



Getting the word out about empathy in a multitude of ways

Darla Shaw

INTRODUCTION

In addition to the year of the pandemic, 2020 was the 100th anniversary of the suffragists getting the right to vote. As a professor of women's studies, I was scheduled to give nine months more of presentations on the suffragists for schools, historical societies, libraries, and women's groups when everything shut down.

The Suffragists and Other Local Women of Note

Being eighty-three years old I was not a technologically savvy person and thought all my suffragist projects would be lost. Instead, I reached out to all the agencies that I was scheduled to work with for help. I asked them to assist me in any way that they could, technologically, as the actual presentations were no problem. Since everyone was desperate for programming at the time, not one group did not help.

During the pandemic I was able to Zoom, video, or YouTube presentations on over sixty different women for six historical societies, four libraries, five women groups, and ten schools. It was not always easy, but it was so well worth it as I now have a complete library of graphic and auditory resources on key women in our area. These women have all been well researched, are noteworthy, can serve as mentors and role models, and can be used for assignments. Along with each presentation I also included a summary of the presentation, additional resources, and possible field trips.

Women's Portrait Project with Individual Artists and Interviewers

One of my favorite Suffragist's Celebratory Projects, however, was one involving Women Employees at the Ridgefield, CT Town Hall. This project could be done with practically any group and could also be assigned to various students as a possible research project.

Women of the Ridgefield Town Hall is a multi-artist installation commemorating each woman through an individual portrait and bio regarding her position for the town and her education, family, awards, travels, hobbies, and interests. Twenty-two female town employees were matched up with a different woman artist in town. Then, a copy of the finished portrait was given to each woman while the original was put into a grid that now hangs in the hallway of the Ridgefield Town Hall.

Along with the grid of portraits of the twenty-two women was a booklet about each of the women. I oversaw finding individual women journalists to write these biographies.

Prior to hanging the portraits on the wall, a virtual program was developed for each woman along with her portrait and information on her background. Once everyone is available to meet in person, there will also be a formal presentation made of the portrait and bio project with the artist, town employee, and interviewer standing side by side, responding to questions. A total of 66 outstanding women in town were involved in this one project.

Now that the Women of the Ridgefield Town Hall Portrait project has been completed, the town will move onto the men of the town hall, and then to other important areas and related people in town. There will also be a website where all this easy-access information is stored and where people can learn more about their town employees.

Virtual Storytelling in the Schools for Spooky Reading Night and Read Across America

In the elementary schools, there are two big events to share the joy of reading with students: Spooky Reading Night, prior to Halloween, and Read Across America, which centers around the birthday of Dr. Seuss. In the fall of 2020 and in the spring of 2021, both events had to go virtual.

In order to share my multicultural stories for these two events, I had to learn how to access YouTube and that was not always easy; however, I persevered and succeeded. Again, after this experience, I now have a library of multicultural YouTube stories that can be used at any time. This means, next year, I can go in-person to the school again, but if there is a snow day, or a substitute is not available at any time, one of my stories (with an extensive study guide) can be used with a class.

Virtual Local History Series for the Schools

My fourth virtual program came about due to the success of my virtual multicultural storytelling series for the area elementary schools. Teachers knew that I had worked with the historical societies and libraries on my suffragist project and now wanted a virtual, six-part series on local history for their third and fourth graders.

For this project I divided up the virtual/historical series as follows: Native Americans of our town, early colonists and their lifestyle, industries coming to our town, problems that the town has had to overcome, famous landmarks and points of interest around town and their story, and famous people in town and their contributions. Again I worked with the historical societies, and they took care of the tech work. The societies were happy to apply the technological help, as the historical materials could not only be used by the schools, but also by the general public.

With each of the six historical segments, I included an online study guide with an overview, a summary of what I talked about in print and for different reading levels, a skeleton outline for outlining, a vocabulary development sheet, discussion questions, possible projects, field trips, and other resources including a reader's theater script and a plan for a living museum.

I have been teaching full time for 63 years, and in all my years of teaching, I would have never created such an interesting or immense virtual library of gender and multicultural resources if it were not for the pandemic. Of course, I wish the pandemic had never occurred, but since it did, I tried to be as resourceful as possible and make the best use of the most physically inactive period in my life.

With the pandemic and people drastically networking for projects, I was probably busier than ever with storytelling, in a way that I had never perceived. As I saw firsthand, when one door closes, another one opens. In this case the door closed for a year and a half, and the only way to get out was through a computer screen. Gladly, now, both the door and screen will be open, allowing new audiences to access both gender and multicultural issues.

About the Author:

Dr. Darla Shaw, professor emeritus at Western Ct. State University. Darla was an administrator and teacher in the Ridgefield Public School for 38 years and then became a full professor at WCSU for the next 28 years. Her field is

education and women's studies, and her research is on women in history and performing, in first person narrative, what she has learned about each woman.