

USING ART AND THEATER TO SUPPORT ORGANIZING FOR JUSTICE

Junebug Productions, Inc.
New Orleans, LA

"The rules of the story circle are the rules of civil participation in society. You agree to listen. You agree to respect."

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SUMMARY: Junebug Productions, founded in 1980, enables artists, community members, and students to share their experiences of the Civil Rights Movement. Junebug uses its widely replicated storytelling model, called "story circles," to build understanding and relationships among people affected by this historic time. The story circle process creates opportunities for African Americans in the black belt south to engage in art and social change activities to improve their quality of life. Through their main program, the Color Line Project, founder John O'Neal and longtime colleague Theresa Holden use the following approaches:

- **Collect Stories:** The Color Line Project collects the stories of those who recognize that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 60's continues to affect them. This includes young people who, according to education consultant Jim Randels, have access to "family stories that can help build a historical consciousness...For example, Rosa Parks didn't just get tired one day," he says. "She was going to these weekly meetings like we're asking these students to go to and she was doing it for ten years."
- **Build Coalitions:** Junebug builds coalitions of educators, artists, and community organizers who use Civil Rights Movement stories and the story circle process in their work. This requires understanding how communities use the stories and how they come together in story circles.
- **Facilitate Community Collaborations:** The Color Line Project encourages and facilitates collaboration between communities that share common needs and experiences, and a common approach to building a movement for social change.
- **Create Community Archives:** Junebug Productions maintains archives of the stories it generates through the Color Line Project in order to preserve historical information about the Civil Rights movement. These archives exist both in the communities in which the stories originate and at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans.

In the following case example, John O'Neal, Theresa Holden and their colleagues describe how Junebug Productions uses storytelling to encourage and support others to create art, teach, and work for social justice.

STORYTELLING IN THE NAME OF JUSTICE

Junebug Productions, Inc.

Writers: Bertha O'Neal, John O'Neal, Amparo Hofmann, and Sanjiv Rao

Co-Researchers: Theresa Holden (Award Recipient); John O'Neal (Award Recipient); Amparo Hofmann (NYU/LCW); and Sanjiv Rao (NYU/LCW)

If there is one powerful truth about history, says Curtis Muhammad, it is that those who write it control it. “We don’t know how the pyramids were built because there’s a layer of people that history writes about,” he says, “And there’s a layer of people that history doesn’t talk about.”

It was that simple truth that compelled Junebug Productions, with the support of a group of activists, including Muhammad, to launch a program ensuring that the history of the civil rights movement would include the stories of those behind it – at every level. Called the Color Line Project, the effort strives not only to ensure that such stories are told, but that there is an accessible record of them forever after.

The project has one other and even loftier goal: To help galvanize people in communities who wish to take action in the face of contemporary social injustice. Prior to the Color Line Project, notes James Borders, former managing director of Junebug Productions, “There was very little contact between and among communities and very little contact between the struggles that were going on in those communities, and yet people were facing the same kinds of challenges, right? So it’s going to be all the more important for us to document what has happened to us here in this community so that people outside can see.”

Stories of Justice

Junebug Productions, established in 1980 as a successor to the Free Southern Theater (FST), is the nonprofit cultural organization based in New Orleans, Louisiana, that launched The Color Line Project. The FST was created in 1963 as a cultural and artistic organization committed to bringing “theater to those who have no theater.” Grounded in the civil rights movement, FST worked to amplify the voices of grassroots people who participated in the fight for social justice. Indeed, FST and the civil rights movement are examples of the “mobilization of social capital based on community assets”* - a basic principle of successful grassroots movements. According to Junebug founder John O’Neal, and Junebug’s general manager Theresa Holden, the whole idea behind Junebug is to use the arts – specifically theater – as vehicles for social change.

Junebug Productions developed its work primarily to support the struggle for justice and civil rights led by African-Americans in the Black Belt South. Junebug uses theater – including music and storytelling – to celebrate the identity, struggles and accomplishments of African Americans and others who fight for justice and against oppression and exploitation.

*Social capital consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible (Cohen, D. and Prusak, L. (2001) *In Good Company. How social capital makes organizations work*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, p. 4.)

Junebug Productions believes that stories and storytelling are among the most effective ways to identify, reflect upon and express perceptions of history and reality. Like most cultures whose core experiences are excluded from the official public media, African-American culture depends to a great extent on oral history and literature to transmit values and beliefs.

Junebug Productions launched the Color Line Project (CLP) to recognize the value of stories and storytelling and to encourage their use. The CLP aims to build networks of artists, educators, and activists who in turn honor, learn from and document the stories of people who were – or are – engaged in the civil rights movement, and others who recognize that they have been significantly influenced by it.

The Story Circle Process

Junebug Productions considers its audiences as *co-creators*. In the case of the Color Line Project, Junebug does that through the story circle process. Story circles bring people together in an equitable, collective experience, to share their stories. The process is a democratic strategy for collecting stories that offers equitable opportunities to participate in the on-going creation of the community's consciousness of itself for all who are present.

O'Neal and Holden say they have found that the story circle process resonates so powerfully that participants often export it to other venues and groups in order to use it to develop their organizations, reflect on their work, and build community. In this way, O'Neal and Holden have identified the story circle process as having applications – and implications – for individual leadership development and organizational growth within and beyond the specifics of the Color Line Project.

As a technique, the story circle process *evolved*, influenced in part by the commitment to "radical" democracy of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, (SNCC), which played a central role in the early civil rights movement. The FST, and later Junebug Productions, share SNCC's values. The story circle process helps those who use it to ground their creative efforts in the realities of the daily lives of the people with whom they share stories. Through the Color Line Project, Junebug Productions engages in various collaborations with diverse artists, educators, and activist partners to refine the story circle technique as a way to inspire and support social change.

Although the story circle is used for diverse purposes, the basic methodology behind it is always the same. All participants sit in a circle free of barriers--there are no tables or other objects inside the circle. Sometimes the group leaders suggest a theme prior to the start of the story telling process and sometimes they decide to let the theme emerge as the circle proceeds.¹ "We're consciously trying to develop the circle technique as an alternative to Robert's Rules of Order," says O'Neal. "Parliamentary procedure tends to limit and cut people out of the dialogue rather than working to include them."

¹ It seems best to set a theme for younger people who are less clear about what stories are or who may have issues based in pre-pubescent insecurities. Because stories evoke stories, sometimes a "primer" story may be used to start a group. Groups working on long-term projects soon tend to develop priorities about what they wish to explore, e.g. making a play, or studying a given curriculum, working to organize people around a given problem in a community, etc. It is a good idea to have someone with a good primer story available to get the group imagination prompted. (O'Neal.)

While the story circle process is loose and ever-evolving, O'Neal says that democratic group leadership is still "leadership." As such, the general process is as follows:

- Everyone sits in circles of no more than ten. The optimal group is six.
- Each participant receives an equal amount of time to tell her/his story. The amount of time allowed varies depending on the size of the group and the total amount of time available.
- The storytelling proceeds in order around the circle.
- If a participant does not have a story when it is his/her turn, the participant may pass. After the last person in the circle has told a story or passed, the participants who passed will have another opportunity to tell a story.
- *Listening is more important than talking.* Everyone should listen to the storyteller of the moment – not talk, ask questions, or even think about her/his own story. It is not necessary to think about what story to tell. Usually a story will emerge through the process. Trust the circle to bring you a story.
- If you have several stories in mind when it is your turn to tell, choose the story that comes from the deepest place that you feel safe telling.
- It is not necessary to like the story that others tell; however, it is important to respect the person's right to tell it.
- After everyone who wishes to tell a story has had an opportunity to do so, participants may engage in cross talk, ask questions, or comment on the stories of others.
- Silence is all right. Take your time. Do not rush to tell.

Junebug Productions' activists find that the story circle invariably provides a common and safe space where participants can express themselves and share meaningful memories of events, experiences, feelings, and emotions. The immediate goal of the process is to create connections by establishing common ground, along with the chance to share experiences of love, injustice, hope, fear, and other powerful emotions and moments that all participants share.

Creating the Record: Archiving the Stories

According to Holden, since 1992 a dozen towns have produced Color Line Projects. Fifty-five organizations and more than 11,000 story circle participants have used the process to collect stories, inspire art, encourage community organizing, and promote leadership. In the process over the years, Junebug Productions has engaged teachers and administrators in schools and universities, artists, theater companies, churches, student activist organizations, school and neighborhood coalitions, and not-for-profit organizations working on social justice issues.

The collected stories are archived locally and/or at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans, (named for the slave ship that mutinied), which makes them perpetually available as a resource for community organizing work and for creating art. Perhaps most important, the documents now serve as primary source material for present and future generations, all in the hope that they will be used to promote social justice. The project's emphasis on documentation and sharing are a direct reflection the vision and values that are the driving force of inspiration behind Junebug Productions and the Color Line Project: the Civil Rights Movement.

Impact in the Community: Education, Organizations, Collaborations

Beyond the immediate connections inspired by story circles, the Color Line Project tries to use stories and the storytelling process to build coalitions with and collaboration among community organizations. What Junebug has found, says O'Neal, is that the story circles not only yield rich content but also provide avenues through which communities and organizations can form coalitions and collaborations. Indeed, a major part of the Color Line Project is working to understand how coalitions are built through story circles, how stories are used, and how groups come together around the story circles.

The Color Line Project has used story circles in varied settings, from schools to union meetings, from churches to community organizations. The common features of these varied “sectors” are: (1) They are all involved in community empowerment and social change work in some fashion, and (2) They come together through a common methodology – the story circle – as a way to help them do their own work better or to work more effectively with others.

When people share stories they quickly begin to see that the problems they face are often similar. That understanding, says O'Neal, frequently leads to the realization that dealing with such common problems requires fundamental social change. That is the key building block in creating a base of awareness that people can then use to develop common goals, strategies and tactics to bring about change. “I’m hoping that as a step toward building a movement, we can get artists in all these communities digging into their own material for that purpose,” says O'Neal. “Let the painters paint the stories. Let the sculptors sculpt, the dancers dance.”

Jim Randels, education consultant for the Color Line Project, describes the historical basis for the coalition-building goal of the effort: “Part of that history involves the Council of Federated Organizations in Mississippi, which pushed very strongly for coalition work. They said, ‘We need to not see our work as separate organizations, NAACP over here, SCLC over there, SNCC over here, CORE over there. We need to begin to weave our work together.’”

In addition, O'Neal points out that the Color Line Project addresses long-term goals. “People don’t rush from the classroom to join the revolutionary brigades or rush out from the theater to storm the barricades – that’s not what education and art can or should do,” says O'Neal. “Short term objectives can be better served by ‘training’ and ‘propaganda.’ Both are legitimate activities but not the work of education and art. Education is more concerned with long-term quality of life issues like development of critical thinking and analytical and research skills. Art is like a special aspect of the larger sphere of education. Art helps to nurture more nuanced ways to perceive, feel, and give expression to the world as people experience it. Building coalitions and helping people to organize around their mutual interests is the community organizer’s discipline. All three kinds of work are important: education, art making and activism. These are all aspects of any healthy community, but our society has fractured its communities by years of abuse. We need each other to do our work. That’s one of the lessons that the movement taught us.”

A New Way of Teaching

“As teachers we want students who have a historical consciousness,” says James Randels. “The Color Line Project deals with a moment in history that can help build that consciousness. So I see

this as reinforcing the process that begins in the story circle in our classes. Rosa Parks, [who inspired the Montgomery Bus Boycott when she refused to give up her seat to a white man in 1955], didn't just get tired one day. She was going to these weekly meetings like we're asking these students to go to and she had been doing it for ten years."

The story circle process is also a tool for students to support each other, both academically and socially, says Randels. It helps youth develop communication skills, and helps to link those skills to academic learning. In this way, story circles help students recognize and make connections across seemingly disparate aspects of their separate experiences, Randels says. "Students should always be at the center," says Randels. "It is not only about getting them prepared for a job, but also teaching them to take care of each other. And it's about their teachers and beginning to see a collective spirit that says our education is about making our neighborhood, ourselves, and our school better." As a result, Junebug Productions staff members report that story circles have a positive impact on young people. As students learn more about themselves through verbal expression, they also develop topics for writing. The students later develop their experiences in writing, because they are writing about issues that come from their own experiences.

The story circle process also helps students connect at deeper levels, argues O'Neal. He led one story circle at Frederick Douglas High School in New Orleans where every student in the group had a story of how social trauma had affected them directly or indirectly. By sharing stories, common emotions of fear, anger, and confusion all emerged. By sharing stories, the students began to see violence in its broad social context. It was one small step toward making their personal problems more manageable.

According to Randels, such sharing serves a broader, more long-range purpose. For example, he says he has seen student mentors working with younger kids in an after-school program apply the story circle approach. "They begin to apply that to their teaching. If they're coaching a young group of football players, for example, they use the story circle process after practice. It's that kind of leadership development that I think the story circle process helps encourage; it sows the soil for the long term."

The Heart of the Mission

While Junebug has made a conscious effort to work through schools, its efforts to influence policy by building a grassroots social change movement is at the heart of the organization's mission. The idea of using the larger community as a text for learning follows the implicit idea that it is also the basis for action. "Junebug is saying that the most important thing that we can do is to help build a movement of people in this community that helps them unite and fight for the things that they want and need in their lives," says James Borders. "That's a more humble position, right? But it's also more just and in the long run is going to prove more durable."

In this way, the Color Line Project develops leadership while simultaneously building the capacity of participants to use story circles in their own lives. What Junebug Productions staff finds is that the personal nature of the stories invariably leads to a level of engagement in which participants transfer the story circle model to other aspects of their lives. Often this leads participants to realize their own role as leaders. In Montana, for example, the story circle process led directly to the successful organization of gay rights activists to push a piece of legislation important to the gay

community. Story circles from five Montana cities joined forces, says O'Neal. "And they campaigned. A bunch of those cowboys came out and marched on Helena, the capital, and changed the law."

Widening the Circle

After ten years, Junebug activists say it has become clear that the challenges facing the Color Line Project are beyond what one small arts organization such as Junebug Productions can accomplish on its own. And so they are in the process of broadening their own circle by forming the Color Line Project Coalition. The coalition will continue the work that Junebug Productions began, ultimately seeking to create a national network of Color Line Projects.

Through the Louisiana Institute for Community Empowerment, (LaRICE), an independent non-profit think tank based at Dillard University², Color Line Project advocates have begun a school for organizers. One of their main jobs will be to provide the educational resources necessary for strengthening the Color Line Project coalition and helping to prepare staff and volunteers in moving the Color Line movement forward nationwide.

It is all about "using the power of creativity" to promote social change, says John O'Neal. The Color Line Project's use of purposeful storytelling to build a broad movement for social change involves not only bringing people together, but also creating a process for leadership to emerge and influencing organizations through productive coalitions, as well as capturing and documenting the work as it happens. For Junebug Productions, the stories are the reasons for – and springboards to – mobilizing a social movement.

O'Neal reemphasizes that the key component in the whole effort is the inclusiveness and the art. "The stories of people who are now and here, the stories of their struggles to accomplish things, it's all about working together and building a movement," says O'Neal. "Clearly, when you're talking about stories, well, that's what theater is."

Learning by Looking Back

Ultimately, Junebug calls its cornerstone practice the "Story Circle *Process*" because it is indeed a *process* that is helpful in collecting material for making plays that resonate with the audiences who contribute stories to the process. Junebug also finds the process helpful in classrooms; regardless of the teaching goals, it can help learners in a given situation make personal connections with the relevant area of study. The process is valuable in helping any group or organization to quickly learn about and feel comfortable with each other. It is a valuable component of organizers' "tool kits." It helps organizers who value democratic processes, equity, and the voices of those who tend not to speak in groups. The process, when applied in the place of Parliamentary Procedure or "Robert's Rules of Order," leads people to appreciate the effort to build consensus more than they value argument, which tends to result in winners and losers. This is of great value in a litigious society where winning is more important than trying to figure out what is right. Still, it is just an alternative to "top down group process." The results that come from it, like any other group

² Dillard University was seriously impacted by "The Great Flood." Student enrollment is seriously down; staff and faculty have been reduced, thus seriously limiting what we can expect from the University.

process technique, depend on the goals, aims and objectives of the group, as well as the commitment, intelligence and skills of its leadership.

Junebug views their application of the process to making art and education as successful. O'Neal suggests that this may be due to working with populations that are more accustomed to using analogy and metaphor. They have found it more challenging to apply the technique to coalition building and organizing because in those contexts people are more accustomed to using quasi-legal techniques that depend on recognized precedents, as well as debate that interprets democratic process as requiring winners *and* losers.

However, there are examples of story circle work graduating to relatively successful coalitions that were sustained over a significant period. These include the Community Labor United and the Douglass School Community School Coalitions. Both served as laboratories for the process in which the lead organizer, Curtis Muhammad, and the lead educator, both participated. However, "The Great Flood" – the flooding that resulted from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 – seriously affected both efforts. It remains to be seen at this point what will become of the long term organizing efforts that these coalitions represent. Both efforts played significant roles in the formation of two other efforts which continue to have local and national consequence – the campaign for Quality Education as a Civil Right and the People's Hurricane Relief Fund. These efforts also continue to operate in the summer of 2006.

O'Neal concludes by saying, "There's not enough time to examine all the lessons that may be gleaned from these efforts. I can say, however, with a certain confidence, whether the reference is to education, art making or organizing oppressed and exploited people, if you're not in it for the long haul it's unlikely that there will be many reliable measurable results. We can learn a helluva lot more looking back than we can by guessing about what's yet to come."

P.S.: After "The Great Flood" (by John O'Neal)

We call it "The Great Flood" now because the wind damage from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was really pretty modest in New Orleans and most of South Louisiana. The devastation we suffered was the result of flooding. "The Great Flood" happened because of bad planning, poor maintenance of the levees and drainage system caused mainly by the rampant corruption that has been institutionalized here. Then there are the persistent rumors of blowing up the levees to divert the flood. If true, that would have to be reckoned as another great failure because more than 60% of the city was flooded. Ten months after the disaster, the fact is that we are still reeling from the blows delivered by local, regional and federal government agencies.

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