Tales of Tolerance
College students use storytelling to inspire acceptance in the next generation
By Nicole Pinho

The best stories are more than entertainment, they are more than fantasy. The best stories carry a message. They are powerful. One New Jersey college has tapped into this power, and its storytelling students have honed their tales into tools for spreading tolerance.

Monmouth University, located in West Long Branch, New Jersey, offers The Power of Story, a class taught through the school’s communication department. Created by Professors Kim Cuny and Claire Johnson, the three-credit class supplies students with performance skills and cultural context. “Storytelling has been important throughout history to educate people and to help them understand the world around them,” Johnson explains. “Stories maintain a society, but they can also transform it.”

Transformation, in a nutshell, is the goal of the Monmouth University Storytelling Project. After a semester of training, the class of 20 student storytellers visits nearby Atlantic Highlands Elementary School, where they perform for classrooms teeming with young listeners. A common thread of tolerance, acceptance, and awareness of other cultures joins the stories told by the university students, in hopes that the children will absorb these messages and transform their thinking. It is an important lesson in times when violence in our schools and in our society is at a historical high.

A Perfect Partnership
Inspiration for the Storytelling Project struck when Cuny was new to Monmouth University. At an orientation meeting, there was a call for new classes incorporating experiential education or service learning. Cuny had gained experience in service learning during graduate school working with creative dramatics, and tolerance was a theme she wanted to promote. She considered how to combine the two. “Storytelling made a lot of sense,” she said.

Johnson approached Cuny with literature from Communicating Common Ground (CCG), a service learning initiative of the National Communication Association (NCA). With her interest in the relationship of stories to societies, Cuny recalled, “She said this initiative sounded like the perfect match for my idea, and she would be willing to work with me on it. From that point forward, we worked as a team. I look at storytelling as an oral performance used to teach children, and she brings in how stories transform cultures.”

CCG is a project of the NCA, Southern Poverty Law Center, Campus Compact, and the American Association for Higher Education. It pairs college classes with elementary and high schools. According to Sherwyn P. Morreale, Associate

Atlantic Highlands Elementary students listen intently to tales of tolerance.
Director of the NCA, “Students in the college classroom and the K-12 partner school should learn to value diversity, combat prejudice, and participate in communities where hate, hate speech, and hate crimes are not tolerated.” While the program does not recommend storytelling or any other specific technique, “Storytelling is a natural for the project,” Morralee asserted.

Most of Monmouth University thought so, too. On the road to becoming a college course, The Power of Story met little resistance. “We did have one comment during an approval review that said, ‘This sounds more like fantasy than a college course.’”

said Cuny. “The truth is, this is our fantasy come true.”

**Storytellers in Training**

Fantasy or not, the reality facing Cuny and Johnson was the question of how two professors could turn 20 students into storytellers, in the span of a 16 week semester. “I wasn’t sure we could teach the performance end,” said Cuny. “But it’s not a class that is only about how to tell stories. It’s about the many different powers of story.”

After culling advice from storytellers around the country, the professors developed a plan that blends voice, posture and character with history, theory and societal impact. The resulting pure conveyed the power of stories and created a team of novice student-tellers.

Storyteller Mary Carol Stunkel, co-founder of the Jersey Shore Storytellers, worked with the class. “The course does an excellent job of introducing students to the elements of good storytelling. It requires students to perform in a number of classroom settings away from the campus, giving both the teller and the listener a valuable gift,” she said. “And, personally, I found the professors’ obvious enthusiasm for the importance of the subject to be most infectious.”

“We ease the students into it, so it doesn’t become intimidating,” said Cuny. Students start off learning how to choose and memorize a story. They are graded on individual aspects of storytelling, voice one week, eye contact the next.

Students select stories with messages of acceptance and community, but it is often difficult for the professors to choose which ones should be offered in the first place. “That is a struggle for me,” said Johnson. “We look for stories that have tolerance themes. I also look for stories that portray women in a non-traditional role.” In any given semester, this can range from the mythology of native peoples to children’s tales by modern authors.

The 20 seats available in the class fill quickly, mostly with communication and education majors. Many of the students, never before exposed to storytelling, are surprised at the amount of material involved. “I did not know the depth of the history and techniques of storytelling,” said Shannon Gance, a senior. “I assumed that anyone could tell a story, especially to younger children, but I found my presumption was incorrect.”

“Storytelling was, by far, harder than I expected,” agreed Dan Stempora, a double major in communication and education. “But the class taught me a great many things I will incorporate into my classroom when I become an elementary teacher. Storytellers truly have a gift, a talent, and a great deal of power to change the lives of children.”

It’s Elementary

A semester’s worth of storytelling studies culminated in a visit to nearby Atlantic Highlands Elementary School. The student-tellers took over, infiltrating classrooms and releasing the children from their daily routine. The response was inspiring. “They go in nervous, but they come out positively high,” Johnson said of her storytellers. “The look in their eyes is something I’m going to remember for a long time.”

“The children hung on every word. I don’t think their teacher gets the amount of attention that we were receiving,” said senior Jeff Moritz.

Communication major Lonnie Abutboul performed “The Coconut and the Monkey’s Face” for third graders. The story expresses the importance of honor and friendship. “The students really enjoyed it. I know if
that happened to me in third grade, I'd be ecstatic. It made me feel good to give something back to the community.”

After stories have been shared, activities are used to reinforce the lesson of tolerance. In Kim Littlefield's sixth grade class, student-tellers Dan Stempora and Jackie O'Neil performed “The Brand New Kid” by Katie Couric. After telling the tale of a boy who is ridiculed at school because he is new to America, student-tellers asked the children to share their own experiences with bullying and had them offer suggestions on how they could be more accepting of people different than themselves. They then had the sixth graders read and sign a pledge against prejudice. As a daily reminder to practice tolerance, the students taped the pledges to the front of their desks.

“Storytelling brings the issue of tolerance to an appropriate level for the children and demonstrates a unique teaching tool that our students can use in the classroom,” said Marilyn Ward, coordinator of service learning and community programs at Monmouth. “The impact of the Storytelling Project grows each year, and we're proud to be part of it.”

Looking Ahead

The Monmouth University Storytelling Project is already extending its reach. Power of Story classes work with Partners in Learning, telling stories to at-risk children from the program and exposing them to college life. They also team up with the Leos, a junior Lion's Club service organization for children in grades four through eight. But Cuny and Johnson have bigger goals than that.

“We’re writing a grant to establish an Institute of Story at Monmouth University,” said Cuny. “We'd like to branch out to help other faculty members develop story courses. We'd like to work with other groups of children off-campus.” Cuny and Johnson are also planning smaller-scale projects, like organizing a storytelling festival on campus.

If the support they have been receiving keeps up, they just might reach their goals. The program has received grant money for books from Pathmark and GPU, as well as from the Teacher's Association at Atlantic Highlands Elementary School. Over $1,000 in grant money has been used to buy books with tolerance themes for the elementary school's library.

After three successful years of growth, Cuny and Johnson continue to strive to share the power of the Storytelling Project. “My biggest frustration is that we can't do enough,” Johnson said. "I feel like taking my students to an elementary school is such a small thing. It is not even a drop in the bucket of what needs to be done.”

Have Talent, Will Travel

Being an author herself, Gwynne Spencer of Mancos, Colorado, knows first hand the difficulty of getting information into the hands of the right people in education. Therefore, when she was approached by Linworth Publishing to create a directory of talent, she was more than willing. She solicited names through a request-for-information form and by searching key words such as storyteller on the internet.

A listing for any author, storyteller or illustrator who "loves to visit schools K-12" was included for free. The result will be a two-volume directory entitled Have Talent, Will Travel. The first volume will include listings west of the Mississippi, the second volume, those east of the Mississippi. Combined, the volumes have 3000 entries. Publication is scheduled for Fall of 2002. Linworth is a publisher of library support materials. They mail to 45,000 libraries monthly, attend 25 regional library conferences and are represented at every state library convention.

"Of all the replies I received, storytellers were in the minority,” said Gwynne. “We will be updating the material, so anyone who missed out on this opportunity is welcome to request an information form for later volumes.” Pengwynnes@aol.com