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A LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

An annual report is a chance for us to do several things at once. On the one hand, it’s an opportunity for the Council to once again acknowledge and celebrate the critical support provided by our donors and program partners. On the other, it’s a chance for us to engage in that most central of humanities activities, storytelling. On these pages you will see how your support has translated, this past year, into more than 500 programs, mostly offered for free, that reached across the state, and in some cases, beyond its borders.

It takes resources and audiences of all types to make it happen, and we’re grateful for both.

It was a good year. I hope you will enjoy our report for 2010.

Erik C. Jorgensen
Executive Director
The year was 1997, and I had just landed a job as marketing director at Mayo Regional Hospital in Dover-Foxcroft. This was a feat, because although I had thrived as a longtime newspaper editor, I knew next to nothing about hospitals or marketing.

Soon after settling into my new career, I received a call from one of Mayo’s most prominent physicians, asking me to “look into” a new program she had heard about down the road at the big medical center in Bangor. Eager to please, and not realizing that “look into” meant “make it happen here,” I was introduced to Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Health Care® and made my first contact with the Maine Humanities Council. The Council had just started Lit & Med, and was curious to see if this promising program could also work at a much smaller hospital. Mayo was a good candidate, being centrally isolated on the edge of Maine’s 100-Mile Wilderness. The MHC thought if Literature & Medicine could make it there, it could make it anywhere.

Literature & Medicine did make it at Mayo. Our first group instantly took to the reading and discussion format, loved our visiting scholar/facilitator, thoroughly enjoyed the intellectual stimulation on those cold winter nights.

The Council began inviting me to annual Literature & Medicine conferences to help train other hospital liaisons, first in Maine and later, as the program went national, from states across the U.S. The more I learned about the Maine Humanities Council, the more I liked. When former Executive Director Deedee Schwartz asked if I might consider serving on the MHC Board, there was nothing to consider. I said “yes” on the spot.

Since joining the Board, I’ve lost track of how many trips I’ve made from Dover-Foxcroft to the MHC offices in Portland, although I can tell you it is a 266-mile round trip. I don’t mind the long drive, because the Council is truly committed to sending its programs, public events and grant resources to every corner of Maine. Travel comes with the territory.

The Council’s Board and staff have invested many hours over the past two years in discussing how best to connect Mainers through the power and pleasure of ideas, and how to use the humanities—literature, history, philosophy, culture—to enrich people’s lives. In 2010 we adopted a Strategic Plan for the next three years, one that will serve as a road map for fulfilling our mission. You can read this 13-page document on the Council’s website, www.mainehumanities.org.

We need to hold ourselves accountable to that plan, because the times demand it. As I write this, factions in Congress are targeting the National Endowment for the Humanities for major budget cuts, and funding for traditional humanities education is drying up at public universities and colleges. The humanities’ share of the educational pie is shrinking in favor of more “practical,” occupation-oriented academic majors.

Oh, the irony. While the humanities are under assault to the point where some feel the need even to defend the value (and expense) of a liberal-arts education, many employers tell of recent college graduates who come to the workplace without the critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication skills widely assumed to be at the core of a college education. A recent study, “Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses,” confirms this dire trend, but does report that students who took courses heavy on reading and writing showed higher rates of learning. They also became stronger readers and writers.

The Maine Humanities Council is now discussing its response to what has been dubbed the “crisis in the humanities,” and whether we should become more forceful advocates. Based on my experience with Literature & Medicine, I think we must.

In the world of medicine, with its focus on science, technology and finance, humanities truly are at the heart of health care. The very human relationship between patient and caregiver remains the essence of healing. This is true at a small hospital in Maine, or at any of the hospitals in the 24 other states where Lit & Med has spread. It is one of those big-picture lessons best learned one book, one conversation at a time.

Tom Lizotte
Board Chair
THE CRISIS of health care! The disgraceful inadequacy of care for our veterans!

Cut from these shrieking headlines and talk show sound bites to the scene of 170 health professionals, health professions students, scholars, and humanities council staff from 24 states, Canada and Argentina, mingling in a Washington hotel lobby. Or imagine them rapt in their seats as a speaker introduces them to the concept of “moral injury”; or as they are rendered breathless by a readers theater performance of the story of the dishonored Trojan War hero, Ajax, on the path to suicide; or in a workshop setting as they share with one another the ways in which poetry has helped make it possible for them to continue to provide care to their patients.

These gatherings took place at After Shock: Humanities Perspectives on Trauma, a conference organized by the MHC, November 12–13, 2010, specifically to address some of the issues contained within the familiar alarms of the news media. This was the most ambitious undertaking of the Council’s Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Health Care® program to date. Literature & Medicine is an award-winning discussion program that offers health professionals the opportunity to reflect on their professional roles through the lens of literature and share insights with colleagues. We designed this conference to provide insight and support to health professionals who work with trauma patients of all kinds, with a particular emphasis on veterans.

As we are a humanities council and this was part of Literature & Medicine, the humanities—in this case literature of all kinds, including storytelling and narrative—ran through all of the conference sessions. Those sessions,

“...the daily routine of caring...can at some point become be impossible for health professionals to bear alone...”

Clockwise from left: Tom Lizotte and others during a plenary session; A military serviceman responds to the Theater of War performance; A panel consisting of Jonathan Shay, a Veteran, a soldier, and a soldier’s family member respond to the Theater of War performance and answer audience questions; Dr. Geoffrey Gratwick; Kate Braestrup shares her insights on self-care and sharing bad news. Photos: Erik Jorgensen
eighteen workshops and four plenary presentations, offered a range of humanities-based approaches and programs built on our belief that literature is the best source for understanding the invisible wounds that many trauma patients suffer, and that it is also a significant resource for the healer seeking to be healed.

*Literature & Medicine* began at Eastern Maine Medical Center over a decade ago and has since spread to 24 other states. In 2011, this scholar-facilitated program will be in 12 Maine hospitals, in addition to 52 outside of Maine. The program engages diverse groups within a medical institution—including doctors, nurses, administrators, chaplains—with literary texts that invite them to step into worlds outside of their own experience to explore accounts of illness, death and human relationships in different places and times, taking the transformative power of the humanities into the heart of health care, and connecting the world of medicine with the world of lived experience. It has had a significant effect on the way participants understand their professions and their work relationships, and has markedly improved job satisfaction.

Based on the success of *Literature & Medicine* at Maine’s Togus VA Medical Center, the Council successfully sought funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities to take the program to additional VA facilities. As part of that grant, the Council organized *After Shock* to support the efforts of health professionals who care for trauma patients, particularly those in the VA system.

Keynote speakers all addressed the experience of trauma. Jonathan Shay, former VA psychiatrist and MacArthur “Genius Award”-winning author of *Achilles in Vietnam*, which traces the parallels between today’s PTSD and the symptoms of ancient heroes, spoke about the crushing and long-lasting effect of “moral injury” on combat veterans—when what they believe is right has been betrayed. The Theater of War’s Readers Theater version of selections from Sophocles’ *Ajax* performed by professional actors, exemplified the fatal effect of the moral injury described by Dr. Shay, and catalyzed discussions about the challenges faced by service members, veterans, their caregivers and families. (Theater of War, a performance and discussion program for military audiences, has been funded by the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury to perform at 100 U.S. military bases here and in Germany.) Maine’s own Kate Braestrup, the first chaplain of the Maine Warden Service and award-winning author of *Here if You Need Me*, spoke to the support needed by health professionals who deal with trauma day after day, and of living with situations which cannot be “fixed.” The conference closed with a talk by Vietnam vet Tim O’Brien, author of the acclaimed *The Things They Carried*, about the experience of war and its aftermath. He warned conference participants not to try to “erase” responsibility from their patients for acts that haunt them, arguing that
our sense of guilt can constitute our very humanity. It has been a privilege for the Literature & Medicine staff to gain a deeper understanding of the health care system, and to identify areas where, using the humanities, we can offer some help. We have come to understand, for instance, that the disconnect between medical jargon and “lay” understanding can make effective communication impossible; that a limited understanding of how a patient lives and how her family functions may make appropriate

“Thank you for the amazing conference you put together. It was one of the most focused, relevant, and stimulating conferences I’ve attended. I spoke with a lot of people during those days, and we all agreed on how much we appreciate the environment you created and the opportunities for reflecting on the work we do and connecting with others doing similar work.”

– Gala True, PhD, Core Investigator, Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion, Philadelphia VAMC

“Measuring the impact of the humanities will always be an imperfect science. How do you quantitate the visceral squiggle of delight that tingles your spine when a thoughtful person offers you dessert topped with their best insights, the zap in your brain when electrified by a new idea, the residual glow when you remember a new perspective: Do ideas help us to become better providers, better people, empathetic, more enriched? These truths we hold to be self-evident.”

– Geoffrey Gratwick, MD, Bangor, Maine

“For me, the highlight of the conference was Tim O’Brien’s presentation, which dealt with the issue of moral responsibility of soldiers in combat for the cruelty and atrocities that occur. His presentation struck home, because what he said sounded similar to what I hear from many aging Vietnam Veterans who are remembering and reflecting on their activities during the Vietnam War. O’Brien offered no easy answers to the questions he raised about moral responsibility, which also parallels what I’ve seen clinically: veterans struggling with these issues do not readily accept the usual answers or solutions for their guilt feelings. The questions and discussion which followed highlighted the divergent views on war in our society, and thus provided a fitting closing to this stimulating conference.”

– Robert W. Hierholzer, MD, VA, Central California Health Care System, Fresno

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– Gala True, PhD, Core Investigator, Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion, Philadelphia VAMC

“The speakers and the workshop sessions were an amazing testament to the power of the humanities to help us address extremely complex contemporary issues in a constructive fashion. A remarkable experience.”

– Esther Mackintosh, President, Federation of State Humanities Councils

“The most intense 36 hours I have had in a long time. It’s hard to comment on the rest of the program by mentioning one part ahead of another because it implies a ranking that is not at all deserved. But the Theater of War was extraordinary, Shay, our own game warden chaplain, numerous breakout sessions, old friends … Measuring the impact of the humanities will always be an imperfect science. How do you quantitate the visceral squiggle of delight that tingles your spine when a thoughtful person offers you dessert topped with their best insights, the zap in your brain when electrified by a new idea, the residual glow when you remember a new perspective: Do ideas help us to become better providers, better people, empathetic, more enriched? These truths we hold to be self-evident.”

– Geoffrey Gratwick, MD, Bangor, Maine
diagnosis and care difficult; that the daily routine of caring for chronically ill patients or those who are severely wounded or traumatized can at some point become impossible for health professionals to bear alone; and that perhaps the health care workforce, along with its patients, is ailing.

*After Shock* was intended to help health professionals take better care of their patients and themselves. The comments and evaluations of conference participants make clear that it succeeded.

Victoria Bonebakker  
MHC Associate Director,  
Founder of Literature & Medicine

In 2010: *Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Health Care®* held programs at nine medical sites in Maine (serving almost 200 medical professionals and, through them, more than 16,000 patients, patient families, and colleagues), as well as 64 sites nationwide.

“*If I ever had doubts about the need for literature and medicine programs in hospitals or my own usefulness as a facilitator, they were dispelled by an intense exchange I had in Joanna Goulding’s workshop ‘How Wounded Healer Stories Help Us Heal.’ First Goulding took us through the archetypal journey of the wounded healer. She said that to be such a healer requires ‘…the ability to tolerate and sit with your wound and acknowledge the wounds…’ and that ‘The wounded healer does not have to have his or her wounds completely healed to be a healer.’

“Then she asked us to take a partner and in turn, become listener and then speaker. She gave a prompt: tell what conflicts you had about coming to this conference. My partner, a health care professional at Walter Reed, hesitated to come, she said, because usually she spends all weekend alone, quietly, recuperating from the assault of the week. She poured out her despair at continually seeing young people, even casually in the hallways, who are maimed and injured for life. She said there was little outlet for expressing or sharing, that she carried her burdens alone, as did all the others working in the hospital, for everyone’s burden was equally heavy. Plus she carried the obligation of confidentiality about her patients. Her trauma and sense of isolation were palpable as, given the invitation, she poured her heart out to me, a stranger.”

– Suzanne McConnell, English professor and *Literature & Medicine* facilitator, New Jersey

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– Suzanne McConnell, English professor and *Literature & Medicine* facilitator, New Jersey
In 2008, at Livermore Falls High School, Susan St. Pierre was asked by her superintendent to participate in the Maine Humanities Council’s Teaching American History Through Biography program. And with a fellow social studies teacher and the librarian from her school, she entered an entirely new experience.

“The TAH program has not only served as a vehicle by which I have been able to come in contact with other teachers who share my passion for history, but it has also treated me as a scholar; not as someone who has to be told how to teach, but as someone who knows their craft and is valued for that skill,” Susan said. “I have returned to the role of historian and expanded my knowledge with a more mature and focused eye, that of the classroom teacher.”

Teaching American History, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, gathers teachers together five times throughout the school year and then for a two-week residential institute in the summer for an in-depth study of how biographies can serve as windows into American history. Teachers become scholars. And their students do, too.

“I have become a better teacher,” Susan said. “Because I have been allowed to be a scholar once again, I am now able to empathize with my students, and, more importantly they can see the work that I have done and we can share and learn together.”

Susan returned to the classroom with fresh enthusiasm, the kind that is contagious. “I walked [my students] through the process of historical research and down the ‘Road Map’ to writing. We talked about the role of the historian, we formed questions, we discussed our findings and we shared in the excitement of learning together.”

Six Livermore Falls High School educators participated in Teaching American History in 2010, and Susan says it has made a difference. “The excitement that this program has developed among these teachers has spilled over to many facets of our school.”

In late 2009, the school hosted a very special segment of its Bagels & Books program, a reading and discussion group for the school and the community. Teaching American History had given Susan and her fellow educators the idea...
that an author might be a very good guest for the program, to “share with us their knowledge, experience and passion for their subject.” The author chosen was historian Charles Calhoun, author of *Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life*. Charles, a former MHC staff member, was one of the scholars Susan met through *Teaching American History*.

Thus, “Bringing Longfellow to Life” came about. Charles not only met with the Bagels & Books group, but also with the 11th and 12th grade American literature, poetry, and creative writing students and faculty to discuss the literary aspect of Longfellow, and his own role as an author. Charles also met with Susan’s Advanced Placement history students and discussed his own “Road Map” to writing, from research to the final copy.

More than 55 people attended Bagels & Books, setting a program record. Students were excited at the opportunity to discuss history with a real author; Charles was surrounded by attendees eager to have him sign their books personally.

Susan’s two-year *Teaching American History* commitment has finished. Yet she has chosen to continue on in a third year of the program, further developing her mastery of content and writing skills. And the recruitment efforts of Susan and her fellow Livermore Falls High School participants have resulted in three new staff members joining the current program group. When they finish, 100% of the history department, 40% of the English department, and 23% of the total teaching staff will have successfully completed the MHC *Teaching American History* program.

“These opportunities for me and my students would not have been possible without my involvement with the *Teaching American History* program and financial support from the Maine Humanities Council. This program has reaffirmed me as a historian; it has allowed me to network with people not only within my school, but outside my school to share our enthusiasm and expertise as teachers of history. It has opened up new opportunities to access new resources and dialogue with experts in the study of history. By engaging in all of this, my students have certainly benefited. … And it is from this that we have all emerged as better teachers.”

Diane Magras
Director of Development

In 2010: The MHC held 7 programs for K-12 educators, as well as two history camps for high school students, reaching almost 300 educators and over 5,000 students in 2010 alone.

“…I have had the pleasure of watching our participating teachers reengage with the research process, and delighted in their enthusiasm and determination. [The content-based] MHC *Teaching American History through Biography* program provides our teachers with a wealth of new resources to take back with them into the classroom—so important in a book-poor state like Maine. … Over the course of the past two years, I have watched the TAH participants begin to reach their full potential as teacher-scholars and become more confident in their research and writing abilities— a confidence that I know will continue to transform their classrooms, and the lives of our shared students, each and every day. This program is the single most important professional development activity I have ever been involved with—both for the obvious benefits of the participants, and for myself.”

– Faculty scholar

(Cumberland, North Yarmouth) | RSU 10 (Canton, Carthage, Dixfield, Hanover, Peru, Buckfield, Hartford, Sumner, Byron, Mexico, Roxbury, Rumford) | Maine Council for the Social Studies | Old Fort Western | Colburn House | Margaret Chase Smith Library | Pejepscot Historical Society | Bowdoin College | University of Southern Maine | Osher Map Library | Ted Sharp | Elizabeth Bischof | David Hecht | Stephanie Yuhl | James Francis | Charles Norman Shay | Charles Calhoun | Walter Sargent | Linda Docherty | Jennifer Scannlon | Joseph Conforti | Eileen Eagan | Tom Desjardin | Bruce Clary | David Richards | Sabrina Nickerson | Tad Baker | Ed O’Donnell | David Carey | Allen Wells | Cedric Bryant | Cheryl Gikes | Kate Miles | Nicole Rancourt | Shane Gower | Jeff Evans | Perry Palmer | Gus Koziszkly | Ken Hamilton
Walking into Jewett School in Bucksport where I facilitated a Born to Read Peaceable Stories training in October 2010, I felt both excitement and nervous anticipation. Here I was, co-creator of Peaceable Stories, having the first chance in three years of leading the session myself. But as always happens when I facilitate, the experience was inspirational, thought-provoking and full of discoveries for me, as I hope it was for the participants.

Peaceable Stories is a training for early childhood educators that explores the ideas within books and shows how both ideas and books themselves can, through conversations and related language activities, have a powerful, positive impact on the child care environment. The thirteen participants for the Bucksport training were educators of toddlers to children in afterschool, elementary, and middle school special education programs, as well as a few administrators of the host agency, Child Care Opportunities (which provides professional development throughout the Downeast region for early childhood educators). Most had been working with children for more than 15 years.

As participants free-associated on the word “peace,” questions about the concept emerged. How often does peace require compromise? What are the connections between power and peace? Does our culture provide heroes and heroines who model peaceful behavior? One participant said peace (for her) meant being quiet, while another described her definition of peace as noisy children who become embroiled in conflict, then learn resolution through communication.

We dipped into the books and discussed the kinds of conversations that are possible with titles from the Peaceable Stories curriculum, such as A Little Peace, Barbara Kerley’s photo essay of children from around the
world, and the classic Leo Lionni
*It’s Mine*. We noted how each book
realistically depicted children’s
experiences of peace, one being “real”
by virtue of its photos, showing varying
degrees of socioeconomic circumstance;
another being “real” by telling a classic
story of children learning to share and
surviving a frightening circumstance.
We spoke at length about the kinds
of conversations that educators and
children could have about the children’s
own experiences of peace and how the
choices made in each of these books
lead to peace or conflict.

The session wrapped up at 9:00pm.
I left filled with admiration for the
dedication of educators and caregivers
who attend a three-hour evening
training, despite having days with
young children that are often (for
home-based providers) ten hours long.
As I drove home through the fog,
I reflected on the great work that is
possible and, indeed happening every
day, using the power of books. With
intentional conversation about stories
and rich illustrations, these participants
were excited to return to the children
in their programs to help them learn
problem-solving skills as they encounter
the choices available to everyone, be
they young frogs or children in India,
in the face of conflict.

Denise Pendleton
Founder and Director
of Born to Read

In 2010: *Born to Read* held 33 statewide trainings, including *Many Eyes, Many Voices; Peaceable Stories;* and *Picturing America*—serving nearly 700 early childhood educators and the more than 7,500 children ages birth through five in their programs.

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**CHOOSE**

*by Carl Sandburg*

The single clenched fist lifted and ready,
Or the open asking hand held out and waiting.
Choose:
For we meet by one or the other.

– from the *Peaceable Stories* Activity & Resource Guide
distributed during trainings

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*“It [the training] was a wonderful experience and I’ve been suggesting it to colleagues. Great discussion and resources. I surely will be using them over time.”*  
*“Since the training, I have taken the time to enjoy and appreciate what gives me a sense of peace—that hopefully is making me a better teacher, mom, friend, etc.”*  
– Peaceable Stories participants

*“Children bully very early and they need to learn about others’ feelings early in life. Social, emotional development is so important to help guide the children with the positive interactions and it starts in early childcare with knowledgeable teachers. Parents and teachers need to work together to help these children grow by feeling safe when they go to school and knowing that a teacher will be there for them. Helping children problem-solve conflicts is the number-one focus for me as a teacher each day in class. Children need to know you will be there to help them come up with a solution. Books are wonderful ways to open up conversations with kids. Books give children language and visuals.”*  
– Early childhood educator attending a Peaceable Stories training
Can you remember a favorite book that was read to you? What would be missing from your life if you had never been read to?

Many parents in Maine were not read to as children. With no childhood memories of picture books, fairy tales, or stories read aloud, these parents can’t remember what it feels like to be read to, and don’t always know how to choose books to read or how to make reading aloud work.

Memories of reading experiences remind today’s parents how reading aloud reinforces the parent-child bond. But even for parents who were read to, it’s not always obvious that enjoying a book with children should start in infancy and continue until children say they’d rather read on their own. For parents who were not read to, especially parents struggling with literacy, reading requires not just extra time in a schedule, but confidence as well.

Thanks to a grant from Jane’s Trust, the MHC created Deep in a Book: Parents Reading Aloud with Their Children to give parents who were raised without books and reading aloud important tools to help them provide strong literacy experiences for their children.

Our first hint that the “why and how” of reading aloud was important to a widespread audience in the Family Literacy world came at the Maine Family Literacy Initiative’s annual conference in March 2010, where a brief workshop about our ideas for Deep in a Book drew 75 people instead of the 20 we had expected.

We first tried Deep in a Book in April 2010 with Biddeford’s First
Teachers parenting program, where I knew I’d see friendly faces and get useful feedback. As I drove down I-95, all the books and handouts and pencils and name tags were neatly packed in the back, but all the vital connections I wanted to make were dancing around in my head. I kept trying to marshal them into some sort of order, but they all wanted to be first! Those friendly faces helped the workshop over the awkward parts. Some things took too long and others got left out. What part of the workshop did they like best? Being read to! What might they do differently now? “Read more often to all my children, not just my youngest.” “Talk about the pictures.” “Get more books that relate to my kids.” “Talk more.” Hurrah! They got the connections that I had most wanted to get across. There were different “firsts” for different parents. Of course those free books were important, but now they had a better idea how to use them.

In May, *Born to Read* program director Denise Pendleton tried a modified version for parents in a support group for survivors of domestic violence: a very successful picture walk with *When Sophie Gets Angry*. Many parents in this group already read to their children, but they were also delighted to learn more about how to integrate conversation with their children into the read-aloud process.

By June, I had modified the demonstrations to work smoothly for the Women’s Reentry Center in Bangor, a transitional facility that uses rigorous social programs to help inmates adjust to life outside. Here, we had time for small groups to read and discuss the “deep” potential in their free books, but not quite enough time to share with the whole group or fill out the evaluation sheet. My observing teacher suggested not spending so much time on the method and development of the research; just get to the main ideas that inform our demonstrations.

What else did we learn? Parents should demonstrate “reading” a board book; the words aren’t the point; it’s what the parent and child find interesting to talk about in the pictures. We should provide a checklist of the potential ways to “go deep” that we demonstrated in the workshop so that parents can think about which ones work best with which books. And of course, two hours is not nearly enough time, but it allows an effective beginning. Participants are ready to go right home and try their new books out.

The best realization of all: while future success in school may for some parents be a selling point for reading aloud, the pure delight of going *Deep in a Book* with a child is sufficient in itself. There’s a child out there who would love to go deep in your favorite children’s book with you.

Carolyn Sloan is the co-founder and primary facilitator of Deep in a Book and program assistant to New Books, New Readers as well as Let’s Talk About It. She co-created the Deep in a Book model based on her literacy training as a teacher and her experience as a New Books, New Readers facilitator.

In 2010: For a new program with a very small budget, *Deep in a Book* had an impact: four programs statewide served nearly 40 parents eager to expand their early literacy skills, affecting more than 70 children.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

We’ve secured a grant from the Maine Community Foundation for 2011 for five *Deep in a Book* workshops in four counties. This time, free books will include a board book for parents with infants and toddlers. Thanks to this grant, three workshops are already scheduled and *New Books, New Readers* facilitator Annaliise Jakimides (a writer, poet, and parent, too) is delighted to become a second presenter.
It was icy, cloudy, and cold—a typical winter day. I stepped out of my car, stiff after the drive, with New Books, New Readers program director Julia Walkling. I was joining her on her annual site visit to Farmington, where New Books, New Readers has met regularly since 1993. As we walked inside Franklin County Adult Basic Education, I was ready to listen, watch, and learn. New Books, New Readers uses children’s literature to help adults strengthen their reading skills. It’s an effective program, but I was in no way prepared for the power in store for me.

The participants greeted me warmly. Most were women, and ranged in age from mid-40s to post-60s. The group included two literacy tutors, and one special guest: Dr. Allen Berger, an MHC board member and the Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost at the University of Maine at Farmington. Elizabeth Cooke, a writer and English professor at UMF, was the scholar/facilitator for this group. She was completely at ease with her three visitors. It soon became clear how much at ease she was with her group—and how much she connects with them.

The series under discussion was “Caught Between Cultures” with the hot topic of immigrants’ experience in the U.S. The books for the meeting of the site visit explored a Mexican-American boy’s struggle to help his grandfather get work, during which the boy learns how exaggeration can backfire (*A Day’s Work*, Eve Bunting); a young Taiwanese girl’s adaptation to a new life, including the pressures of waiting for a green card (*Hannah is My Name*, Belle Yang); and a harrowing description of Chinese railway laborers and the privations, dangers, and prejudice they faced (*Coolies*, Yin, illustrated by Chris Soentpiet).

Elizabeth began the session by asking who had an immigrant past. She urged participants to think about not just their parents but their grandparents, too. Canada proved to be the only foreign country of origin, so Elizabeth used that as her point of reference, showing that being from “away” can still have an impact when the country of origin is nearby. This exhibited Elizabeth’s approach: she reaches her group through obvious respect for their minds, opinions, and experiences. When asking them to explore a concept—such as the feeling of being an outsider in the U.S.—she asked them to draw upon what they themselves knew. She asked them to personally consider if the things that had happened to characters in the books were fair.

Several times, the conversation entered tense territory. One participant
opined that immigrants take jobs from locals, making life tough for people who have always lived there.

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, “that can be hard.” Her sympathy was clear. But then she asked participants to think deeper. “What about people who came here a hundred years ago? Did they take jobs away from people who were already here? Did the locals then think they did?”

Participants nodded; this made sense. “For people who come here now—what should they do about jobs?” “Well, they have to get them,” one woman said. “Like everyone else.”

Near the end of the session, another tense moment came during the discussion of *Coolies*. Participants seemed to understand the hardships of the Chinese immigrants, yet did not connect to the characters. Did anyone know an immigrant? Elizabeth asked. “Our President is one,” suggested one participant.

“No,” Elizabeth responded gently, “He was born in the U.S. Only people who are born in the U.S. are allowed to be President.” Briefly, she spoke about misinformation and how easily it can spread, and wondered aloud if that contributed to negative feelings about immigrants.

“That isn’t right,” a participant said. “They can’t help it. A lot of people are from other places.”

Helping people think in ways they haven’t before, and giving them the courage to speak new thoughts aloud, is a huge part of the program. I saw precisely that power in action.

Diane Magras
Director of Development

In 2010: In partnership with adult education, literacy volunteers, and correctional programs, *New Books, New Readers* held 50 series, serving 850 low-literacy adults, immigrants and refugees, and inmates in Maine’s prisons, jails, and reentry centers.

“My student is avidly interested in the discussions, and has come to feel much better about himself as an intelligent human being and as a learner from realizing that he has something valid to contribute. He is very dyslexic, and had a very hard time in school. His experience in reading was limited to struggling to sound words out, letter by letter, with no real connection with meaning. New Books, New Readers has helped him to understand what reading is all about. He brings meaning to the text from his personal experiences and from what he had learned watching the Discovery Channel or the History Channel, and suddenly he is actually reading for meaning. His improvement in reading this year has been dramatic. I am certain that the New Books, New Readers series led to this breakthrough for him.”

– Teacher at Oxford Hills Adult Education, Norway
St. Agatha is nestled beside a large lake, surrounded by undulating hills and farms. In the Saint John Valley in northern Maine, on the border of New Brunswick and Québec, St. Agatha is an intimate setting, rich in history and culture. It is also the site of a strong work ethic and awareness of community that has helped its residents pull together to raise significant funds for the local historical society, museum, and library.

Yet like many small towns, there are challenges. Long Lake attracts seasonal residents, and their presence shifts both the culture and the tax base. Summer residents join year-round residents as keen supporters of the local cultural resources, like the Long Lake Public Library.

Sheila Jans, MHC board member and resident of neighboring Madawaska, knows St. Agatha and its library well. “They really get what it means to be a community center,” she said. Sheila points out that keeping St. Agatha’s sense of place, the intimacy of the small community, is important to everyone, but not everyone agrees how to do this.

This kind of difference in communities is not uncommon. Yet *Let’s Talk About It*, the Maine Humanities Council’s free, scholar-facilitated reading and discussion program for libraries, helps bring people together. Sheila saw that when Long Lake Public Library hosted a *Let’s Talk About It* series in the summer of 2010. Each *Let’s Talk About It* series offers five two-hour sessions. One of its program goals is to support libraries in their efforts to offer humanities-based public programming, building a sense of community. A second is to encourage respectful conversation. Long Lake Public Library chose the series “Defining Wilderness, Defining Maine,” which includes such titles as Thoreau’s *The Maine Woods*, Dean Bennett’s *The Wilderness from Chamberlain Farm*, and Louise Dickinson Rich’s *We Took to the Woods*, because of this series’ connection to local issues.

“What was remarkable was that certain issues that could be divisive in a different forum—land use, identity, consolidation, northern Maine versus southern Maine—and we talked about these issues in a way that doesn’t normally happen. We had constructive, supportive, thought-provoking conversations—all in the context of a larger issue from the book.”

Sheila added, “The facilitator was key to everything. Every time I talk about this program, I talk about its distinction of being led by a scholar. With that, it’s a facilitated discussion that has weight to it. The books are chosen by a scholar, and that shows; they’re high-level, giving people a scholarly experience.”

*Let’s Talk About It* prompts powerful conversations about hard topics through the removed nature of literature and the skill of the MHC facilitator. And both prompt digging deeper into issues relevant to participants’ lives. “You
start realizing that everything is so connected,” Sheila said. “We talked about caring for place and the way of the wilderness during the height of the oil spill in the Gulf, and discussed the relevance of those things to what we’re facing in the Valley. It’s sometimes hard to make those connections in real life.”

Sheila also credited Jacqueline and Joan Ayotte, the leaders at the library. “Jackie and Joan’s sensibility and desire to bring people together in a constructive way makes a big difference. The energy of that library is supportive and positive. Even the series selection is a reflection on that leadership, and how they’re responding to the community’s needs.”

“It’s a really affirming way to advance the things that we’ve learned,” Sheila said, “or even to unlearn something. We have maybe twenty people in the room, everyone coming from different experiences. I’m listening to that person across the room—and I might not normally have the chance for thought-provoking conversations with that person.”

There are many ways to bring a community together, and a book discussion can do it well. “Let’s Talk About It does just that,” Sheila says. “The beauty is that it works in small groups. And those twenty people who come have an enormous impact on their community, because everything in rural areas is community-based, connected to families, and it rubs off.”

Who were participants in Long Lake Public Library’s Let’s Talk About It last year? Retirees, educators, former legislators, community leaders, a Maine guide, homemakers, a hairdresser—people from all walks of life, from their 30s to 90s. They were all people, Sheila says, who like to learn, and that learning united them into a very special new community.

Diane Magras
Director of Development

In 2010: Through series held in partnership with 29 libraries statewide, Let’s Talk About It served almost 430 Mainers in towns small and large.

“Just being nudged to read outside one’s favorite genres is mentally energizing, and in truth some of the most intense and far-reaching discussions were generated by books that set off very disparate reactions in readers.”

– Suzanne Plaut, Director, Lubec Memorial Library

“I came because of the critical nature of the Middle East region and my own lack of knowledge.”

– Lovell Participant

“Learning about the South Asian culture from someone with first-hand experience was invaluable. The facilitator made the series informative and interactive. She was excellent at leading discussion while revealing cultural information found in the books.”

– Belfast Participant
**EXPERIENCING HISTORY AT THE GAME LOFT**

The Maine Humanities Council awards grants ranging from $500 to $7,500 to nonprofit organizations throughout the state. Committed to the idea that even small grants can make a difference, the MHC offers a simple application process with rapid turnaround times and, excepting larger grants, rolling deadlines. In reviewing projects, the MHC prioritizes those that stimulate meaningful community dialogue, attract diverse audiences, are participatory and engaging, and invite discovery of the humanities.

In 2010, the MHC awarded a major grant to the Game Loft in Belfast, a community center that promotes positive youth development, leadership, and academic enrichment through non-electronic gaming and community service (now a division of Spurwink Services). The project funded aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding of the 1960s, both in the community at large and among a targeted group of high school students.

It was designed to immerse students in the experiences of ordinary Maine residents at different historical periods through experiential and role-playing games. A team of eight high school students and six adults planned the 1950s/1960s unit, which culminated with two major role-play events: “1968: Gone but not Forgotten” and “Henry Chandler Defies the Draft.” Nearly 30 youth and adults helped execute each event and 400 people participated.

The unit’s fundamental goal was for participants to learn about the social, political, ethical, and artistic issues of the 1950s and 1960s through role-play. Topics included the changes in rural Maine after World War II and the beginnings of the Youth Movement.

The “Gone but not Forgotten” activity centered on the story of a fictional young man named Jake Watson who receives his draft notice and must decide—on the day of his and his friends’ popular rock band’s big concert—whether to serve or refuse. Young people portraying Jake and his friends represented the various sides of the issues surrounding the Vietnam War. To prepare, participating students interviewed veterans and others who lived through this period, which helped them understand the issues of the day and informed their portrayal of their characters. Ultimately, as the August 2010 event unfolded, Jake and his friend, Jim Chandler, decided not to serve, and fled to Canada.

In conjunction with this activity, the Game Loft also hosted an entire day of 1960s-themed events for the students and wider community, ranging from hula-hoop instructions to a long hair contest and documentary film footage at the Belfast Library. The event attracted 300 local residents and visitors and ended with a street party filled with 1960’s music and costumes. Describing the event, Patricia Estabrook, who with her husband Ray Estabrook founded The Game Loft, noted, “For a day, [Game Loft kids] had left 2010 behind and become part of another time and place.”

The second major scenario, “Henry Chandler Defies the Draft,” focused on another fictional young man facing the draft: Jim’s brother Henry (played by high school student Luke Merrithew). Unlike Jim, who chose direct action, Henry drifted around the country hoping that the issue would disappear, representing the many people who were disaffected or confused by the issues raised by Vietnam and who chose not to participate in the political process. Henry ignored his draft and was finally arrested and went to trial.
On Martin Luther King Day in 2011, the Game Loft simulated a January 17, 1969 trial, at which Henry’s lawyer (played by a local attorney) defended him as a conscientious objector. His passivity and lack of commitment to the political process worked against him, and he was convicted of evading the draft and sentenced to a year in prison and two years of alternative service by a jury and judge comprised of fellow role players.

Both events provided opportunities for youth and adults to interact while confronting issues of the 1960s. According to Patricia Estabrook, this collaboration between adults who “had experienced the 1960s as young people and brought their memories and some of their unresolved feelings” to the activities and the youth who “had little understanding of the period when they started and only the haziest knowledge of the events that they would be portraying” led to “insights on both sides that would not have happened otherwise.”

The Maine Humanities Council’s major grant supported the creation of the curriculum for this innovative and deeply engaging project.

Karin France is a MHC intern from USM’s American and New England Studies graduate program.

In 2010: MHC grants reached more than 302,800 people through reading and discussion programs, symposiums, and seminars.
Maine Humanities Council Annual Fund donors make a difference for people across Maine—the scope of which being clearly seen within the map below.

They inspire the exchange of perspectives that lead MHC program participants to a better understanding of themselves, one another, and the world. They enrich the state by supporting the programs described in this report. We are grateful for their generosity.

If you feel inspired to contribute, please fill out the enclosed envelope, or contact Diane Magras, Director of Development, at 207-773-5051, or diane@mainehumanities.org.

To all of our donors: Thank you. You really do make a difference.

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