

A Photo Essay
by Jane Sapp

Cultural Work— A Powerful Resource for Change



“A key aspect of cultural work is its focus on the people first, rather than a focus on the issues. The issues will always be with us, but it is the people who will make a change in those issues.”



“Cultural work reminds us that there are **always possibilities**, that there are no dead-end streets if we have the **will** to **create** a new world and to create **changes** in our communities.”

“I have a vision of people **seeing** their communities **with new eyes**, actually seeing the inheritances that were there, seeing the history of the community, seeing the intellectual tradition and aesthetic inheritances, and seeing their communities through the lens of those inheritances.”



“Cultural work focuses on **what the community has**, rather than what it does not have. People have their songs, stories, histories, cooking styles, and ways of being together. My work has been to take all the ways in which people have fashioned a life together and **use it as a mirror**. People can look in this mirror, look at themselves, and say: ‘This is the way we have created our lives together. Can we not continue to do that today? Can we not continue to be active participants in our own lives?’”



“It was really rewarding to see how seriously people took the exercises. The quality of what they did is just excellent.”

*Excerpt of Presentation
by Jane Sapp at the
Global Partnerships
for Education Institute*

Cultural Work, Folklore, and Community Knowledge

I was born in Augusta, Georgia, and grew up during a period of segregation in the South. I've just never forgotten segregation; I think that my work around social justice is to make sure that it doesn't happen again. No one should ever feel that kind of assault on one's dignity, intelligence, community, and sense of humanity.

...I always wanted to hear people's stories... I decided to minor in folklore because it allowed me to continue to hear the people's stories and struggles and at the same time study music. After I got out of graduate school I went into communities, as folklorists do, with my tape recorder. "I'm going to listen to your story, I'm going to look at your quilt, I'm going to analyze your basket, I'm going to your church service, and I'm going to document your food and how you made it." I was working on the Sea Islands in South Carolina in an area people think of as the Gullah area, and everywhere I went there were issues. I would go in with my tape recorder, but people didn't want to talk about their history, they wanted to talk about their own struggles, how there was racism in their own community. They wanted to talk about how people were trying to hold on

to their land, because the 1970s marked the beginning of the "theft" of the land of the Sea Islands in South Carolina and Georgia. I was thinking, how could I go in saying "tell me your story" when their real story was about their struggles?

At the same time I felt that when I WAS able to hear people's stories, I was learning a lot of history, I was learning a lot about the cultures. It didn't make any sense for one person to walk into a community and walk out with all that richness, because when I left, the community remained the same. People's lives didn't change. I didn't feel right going into a community, and leaving with the people still poor, feeling that their schools were inadequate, that they didn't have jobs, and that the land was not theirs. I began to think there must be a way to do this work in a way that could have a positive consequence for the people.

After several years of working with the Smithsonian, I went to a meeting of folklorists. I raised the issue: How can you walk into a community of people who are poor and struggling, who feel their lives are being assaulted from all different directions, and just walk out with your research and feel like that's ok. One folklorist said to me, "If people become literate and educational level rises and their economic level is developed, then we won't have this rich folklore anymore. We won't have the songs or the stories and they won't be creating those dances anymore because they'll become a part of [mainstream society]."

It was clear to me that this way of thinking *had to change!* We could not equate a people uplifting themselves with the end of their culture. Culture is not static: as the people grow, so does the culture. I went back into that work with a new realization – people had





“The song was a real highlight for me. It was very special and exciting to see the fruits of a collective effort in the development of this beautiful song. When you work with other people and share your stories openly, you ultimately come together, even with your differences in inheritances and experiences, to find a common humanity, a common will. We couldn’t have written that song on the first day or even the third day. It was possible only after we took part in a process in which people came together and saw each other in different ways.”

—Jane Sapp

to know the knowledge that they represented. If anthropologists and folklorists could go into a community and extract stories and knowledge for use in courses, then why can’t we? It’s our knowledge, our wisdom, our energy, our experiences, and our creativity. I returned with a passion to go into communities in such a way that people would begin to document their own stories, collect their own experiences and acknowledge their own wisdom. Then, they are able to look at what they know, and to know that they know. They can know how to take that knowledge and recognize in it, the building blocks for the future and for change.”

If Only We Believe

—Written by participants in Global Partnerships for Education with Jane Sapp

The sky is full of dreams
The ground is full of struggle
Our voices set us free
If only we believe

The nightmare seems endless
And shadows fill our hearts
But we reach for possibility
And the courage to break free

CHORUS:

Through struggle we reach the sky
Together we dream of joy
With courage we give our voice
For justice! For peace! For life!

Within us all we have the power
To make a better future
To go forward for our children
We can learn! We can grow! We can love!

—CHORUS—

The sky is full of dreams
The ground is full of struggle
Our voices set us free
If only we believe...
If only we believe...
If only we believe...

