



## ***Telling Stories: Giving a Voice to Foster Youth***

### **What is *Telling Stories*?**

*Telling Stories* is a new program that evolved from Playwrights Project's work at San Pasqual Academy and our association with the LEAP (**L**eadership **E**mpowers **A**ll **P**ossibilities) Board of San Diego Foster Youth Initiative (SDFYI). Youth from these groups told us they wanted to shape their real life stories into theatre. They wanted the community to hear about their lives and learn from their experiences.

The LEAP Board named the program *Telling Stories*, because many foster youth feel that no one is listening to them. "We go through many trials and tribulations and when we talk about what has happened to us, the response is 'You're lying. That didn't happen. You're telling stories.'"

The San Diego Foundation, through its Art Works Initiative, is funding the initial planning phase of *Telling Stories*.

### **What is the "Planning Phase" of *Telling Stories*?**

In this current phase, we are:

- **Consulting** with experts in the field of child welfare, including administrators in the system, representatives of foster care placement organizations, case workers, foster parents, volunteers, and the youth themselves.
- **Teaching residencies** to test the new playwriting curriculum designed to enable youth to safely tell their *real life* stories. This is different from our regular playwriting programs which encourage youth to draw on their imaginations and fictionalize their experiences and observations.
- **Collecting stories** from individuals involved in foster care through a series of interviews conducted by a theatre artist. Information from the interviews are shaped into dramatic vignettes by the theatre artist, and fine tuned through feedback from the "storyteller."
- **Workshopping performances** with small groups of foster youth and adults involved in foster care. Audiences listen to collected stories as works-in-progress and participate in a dialog about their observations to help us pinpoint common themes and help writers to further develop their plays and vignettes.
- **Performing for the community**. We will conduct one or two community performances for an audience of stake holders and invited guests in June. The performance will present a compilation of excerpts from various stories. A focused discussion after each performance will further guide the collection process and shape future performances.
- **Documenting the process** by videotaping teaching residencies, interviews, group planning discussions, performances and feedback sessions.

### **What happens after the Planning Phase?**

*Telling Stories* will be conducted as one of Playwrights Project's regular programs. Scripts written during the residencies and vignettes written in the story collection process will be compiled into new performances each year and presented to foster youth, stakeholders and decision makers in the child welfare system and the community. Videotaped documentation will be compiled into a documentary for farther reaching distribution.

## How do I participate in *Telling Stories*?

To assure that all characters are multi-dimensional, playwrights will analyze their writing with an effort toward understanding the reasons behind their own and others' actions. We are interested in hearing a variety of perspectives to shape performances that present the individual stories of the youth involved, balanced with an understanding of the challenges faced by the foster care system. If have been a part of a foster youth's life, we'd love to hear from you. Even if you think you don't have your own story to tell, your observations and feedback on our work will help us to improve our program.

## Questions?

Contact: Cecelia Kouma  
 Managing Director  
 Playwrights Project  
 (619) 239-8222  
 ckouma@playwrightsproject.org  
 www.playwrightsproject.org



## What is Playwrights Project?

Playwrights Project, a non-profit arts education organization, has been helping young people craft their stories into plays since 1985. Our mission is to promote literacy, creativity and communication skills through drama-based activities, with an emphasis on inspiring youth and seniors. We teach playwriting classes at schools throughout San Diego, and we produce *Plays by Young Writers* each year in a professional theatre. Our productions receive praise from theatre critics and the education community.

## Comments about our programs



James Monroe

*In his moving short play "Step by Step," novice playwright James Monroe champions the power of the imagination to transform human suffering into art... In a street-smart, rap-inflected vernacular, he charts a young man's struggles within the foster-care system as he attempts to locate his missing mother. Monroe has an ear and the courage to face feelings many 17-year olds would rather leave buried. His play, directed by Esther Emery, is riddled with humor, though it ends on an unhappy ---- and for such parent-deprived teens --- - all too realistic note.*

~ Theatre Critic Anne Marie Welsh

*There are things you keep so deep down in your heart and mind...I feel better after talking openly about my life. Being interviewed by my writing partner was a great experience.*

~ Storyteller

*Telling Stories* is supported by The San Diego Foundation's Art Works Program and the following funds of The San Diego Foundation:  
 The James Irvine Foundation, Colonel Frank C. Wood Memorial Fund,  
 Ariel W. Coggeshall Fund, Charles B. Cram Fund,  
 Myron Feinberg Discretionary Fund,  
 and the Mary E. Heild and Robert R. Hield Endowment Fund.

