



A True Story for Readers

I have the honor of teaching theatre and storytelling at several schools in the metro area as the Director of Education and Community Engagement at Speaking Out Collective (SOC). Through this work, I've developed a long-standing relationship with Lucy Craft Laney School (LL) in North Minneapolis. I was piloting new curriculum that reconsiders the way we teach Minnesota history through an initiative with local Indigenous partners, Dakota and Anishinaabe. The African American teachers at LL, who often say they want children to have a teacher that looks like them since they never did, loved the curriculum but also exclaimed, "now, we need you to tell some stories about us!"

In response to community requests, we developed our Truth Telling Community that documents BIPOC untold and silenced narratives and creates new curriculum missing from our textbooks and collective knowledge. A new Truth Telling theme emerged to design and center Black cultural and community heritage. In partnership with SOC, teachers and students began to focus on The WAY Community Center on the Northside and the 1969 Morrill Hall Takeover at the University of Minnesota. Simultaneously, members of Million Artist Movement (MAM) including myself, were hosting weekly quilting and singing in Saint Paul. Participants would often share stories about their elders and ancestors while quilting as well as passersby. I immediately contacted fellow SOC teaching artist and MAM member, Laura Mann Hill (MAM/SOC) and well-known musician and community activist Patty Lacy-Aiken (MAM). The stage had been set and we began interviewing key local leaders about their histories.

We have interviewed 15 Black elders to date including Emeritus Professors Frank Wilderson and Mahmoud El-Kati, artist Seitu Jones, Melvin Carter Sr., and Margo Mann. Interestingly, we discovered that Margo, who is also Laura Mann's aunt, had actually participated in the Morrill Hall takeover herself. We discovered an incredible interconnectedness among the stories shared and recorded. SOC used the interviews to inform an enthusiastically received fifth grade play at Lucy Craft Laney about the Takeover. A second-grade teacher from Cityview attended the performance and at their request we brought the story to Cityview too. Students at both schools had so many questions. "Can they really put someone in jail for having papers on the ground?", asked students about a reference to a photo of files spilled when students moved some desks and it was cited as "property damage". "How is it possible to have to sit in school all day and never learn about people who look like you?" "Did the Professor really say are there more than ten minutes of African American contributions to US History?" Students are often taught that the Civil Rights movement happened just in the South, when it took place in every part of the country.

It has been incredibly powerful to learn alongside our North Minneapolis teachers and students about what happened right here in Minneapolis. Both school performances were honored to include audience members who had been students who participated in the



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Morrill Hall Takeover. They spoke with eager students and families after each play and the room was so electric, no one wanted the conversation to end. .

Stories breed stories, especially when histories have been silenced or under told. Most interviews ended with, “you know, you should really talk with...” We’ll continue recording, documenting and transcribing stories so this generation and the next know the truth about how this land came to be and ensure mistakes of the past are never repeated. Look for continued additions to the Truth Telling Community stories by creating a free account [here](#).

Sharing stories also forges a sense of family. MAM founder and current Pillsbury House + Theatre Artistic Producing Director, Signe Harriday, is like my sister. When she listened to Patty, Laura and I retell parts of the interviews, she agreed that this is a story that we should share with as many people as possible, and further widen the family circle. MAM and Pillsbury House + Theatre have commissioned playwright Lester Mayers to expand the circle of storytelling, write and workshop a script around dominant themes.

This is what can happen when storytellers, teachers, students, and families come together and advocate for the education kids need and deserve. May these stories inspire us and be a reminder: *We are the change!*

Maria Asp

Many people had a hand in this incredible project including: Alice Butts, Tonette Clardy, Tessa Flynn, Jordan Hamilton, Signe Harriday, Sonja Harriday, Laura Mann Hill, Imagine Joy (Demetrius McClendon), Regina Jackson, Sonja Kuftinec, Patricia Lacy-Aiken, Alizarin Menninga-Fong, Suzy Messerole, Sterling Miller, Peter Morrow, SooJin Pate, Sydney Plunkett, Jayanthi Rajasa, Sarah Degner Riveros, Stacey Schwebach and Aa-Rael Seankh-Ka

And so many more who quilted with us and opened their hearts to share their stories. These stories will continue to grow, just as our understanding of history grows and changes. Please, join us!



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