

## From the Co-Director's Desk

*By Ronald L. Sass, Co-Director, Center for Education*

Every now and then, it is helpful to us who work in the Center for Education at Rice University to step back and ask what the Center is and does and how successful it is in its varied activities.

To begin with, the Center was created in 1988 at the urging of The Brown Foundation, Inc. to form links between learning, research, curriculum, and school organization and policy. It was intended to be a significant presence in school change in the greater Houston area, working closely with school practitioners, community leaders, policy makers, and children. From the beginning, the Center has striven to improve K through 12 education by working closely with teachers to provide them with meaningful educational opportunities and by working together with them to create new ways for teaching and learning.

The Center has evolved into an exciting assembly of several different programs developed to enhance teaching and learning in pre-college environments. Programs include Asian Studies, School Literacy & Culture, The School Writing Project, The Model Science Laboratory, The School Science and Technology Project, lecture series and symposia, and Research and Publications. These projects are research-based and designed to help teachers realize their own potential as true professionals. It provides them with a base for establishing and strengthening links with each other and with community leaders, artists, writers, scientists, university scholars, and other school professionals. By building networks of teacher leaders, the Center provides a platform for policy discussions, serving as a catalyst for teachers to develop broad, systemic, and lasting improvements in their schools. The Center also assists in this process by conducting research on teaching and learning, as well as by disseminating the resulting information with the goal of serving as a national model for educational reform. *continued on page 3*

## Storytelling Grows at Bear Boulevard

*By Jonathan M. Hamrick*

The Bear Boulevard School in Spring Branch Independent School District is one of five schools for early learning available in SBISD. These schools are the first in Texas to offer full-day pre-kindergarten to every four-year-old in the district. Since 2002 the theories and methods of School Literacy and Culture's Classroom Storytelling Project have become central to the curriculum at Bear Boulevard. With seven resident teachers (teachers who have completed Classroom Storytelling Project training) and three mentor teachers (trained Classroom Storytelling Project teachers who guide resident teachers through their first year with the project) on its faculty, the Bear Boulevard School has made a concerted commitment to bringing storytelling and story acting into its classrooms. In fact, the program has been so successful that Bear Boulevard administrators have decided to make storytelling a part of the universal curriculum. All teachers have attended a workshop on children's storytelling. While they may not all be trained experts, all Bear Boulevard teachers are exposed to the values of the Classroom Storytelling Project.



Standing: **Tina Schwartz, Judy Ruppel, Debbie Paz**  
Seated: **Patty Brady, Vilma Lopez, Heather Wear**

The growth of the Classroom Storytelling Project (CSP) at Bear Boulevard can be attributed in large part to curriculum coordinator Judy Ruppel's belief in the project. "I was [teaching] in the classroom [when I first heard of] story dictation and I thought, children making up their own stories was such a neat way to integrate literature, vocabulary, recall, giving power to the children. And [the Trinity School for Young Children] was the only place doing it *continued on next page*



## Bear Boulevard continued

at that time, and then Rice picked it up and went on with it.” Ruppel has not only been instrumental in sending teachers to CSP training; she has attended the training herself, which is quite significant since she had moved out of the classroom and into curriculum planning when she was trained.

CSP-trained Bear Boulevard teachers were drawn to the “child-centered” aspect of taking stories. There are two important components to this child-centeredness. First, there is the intimate attention given directly from the teacher to a single child. According to mentor teacher Heather Wear, CSP has helped create a stronger “teacher-student bond. I felt closer to the kids.” This bond is strengthened through empowering the child. When taking a story, CSP teachers write down children’s words, asking questions for clarity, but never altering a child’s intent. “This is one of the only times when their stories will be written exactly as they say them,” says resident teacher Patty Brady. The other important child-centering component is the creation of a community among the children through the dramatization of dictated stories. After a child has dictated her story to the teacher, she has the opportunity to direct a class performance of the story. “They learn from each other and they get to help out with each other, too,” says Wear. “So there’s a chance for the class to relate, to get comfortable. It’s a little cozier.” According to mentor teacher Tina Schwartz, “The shy kids, ones that would normally back away, or who never really participate, will actually tell you a story and then act it out in a character that they wouldn’t be in their normal lives.” Creating this community helps build a child’s confidence, which can help children excel in areas other than language development.

In fact, it has been a bit of a pleasant surprise to see Bear Boulevard students fare remarkably well on district-administered language assessments. CSP is not designed as a test preparation program. It is actually just the opposite. “Traditional training is more skill-based and quite test-oriented,” says Ruppel. “[CSP] is totally for the child.” Yet, the CSP approach has actually improved performance. “In my first year I loved taking stories,” says mentor teacher Debbie Paz. “But I was panicked about the district assessment at the end of the year. Taking stories required so much time, I wasn’t able to do some of the things I usually do to prepare [for the assessment]. But, it turned out that group did better than any group I had ever had.” Schwartz points out the reason: “You’re giving them a model. They’re watching you write, so you can point out things like, ‘take a look at this word.’ When you’re taking a story, you can teach other things that go on in the story.” “It’s their own words,” says Brady. “And they’re interested.”

### In This Issue

From the Co-Director’s Desk <i>Ronald L. Sass</i>	1
Storytelling Grows at Bear Boulevard <i>Jonathan M. Hamrick</i>	1
Josephine Smith, Longtime SLC Supporter <i>Jonathan M. Hamrick</i>	3
Vivian Paley Visits SLC Miniconference <i>Jonathan M. Hamrick</i>	5
Racism Explained to my White Daughter <i>Patsy Cooper</i>	6

The benefits of storytelling can reach far beyond a student’s pre-kindergarten experience. “I don’t think we even realize we’re preparing them for that TAKS test they take in third grade,” says Ruppel. “They have to write paragraphs of stories, very elaborate ones, and the prelude to all of that is telling stories. And this way the children are learning to tell stories and learning little things like verbs and descriptive words, too.”

The child-centered CSP approach has also proven to be an effective way to help non-native speakers learn English. “First of all,” says Brady, “you get to see just how good their English is. I was able to see this pattern of a mistake this little girl made. She said, ‘When I went to the store, when I went to school, when I went etc.’ I quickly realized she meant, ‘Then I went to school, then I went to the store.’ When we had finished the story, we were able to see that she had this confusion. We could then go back and model the correct way.”

Children just love doing story dictation, too. Telling stories is part play and part exercise in empowerment. “They live in a fantasy-based world,” says Ruppel. “They love fantasy and fairy tales and to make it part of their curriculum is great.” “It’s their story,” says Schwartz. “They get to be in control.” This leaves a lasting impression on children. “We had a child come back and visit us [Debbie Paz and her Head Start teaching partner Vilma Lopez]” says Paz. “He did storytelling as a three-year-old in Head Start and in four-year-old pre-k, so he had two years of storytelling. He visited from kindergarten. He got in front of the class and said, ‘Kindergarten’s great, but we don’t get to tell stories.’”



## Josephine Smith, Longtime SLC Supporter

By Jonathan M. Hamrick

If one were to look at the number of educational organization boards on which Josephine Smith has served, one might rightly think that her decision to become involved in the Center for Education's School Literacy and Culture Project (SLC) in the early nineties stemmed primarily from a general interest in education. That is partially correct. In addition to her role as supporter of SLC, Smith also serves on the board for Teach For America, the Neuhaus Education Center, and the Houston Seminar. For many years, she was a trustee at the St. John's School in Houston, chairing the education committee for most of those years. Indeed, the breadth of her involvement in educational organizations cannot be overlooked. "I'm interested in school reform," says Smith, "in attracting new, bright, motivated people into education." The School Literature and Culture Project, however, displayed some special qualities.

With Center for Education co-director Linda McNeil's assurance that she would be impressed, Smith met School Literacy and Culture Project founder Patsy Cooper (currently assistant professor of education at New York University) in 1993. "I immediately felt enthusiastic about [Cooper's] work," says Smith. "One, because she's a very bright, engaging, and intellectually challenging person. And two, I had taught in a school in New York City right after college in the early sixties, and I had taken dictated stories from the students in my class. It was a big part of what we [\*continued on next page\*](#)

### From the Director continued

The success of the Center can be judged in several ways. It has exhibited gratifying financial endurance. Now sixteen years old, no program has been dropped or forced to curtail services for any reason. Budgets have been tight on many occasions, but somehow the Center has convinced enough people that it is a worthwhile organization to support. Our annual budget now approaches \$1.6 million, \$900,000 from gifts and grants, \$250,000 from contracts with schools and school districts, and \$450,000 from in-kind contributions.

Another measure of success is recognition of excellence. For example, The Model Science Lab Program was the first Center program to receive funding – a \$1.64 million grant – from the National Science Foundation. That program has since gained recognition as one of the most successful programs sponsored by the National Science Foundation. It has received state recognition by being given the Exemplary Partnership Award at the Governor's Conference for Mathematics, Science, and Technology Education, and has been locally recognized and funded by the Houston Independent School District. In a recent article in the Houston Chronicle, HISD Superintendent Saavedra stressed a district shift from a focus on testing to one on teaching. He recognized the value of this Center program for this new initiative by recommending that 100-plus middle school science teachers, who were enrolled in the Model Science Lab yearlong program, spend roughly half of their time working with and helping district elementary science teachers. Other Programs have had similar results and recognition. The School Science Project and the Aldine ISD received a "Special Recognition" award from the Texas Governor's Conference on Mathematics, Science, and Technology Education in 2002.

The success of the Center may be gauged by the continued support of the teachers who have participated in its programs. Thus far, the Center has directly served over 1,600 teachers and their 294,000 students. These teachers have been major spokespersons for the work of the Center, and have stayed in contact with it through the years. As an example, over 300 of these teachers annually attend the Hazel Creekmore Symposium sponsored by the Center and financed by an endowed gift from the Houston Endowment Inc.

The Center now looks forward to serving children and their education in the years to come. Center educational research projects have identified several problems facing education now and in the future. These include a study of the causes of adolescent dropouts for reasons related to their educational experiences in school and the pressures of high-stakes testing and accountability, that, rather than raising academic standards, may actually lower educational quality. Center researchers have found that studies that inform policy need to trace the effects of policy to the level where those effects impact children. The key to successful school improvement is developing teachers' capacity and knowledge in the areas of subject content, pedagogy, and the cultures of the students they serve. That is what the Center for Education is all about.



## Smith continued

did in terms of literacy.” It would appear as though Smith were destined to become involved in the School Literacy and Culture Project. Story dictation and dramatization form the cornerstone of the School Literacy and Culture Project’s Classroom Storytelling Project, which is one of the two branches of the School Literacy and Culture Project’s program. (The other is Cultural Conversations.)

“Classroom Storytelling is close to my heart,” says Smith, “because it was the kind of teaching that I liked to do when I was teaching. I thought that it was a wonderful way to engage children in reading and writing. I liked the fact that it gives every child an opportunity for one-on-one contact, relationship, conversation with the teacher. It has a lot of beneficial aspects that are not immediately obvious to people. In those classrooms that tend to have a lot of children, the opportunity for a child to have a chance to make his personality known and tell his story is very valuable.”

A recent project that is even closer to Josephine Smith’s heart was



**Josephine Smith** and her grandson **Zachary**

America places college graduates in teaching positions in underserved classrooms; the Houston Seminar is an adult education initiative. At New York City’s City and Country School she had practical experience at a variety of grade levels. “When I started out, I taught second grade, then first grade, then I went to pre-school.” From this experience and from her experiences with the School Literacy and Culture Project, she concludes that, “the sooner” children start going to school, “the better.” Most everyone involved in the Project would agree with that statement. And all, with the exception of Smith, would agree that her passion and interest have been vital to the success of SLC over the years. Smith, however, is a bit more modest. “I’ve mostly just been a cheerleader,” she says.

### **Zachary’s Story** as told to Julie Oudin May 14, 2004

Once upon a time a great **big** lion drank up all the water. A great **big, big** dinosaur comes and a great **big** butterfly comes and says, “Put back the water, lion!” The lion puts back the water. The butterfly flies in the water. A great **big** elephant comes and **STOMPS** in the water. Then a great **big** bee comes and he stings the elephant. A great **big** monster comes and he takes the bee away. The monster gives the bee to the hero, and the hero takes the bee away. The hero wears a green cape and a purple mask.

The End

her success in bringing Classroom Storytelling to The Arbor School, serving children with special needs. Smith has a seven year-old grandson, Zachary, who has Down syndrome. He has attended The Arbor School since he was six months old. “I just thought Classroom Storytelling would be a wonderful enriching thing for the children at The Arbor School, so I talked to Bernie (Mathes) and to Patsy. And it seems to be a great experience for those children. Even children who can’t talk are able to communicate stories with the help of their [Arbor School] teachers. All of the students love the dramatizations.” Thanks to Smith’s efforts, two trained CSP mentors have gone into The Arbor School to take stories and lead dramatizations. An article by Julie Oudin, now principal of Beth Yeshurun Day School, about her experience as a teacher at The Arbor School appeared in the last CenterPiece.

A personal attachment to education, school reform, and philanthropy has been what has most driven Smith to support the School Literacy and Culture Project. The seeds for this personal attachment were planted early in her life. “I grew up in a family committed to education and public service.” Her father, the late Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr., was chairman of the Richmond, Virginia school and subsequently of the Virginia State Board of Education.

Judging from the number and variety of organizations with which she has been affiliated, education is, for Smith, a lifelong endeavor. The School Literacy and Culture Project targets young children; Teach For



## Vivian Paley Visits SLC Miniconference

By Jonathan M. Hamrick

The 2005 School Literacy and Culture Project Miniconference for Preschool and Elementary Teachers, titled “Is Reading Instruction Really Enough? Nurturing a Thinking Child,” featured a lecture by writer, teacher, and MacArthur Fellow Vivian Gussin Paley. Paley’s work provides the theoretical background for the School Literacy and Culture Project’s Classroom Storytelling Project. It should be mentioned that Paley’s books are not abstract tomes on pedagogical theory.



**Vivian Paley talks with SLC founder Patsy Cooper**

Rather, they are intimate and personal explorations of issues and questions Paley faced in her work as a teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory School. Not surprisingly, her lecture, addressed to the 300 teachers and administrators in attendance, was a personal and intimate exploration of the theme that runs through her twelve books. By turns hilarious and touching, Paley discussed, “what has propelled me to keep writing books. It’s that I’m trying to figure out what I’ve done wrong.” The lecture consisted of a series of stories in which Paley related the interesting and unusual points about the teaching and classroom life that led to the creation of each book.

Paley called The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter her central book. It tells the story of how Jason, a child who is, in all senses of the word, the outsider of the class, finds a way to join his classroom community. Jason had a single pervasive fantasy that structured his world. He liked to imagine a helicopter. Sometimes he was the helicopter, and some-

times the helicopter would fly around the classroom. This helicopter appeared in all of his dictated stories, in all the games he played with himself. The moment at which Paley saw that Jason had begun to accept and be accepted by the other students was when he suggested his helicopter be used to transport a student who was dramatizing an illness to a doctor. “So magical is that quality,” said Paley, “of bringing a boy like Jason to land his helicopter in the field of others, and getting others to land in Jason’s.”

Early in her career Paley became aware of the importance of gender in early childhood classrooms. “After Wally [the pseudonym for a problematic child whose experiences Paley chronicles in Wally’s Stories], I realized how little I knew about *boys*.” Later, her writings became concerned with issues of race. “Turning sixty, I became more and more aware of the voices of exclusion in the classroom. I began to ask two questions. Is this a racist school? How do you create a community here?” Paley is not speaking of the obvious racial issues one may find in any high school. She is talking about the voices of exclusion, the racism, one may see in classrooms full of children who are just learning to read and write.

Paley described how she came to understand, through storytelling and fantasy play, how children think. Through this understanding, she was better able to articulate – to herself and to others through her writing – how teachers can work with children. “What I – and you – am involved in is the meaning of the world for a group of kids.” To Paley, then, the intellectual possibilities of the child become the focus of the teacher’s work. “[We see] how fantasy play structures a rule-based environment,” she says.



**Vivian Paley lectures at the SLC miniconference**

The theme that runs through her books and her presentation is one of personal reflection. Her listeners left the auditorium not only with a new awareness of the importance of observation, but also with an appreciation of the value that personal insight can lend to an inquiry. The theme was belief in the joy both adults and children can feel when involved in the process of personal reflection and discovery. “Writers grow to love the sound of their own words.” She paused for a second then added, “So do children.”



# Racism Explained to My White Daughter

## Necessary Lessons of an Education Professor and Former Teacher

By Patricia M. Cooper

My daughter, a college sophomore, joined her university's gospel choir this year. The choir was founded to celebrate African-American culture. We are white. Beyond the joy of singing wonderful music, the benefits to my daughter of membership in the choir are obvious, from learning a lot about African-American history to participating in deep discussions on such questions as whether nonbelievers have a right to sing Christian-themed lyrics. She's also getting firsthand experience as a nonmajority member of a group. All told, an opportunity hard to argue with.

Recently, however, the choir selected individual members to take on tour, and my daughter was not among them. As is her nature, she agonized over why. Was it her singing? She couldn't be sure, of course, but she thought she compared favorably to students who had been asked to go. Could it be her level of commitment? No, she was sure she had worked very hard to be a responsible group member. Eventually, she got around to wondering if race had been a factor in who was selected. How could this be? Was it possible that the color of your skin made a difference after all?



Patsy Cooper

Maybe, I told her. But maybe not. You'll never know unless you ask, I said. She said she couldn't. She didn't want to appear whiny, or worse, as if she felt entitled. I reminded her that blacks regularly confront not knowing whether they have been turned down, or out, or away because of their skin color. My daughter wasn't consoled. Well, what if it's true? I asked. I reminded her that she's pro-affirmative action, and that there are times when racial accommodations make sense for the good of the group, or the individual, or the goal. Still, no consolation. Finally, I joked that if the goal is to showcase a gospel choir, just how many blue-eyed blondes do you need? She didn't laugh.

I tried another tack. History. Not African-American history, but mine

There were many lessons I had to learn as a young white teacher working with black children and their families on Chicago's South Side. They were different from what my daughter is trying to figure out, of course, as they are different again from what my education students, most of whom are white, are trying to learn as future teachers in New York City, where an overwhelming majority of children and their families do not look like them. The one common thread that runs across the years and the venues, however, is the need to acknowledge that being white in a conversation is not the same as being black. This doesn't mean one perspective always trumps the other. It only means that we've got to be unsparingly honest about what's at stake for both parties.

I told my daughter how devastated I was as a young kindergarten teacher on the South Side when a black mother demanded to know why her twin girls insisted that their hair would be like mine when they grew up, that is, very long, very blonde, and very straight. I, of course, protested immediately that I hadn't done a thing. She didn't look at all convinced. Next, I tried to play it down. All kindergarten girls want to look like their teachers, I said. At this, she looked angry. I then stammered my way through a promise that I would try to be extra-sensitive to the problem and see what I could do. She had barely gotten out the door when I began assuring myself that no one worked harder than I to be a colorblind teacher. My insides actually hurt with the unfairness of it all.

Twenty years later, the *Nappy Hair* controversy erupted, wherein a young white teacher unwittingly offended some black parents by reading a book they thought demeaned black children. By then, I had learned enough to know that the twins' mother had not only been right to be worried, but also had a right to ask. She was trying to tell me that hair is a racialized issue in America. I had tried to tell her it wasn't. Finally, I had to accept that the twins' mother, who, by the way, was one of the first I knew to wear her hair in its natural style, knew more about being black than I did.

I also shared with my daughter my experience with another black mother in that same school. She had four children under the age of 6, one of whom was in my class. Until family night, I thought we were on good terms. Thinking she would appreciate the gesture, I reserved a large table for her, the kids, and me, and helped with the *continued on next page*



## Racism Continued

dinners as I chatted about large families. After the evening's events, she sought me out in the lobby. Loudly and furiously, she first called me a "white bitch" in front of half the school. Then, screaming, she demanded to know what right I had to think she needed my help or to insult her for having so many children. With this, my daughter finally had something to laugh at, seeing the ridiculousness of the allegation in light of her 11 aunts and uncles, my siblings. She guessed, though, that it probably wasn't funny to me at the time. It wasn't. I was mortified and humiliated in front of my colleagues, the children, and the other parents. I was also deeply frustrated by the assumption of racism. Who better than I could anticipate any mother's need for help with four small children?

Of course, my sense of injustice made me conveniently forget what I knew most people think about families with too many children in a row. How often after I left my Irish working-class neighborhood for college and graduate school had I been stunned by what perfect strangers would say upon learning of my six brothers and five sisters, let alone the three-bedroom Bronx apartment I invariably had to admit to? You wouldn't think that so many random people would automatically think to ask if my father could read. But, trust me, there are too many. And before I learned to find them silly, I hated them.

So why was I surprised when that young mother fought back against a perceived insult to her family? She was a young, black, single mother of four on welfare. I was her same age, married, and working on my second master's. Though I still wish she had chosen another way to express her anger, the fact is that no matter what we had in common, there was more we did not. Did I think she didn't notice? Civil rights activist Myles Horton puts it this way in *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (Teachers College Press, 1997):

"You're white, and black people can't say they are colorblind. Whites and white-controlled institutions always remind them that they're black, so you've got to recognize color. This doesn't mean you feel superior, it's just that you've got to recognize that you can never fully walk in other people's shoes. You can only be a summer soldier, and when the excitement is over, you can go back home. That doesn't mean that you don't have solidarity with black people and aren't accepted; it just means that you have a different role to play."

We have to keep thinking about the terms of the conversation, I told my daughter, if for no other reason than that, as Myles Horton suggests, we never take it for granted. This is something I never stop learning. I relayed to my daughter, for example, an incident from one of my education classes that centered around Ann Haas Dyson's *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write*. I asked the students, all of whom were white, why they thought the children in the book, all of whom were black, wrote stories steeped in popular culture. A perfectly pleasant, hard-working young woman responded quickly. "Well, what else would they write about?" she said. "They have no experiences."

No one challenged her. Disappointed, I asked the student, "What kind of experiences do white kids have to write about?"

"Oh, you know," she answered. "Ballet lessons. The violin. Things like that."

"You mean, all of the white kids you know take ballet lessons and play the violin?" I responded.

"Well, no," she said, "but I'm sure they do other things after school besides watch TV."

"Like black kids do" was the unspoken assumption. It was clear that it had not occurred to her that black kids, including black kids who write about popular culture, might have after-school lessons. Or that white kids might not. And it certainly never occurred to her that white kids thrive on popular culture, too. Most importantly, she had yet to enter into a conversation where she might learn something worth knowing from black kids.

I asked my daughter if she was willing to quit the choir. No, she said. I was glad. I couldn't promise what it would all mean to her in the end, as I can't promise my white education students. I am only sure that, if she's willing, the experience won't be short on lessons learned.

A month later, the choir director told my daughter that a place had opened up on the tour. Did she still want to go? She did.

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## •Upcoming Events•

April 5 and May 3 – School Writing Project student readings, Farnsworth Pavilion, Rice Student Center. Two more dates will be announced. For information, call 713-348-5145 or visit [www.rice.edu/education](http://www.rice.edu/education).

May 10 – Classroom Storytelling Project Yearend Celebration, Rice Student Center. For information, call 713-348-5333 or visit [www.rice.edu/education](http://www.rice.edu/education).

June 6-24 – Summer Creative Writing Workshop, a collaboration between the School Literacy and Culture Project and Writers in the Schools. Registration begins in March. For information, call Writers in the Schools at 713-523-3877 or visit [www.writersintheschools.org](http://www.writersintheschools.org).

July 11 – School Literacy and Culture Project's Summer Institute on Reading, Writing and Cultural Connections. For information, call SLC at 713-348-5333 or visit [www.rice.edu/education](http://www.rice.edu/education).

To learn more about the Center's teacher development programs, its publications and its research activities, see our website at <http://www.rice.edu/education>

To learn how to participate in one of the Center's teacher development programs, contact Glenda White at the Center for Education at (713) 348-5145.



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