

***Durham Herald-Sun* Articles on the Five Faiths Project**
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February 21, 1998

"Faith project intended to bring Ackland to community"

By Mark Schultz

Durham Herald-Sun, February 21, 1998

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Ray Williams doesn't like to leave anyone out.

When he began to get calls about his World Religions Project, from people who wanted to know why the Ackland Art Museum was not including their faith, he changed the name to the Five Faiths Project.

"It's a museum project so it starts with the collections we have," said Williams, curator of education. "I'm always sorry when people feel left out, because it's meant to include people."

Williams created the Five Faiths Project as a way to bring the museum's collection into the community, and vice versa. Many North Carolina children know few if any people from outside their religion or may think of a foreign religion as something that exists only in a foreign land.

"Rather than just rely on stereotypes we want to introduce North Carolina people to each other," Williams said. "I mean, I grew up in a small town in western North Carolina, and I knew two Jewish people and maybe two Catholic people.

"It's a time of great change in North Carolina, and it's hard to go knock on the mosque door and see what's happening."

Funded by \$47,000 from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and \$100,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Five Faiths Project eventually will produce classroom teaching materials on Buddhism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism.

Posters and other materials drawn from the museum's existing collection will supplement two new projects: photographs N.C. children are taking of their religious communities and a series of personal and traditional stories told by members of the different faiths. Photographer Wendy Ewald, a research associate at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies, and Louise Omoto Kessel, a storyteller who lives in Bynum, are heading those projects, respectively.

Eventually a CD-ROM or museum Web page may let visitors see museum art, view pictures taken by the children and hear stories in the voices of people in those religions.

"I'm not a technology expert," Williams said, "but I'm trying to think what the technology can do."

"Five Faiths Project exploring state's minority religions"

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CHAPEL HILL — When Peg Lewis tells a story, you don't watch her face to see how it's going.

You watch the faces of her audience. The corners of their mouths rise in anticipation of a smile. Their eyes fix on the narrator, as animated as her outfit -- aqua socks, black leggings, a salmon pullover, a blue turtleneck, and a scarf that splashes all those colors and two or three more in a loose knot across her chest.

It's Sunday afternoon. In a room above the Ackland Art Museum, Lewis is telling a story about a man on his way home with a bottle of wine, two loaves of challah and candles for the sabbath.

Only, as he walks through the woods, he hears a song -- a nigun, Lewis calls it -- he cannot ignore. He follows the haunting melody to a gypsy camp where he trades his wine for the nigun. So intently is he practicing it, so that he can repeat it when he arrives home, he fails to see a low-lying branch. It knocks him to the ground and he forgets the song.

So back he returns, this time trading his bread for the nigun. Only as he walks through the woods, careful to look up for branches, he fails to see a low stone wall. He stumbles, and the song again tumbles from his brain. He returns to the gypsy camp a third time, trading his candles for the music, and slowly, very carefully winds his way home.

Fearful his wife will be angry that he has traded away all the pieces of their sabbath prayer, the man breaks into song. The beautiful melody enchants his wife as it did him. And together they realize that the sabbath means more than the ceremony they had planned.

By the time Lewis finishes the story, she has her audience of 17 chanting the nigun along with her. She has practiced the story only a few times, one of them to a woman on a Stairmaster at the Y. When she sits down, to applause, it is her turn to smile. Sunday's class was part of the Ackland Art Museum's Five Faiths Project, which will tell the stories, in words and photographs, of five lesser-known religions in predominantly Protestant North Carolina: Buddhism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism.

Part of the project will have children taking Polaroid snapshots of their faith communities. The other will record oral histories and teach people how to tell stories that help explain their religion. Together they will form a curriculum N.C. school teachers will use to discuss religion, in middle and high school classrooms.

"Story telling was never for kids," instructor Louise Omoto Kessel said.

"In traditional settings, adults were telling stories to other adults. Kids would listen if they had patience, but the stories were never for kids. People are hungry for it."

Certainly the people in this group -- and another sharing stories of their Hindu faith -- are hungry. Recruited through local religious groups, they are spending weekend afternoons preparing stories for a March recital for friends and relatives.

Some already are taking their storytelling to schools, nursing homes and other places.

There's a power to a well-told tale, Lewis said.

"You can tell a story and really learn it, or maybe never tell it, but it stays in there," she said and pressed her hand to her heart.

Her story about the man heading home for the sabbath shows that one can honor one's religious faith even without following strict custom, she said.

"It's important that we have these traditions. The wine and the challah and the candles are worth preserving," Lewis explained. "But that spirit of creativity and innovation are part of our tradition, too."

Kessel encourages her students to critique each other. When subsequent storytellers veer off course or fail to paint detailed mental pictures, classmates offer gentle encouragement. But at least on this Sunday, the four who tell stories, gleaned from children's books or folk tales, are engaging.

When Donna Kaye of Chapel Hill finishes her story, "Mrs. Katz and Tush," in which an elderly Jewish widow befriends an African-American boy and teaches him the meaning of Passover, she dabs a few tears from her eyes.

"I still don't feel like I've made it my own," she later tells the group. "I'm still hearing the words of the book in my head."

"But the love was apparent," says Barbara Lang, sitting beside her. "I cried, too."

For Kessel, the Five Faiths Project combines her passion for telling stories and a newer quest to explore her own religious background. Her mother is Japanese and was raised as a Buddhist. Her father is descended from Russian Jews. The mix explains Kessel's silver-flecked, black hair that trails in a thick braid to her waist and the dark eyebrows that arc expressively as she speaks.

"I care about how people experience their faith and spirituality," Kessel said. "For me, it is not just an academic exercise."

Even within the Jewish storytelling group, there is a variety of Jewish experience, from Orthodox and Conservative to others who may rarely, if ever, enter a synagogue.

The eventual teaching curriculum these sessions will help to produce is critical for Kessler.

When school children talk about anti-Semitism, she wants them to hear a real person who has been touched by hateful feelings.

When they hear about Jewish holidays, she wants them to hear a story like "Mrs. Katz and Tush" that teaches them what those holidays mean and how all people are more alike than they are different.

Peg Lewis may not have needed the class. Give her a sock puppet and a perm, and she could be the next Shari Lewis.

But she, too, is making connections. When she practiced her story to the woman on the Stairmaster, the woman was a stranger, Lewis said.

"But now when she sees me, she says, 'Got any stories?'"

Louise Omoto Kessel is seeking people of Buddhist background for a new storytelling group. People interested in sharing stories of their Buddhist heritage may call her at 542-5599.