

The Humanities Program of Gainesville Middle School

Folkwriting

*Writing the Hearts and
Lives of Our Students*

Renee Morris, teacher

The Humanities Program Overview

- ▶ Implemented in fall 2002
- ▶ Focus on link between history and literature
- ▶ Publish student work each spring
- ▶ Guest authors – Terry Kay, Judith Ortiz Cofer
- ▶ Funded by the Georgia Humanities Council and the Teaching Tolerance Foundation of the Southern Poverty Law Center

To Do List

- ▶ Start with a theme – an umbrella for what you would like to do.
- ▶ Google grants – there IS money available, to help do what you would like to do.
- ▶ Start early – year-long projects can be effective and connect your curriculum.
- ▶ Listen to your children – they have so much to say.

What is our purpose for folkwriting?

Brief statement of need...

Gainesville Middle School's student population consists of 45% Latino, 28% African American, 23% Caucasian and 4% Asian and multiracial. Because of this diversity, our students need to develop an understanding and awareness of other cultures and traditions. This understanding will assist with bridging the gap that exists between our various ethnicities.

The students will...

- play a contributing role in maintaining and improving aspects of the school environment and community.

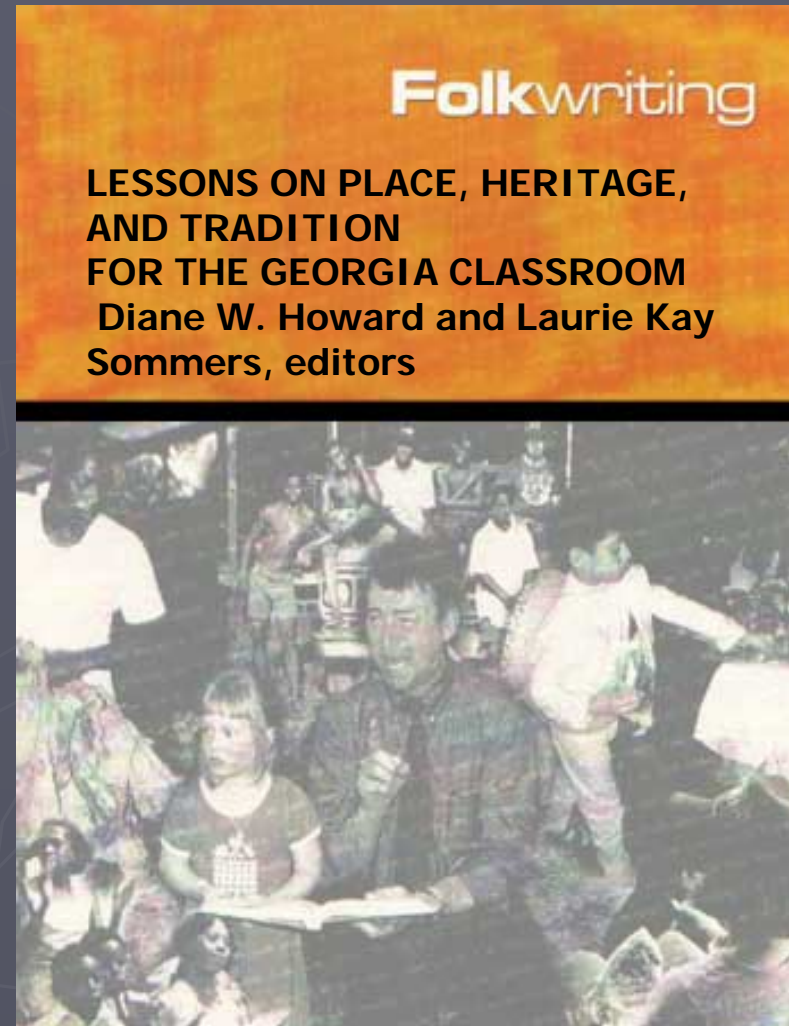
- learn to respect beliefs or practices that differ from their own.

- understand dependability, reliability and trustworthiness.

- develop a greater understanding of their family and community, contributing to a greater understanding of self.

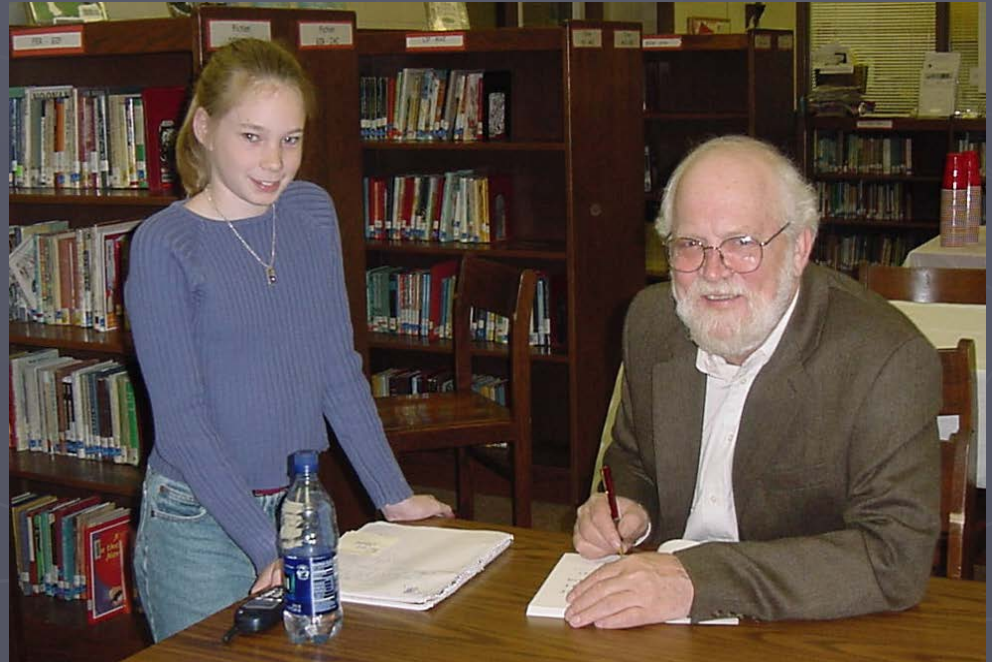
What works for me

- ▶ Use literature as a starting point for student work. Sometimes you can create it, and sometimes it just happens. Non-fiction works, but so do so many novels. Everything connects!
- ▶ When it just happens, recognize it. Know that it can work, if students are invested in it.
- ▶ Use Folkwriting prompts such as "Seasonal Customs" and "My Favorite Place." What results will be creative, original, and unique to each student, even if they did start at the same point.



Folkwriting Projects

- ▶ 2003 – Calendar of student work including poetry and personal narrative
- ▶ 2004 – Making Sense of the World Around Us
- ▶ 2005 – Stories of Our World
- ▶ 2006 – Radio Essays in coordination with the Bread Loaf School of English



A Calendar of Our World -- 2003

Humanities



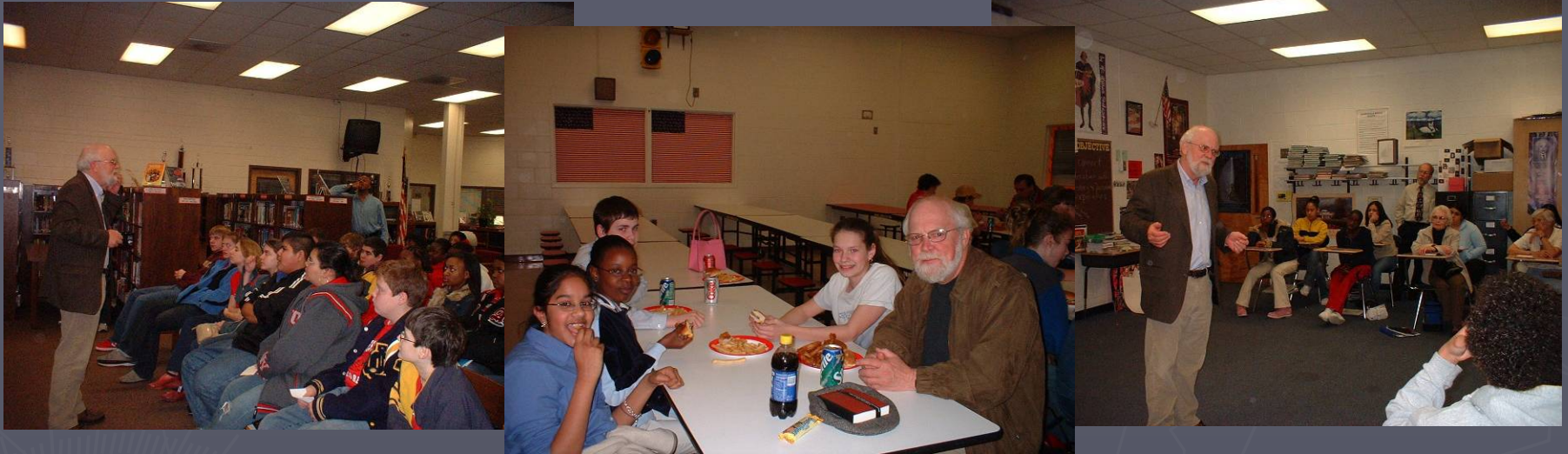
*Making Sense of the
World Around Us*

2003-2004 Calendar

- ▶ Students submitted best writing of the year
- ▶ Dates were coordinated with topics such as holidays, family events, and seasons

An Author to Inspire – 2004

To Dance with the White Dog



After students read Terry Kay's novel – a fictional creation about his own family – they gathered stories of their own families. Such stories aid children in *Making Sense of the World Around Them* – their school, their culture, and their countries, old and new.

A Gathering of Young People – 2004 addendum

As two of my classes read *A Gathering of Old Men* by Ernest Gaines, they decided to write their own companion novella. How can 45+ students write one piece of literature? Very well, thank you. By exploring their world and the influence of bullying, students created a sophisticated work of various narrators, various points of view, and various victims – all part of One World.

An Author's World Inspires Stories of Our Own World -- 2005

- ▶ *Humanities: Stories of Our World* was subtitled *Stories of Immigration and Integration*.
- ▶ Students read short stories by Judith Ortiz Cofer, and then gathered to hear her stories of living in two worlds – Puerto Rico and the United States. Many of our children live in “two worlds,” with differences in language and culture. Their stories celebrated these cultures while sharing a part of themselves with their peers and their new community.



Titles Speak Volumes

- ▶ "Crossing Over"
- ▶ "Coming to America"
- ▶ "A Tale of Transition"
- ▶ "My Culture"
- ▶ "A Beautiful New Life"
- ▶ "Coming to Los Estados Unidos"
- ▶ "This is Me"
- ▶ "Finding the American Dream"
- ▶ "New Life"
- ▶ "My Generation"



Student Prompt: I Am

Who are you,
and how
would you
describe
yourself, your
culture, your
world?



And then there was that one class...

- ▶ What is an orb?
- ▶ Have you ever seen an orb?
- ▶ What would you do if you found an orb?
- ▶ Can orbs inspire a book?
- ▶ Is it possible to talk about orbs for many class periods and still not have any answers?





The Process

- ▶ "Field trip" to a local haunted house
- ▶ Ask the experts: research methods
- ▶ Students were advised to
 - Locate a "haunted house"
 - Discover the known history
 - Interview locals or residents with information
 - Weave a story from the known facts



“This story is based on facts, but is fiction... Being in Mrs. Morris's English 1 Honors class, I visited the house on Brenau Avenue, with my class, where the family first lived. There we learned the history of the house. What we were told was that John Adams built the house for his wife and when they moved in, she fell in love with it. The dates of the son's birth and death are not known, so we have no idea how old he was or how long the Adams lived in that house.

When the son died, the mother was devastated. After awhile, she said that she heard her son calling her name and could see him, but whenever she went to touch him, he disappeared. This was very hard for her and she was going insane because of it. Seeing his wife fall apart, John Adams built an exact replica of the house and moved them there. Nothing else is known about what happened after the move. That is why I wrote this story. I wanted to end the story, or at least start the end. Maybe your house has a story...”

-- Suzanne C.



Radio Essays -- 2006

A fellowship to the Bread Loaf School of English has inspired this year's project. Once again, students will capture local and personal history, this time in a radio essay. Voice tracks will be mixed with music and added to our school web page.



The Process

- ▶ Students were given a handout on radio essays, including editing tips
- ▶ First Homework Assignment: Sound Walk
- ▶ Students listened to excerpts of *Naked* by David Sedaris and *Mama Makes Up Her Mind* by Bailey White.
- ▶ A Rough Draft was assigned – non-fiction
- ▶ The stories rolled in...

What Students WANT to Write About

- ▶ "The Fight for Freedom" – integration
- ▶ "A New Home" – moving to America
- ▶ "The Story Never Told" – a loving tribute to a grandmother
- ▶ "The Angel on the Train" – the story of a World War II P.O.W.
- ▶ "A Life to Remember" – moving to America from Vietnam
- ▶ "Living Through Segregation"

Radio Essays – the future?

Not only will students express a sense of self through words and music, this project meets requirements for non-fiction and technology in the new Georgia Performance Standards. Media. Technology. Mixing down. Voice tracks. Music tracks.

Recording the past and present for the future.



Folkwriting and Today's Student

Today's student needs focus and a sense of place in a world that offers few absolutes. By examining family history, traditions, and personal history, students determine their own place in the world. They discover

How We Came to Be Us