation. These created rich discussions among the young people and adults.

At each site, the exhibits were mounted and families and communities were invited to view them. The arts organizations hung the exhibits in their own gallery spaces. The community organizations hung exhibits in their community rooms and in other spaces in their communities – at malls, museums, and a youth recreation center. The opening receptions and exhibit viewings were times for sharing with parents and the respective communities, and for receiving their approval. They were also occasions for cultivating the communities’ appreciation for art as a means of cultural sharing and learning.

The culminating event in each of the years was a retreat on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The kids got to meet the other kids they had come to know through the art exchange. They were partnered with young people from other sites for arts projects, games, field trips and lodging. For three days in the first year and four days the second, they lived and actively practiced the principles of acceptance and appreciation they had spent time discussing. But that’s not what the young people would say about those retreat weekends, nor the whole of their YPCEP experience. They would probably simply say, “We had FUN!” Art is, indeed, a fun way to learn about self and others.

The Organizations in 2000

Madison County Cultural Center

Founded in 1992 and incorporated in 1993, the Madison County Cultural Center (Madison) provides arts programming in a county that is socio-economically and racially diverse – predominantly black rural communities of working poor in the north of the county and an affluent predominantly white population to the south in the bedroom communities of nearby Jackson. The Cultural Center is located in the old Madison-Ridgeland High School on Main Street in the town of Madison. The facility, which is leased from the Madison County Board of Supervisors, offers limitless possibilities for programs and services for the communities it serves. The board and staff of the Center are invested in a long-term commitment to bridging disparities in the community, encouraging cultural development, and increasing the availability of opportunities for using art to create dynamic community partnerships. The Cultural Center fulfills its mission of “*providing opportunities for education and participation in the arts for all residents of Madison County*” through visual and performing arts courses for all ages; after school care and arts activities for children; a scholarship program for children who cannot afford tuition; a performing arts series featuring outstanding Mississippi touring artists; a quarterly newsletter distributed through the local newspaper; and collaborative projects with other community organizations.

Mississippi Cultural Crossroads

Mississippi Cultural Crossroads (MCC) operates in two buildings the organization purchased in 1989 and 1990 on Market Street in historic Port Gibson, the county seat of rural Claiborne County. The county of 12,000 residents is 82% African American. Unemployment is higher and median family incomes lower than state averages. The lack of employment opportunities causes an out-migration of young adults and disproportionately high populations of children and seniors. Many adults commute to work in urban areas creating the need for childcare and after school programs. Public schools and private academies remain essentially segregated. MCC is one of few places in the county where black and white residents come together outside of work environments. Its programming began in 1978 with an effort to encourage young people to explore the arts, crafts, lore, attitudes, and emotions of the cultures that have shaped the local community. It has continued to evolve out of a recognition of the needs and assets of the community and a vision for its future. Its mission is “*to promote the educational, cultural, and economic development of the citizens of Claiborne County by providing and supporting programs in the arts and humanities which will develop talents, provide outlets for personal expression, and create opportunities for persons of diverse cultural backgrounds to celebrate their heritage and learn respect for other cultures.*” Programs include: Crossroads Quilters, an adult program of quilting classes, apprenticeships, workshops, production, exhibits, residencies and sales; gallery exhibitions including national traveling exhibits, locally curated exhibits, the annual quilt show and children’s art exhibits; community theater productions drawing upon oral histories and local research; and after-school and summer youth arts programs.

Moore Community House

Located in the bustling gaming (docksides recreational gambling) city of Biloxi in Harrison County, Moore Community House (MCH) is “*an advocacy and service organization empowering people to make positive changes in their community and their lives.*” The organization was founded in 1924 as a mission agency of the United Methodist Church with the charge of designing services that respond to the needs of the community. MCH concentrates its efforts in an area bordered by the Biloxi Bay, the Gulf of Mexico, and Keesler Air Force Base, a culturally rich but economically impoverished neighborhood of African American, Vietnamese and white residents. Nearly 700 of

its 931 families live in public housing and 73% of these have annual incomes of less than \$6,000 per family. While the new gaming industry has displaced many neighborhood patterns, it has not absorbed unemployed populations, especially the high percentage of residents who lack a high school education. In this context, MCH offers pre-school child care, Early Head Start, meals and nutrition education, parent education and support programs, family counseling, after-school tutoring and enrichment, summer reading programs, cultural arts workshops, adult literacy, and anti-prejudice World of Difference training.

Operation Shoestring

Founded in the basement of a neighborhood church in 1968, Operation Shoestring is an ecumenical community services ministry located on Bailey Avenue in the Georgetown neighborhood of inner-city Jackson. Georgetown, once a proud, modest African American community, has, in recent decades, gone through cycles of physical blight and economic decline. Shoestring's mission is to: *help people overcome the problems of poverty and racism in order to become self-sufficient... meet the spiritual, emotional and social needs of people and work actively toward social, economic and racial reconciliation.* The organization seeks to be a collaborative partner with faith communities, businesses and interested individuals in efforts of helping residents fight against the decline of their community. Its programs, organized under Children and Youth Development, Child Care, and Family Development, include child care for pre-schoolers in an on-site day care center and sixty home-based day cares in Georgetown and other Jackson communities and after school and all-day summer programs for children in grades K-12. Activities for children include computer classes, literacy monitoring, arts activities, nutritious meals, gardening, storytelling, and recreational activities.

Other Players

Nayo Watkins, the consultant/facilitator for the project, is sole proprietor of *bodacious Consulting & Organizing* based in Durham, NC. Under the credo of *Culture, Art, Community – toward a bold and bodacious new world*, she provides training, facilitation, organizational planning, board and staff development, feasibility studies, and other technical assistance services for arts and community organizations in North Carolina and the South. As with MS YPCEP, Nayo provides facilitation and/or coordination for community projects that explore relationships between art, culture, community, and empowerment through partnerships and collaborations. These have included the Mississippi American Festival Project (1990-92) and the Durham-based Alternate ROOTS Community Artist Partnership Project (1993-94.) Nayo is also a technical and creative writer, playwright, and journalist.

Jearlean Osborne started out as Project Director for the YPCEP project at Moore Community House, one of many positions she has held in her long-time employment with Moore. In the Biloxi community, she is well known as a community organizer and cultural organizer. With her promotion to director of Moore's community development coalition, she left the role of YPCEP project director but remained close to the project by facilitating team workshops, leading sessions at the final retreat, and participating in the evaluation of the project.

Patricia Smith served as State Coordinator during the first year of the MS YPCEP. A former arts council administrator, she currently works as an arts consultant based in Meridian, Mississippi.

Beth Batton served as YPCEP Statewide Coordinator from late 2000 to the end of the project. She has also worked as arts program administrator and in other positions at Mississippi Cultural

Crossroads. A photographer with a fine arts major and further study in documentary studies, Beth has exhibited her work in Atlanta and Mississippi and has conducted community documentation projects in Maine and Mississippi. Shortly after the close of the MS YPCEP, she joined the staff of the Mississippi Arts Commission as Community Arts Director.

The Group for Cultural Documentation: Roland Freeman, David B. Levine, and Judith H. Katz of TGCD conceived, initiated and facilitated the group process for the 1993-94 YPCEP pilot project. That project created an exchange between Mississippi Cultural Crossroads of Port Gibson, Mississippi, Old Pascua (Yaqui Indian) Youth Artists of Tucson, Arizona and Weybridge Elementary School of Weybridge, Vermont. Based in Washington, DC, TGCD was established in 1991 for the purpose of *increasing awareness, understanding and appreciation among individuals, communities, and institutions throughout our nation of the nature, continuity, vitality and significance of our multicultural traditions.* Toward this goal, it seeks to document cultural traditions, exhibit and interpret cultural materials, produce and disseminate cultural and educational information, educate and bridge cultural gaps, promote awareness, sustain impact by encouraging replication of its approach, and over time, begin to establish and maintain archives of artifacts and related materials. The TGCD team provided valuable start-up facilitation for the MS YPCEP and remained available for consultation throughout the project. Their publication, *Drawing Our Worlds Together*, which documents the earlier project, was a constant guide for the MS YPCEP.

Mississippi Arts Commission: The State Arts Commission was not only a funder of YPCEP, but also facilitated processes for conceiving and initiating the project. Lynn Wilkins, then MAC Community Arts Director, hosted the pre-project meetings at the MAC office and helped the potential participants think through how the project might work.

The Staffs

The staff of the MS YPCEP partner organizations included seasoned professionals with years of experience as program directors and project managers, experienced and talented artists, dedicated community organizers and activists, as well as young people still in school or in the early years of their work careers who were eager to have on-the-job training in community/arts work.

Madison County Cultural Center

Mark McCrary, Executive Director

Terri Cribb, Artist

Chris Reid, Program Coordinator (2000)

Melanie Johnston, Program Coordinator 2001

Evelyn Elmore, Administrative Asst.

Mississippi Cultural Crossroads

Patty Crosby, Executive Director & Artist

Shonica McBride, Artist

Lionel Milton, Visiting Artist

Nancy Calcutt, Visiting Artist

Geraldine Nash, Program Assistant, Quilter, Bookkeeper

Shirley McBride, Community Resource Person (2000)

Clancy McGrew, Community Resource Person (2001)

Beth Batton, Arts Coordinator

Moore Community House

Julene Mayeweski, Executive Director

Jearlean Osborne, Project Director (2000)

Juanita Laws, Project Director (2001)

Annette Brealand, Community Resource Person (2000), Project Director (2001)

Angela Sartin, Artist (2000)

Rebecca Stockton Rossi, Artist (2001)

Barbara King, Community Resource Person (2000)

Felicia Walker, Community Resource Person (2001)

Eretta Jenkins, Community Resource Person (2001)

Alice Brown, volunteer

Operation Shoestring

Robert Langford, Executive Director

Cyrus Webb, Artist (2000)

Felandus Thames, Artist (2001)

Terrence Jackson, Community Resource Person (2000)

Naomi Carter, Community Resource Person (2001)

Patricia Smith, state coordinator (2000)

Beth Batton, state coordinator (2001)

How It All Worked

Planning and Implementation

Spring 1998

Patty Crosby sent out letters telling folks around the state about the “wonderful Young Person’s Exchange Program” her organization had been a part of in 1994-95. “If you think this is something that is right for your organization, make arrangements to attend the June 23rd meeting,” she wrote.

So we met all day at the Mississippi Arts Commission. David Levine, Judith Katz and Roland Freeman of TGCD were there to answer questions and trigger our imaginations about a MS YPCEP. We had more meetings, and in time, we gained the confidence, excitement and momentum to undertake the project.

December 9-12, 1999

TPM #1 – The formal beginning of the project! We met in Biloxi so it seemed quite fitting that we first visit Moore Community House. We interacted with some of the children and observed the staff at work. Our meetings were held at a retreat center with the waves of the Gulf of Mexico lapping the beach across the street. Everybody came with high expectations and more than a few nervous apprehensions. How would it all work? Would we all get along? Could we make a successful project? Would it be a good experience for each of us and for our organizations?

Nayo Watkins was there to lead the process. As we would later do with the children, she asked that we start with “Who Are We?” Each of us talked about ourselves – What you like to be called. What makes you smile. Something that gives meaning to your life. Then each organization did “Mapping Your Community”, a drawing of the cultural symbols of our communities. We reviewed *Drawing Our Worlds Together*, the required reading about the earlier pilot project, and looked to it for helpful lessons. We were aware that we were inheriting a vision and it was up to us to interpret the vision in ways that would work for our organizations and collaboration. We talked about how the project would work in our four sites and worked on details for the collective project – consensus on themes, shared goals, what needed to be done by when and what resources and information were needed to get started. It was also necessary to talk about how we would do the YPCEP work while maintaining our regular organizational responsibilities. We took a deep breath. Then we talked about “The Hard Stuff” – confronting our own assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes – a prerequisite for addressing similar issues with the kids. We made art, did cultural sharing and ate wonderful meals together. Then we finalized our action plan, clarified administrative and technical assistance details, and went home to start working. We were highly charged now and some of the apprehensions were subsiding.

January- March 2000

With a January 10th start date facing us, the local site teams scrambled to get ready for the big challenge – working with the young people. Flyers had to be done and distributed, participants recruited, inventories surveyed, supplies ordered, and press releases written. Parents were invited to orientation gatherings. Some of us were having trouble identifying and securing an artist. Others had trouble recruiting young people. Still combining patience with frantic work, it all started coming together and finally, it was happening. Active, imaginative children crowded our spaces with lively discussions and wonderful artwork. Parents stuck their heads in as they picked up their children and some came in to check out the commotion firsthand. As planned, we tried to do lessons plans, record how it went, and send weekly reports to the State Coordinator for what we had promised would become the documentation of our work.

March 2000

Our teams included people who had not worked together before. We were administrators, artists and community workers. We had different working languages; different ways of working, and quite simply, didn't always know how to work together. Jearlean Osborne led a Team Building workshop in Port Gibson. She asked us to consider the differences, commonalities and shared values among us, and to consider how we wanted to pass on these strengths to young people. Then we broke up into site teams and practiced teamwork by developing lesson plans based on the themes.

March 30- April 1, 2000

TPM #2 -- This time we met in Jackson which allowed us to visit the Madison and Shoestring centers. In our meeting, with the work well underway at the sites, of course, there had to be time for show & tell, and time for oohs and aahs. But we also needed reflection time to step back from the hectic days we were going through and examine what we were doing. We needed to affirm what was going well and brainstorm around what wasn't going as planned. We were building trust and a willingness to be supportive of each other. After that, we turned our attention to the nuts and bolts of the tasks before us — developing the collections, preparing for shipping, exchanging and mounting the exhibits and a workable timeline for all of the above. By now, eating together had become a bonding ritual so we took great pleasure in choosing the restaurants and meals we would share. We began making plans for the annual retreat and assigned a committee from the four sites to continue the planning. Lastly, we tackled the less joyful but ever pressing issues of collective management, budget, and fundraising responsibilities.

April- June 2000

Back home, it was a busy time at the sites. – selection of pieces for both the exchange and home exhibits, captions and interpretive materials, making photo slides, shrink wrapping, packing, and figuring out best methods for shipping. We kept in touch across the state through conference calls. The retreat committee talked. The directors talked. So many logistics had to be worked out.

By mid-May, the sites had split the collections into four parts and sent three of them off to the other sites. But that didn't mean we had a breather, only start-up for the next phase. As the artwork arrived, we had discussions with the kids about the work of the kids from the other sites – similarities and differences, likes and dislikes. Press releases were sent out, the exhibits mounted, and opening receptions held. By now, parent interest was picking up and some agreed to help with the openings. Finally, we – adults and young people — took a moment to glow in the appreciation and approval our respective communities gave. Surely, the kids were bolstered by all the attention they received. Then we packed up and took off for the retreat on the Gulf Coast.

June 5-8, 2000

The retreat was the culminating event for our first year of MSPCEP. The kids had seen each other's artwork and now they were meeting and teaming up as partners with these "other" kids who were new and different, and yet familiar and similar. With Moore taking the lead for planning activities, it was three days of Biloxi sun and sand, fun and games, making art together, and sharing field trips. One highlight was a visit to the Friendship Tree, a huge coastal-grown live oak with broad limbs that the kids could climb onto as they listened to its legendary history. Young people have an amazing capacity for taking on new experiences. We hoped we had prepared them with skills and tools for acceptance and respect. Whatever their levels of understanding, they dove into the experience as only the young can do. Parents came too, and we adults tried our best to guide the kids and keep up with their energy at the same time.

June 14-16, 2000

TPM #3 -- There we were again, back at the retreat center across from the beach in Biloxi. There was a sense of accomplishment and no doubt, a great sense of relief among us. We started the TPM by debriefing on what had been most enjoyable and most difficult for us as individuals and for our organizations over the past year. Our TPMs had become wonderful equalizing experiences that allowed everybody to have their equal say no matter what their job or position. We reflected, sharing our favorite stories, laughing a lot, and shaking our heads about things that had amazed, outdone, and delighted us. We looked back and evaluated what we had done, walking step by step through the project – from its basic format and framework to its management and administration. With a successful year under our belts, we began to look forward to the next year by revisiting, reaffirming or revising each of the goals of the project. We determined what and where changes and improvements would take place. With a level of comfort between us, we had the confidence to be bold, thoughtful and assertive in our visioning.

Summer 2000

Over the summer, we saw some of our MSYPCEP kids in the summer camps at each of the sites. For MSYPCEP, there were grant applications to write and final reports to make. The State Coordinator nagged at folks about overdue reports, slides, anecdotal stories, and other documentation. At the sites, there were staff changes and staffing decisions to be made.

October 5-7, 2000

TPM #4 – We met in Jackson for the beginning of the new year. There were a few new faces in the room and some people had shifted their roles within the project. “Everybody on the Same Foot,” “The Way I See It,” and “The Happy Medium” were exercises for sharing and for creative visioning aimed at getting us all started in the new year together. In our determination to take good work to a better level, we spent time fleshing out the themes, developing lesson plans around them, suggesting ways to introduce them, and role playing on how to do it. We talked about the differences in the ways artists and community workers view the arts and the value of each perspective, and about merged visions. An art therapist made a presentation on listening and caring for the whole child. We talked about power dynamics between adults and children and what it means to involve children in “participatory process.” Then we spent two full sessions on our action plan, developing a very clear and specific timeline for our work and clarifying the distribution of tasks within and between the teams. There was a determination to put what we’d learned last year into action in the new year.

October – November

Recruitment, enrollment, and start-up. We were excited to be off to a good start, beginning earlier this year than last and assuring ourselves that we would avoid last spring’s crunch of developing and exchanging the collections. We had planned well and everything was in place – all the forms and procedures for lesson planning and reporting; systems for securing the artwork with the children’s captions attached; distribution of responsibilities of the teams; expenditure recording and reporting, reimbursements, in-kind tracking, photo and slide documentation.

Again, the joy of the project was watching the children do art, listening to their chatter as they worked on their pictures and as they presented what they had created and what it meant to them. There was joy, too, in seeing the pride in parents’ faces as their children showed them the work they had done.

January 11-13, 2001

TMP #5 -- There was much to share. As usual, we lined the walls around the meeting room in Biloxi with artwork the kids had produced. We shared stories about how we introduced themes and the moving, witty, funny, and innocent thoughts the children brought to discussions. Collectively, we rejoiced about our hard earned confidence and the improvements we’d made over our first year. There were lots of victories to celebrate about our work with the kids, their families, and in our communities. Even so, with all we had learned and all the planning we’d done, why were some things just not going quite right? Why hadn’t all the sites been able to start on time? Why were we still having trouble doing written plans and documenting our sessions with the kids? Why was teamwork still an issue for some teams? Why was it still necessary to talk about kid-centeredness and reflecting the values of the project in the actions of adults? We talked about these things. There were no redemptive answers, only to keep

learning and trying to get it right. We did an exercise called “Moccasins” in which we “walked in the shoes” and tried to see through the eyes of the young people. Then we moved forward into discussions about the work of the next months – our expectations and standards which, again, had to be a merger of perspectives. And, finally as always, the ever present budget and bookkeeping issues.

February 3-4

MS Cultural Crossroads extended an invitation to the sites to visit Port Gibson at the time of the always memorable and momentous annual Alcorn State and Jackson State basketball game. We thought it was important that the young people get to see each other in their own communities. Only the kids from Moore Community House in Biloxi could make the trip. Besides the basketball game, the two groups had a picnic in a park, made art, played games, and shared a Sunday morning spiritual service with music, Bible readings and poetry. With the help of local parents, they finished it off with a potluck dinner.

February - June, 2001

Although we were still working on getting it “right,” our experience from last year served us well as we completed the themes and finished the artwork in preparation for the exchanges and exhibits. Collectively, the children’s work seemed to have improved. This year, we tried harder to involve the children in the “participatory process” of selecting and preparing the artwork to be exhibited. The shrink-wrapping and shipping went smoother. The appearance and tone of captions and text panels achieved a more desired level of exactness and consistency. Exhibits were planned for new and additional community sites and were attracting excellent press coverage. By late May and early June, our exhibits were opening at malls in Jackson and Biloxi, at a historic museum in Jackson, and in the galleries at MCC and Madison.

June 1, 2001

Diversity Training. Somebody somewhere once said that the more you know, the more you know there is to know. Most of us had gotten involved in this project because we understood the importance of giving young people opportunities for affirmation of self and appreciation for others. Although we considered ourselves and our organizations to be broadminded and non-discriminating, we knew that we would learn too. Each TPM had covered some aspect that helped us broaden our understandings and further confront our own assumptions. We, adults were different, too – black and white, male and female, young and not so young, educated and not so educated, from urban and suburban neighborhoods and rural hamlets. Each time we came together, we were actively practicing the values underlying the project. Even within the collaborative management of the project, we had had to learn and practice acceptance and tolerance for differences in organizational cultures. Yet as we neared the end of the project, we suspected that we might have missed something. So, we revisited difference, diversity, understanding and acceptance. In a workshop led by Jearlean, we looked at the influences that made us who we are, shaped our values, and molded our cultural assumptions. We examined the assumptions of mainstream America that impact and

influence our daily lives. We compared the roots and causes of behaviors to the ideals we desire to act upon and recommitted to carrying out the ideals in our lives and in our work. Not that we weren't already committed, just that re-examination and recommitment take the form of renewal.

June 13-16, 2001

This time the culminating retreat was held in Waveland, Miss., further east along the Gulf Coast from Biloxi. Again, it was fully packed days of arts and recreational activities. In one day alone, we did icebreaker exercises, Polaroid photo taking, banner making, volley ball, wave pool, tennis, basketball, soccer, Frisbees, jump rope, horseshoes, and topped it off with a seafood fest. On other days, we traveled to a national seashore park, the Friendship Tree, the mall where the MSYPCEP artwork was exhibited. We took a train tour and made art on the beach. The young people got to talk to local fishermen. They had a talent show and made friendship bracelets to exchange. In a change of pace, we worked on our evaluation forms and the kids wrote letters of thanks to funders. The occasion, which marked the end of the two-year project, was quite joyous, but a little sad, too.

July 12-14, 2001

TPM #6 – Well, of course, we couldn't end it all without one more TPM. We gathered in Jackson – 13 of us from the four sites plus Nayo, the facilitator who had been with us for the two years, and Beth, the State Coordinator. We started by talking about what we wanted to get from this final TPM. Then each of us evaluated each goal with a grade and discussed the grades we had given. The group discussions were rich. We were ready to be blatantly and generously honest in both our praise and our criticism of how well we had fulfilled the goals at our sites and in the statewide project. We were hard on ourselves, but we also admitted that some of our harshness was the weighing of actual accomplishments against our own high expectations, and that the more we had accomplished, the higher our expectations had risen. Mostly, we were extremely proud of what we had achieved and ready to pass on what we had learned in the hopes that others will want to take this journey.

What had we learned and how would we tell others? How would we articulate the richness as well as the challenges of the experience in words? We revisited our assumptions about culture, art, people, process, and organization with an eye to what we will tell others. This report summarizes what we came up with.

How It All Worked

Working with the Young People

Creating Dialogue about Self and Community

The nine themes provided a view master through which children could look at themselves, their families and their communities, and create art based on their own perceptions of what they saw. Essentially, they were being asked to describe and draw their “culture” – their beliefs, traditions, customs, social manners/protocol, values, and way of life. Approaching each topic, the site teams developed lesson plans for engaging the children in examining these abstract notions and bringing them to discussion and artwork through concrete experiences in their daily lives. Standardized planning and reporting forms across the project provided a way to capture and share the progress of the dialogues. Often the themes were introduced by asking the children to think about and discuss them from their own experiences. Brainstorming in TPMs had also produced a list of resource materials and experiences for getting discussions started – reading books or poems, writing exercises, games, videos, field trips, and visits by community elders, specialists in particular fields, or artists of other media. Below are a few examples of what the site teams did and how it worked:

What Makes Me

- ◆ The Madison team used “Thank You, Mr. Faulker” by Patricia Polacco as an icebreaker and a way to get the children thinking about life experiences. Their discussion led to personal likes and dislikes, the “inside” and “outside” person, influences such as television, feelings of loneliness and of being different, and triumphs over adverse situations.
- ◆ The Shoestring team started by giving the children an outline of a face and asking them to first draw a mirror image of themselves and then filled out the space around it with their likes and dislikes. The drawings were the springboards for discussions.

Family and Friends:

- ◆ The theme of family created lively discussion at Shoestring as the children talked and wrote about family members who inspired them and others with whom they’d argued or fought. Discussion led to ways of compromising, tolerance, and the continual love of family members even when they are annoying.
- ◆ At Moore, the friendship discussion focused on the meaning of friendship. “Acquaintance” was introduced as a vocabulary word and they talked about the difference between a friend and a person you know.

Community and Neighborhood:

- ◆ The theme of community was introduced at MCC by making a chart of the children’s choices for the most important place in the community or the place they would not want destroyed by a tornado. In the course of it, the children wanted to talk about whether “community” was “the little place where I live?” or all of Claiborne County.
- ◆ With an introduction about personalities and characters in their community, Moore’s children talked about the good and the not-so-good in their community, about differences in communities, and improvements they would like to see.

Food:

- ◆ The Shoestring team used magazine clippings to trigger imaginations about foods. Still, after talking about all types of food preferences including religious-based choices, the kids ending up naming French fries as their most favorite food.

- ◆ MCC read “Our Family Table” a compilation of favorite recipes edited by Camille Cosby. They also had a parent’s meeting for which each parent shared recipes and brought a favorite dish for a potluck meal.

Celebration and Spirituality:

- ◆ Madison’s team used “I’m in Charge of Celebrations” by Byrd Baylor to introduce celebrations. As they covered spirituality, they invited a Catholic priest, a Jewish Rabbi, and Baptist minister to come to talk about religious customs and ways of worship. The children enjoyed the speakers and were eager to express themselves both in discussion and in their artwork.
- ◆ At Shoestring, Mardi Gras was discussed as both a religious ritual and a celebration. The children then made Mardi Gras masks using acrylic paint and glitter.

Play and Recreation:

- ◆ Moore introduced play and recreation with a field trip and by playing games the children enjoyed. This led to discussion on what, when, and where play time is spent and the importance of recreation.

Past, Present & Future:

- ◆ The kids at Madison and MCC interviewed older family members as a way to look at the past. For the present and future, they imagined the art room to be a time capsule. They were asked to think about something in the world they would change, and with a snap of the finger, they were conveyed to and described the changed time.

Making Art about Self and Community

After discussions and often during them, the young people created works of art to reflect the theme they were addressing. How they interpreted the themes mirrored their life experiences, cultural perspectives, and personal preferences. The artists guided the work. They taught the basic elements of visual art – line, shape, texture, balance, color, contrast, etc. Their approach to instruction was to help the children gain skills and techniques for developing and improving their individual creative responses as opposed to the practice of skills and techniques for art’s sake. The children learned contour drawing as a way to improve their drawing of faces and facial features. They learned to mix colors to discover the variety of colors they might use. They learned to fill in the background of a drawing as a way to create mood or give greater detail or emphasis. They were encouraged to use a range of materials – pastels, watercolors, tempera, paper mache, colored pencils, pencils, markers, crayons, collage, sand, mud, chalk, fabric, charcoal – as experimentation for making personal choices about what worked best for them. As they experienced growth in their artwork, they gained confidence in their creative abilities and in themselves. Their experience is best articulated in their own words:

- *I learned how to make eyes connect to the nose.*
- *I learned how to draw lips perfectly!*
- *I used to leave out details. I used to just draw figures, but now I do more details. My art has changed a little, it’s smoother, straighter and I have fewer mistakes.*
- *When I draw now, I can make things look more realistic.*
- *I learned a lot of different steps to channel what I want to say through pictures – sit down, think about it, picture what you want in your mind and put a picture to it.*
- *I learned how to use different kinds of shades. I used to use the same shade.*
- *I draw better than I used to, because I can draw a nose better.*
- *I learned that when you draw, don’t leave the paper white, color it and cover the empty spaces.*
- *I was taught that you don’t just draw; you have to put feelings in it. I used to put a house, just a house! Now I put more details – like if I make it cloudy, I use the rain.*
- *I can do better art.*

- *I'm proud of my drawings because I try my best.*
- *I think I can do a lot of stuff in my drawing. I get to show how I feel.*
- *I feel more confident because I know I can do it.*

Cultural Exchange
First They Met the “Others” Through the Artwork
Then They Met Them For Real

Sending and Receiving the Exhibits

When the Biloxi kids visited the Port Gibson kids, one Biloxi boy commented that the other kids there were not so different at all, because, “they have art classes and we have art classes.” Mostly, as they helped to wrap and pack their art to be sent off to the other sites, the children could only imagine what the children who would receive their art would be like. Some had visited those other places; some hadn’t. Still based on their perceptions of what those places were like, they imagined those “other” kids to be like that. Surely, stereotypes came into play. Then as the collections arrived, there were similarities and differences to explore, some slight, others profound. At each site, the children looked at the drawings and read the captions of the “different” kids. They were awed, pleased, and sometimes judgmental. Some things in the other drawings were familiar and clear; other content had to be looked at closely and studied for understanding. But more than anything else, there was a sense of connection to these other kids in other places who, like them, had spent the last months creating art around the special themes, and an appreciation for what they were trying to say through their art.

The Retreat: Meeting by the Beach

A retreat gathering culminated the activities of each of the two years. The kids had met each other through the artwork and at the retreats; they met and interacted with the kids behind the art. It was also a meeting of cultures, classes, races, and places. What would the black kids from inner-city Jackson have in common with the urban coastal kids from Biloxi who were also black? Would the white suburban kids from Madison County know the games, the slang, the heroes of the black rural Claiborne County kids, and vice versa? What about pop culture – musical videos, hair styles, religious practices, television shows and foods? Would their likes and dislikes of the four groups be similar? Only one thing was for sure – they had all been involved in making art.

Each young person was given a partner from one of the other sites. The partners did art projects together and made farewell gifts for each other. They shared recreational activities and field trips. There were informal times for getting to know the other kids and sharing information about their lives and interests – boyfriend and girlfriend matters, school experiences, favorite CDs, clothes, and families.

Each site team took responsibility for one activity or another. That meant planning and leading the activity and bringing supplies needed to carry it out. Together the teams were responsible for structuring activities for exchange and interaction, and for maximizing opportunities for appreciating the differences and likenesses within the group.

Difference and Diversity

The Mississippi Context

Mississippi is geographically, racially, ethnically, culturally, and economically diverse. Its citizenry includes racists and bigots, progressives and change agents, powerful people and powerless people. Its tapestry is woven with a diversity of cultures based on race, nationality, class, and location. The tapestry is often woven into segregated blocks, though less so than before. Mississippians are acutely aware of outside perceptions of Mississippi as the “worst of the worst” or the “bottom of the barrel” because of the state’s legacy of slavery and Jim Crow and its record of civil rights and race relations abnormalities. We, however, know our state as part and parcel of all that is beautiful and all that is ugly in the American experience, and the many contradictions in between. We have not outlived Mississippi’s legacies, and some of them are not past legacies but realities of the present. Yet, we also know the contradictions to the legacies: the day-by-day victories over them that do not make the national news and the richness of cross cultural and interracial endeavors that defy them. What is more important, and what was important to the YPCEP partner organizations, is what we can do now to simply and willfully create a more equitable, respectful, and joyful present and future for our state and our world.

Preparing young Mississippians for the future is a multi-layered task involving all the institutions and influences that touch children, including programs like YPCEP. Our project began with strengthening a sense of the children’s individual uniqueness, their connection to family, friends, and community, and by extension, the cultural beliefs, traditions and values that inform their daily lives. The project then sought to broaden the self-discovery and cultural affirmation experience through opportunities for developing awareness and appreciation of the individual and cultural differences and similarities of others. The arts experiences served as a powerful common carrier for the exploration, the learning, the growing.

Organizational Collaboration

The four organizations were recognizably “different.” By location, they were urban, suburban, and rural. Their constituencies ranged from very poor to well-off and from low-income to upper middle class with only slight class variances within the sites. Missions were different – two arts organizations and two community development organizations. Perhaps the most significant difference was that of operations – the priorities that drive the day-to-day and the organizational “culture” at each site. Within the collaboration, people worked to understand, accept, and compensate for the differences. At the sites, staff worked to develop strategies for how to approach the goals within the organizational resources and limitations.

The State Coordinator was key to maintaining communication between the organizations. She received and maintained site records, wrote and disseminated TPM minutes, wrote and distributed a newsletter, and helped maintain the flow of assigned tasks. She also prodded and prompted the sites to maintain schedule and meet deadlines. Her central positioning helped to equalize the differences between the organizations and synchronize their work.

From the beginning, emphasis was placed on team building at the sites and across the project. The TPMs and other team meetings were central to building teamwork. Teamwork was demonstrated through the distribution of labor between the organizations. Each organization was responsible for submitting funding applications and filing final reports. Project management through records and reports was also a shared responsibility. For the retreats, the organizations shared responsibilities

for leading different activities and bringing the materials for those activities. Equal shares within the collective responsibility was not necessarily the sought for or attainable goal. More often, responsibilities were undertaken by the organization most appropriate to do the task.

The TPMs allowed for inclusion and participation at all levels. Artists, community resource persons, support staff, and administrators gave attention to all aspects of planning and problem-solving – from the creation of artwork to the details of preparing for and mounting exhibits; from issues of respect and power dynamics and to the logistics of travel and lodging; from retreat scheduling to menu and eatery choices; from agenda items to budgetary and cash flow matters. The state team included persons who were in their early 20s to persons aged over 60 years; college students, college graduates and people who had not been to college; young people in the early years of their careers and seasoned professionals. While deference was given to areas of expertise and/or areas of responsibility, EVERYBODY was free to offer constructive opinions and ideas. The open process provided an excellent training ground for the young adults and perhaps helped to cultivate another generation of arts administrators and cultural workers.

What We Learned: Lessons to Pass On

There is probably no way to capture all that the children, the parents, the team members and the organizations learned through the MS YPCEP. At our final TPM, we brainstormed about what we had learned, how our assumptions had changed, and what was important to pass on. Here is some of that brainstorming:

About Art:

- Art is a process of expressing feelings.
- Art is relevant; art is relative to culture and experience.
- Anybody can create art; training strengthens the product and expression.
- Good art supplies and the quality materials are critical.
- Art can be utilitarian. Art is necessary.
- Art can be helpful in developing decision-making skills. It is helpful to children and it can be helpful to adults, too – as parents and as citizens and voters; you experience the effect of living with the consequences.

About Organization and Collaboration

- Communication is critical to success of the project.
- A key goal is to develop the sustainable capacity of the organizations.
- Buy-in from partners is critical to the partnership.
- Leaderships/management styles: the leaders need to be part of the process; allow growth to empower. Empowerment is key to getting things done.
- Organic process vs. organizational mandates: directors/managers have to make judgements at times about when the consequence of allowing others learn responsibility (organically) is too great a risk for the success or failure of the project.
- People have different learning styles that must be considered in conveying information. At the TPMs, we've reinforced learning in different ways.
- Within the collaboration, avoid duplication of responsibility; may be best to have one fiscal agent.
- We hadn't realized how much of the learning in YPCEP would be amongst the organizations.
- There had to be a level of sufficient organizational and collaborative strength for this program to work.

Other Insights, Aha's, and Useful Pointers

Jearlean offered a visual metaphor of the project as a house: A broken foundation, she said, causes leaky roofs. A solid foundation consists of partnership responsibilities: carrying out the mission, planning, doing quality programming, communicating, securing funding, and sharing lessons learned. Cracks in the roof are natural conflicts: weak relationships, lack of trust, cultural differences. We built a strong foundation with a good roof in the MS YPCEP.

Building collaboration and implementing a successful project is a journey. It's important to allow time for the journey. Without the four sites coming together, setting ground rules, and spending time together in work and (a little) play, it would have been very difficult to pull off the project. The team members became friends, which helped them work by phone and e-mail when at a distance.

Effective communication includes hearing someone when they are being totally honest. That leads to trusting relationships. Compromise comes when trust is present. We had to talk about difficult issues, listen to each other, and do interactive exercises to learn about each other. We all have history and we associate those fears to similar situations. In making a journey that builds relationships, sometimes you have to take a deep breath and figure it out. When you have a panic moment, the partnership could dissolve or you can make the choice to move past the panic to understanding. We are the same, but we are different. We are different, but we are the same.

The three-peg team of artist, community resource person, and administrator would be ideal, but in reality, personal dynamics and circumstances necessitate that the team adapt. Planning times and specifically, lesson planning, were the best ways of keeping everyone on the same page.

In the YPCEP model, the artist is responsible for initiating the artwork and the community resource person is responsible for the cultural discussion. Sometimes, these two roles are valued differently. The attitude that the artist is more important than the community resource person transfers into the granting world.

Children often ask difficult questions. They go beyond the “script” or lesson plan. Adults need to have an awareness that this moment is serious. Inform and educate yourself on the theme before hand as much as you can. Then come from the heart when you respond. Realize that there is no textbook for this; it’s all part of a process and a journey.

One of the reasons bright, young people don’t have the confidence to become leaders, managers or administrators is because they think the leader types know something they don’t know or can’t learn. This program put us on an equal level – allowed the less experienced to join in the discussions with the more experienced – and we’ve grown the new responsibilities and experiences. As we move forward, we as individuals and as a group will have greater confidence in ourselves and in what we can do.

How can this MSYPCEP model impact Mississippi? It has taught us to give people a chance before judging them. The process of bringing people together to uplift and to redefine how we think about things began with our children, but could also become a model for organizational development. This is a strong model that could be used by social service agencies and community groups that are choosing to bridge differences and don’t know how to make it work.