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## Big Read: Collaborations Between a University and a Community

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## **Introduction (Chris Birchak)**

Five University of Houston – Downtown (UHD) colleagues and I gathered in a small conference room on a cold winter’s day in early January 2014 to complete the multiple forms for a Big Read grant. A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Big Read (<http://www.neabigread.org/>) encourages the community-wide reading of a single book as a strategy for better understanding ourselves and others as well as the world in which we live. The requirement that the book be approached through a variety of media that include the literary arts intrigued us. Moreover, we knew that the robust partnerships UHD had forged over the years would reinforce the required collaboration with local organizations. We had spent more than a month recruiting partners, exploring programmatic opportunities, and estimating costs in order to remain within the designated budget. Thus, on that January afternoon, we remained confident about overcoming the challenges that frequently seem to accompany submitting a grant proposal online.

That confidence arose, in part, because of our stated intention to coordinate Big Read activities with the 2014 Houston Citizenship Month, a series of community-centric events and programs that enhance civic engagement by building bridges of understanding, cooperation, and awareness of Houston's unique multicultural community. In 2013, UHD had been a primary sponsor of this annual event, held in November. In fact, Dr. Noel Bezette-Flores, executive director of the UHD Center for Public Service and Family Strengths at the time and a member of our proposal-writing team, served as co-chair of the organizing committee for the 2013 Houston Citizenship Month. Moreover, the mission of UHD includes engaging “with the community to address the needs and advance the development of the region.” In light of the many services that UHD provides to its differing local communities and diverse populations, and its prior successes in promoting and organizing large-scale events involving students, faculty, staff, and community members, we strongly believed that UHD was well positioned to meet and exceed the objectives of the Big Read program.

Whether we received the grant or not, we were committed to incorporating some of the partnered events into our existing freshman common reader program, conducted since 2010. This program includes a freshman convocation, discussion sessions, panels, guest speakers, and movie screenings related to a topic that typically addresses societal issues. Prior to submitting the grant proposal, we had already chosen *A Lesson Before Dying*, by Ernest Gaines, for our 2014-2015 common

reader. The Big Read included this book on the list of books from which applicants for the grant could choose. Moreover, the book aligned with the opening of the UHD Center for Critical Race Studies, for which race and crime would be the 2014-2015 theme.

Upon receiving news that we had been awarded a Big Read grant, our interdisciplinary team celebrated this opportunity to strengthen and expand the reach of our common reading activities to the greater Houston community, fostering discussions of social issues and books that might previously have been inaccessible to certain audiences. Nationally recognized for its many outreach and community engagement efforts, UHD maintains a symbiotic relationship with the city, which requires an informed citizenry to maintain its prosperity. Crucial to advancing the development of the region is enriched literacy for a broad sector of the population. Keeping this goal in mind, we began the challenging task of implementing the grant with its multiple components. Throughout the year, we remained energized, working with our partners as we addressed social issues through the literary arts. We encourage others to apply for grants that provide the opportunity to scale up a project with the potential to touch the lives of a broader population.

### **Gather at the Table: Big Read Event at SEARCH With the Families From the House of Tiny Treasures (Leigh Van Horn)**

When Chris Birchak approached me to ask if I would work with SEARCH, our long-time community partner and a sponsor of the House of Tiny Treasures (HTT), to host a Big Read event, I told her I would need to think about a way to share *A Lesson Before Dying* with this particular group. HTT is an accredited preschool and day care facility founded to serve children one to six years old whose families are either homeless or living in subsidized transitional housing. As noted in a recent award application from a university administration, “HTT provides stability and structure for the children it enrolls, as well as for siblings and parents, by countering the disruptions and chaos of homelessness, which often entails violence and other instabilities, including maternal drug use that has caused developmental challenges in some HTT children. The parents often lack the skills or emotional strength to meet the challenges of parenting, as well. The founders of HTT aimed to promote opportunities for optimum developmental growth for success in school and in life for HTT children, as well as for their siblings and parents.”

I have been working with this community partner group for nine years, first as a literacy faculty member in the Department of Urban Education, and now as interim dean of the UHD College of Public Service. UHD students who are pre-service teachers or teacher candidates work with me to host family literacy events at HTT four times each academic year. These events are a collaborative effort with the teachers and administrators at HTT, who are required to hold one parent meeting/event per month. For me, it has been a learning experience and one of personal and professional growth. I have had the opportunity to work with a group of people who, although they are often experiencing personal crisis in the form of homelessness, instability, ill health, and anxiety or depression, have over the years taught me much about the naturalistic development of literacy skills that occurs in encounters between children and their parents. To prepare for these family-centered events, I begin by choosing four quality works of children's literature that address the interests or needs of the children and their parents – one book for each event. I then choose a related book that families can read together on their own to extend the experience. Once the books are chosen, I design a response activity to go along with the theme of the book to be featured at the event. The response activities involve participants in creating an original work of art or craft or engaging in gamelike interactions while reinforcing and developing literacy-related skills. Years of working alongside the families that have attended the events and talking with them about what they like to do have given me insight into the kinds of books and response activities that will be the most appealing to them. An assessment of our family literacy program, funded by the Union Pacific Railroad, has revealed increases in self-esteem and empowerment, in school readiness owing to social engagement with teacher-education candidates, and in a sense of well-being thanks to the opportunity to interact in a safe environment around common issues of children, family, and literacy education. We also know from reports of the HTT director that we are contributing to the academic growth of the children, as evidenced in adult participants' conversations with the children in interactive read-aloud and response experiences.

I began preparation for the Big Read event with a close reading of *A Lesson Before Dying* with the HTT population in mind. I wanted to design something that would be a special "gift" to the parents of the children. I wanted to show them my deep appreciation for the ideas about parenting and family literacy that they have shared with my students and me over the years. We couldn't express this gratitude to all of the parents we had worked with over the years, but we could create an event for these particular parent partners. Thus, an evening focused on exchanging

recipes and stories about cooking and eating, and providing them with an opportunity to hold their children close and listen to a Reader's Theater play before sharing a meal together, seemed to me an effective way to thank them. The book focuses on Jefferson, a young male African-American living in a small town in the 1940s. Jefferson has been accused of murder and awaits execution. Readers are drawn into his world and that of the people whose lives touch his as he waits to die. As I read, I was struck by the pain and strength of the central characters as they struggled to help Jefferson come to terms with the reality of his situation and to die with dignity. At the end of the first reading, I did not have an immediate idea of how I might share this book with the families in crisis at HTT. After a day or so, it occurred to me that I would have to come at the book from another angle. As I was thinking, I remembered several powerful scenes in which Jefferson's Tante (Aunt) Lou cooks for him and brings carefully packed suppers to the visiting room or the jail cell. Jefferson often refuses to eat, and the meals are later shared with others in the jail. I read the book again, this time with a pack of post-it notes in hand. Each time I came across a scene that involved sharing food or drink, I marked it. When my reading concluded, I had marked sixteen scenes in which food or drink was shared. This might be just the link I needed. I chose scenes that demonstrated the way that food brings us together and helps us to grow or heal, and then wove them together as a Reader's Theater script that could be read aloud to the families from HTT. The idea that food nourishes us in more than physiological ways would be familiar to them. We had already established a connection between our being together at family literacy events and preparing and eating food because at the conclusion of all of these events, the participants are provided with a meal for each family member. Sometimes, they have the meals while at the school, and at other times, we pack the food in small boxes that the families can take back to the shelters where they live. Food, as depicted by the author, Ernest J. Gaines, has the power to heal wounds, to draw people together, to bring an end to an argument, to offer a truce. As I considered this further, ideas for our Big Read event began to flow. I wrote my thoughts down in an e-mail and sent them to the director of HTT and the social worker at the school, asking, "What do you think? Will this be something that our families would enjoy?"

The idea I shared was for us to invite everyone to a special dinner made up of some of the foods featured in the book. The announcement of the event would be in the form of a blank recipe card and would include an invitation for each family to contribute a favorite recipe by writing it down on the back of the card and depositing the card in a basket as he or she

arrived that evening. The recipe cards and stories about food and special times associated with the food shared by the families during the event would be collected. After the event, we would compile the recipes and stories and publish a cookbook/storybook for all of the attendees. During the evening, the UHD pre-service teachers would also perform a Reader's Theater reading of a script of scenes related to food excerpted from *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Responses from the director and social worker came back swiftly – “Yes! Let's do it!” At a later date, we met face to face so I could present the details to them. Our invitation for the evening would let participants know what to expect:

SEARCH/House of Tiny Treasures

Big Read Event

Inspired by Ernest J. Gaines's book, *A Lesson Before Dying*

Please join us on (date).

Reader's Theater – *Gather at the Table: The Healing Power of Food*

Dinner inspired by the text

Talking together – our stories about preparing and eating food

Share a recipe! On the back of this card, please write down a favorite recipe and bring it to the party. We are going to put all of the recipes and your stories together to make a book for you!

At a later meeting, I shared the Reader's Theater script I had created (see Appendix A for a full copy of script) by using key scenes and interspersing them with the words of a narrator, who would help listeners transition between the scenes or develop understanding through his or her preview or comments on an upcoming scene. For example, to introduce/preview the play and activate the prior knowledge of listeners, this is what the narrator relays:

They say that food is one of our basic needs. Yes, we need food to survive, but what I'm here to say tonight is that we actually need food for many more reasons. Food brings us together – making food, passing food around the table, sharing food, eating food,

feeding our babies or our elders – all of this gives us something to do while we're with someone else, something to do while we sit and talk to one another. We need food to give us strength, to hold us up, to help us celebrate a special moment, or to show someone that we love them. Food *is* love, isn't it?

A transition between a scene in Henri Pinchot's kitchen when Inez offers Grant a cup of coffee and he is too tense to accept it and one later that evening when he returns to his aunt's house reads like this:

It seems to me that preparing food for someone else is a way to show them that we care about them. When we offer food to others, we offer ourselves to them. On the other side is eating food. When we eat the food someone has prepared for us, we show them that we accept that care. Other times, when we won't eat, we might be saying we are not ready yet, that we are holding back for some reason. Funny thing that is ... what about that cup of coffee, too? Seems like Inez was trying to get Grant to sit down, relax, and have a cup of coffee. She wanted to be able to help him calm down, and she thought that coffee at the kitchen table would do it. We get together around coffee drinking too, don't we? Later on that night, when Grant got home, he found some coffee drinkers in the kitchen around the table.

The Reader's Theater play is a gathering of scenes that allow listeners to come to know Grant Wiggins, a teacher in the community, and to see how the simple acts of eating and drinking together, or not eating and drinking, give us insight into Grant's relationships with his aunt Lou and her friends; with Vivian Brown, the woman he loves; and with Joe and Thelma Claiborne, the owners of the Rainbow Club and Café. The scenes demonstrate that even in the face of hardship and tragedy, love and understanding are to be found at the table.

Finally, the night of the event arrived. It was a chilly February evening, and twenty-eight UHD pre-service teachers and I boarded the Metro Rail light rail train together to ride the few blocks to the SEARCH facility. There was much laughter and excitement and picture taking with cell phones. When we arrived at SEARCH, we were greeted by members of the staff and led down a winding hallway to the cafeteria, where they had covered long tables in brightly colored plastic topped with centerpieces of terra cotta garden pots filled with silk flowers. Our catering team from the UHD cafeteria had already arrived, and the smell of fried

chicken, mashed potatoes and cream gravy, yams, collard greens, sweet tea, and pecan pie filled the room. The families began to arrive – twenty-four adults and twenty-nine children. We scrambled to rearrange chairs at the tables so everyone could sit with those they knew best. Some had remembered their recipes and others had forgotten. We had come prepared with blank recipe cards. In the first few minutes, we settled in and talked about recipes. Some shared what they had written down while others took up a pen and jotted down a recipe from memory. A few held tightly to squirming babies while dictating a recipe to a UHD volunteer. “I make everything from scratch,” one woman commented. “Oh no, honey,” another replied, “I don’t have time for that. My home cookin’ has all got the label Kraft on it!”

When the recipes for Oreo truffles, fried plantains and pork chops, pastelitos de carne, three-can chili, and more had all been collected in a basket, there was an expectant moment of silence. I nodded to the UHD pre-service teachers who had volunteered to enact the parts of the narrator, Tante Lou, Grant, Thelma Claiborne, Inez, Reverend Ambrose, Miss Emma, Vivian, and Miss Eloise. They took up their spiral-bound scripts and formed a line in front of the quietly hissing warming trays of food. Just before they began reading, a curious child who had heard there was going to be a play questioned, “What are we going to play?” We explained that “a play” was different from “playing,” and then, when he and the others were ready to listen, Amanda, our narrator, began reading. “This Reader’s Theater script is made up of scenes from a book called *A Lesson Before Dying*, by Ernest J. Gaines. It’s a book about a lot of important things, but the one important thing we are going to read about tonight is food and how it brings people together and how it represents the love they have for one another. Let’s listen and join them at the table.” I sat on the ground watching, listening as the words flowed, as babies cried, as parents hushed them and held them, as laughter erupted at all the right moments, as people murmured agreement or said “uh-huh” aloud when they could relate.

In the final moments of the play, when Grant says to Vivian, “It went well today, honey. It went very well,” and then asks, “You want me to ask the blessing, honey?” the readers paused, then closed their scripts and bowed, standing silently, facing the audience. Applause erupted and went on for several minutes. And then, laughing, the readers motioned for us all to get together in line, fill our plates, and sit down, sharing our stores about making and eating food together and building on what we had experienced in listening to the excerpts from *A Lesson Before Dying*.



Every seat at the tables was occupied. Some mothers and fathers sat with a squirming child on their lap. UHD teacher candidates filled plates and joined the families, leaning forward, listening intently to stories about food and family. I stood at the side of the room with the director of the school, Mitzi Bartlett, and my long-time partner in the family literacy events, Paulette Purdy. We balanced our plates on the top of a file cabinet and tried to make ourselves heard over the cacophony of voices and laughter. Everything about that night felt right. Once again, we had been drawn together by a book. Once again, the teacher candidates and I were experiencing new ways of learning with and being with families. We would take this experience into our schools and classrooms, transforming the way that teachers, parents, and children work and learn together. But that's another story.

### **Partnering With Harmony Public Schools (Keri Bell)**

Harmony Public Schools (HPS) was thrilled to partner with UHD for the Big Read Project in 2014, in an effort to further enrich the lives of Houston-area students through a rich literary experience and subsequent opportunities to exchange ideas and dialogue with undergraduates and faculty at UHD. The idea was to bring HPS teachers and students together with UHD faculty and students by establishing a common ground – reading Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Personal copies of Gaines's novel were provided to all HPS juniors and seniors in the Houston area, as well as the upperclassmen at our Bryan and Beaumont campuses – about a thousand students in all; the HPS academic department purchased five hundred fifty student copies, and UHD generously used funds from its Big Read grant to provide three hundred students with copies of the novel. As the books were divided and distributed to students and their teachers, we realized we were still short of the number needed – so our communications director and two of our English instructional coaches helped us to scour local bookstores in order to supply copies to *all* involved in the project. Since we could not provide free copies to freshmen and sophomore students, their English teachers weren't *required* to teach the entire novel; however, they were encouraged to incorporate excerpts or chapters into their genre studies of fiction.

In January of 2014, when I first heard about the possibility of HPS partnering with UHD in its 2014 Big Read initiative, I was teaching two sections of advanced preparation (AP) English literature and composition

to seniors at Harmony Science Academy – Houston High School, in addition to serving in the HPS academic department in the central office. While wearing my “AP English teacher” hat, I started generating meaningful connections between *A Lesson Before Dying* and the types of essays that students would be required to produce for each of the AP English courses (language and composition in the eleventh grade, literature and composition in the twelfth grade). In addition to brainstorming extension projects for the other high school English courses (English III and IV), we incorporated my original connections into curriculum documents for AP English teachers. Our AP English language and composition students (eleventh grade) were tasked with collaborating in small groups to produce an original AP English language synthesis essay question that delved into topics from the novel. This assignment required them first to review and critique synthesis essay prompts and sources from previous years’ AP English language and composition examination free response questions (FRQs) in order to better understand the style of this type of essay question. Then, they were asked to produce their *own* original synthesis essay prompt, including a brief introduction, and the “assignment” (the question itself). Modeling their own prompt and question after FRQs from the AP College Board’s released questions of the past, they were also tasked with conducting background research to generate six to seven cited sources to be used as evidence in answering the driving question they had created for their assignment. One of the six to seven sources had to be a one- to three-paragraph excerpt from the novel. Teachers could take the assignment one step further by having students actually respond to one another’s synthesis essay prompts to produce an essay of their own. AP English literature and composition students (twelfth grade) were asked to follow the same process of first reading through several sample *prose* essay prompts, then choosing a lengthier passage from the novel in which to analyze the author’s stylistic elements. They also had to write a prose essay prompt for their selected passage. The twelfth-grade AP teachers could also have students respond to an open-ended question focused on character or thematic analysis of the whole novel. Campuses had the option of displaying AP students’ work in the campus library so that underclassmen and parents could view final products.

In order to organize all of our plans and components of the UHD–Big Read partnership, I created a detailed timeline of events; starting with our Big Read field trip day on November 14 at UHD, I worked my way backward to August to ensure that all of our plans were given an adequate amount of preparation time, and to determine when each phase of the

initiative should begin. In conjunction with UHD's involvement in Citizenship Month and the Big Read, Dr. Leigh Van Horn graciously provided HPS teachers in the Houston area with a full day of professional development on site at the UHD campus in August 2014, and also prepared a curriculum packet of resources and instructional ideas for them to take back to their classrooms to better facilitate the experience of the novel with their students. She focused on connecting the novel to topics of social relevance and took our teachers on a tour of the following possible meaningful class activities:

- Reading and talking about children's literature, young adult literature, short stories, or poems on topics of social relevance to develop broader concepts about issues surrounding social relevance (including a lengthy annotated list of suggested texts; see Appendix B)
- Reading Maya Angelou's poem in *Celebrate America in Poetry and Art* and suggesting that teachers work with students to create a reading performance or choral reading of the poem
  - Talking about the poem together and noticing specific words that indicate a call to action or a call to investigate things in our own communities
- Creating a collaborative definition of "issue of social relevance" and listing students' examples
  - Providing our teachers with a list of topics that Dr. Van Horn's own students have written about
    - Patient care at a health clinic, trash collection in the Acres Homes neighborhood, gangs in the Fifth Ward, teen pregnancy, animal shelters, neighborhood fast food restaurants, flooding in southwest Houston neighborhoods, aesthetic environment of a middle school, park cleanup, trash in vacant neighborhood lots, redevelopment of Sunnyside Community through the Houston Hope Program, lack of sidewalks in a neighborhood, need for neighborhood playground cleanup, vacant houses in a neighborhood, traffic safety on neighborhood streets, elder care and upkeep of the homes of the elderly, condition of streets in a neighborhood, homelessness, childhood obesity, school bus routes, school lunch menus, lack of physical exercise/recess time for young people
- Photographing, reading, talking, and writing about issues of social relevance in our community

- Inviting students to spend a week walking around their community and photographing places and things they think might be issues of social relevance
- Having students bring their photographs to the classroom
- Discussing a photograph provided by the teacher and generating questions: What do you already know about this issue? What do you want to know? What does the photo make you feel? How can you document this issue?
- Talking with students about possible pieces (multiple genres) they might write based on the photographs

After receiving these dynamic curriculum resources and undergoing on-site training, our high school teachers were eager to start the school year and delve into Gaines's novel with their students. All of these activities encourage students to connect with their surrounding communities on a deeper level, reinforcing the importance of "social relevance" and creating a spirit of kinship between the reader and Grant Wiggins, the novel's narrator and reluctant do-gooder of the community in Bayonne, Louisiana.

In early October 2014, in the middle of the study of *A Lesson Before Dying*, HPS invited University of St. Thomas Professor Nicole B. Cásarez to speak to a crowd of 300 junior and senior students from Harmony Science Academy – Houston High School about her experience, alongside her investigative journalism students, in the 2010 exoneration of Anthony Graves, a Texas man wrongfully accused of capital murder and sentenced to death. Mr. Graves had lived on death row for nearly fifteen years. As our students were already engaged in the tale of an African-American man in the South who was wrongfully convicted and sentenced to die by electrocution, Professor Cásarez's real-life connection provided both immediate relevance and a unique glimpse into the Texas criminal justice system. The students were moved not only by the story of Mr. Graves but also by the candor with which Professor Cásarez spoke to them about the difficulties of her experience. Students responded to the event with the following statements:

"Thank you for taking the time and effort to bring such an inspiring person to speak at our school. It meant more to us than the fact that we got to miss class."

"Her presentation provided us great insight into the injustices (and triumphs) of our justice system."

“Thank you for bringing Professor Cásarez to help us better understand our society.”

“Thank you for bring such an amazing story to life at our school.”

One of our English IV teachers sent the following comments after Professor Cásarez’s presentation:

“I cannot thank you enough for arranging this incredible opportunity for my students. We were all so inspired by Ms. Cásarez, and she became a catalyst for some amazing class discussions. The essential question we’re tackling in AP classes is, ‘What is an individual’s duty to society?’ I know Ms. Cásarez was hoping to inspire social change with regard to Mr. Graves’s case, but she inspired so much more. Students looked at her as a person who went beyond her duty as a citizen, professor, or attorney. They saw her as ‘courageous’ and ‘just.’ In one student’s words, ‘Ms. Cásarez was so brave for standing up for what was right, even when others around her weren’t. I just want so badly for Grant to do the same for Jefferson!’ A few students are considering law school because of her. They were able to see that an individual can make a difference. It was so obvious to all the students that she was passionate about seeking justice, and they truly walked away with deep admiration. I know this was an opportunity that will stay with my students for a long time. I am so appreciative of your effort to bring Ms. Cásarez and to involve Harmony in the Big Read. So far, it’s been a wonderful way to start the year!”

After finishing the novel in early November, AP English students from Harmony Science Academy – Houston High School created the following discussion questions, which were shared with UHD for the Big Read field trip day, scheduled for November 14, 2014; these student-written questions were used by UHD undergraduates to facilitate small-group novel discussions among HPS upperclassmen from all of our Houston-area schools.

- What is an individual’s duty to his or her society?
- After reading *A Lesson Before Dying*, have your views of the death penalty changed? Explain.
- What role do women serve in the novel?
- Is Jefferson’s behavior in jail justifiable? Explain.

- Do you think that Grant's behavior toward his students will change after Jefferson's death? Explain.
- In what ways do the religious parallels add complexity to the text?
- How does Grant's attitude change throughout the novel?
- Do you think that Jefferson has the capability of being a hero?
- Is it important to die with dignity?
- How does education affect one's perspective of life?
- How does race affect society's expectations of an individual?
- Contrast the actions of the faithful and the faithless.
- Is the desire to be free a part of human nature?
- Can an individual create change?
- What role does food play in the novel?
- How does society define manhood, and why is it so important to acquire it?
- How might Jefferson possibly end the "vicious cycle" of hardships that African-Americans have faced for several years?
- How does an individual develop identity?
- What is society's duty to an individual?
- What stereotypes do we encounter? What can societies do to combat negative stereotyping?

The Big Read field trip day was a major success, and one that participating students will note as a highlight of their high school years. After arriving at the UHD campus, our students were greeted with breakfast snacks and opening remarks of welcome from Dr. Noel Bezette-Flores, the first lady of the university. They then attended a private screening of Joseph Sargent's 1999 film adaptation of Ernest J. Gaines's novel, and following the film, Dr. Bezette-Flores facilitated a whole-group discussion of their personal reactions and connections to the novel. After viewing the film, students were offered a UHD-sponsored lunch and were welcomed by Dr. Leigh Van Horn. In small-group settings, students engaged with one another and UHD undergraduates about the text's themes and connections to society by using the student-generated discussion questions listed above. This discussion was followed by a short presentation by Dr. Judith Harris on her work with UHD undergraduates and inmates at a local prison, as well as a contemporary dance performance by UHD students led by Dr. Rachel Dickson. The event concluded with an invitation to students to remain engaged in intercommunity dialogue and discussion around this shared experience with *A Lesson Before Dying* through a blog led by UHD faculty and staff.

The following remarks from HPS staff about our Big Read partnership with UHD convey thanks and appreciation for the powerful memory of this experience for our students. We look forward to every future opportunity to partner with UHD.

“Thank you to UHD and Dr. Flores for putting together a great event to celebrate literature and cultural awareness. My students were so positive about their experience. They particularly liked the small-group discussion with the table leaders. Students were able to get to know other students and learn about their perspectives on the issues raised in the novel. Overall, it was an incredible learning experience and a perfect way to end the novel study.” -Elizabeth A. Parchman, AP English teacher at Harmony Science Academy – Houston High School

“Harmony Public Schools juniors and seniors who attended the Big Read event were excited to have the opportunity to synthesize all that they had learned about the book, the events that were the impetus for the book, and their personal experiences, and to apply that knowledge in discussions that address current and ongoing events. In this way, their lives have been forever changed by this experience.” -Meredith A. Marchante, English language arts instructional coach at HPS, South-Houston Cluster

“As a result of the partnership with UHD, the learning for Harmony students who read *A Lesson Before Dying* stretched beyond the classroom. Harmony students had an opportunity to view the movie at UHD and participate in small-group discussions with college students and faculty at UHD. This opportunity for dialogue in a college setting provided Harmony students with a real taste of college life. Thanks to UHD for their ongoing participation in community engagement, and for initiating and sustaining this partnership with Harmony Public Schools.” -Julie Norton, executive director of strategic partnerships at UHD (former HPS director of communication)

As you can infer, the Big Read experience with HPS was truly a collaborative effort among faculty, students, and administrators at HPS and UHD. Two particular aspects that contributed to the success of this partnership are the following: (1) that we set aside particular times to meet and listen to one another, and (2) that we shared specific curricula, timetables, and the like, so that each of us could be informed by and build

upon the work of the others. Faculty co-developed a large, cohesive plan with Keri Bell and Leigh Van Horn. They could then choose the elements that would be most authentic and meaningful for their students. It is evident that our plans addressed multiple aspects of literacy, and Rachel Dickson and her students were able, through their contemporary dance performance, to unite the elements of our prior experiences and leave us with a creative vision that solidified the value of all that we had accomplished together.

### **Performance Synthesizes the Experience for Harmony Students (Rachel Dickson)**

When I read *A Lesson Before Dying*, by Ernest J. Gaines, I found the novel to be masterfully written, with issues intricately developed to allow a truly visceral response. The play of the same name, by Romulus Linney, includes some of the same elements. When approached by Chris Birchak about creating a theatrical piece addressing the issues in the book, I immediately began a *long* list of possibilities, all appropriate for theatrical convention. I was connected with Dr. Judith Harris, an assistant professor in criminal justice who leads a senior seminar course that allows undergraduate students to help the Harris County Jail in the process of rehabilitating inmates before their reentry into the community. We discussed how in an effort to get basic needs met and to aid survival, sometimes people make choices that can lead to incarceration. Dr. Harris highlighted that once released, these same persons are often further victimized by society, despite the idea that their debt has been paid. A vivid example of survival that we talked about involved a mother who could not get legitimate work and chose prostitution in order to feed a hungry child. This example informed the direction of the project. I also was given Leigh Van Horn's classroom support material, *Reading and Writing Our Way to a Better World! Curricular Ideas for a Celebration of the Big Read and Citizenship Month in Houston, Texas*. Because the classroom support material, which highlighted poetry, had already been introduced into the overall project, I felt strongly about incorporating poetry into our final product.

Wanting to ensure that the piece created had relevancy to the student population that was going to view it, I requested clarity about the perspective from which the book would be addressed with students. Keri Bell from Harmony Science Academy – Houston High School provided a



list of discussion questions created by AP and ninth-grade pre-AP students. The questions ensured that the foundation for what we were going to share would come from the perspective of students.

I called upon four actors, two of whom were current students at UHD. The requirements for participation included being intelligent, creative, multitalented, accessible to the issues, self-motivated, and a team player. I knew the process would demand that the actors create from a personal space while energizing the issues for a high school audience. We first met to come to a common understanding of the philosophy of the Driven Theater Company (DTC) and to discuss the project. I founded DTC in 2010 because of my desire to do issue-based theater. I find many places that do theater, many places that focus on specific issues, and many places that will discuss the issues that come out of a theatrical piece. However, there are few entities that allow theater to be a result of the issues. DTC is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt, nonprofit theater company dedicated to empowering, connecting, and entertaining diverse audiences during quality issue-driven theater, and to providing education designed to encourage the healthy development of individuals, families, and society. Part of our vision is to “challenge all the parts” of a creative project. At this same meeting, we shared our own experiences and knowledge of the book and its subject matter. This led to discussions about incarceration, relationships, family dynamics, race relations, oppression, freedom, the death penalty, and stigma.

Over the course of four more meetings, we created, rehearsed, refined, and polished. Each actor was given a specific question from the list to focus on and given time in the meeting to create an individual piece about a personal experience that spoke to what he or she saw as the prevalent issue addressing that question. The actors were encouraged to use their strengths and to speak honestly in the pieces. The outcome could be any format. We came back together on the same day to share and affirm the next steps to be executed for each piece. We used the remaining questions as the foundation for short scenes. In subsequent meetings, we theatricalized the pieces and established a performance order. We ended up with a dance piece, a poem, two monologues, and several short scenes, which used music, limited props, and audience interaction. Many excellent possibilities existed for staging the work, so I functioned as a “director” to make the pieces move from the page to the stage. A few short scenes created for the final performance can be found in Appendix C.

On the day of the event, when the finished piece was to be shared, the students from Harmony participated in a tabletop discussion about the book, centered on the same questions we had been provided at the beginning of the process. I participated in this discussion as a facilitator. I was able to glean that the piece we created did indeed speak to the perspective that the youth had on the topics. While the roundtable discussion proceeded, the actors polished their work and their nerves! A challenge of presenting personal content is the vulnerability that can be exposed. All of the pieces did not have the same raw edge, but any time that artists share their artistic creations, they share their souls – and that can make for nerves. We began watching the clock ten minutes before our anticipated performance time. Unfortunately, because of time constraints, we had time to perform only eight minutes of the twenty-five-minute creation.

Despite the shortened performance, I found the experience invaluable and will consider the following points in future endeavors:

- Personalization of issues helps the material to be more accessible to creators in the creative process and ultimately makes for a stronger product. It was easier to consider the topics to be addressed when we came at them from a familiar place.
- A designated leader had to be in place to ensure the finished work centered on the ideas to be communicated. The same person served as the “director” and shaped the visual elements of the performance.
- The students who were engaged in the roundtable discussion seemed to truly understand the concepts in the book, and I believe that is partly because they were afforded so many different ways to access the material: discussions, exercises, film, lectures, and performance.
- This project was an excellent way to foster faculty engagement within and outside our campus community. Taking time to explore can bring varying disciplines to common ground.
- Theater is an excellent bridge for bringing people together to discuss topics that seem inaccessible to a certain group, topics that can be considered irrelevant, and topics that are difficult to talk about.

### **Ripley House (Chris Birchak and Vida Robertson)**

Arrangements had been made with Neighborhood Centers, Inc., to take our literacy outreach program to the Leon Castillo Center and the Ripley House, both within a few miles of UHD. Both are sites that benefit youth, families, and seniors in designated neighborhoods. Dr. Vida Robertson, director of the UHD Center for Critical Race Studies, and I arrived at the Leon Castillo Center carrying cookies, punch, and copies of the book for the scheduled read out. Inasmuch as rain was creating difficult road conditions that night, we speculated while walking into the center that attendance might be light. What a surprise for us! No attendees for our event ever arrived. We could not blame the weather conditions because many individuals were engaged in the various activities offered at the center, including an exercise class. We soon realized that no one would be joining us for an evening of reading significant passages and fostering conversations about the book's themes. Then, we began exploring the site, which we had not visited previously, and chatted with the staff, anticipating future collaborations. Finally, we reflected on the fallacy of our planning process, which had focused on what we had decided to deliver to the community. Thus, we realized the necessity to work closely with Neighborhood Centers' leadership or the leadership of any community organization to determine what program was wanted and then collaboratively create it. We used this strategy in ensuring the success of the event at the Ripley House Neighborhood Center later in the year.

When Dr. Robertson and I first arrived at the Ripley House in Houston's East End, we were amazed at the breadth of the facility, including the Promise Community School, the Senior Center, a community garden, and classes in English as a second language and in citizenship. Sitting in one of the classrooms with three of the professional staff members, we shared the goals of the Big Read and described some of the partnerships that had led to events earlier in the academic year. As we brainstormed possibilities for a Big Read initiative at Ripley House, the staff indicated an interest in embedding it in their Emerging Leaders Summer Program for five- to eighteen-year-olds. We left copies of *A Lesson Before Dying* with them and indicated that we would consult with colleagues to identify a companion book with similar themes for the beginning readers. Then, we arranged to return for another planning session.

After reading *A Lesson Before Dying*, the Ripley House leadership confirmed that they wanted to partner with us on the Big Read as a component of the Emerging Leaders Summer Program. Nevertheless, they expressed concern that some parents might object to the book for students thirteen years old and younger. We had already consulted with

Dr. Leigh Van Horn, interim dean of the College of Public Service and an expert in children's literature, to identify a book for the beginning readers – *Baby Bear*, by Nelson Kadir. It was the book she had used so successfully at one of the HTT family literacy events. The theme of being my brother's keeper pervades both *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Baby Bear*. A challenge arose when Dr. Robertson and I learned that the summer program would be organized for three different groups: ages five through eight, nine through thirteen, and fourteen through eighteen. He and I could not envision the nine- to thirteen-year-olds being receptive to a picture book, even though their reading skills were said to be limited. Thus, we recommended a second consultation with Dr. Van Horn for additional advice. Gracious and helpful as always, she sent us several titles to consider. Impressed with author Nelson Kadir, we selected another of his books, *Heart and Soul: The History of African-Americans in America*.

Dr. Robertson decided to merge his Center for Critical Race Studies Second Annual Read Out with the Neighborhood Centers Ripley House Emerging Leaders Summer Program. He guided his UHD students in preparing to work with the three different groups, focusing on developing and engaging critical reading and thinking skills. UHD students honed their abilities to foster discussions that encouraged the young Ripley House students to think critically about individual choice in relation to their commitment to their respective communities and our mutual humanity. All three books selected resonated with their intended audiences at the collaborative summer program.

- Little Leaders – ages five through eight (thirty-five youth) – received the book *Baby Bear*, by Nelson Kadir.
- Little Leaders – ages nine through thirteen (thirty youth) – received the book *Heart and Soul: The History of African-Americans in America*, by Kadir Nelson.
- Young Leaders – ages fourteen through eighteen (thirty-three youth) – and twenty teacher/educators received the book *A Lesson Before Dying*, by Ernest Gaines.

Ultimately, students learned the ways in which philosophical ideas and constructs of identity are useful in daily activities and community engagement. This initiative fostered civic responsibility among UHD students by helping them understand how to use their valuable critical thinking and reading skills to contribute to the improvement and growth of their communities.

## **Conclusion**

The Big Read project enabled us to become even more intentional in engaging with the community to address literacy, thereby advancing the development of the region. This shared vision framed the original proposal and the unfolding of ten different events, including those highlighted in this article. We aligned with existing initiatives when possible to maximize effectiveness and foster sustainability. The resulting partnerships, several evolving from long-standing relationships, reinforced our commitment to connecting the classroom and the community through an emphasis on personal and social responsibility. We valued the opportunity to exchange ideas with partners as we explored innovative ways of presenting *A Lesson Before Dying* and its themes to diverse audiences. By exploring social issues through the literary arts, we encouraged dialogue intended to bridge the borders between people and increase literacy. The Big Read brought us together in a common goal. Our collaborative contributions led to the success of the project.

We urge readers to seek out others who are interested in learning and working across sites and centering collaborative power in expanding ideas about literacy. When we listen to one another, when we identify and develop a theme that is authentic and meaningful to us, and when we include multiple recursive opportunities for participants to experience all aspects of literacy, we experience synergy and success!

### **What We Learned**

- Ensure that the planning process involves the designated partners and remains flexible as the project evolves.
  - Reflect on previous experiences, successful and unsuccessful, to prepare for programmatic challenges.
  - Analyze intended audiences to select the most effective strategies for connecting them with the text and fostering expanded literacy among Houston residents.
  - Personalize the issues.
  - Identify and/or construct resources with your audience in mind.
  - Include multiple ways to access the text or texts.
  - Consider ways in which readers can synthesize what they have learned and apply it in discussion or action.
-

## Appendix A

### Reader's Theater, Based Upon Excerpts From *A Lesson Before Dying*, by Ernest J. Gaines

#### *Gather at the Table: The Healing Power of Food*

#### Readers in order of appearance

Narrator  
Tante Lou  
Grant  
Thelma Claiborne  
Inez  
Reverend Ambrose  
Miss Emma  
Vivian  
Miss Eloise

**Narrator:** They say that food is one of our basic needs. Yes, we need food to survive, but what I'm here tonight to say is that we actually need food for many more reasons. Food brings us together. Making food, passing food around the table, sharing food, eating food, feeding our babies or our elders – all of this gives us something to do while we're with someone else, something to do while we sit and talk to one another. We need food to give us strength, to hold us up, to help us celebrate a special moment, to show someone that we love them. Food *is* love, isn't it?

This Reader's Theater script is made up of scenes from a book called *A Lesson Before Dying*, by Ernest J. Gaines. It's a book about a lot of important things, but the one important thing we are going to read about tonight is food and how it brings people together and how it represents the love they have for one another.

Grant Wiggins lives with his aunt, his Tante Lou, and teaches school in a nearby church. Joe and Thelma Claiborne are the owners of the Rainbow Club, a combination bar, café, and gathering place for the townspeople. Vivian, or "Miss Fine Brown," as Thelma calls her, is Grant's ladylove, and is also a teacher working in a nearby town, Bayonne. Miss Emma and Miss Eloise are longtime friends of Lou. Inez works for Henri Pinchot, a wealthy and powerful citizen. Reverend Ambrose is the minister in the church. Let's listen and join them at the table.

**Tante Lou:** I'll be home to cook in a little while.

**Grant:** I'll eat in town. (**To the audience:** Tante Lou held the door while she stood there looking at me. Nothing could have hurt her more when I said I was not going to eat her food. I was supposed to eat soon after she had cooked, and if I was not at home, I was supposed to eat as soon as I came in. She looked at me without saying anything else, then she closed the door quietly and followed Miss Emma into the yard.)

**Narrator:** Grant went on into town to eat at the Rainbow Club. With its green, yellow, and red arched neon lights, the Rainbow Club was easily seen. Several cars were already parked outside in front of the door. One of them, a big white new '48 Cadillac, belonged to Joe Claiborne, who opened the place.

**Grant:** (**To the audience:** I spoke to Joe Claiborne and went through a side door into the café to use the telephone. The tables in the café had checkered red and white tablecloths. Thelma Claiborne, Joe's wife, was behind the counter. Thelma ran the café.) What's for supper, Thelma?

**Thelma Claiborne:** Smothered chicken, smothered beefsteaks, shrimp stew.

**Grant:** Shrimps any good?

**Thelma Claiborne:** All my food's good.

**Grant:** I'll have the shrimps then. (**To the audience:** In a few minutes Thelma had the stewed shrimps, a green salad of lettuce, tomato, and cucumber, a piece of corn bread, and a glass of water on the counter waiting for me.)

**Thelma Claiborne:** Anything else to go with that?

**Grant:** This'll do.

**Thelma Claiborne:** Here or a table?

**Grant:** The counter's good.

**Thelma Claiborne:** What you doing in town on a Monday? Calling on Miss Fine Brown?

**Grant:** (**To the audience:** I nodded yes.)

**Thelma Claiborne:** Figgers!

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* I talked with Miss Thelma for a while after I finished eating. Thelma and Joe were good people, both of them. When I was broke, I knew I could always get a meal and pay later.)

**Narrator:** The next morning while he got dressed, Grant thought about his work as a teacher.

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* My classroom was the church. My classes ranged from primer to sixth grade, my pupils from six years old to thirteen and fourteen. My desk was a table, used as a collection table by the church on Sundays. My students' desks were the benches upon which their parents and grandparents sat during church meeting. The students either got down on their knees and used the benches as desks to write upon, or used the back of their books on their laps to write out their assignments. Our heat came from a wood-burning stove in the center of the church. There was a blackboard on the back wall, and another on the right side wall. Behind my desk was the pulpit and the altar. There were three pictures on the wall behind the altar. One was a head-and-chest black-and-white photo of the minister in a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie; the other two were color prints of Jesus – *The Last Supper* and Christ knocking on a door. This was my school. I was supposed to teach six months out of the year but actually taught only five and a half months, from late October to the middle of April, when the children were not needed in the field. Last night, when I got back from the Rainbow Club, I had gone to my aunt's room to say good night, but she pretended to be asleep, just to avoid speaking to me. This morning, when I passed her on my way to the kitchen, she was still irritated with me.)

**Tante Lou:** Food there if you want it. Or, you can go back where you had supper last night.

**Narrator:** Grant knew he was going to have to eat breakfast. Eating breakfast was not just something he needed to do so he wouldn't go to work hungry ... eating the breakfast Tante Lou had fixed him was a way to show her he was sorry he had been impatient with her the night before ... sorry he hadn't eaten the dinner she had fixed for him.

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* Breakfast was two fried eggs, grits, a piece of salt pork, and a biscuit. I ate at a kitchen table, looking across the yard. I looked back over my shoulder a couple of times, but I couldn't hear my aunt anywhere in the house.)



**Narrator:** Later on that same day, Grant Wiggins has to go to a meeting at Henri Pinchot's house. Grant was not a man to bow down to others, but this Henri Pinchot was a man who wanted to see him do that. Grant was holding himself in check when he knocked on the back door and was greeted by Inez.

**Grant:** How are you, Inez?

**Inez:** I'm making out. Can I get you a cup of coffee?

**Grant:** No thanks.

**Inez:** You want to sit down?

**Grant:** I'm all right, I don't mind standing. (**To the audience:** She went back to the stove. With a dish towel she lifted the lid on one of the pots, and I could smell a strong scent of onion, bell pepper, and garlic. She raised the lids on two other pots, but still the odor of the onions, pepper, and garlic pervaded the room. Inez left the kitchen. I heard her knock on the library door, and I could hear her and Henri Pinchot talking, then she came back into the kitchen.)

**Inez:** How's Lou?

**Grant:** She's all right. I left her there with Miss Emma. (**To the audience:** After school, when I didn't find my aunt at home, I figured she was keeping Miss Emma company. I found them at the kitchen table, shelling pecans into two big aluminum pans. Inez dished up the food. She had cooked a pot roast with potatoes and carrots, onions, bell pepper, and garlic. She also had rice and mustard greens, green peas, and corn bread. She took the platters and bowls to the dining room.)

**Inez:** Can I fix you something?

**Grant:** No, thank you. (**To the audience:** I was hungry. I hadn't eaten anything but a sandwich since breakfast. But I would not eat at Henri Pinchot's kitchen table. I had come through that back door against my will, and it seemed that he and the sheriff were doing everything they could to humiliate me even more by making me wait on them.)

**Inez:** Why don't you sit down. You'll feel better.

**Grant:** I'd rather stand.

**Inez:** You sure I can't fix you something to eat?

**Grant:** No, thank you, Inez.

**Inez:** You sure I can't get you a cup of coffee?

**Grant:** No, thanks. I appreciate it, though.

**Narrator:** It seems to me that preparing food for someone else is a way to show them that we care about them. When we offer food to others, we offer ourselves to them. On the other side of it is eating the food. When we eat the food someone has prepared for us, we show them that we accept that care. Other times, when we won't eat, we might be saying we are not ready yet, that we are holding back for some reason. Funny thing that is ... what about that cup of coffee, too? Seems like Inez was trying to get Grant to sit down, relax, and have a cup of coffee. She wanted to be able to help him calm down, and she thought that coffee at the kitchen table would do it. We get together around coffee drinking too, don't we? Later on that night, when Grant got home, he found some coffee drinkers in the kitchen around the table.

**Grant: (*To the audience:*** It was dark when I returned to the quarter from Bayonne. It was cold too, and I could see sparks of fire rising up from the chimneys. When I got to my aunt's house, I recognized Reverend Ambrose's car, parked before the door. The three of them were in the kitchen drinking coffee – Reverend Ambrose, Miss Emma, and my aunt. They were quiet, sitting in semidarkness. The only light in the kitchen came from the open door of the stove. No one looked around when I came in, and Reverend Ambrose and Miss Emma barely answered when I spoke their names.) Evening, Reverend Ambrose. Evening, Miss Emma.

**Reverend Ambrose:** Evening, Grant.

**Miss Emma:** Grant ...

**Grant: (*To the audience:*** I went to the icebox and took out the pitcher of water, and while I poured a glassful, I looked at the three of them at the table. They were quiet, not even drinking their coffee now, just sitting together in silence and drawing comfort from one another.)

**Narrator:** Later in the week, on Sunday, Vivian, or "Miss Fine Brown," visits Grant. He wants her to feel comfortable, so where do they go? Into the kitchen for a cup of coffee and a piece of cake, of course!

**Grant: (*To the audience:*** We went into the kitchen. In the kitchen was a black four-lid wood stove, a five-foot-tall white icebox, a handmade table

with four wood-bottom chairs around it, a safe with screen doors for the dishes, a broom that had seen better days, and several black pots and aluminum pans, hanging from nails on the wall. Vivian stood at the back door, looking across the yard toward the field. After warming the coffee, I poured each of us a cupful. I cut two slices from the chocolate cake my aunt had in the safe, then we sat down at the table, facing the yard and the field.)

**Vivian:** It's really peaceful.

**Grant:** Sunday is the saddest day of the week.

**Vivian:** Not for those who have to work in the field.

**Grant:** It always has been for me.

**Vivian:** You ought to find something to do on Sunday. Like going to church. I know you believe. I know you do.

**Grant:** The only thing I believe in is loving you. (**To the audience:** We finished our cake and coffee, and I put the cups and saucers in the pan of soap and water on the window shelf.)

**Vivian:** We ought to wash them.

**Grant:** They're okay.

**Vivian:** No, it's not fair to your aunt. You wash, I'll dry.

**Grant:** It's going to be like that, huh?

**Vivian:** Uh-huh.

**Grant:** (**To the audience:** There was hot water in the kettle on the kitchen stove, and I poured some into the dishpan. Vivian had already taken down another pan from the wall, and I poured the rest of the hot water into it; she added cold water from the faucet by the icebox. I washed and rinsed the dishes, and she dried them and put them into the safe. It felt good doing this with her.)

**Narrator:** Grant and Vivian went for a walk in the fields surrounding the house, and later, when they returned to the house, Grant's Tante Lou had also arrived back home from church with her friends Miss Emma, Miss Eloise, and Miss Inez. Grant could see that his aunt was looking at Vivian's little blue Chevrolet parked in front of the house.

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* They stopped before the house, and I saw Miss Eloise talking to my aunt. I am sure she was asking her whether they should come in or not. My aunt said yes, because they all proceeded into the yard, walking in a single-file line, my aunt in front. I introduced her to Vivian as soon as she came up the steps.) Tante Lou, this is my friend Vivian Brown.

**Tante Lou:** Miss.

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* I introduced Vivian to the other women.) Miss Eloise, Miss Emma, Miss Inez, this is my friend, Miss Vivian Brown.

**Miss Eloise:** Howdy do.

**Miss Emma:** How you?

**Inez:** Glad to know you.

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* But they were not glad to know her. They didn't feel comfortable at all. They were at my aunt's house, and they were not about to show much more enthusiasm than she had shown. They went inside single file. You could smell their sweet powder all over the place.)

**Vivian:** You think I should go?

**Grant:** No, come on inside.

**Narrator:** Tante Lou and the other women had taken off their hats and coats and laid them, along with their pocketbooks, on the bed. They were in the kitchen sitting at the table. Tante Lou had brought them to her house for coffee and cake.

**Grant:** I'll have to make some more coffee.

**Tante Lou:** I'll make my own coffee.

**Grant:** I'll make it.

**Tante Lou:** Not here.

**Grant:** Vivian and I drank the coffee, and I'll make some more. That's all there is to it.

**Tante Lou:** You go'n walk over me?

**Grant:** No ma'am. I'm going around you. But I'm going to make the coffee.  
(**To the audience:** I filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove. My aunt was watching me. Her friends, sitting at the table, were quiet.)

**Vivian:** Grant? I think ...

**Grant:** Just be quiet.

**Tante Lou:** You taking over my house?

**Grant:** No, ma'am. But we drank the coffee. And this is the woman I'm going to marry one day. So you might as well start getting along right now.  
(**To the audience:** The women at the table did not look at us and were afraid to look at one another. My aunt was like a boulder in the road, unmovable, so I had to go around her. She could see that I was not going to change my mind. And she had three choices. She could stop me physically, she could leave the room, or she could sit down at the table with her friends. If she sat at the table, only her pride would be hurt. She decided that was best and sat down.)

**Narrator:** A few weeks later, Grant needed some money to buy a radio for a man he was trying to help. The radio would be something to keep the young man, Jefferson, company when he was feeling very low. Grant didn't have enough money to spare to purchase the radio right away, and he wanted to do that for Jefferson.

**Grant:** (**To the audience:** I didn't go home. I thought I would borrow the money from Vivian, and I went back of town to the Rainbow Club to wait until she got out of class. The bar was in semidarkness as usual and Joe Claiborne was behind the bar, talking to two men sitting there. I ordered a beer and told Joe about the radio. He didn't charge me for the beer, and he went back down the bar and spoke to the old men and he came back with a couple of dollar bills and some change. He took five dollars out of an old leather wallet that had once been light brown but had turned almost black over the many years that it had gone in and out of Claiborne's back pocket.) Thanks, I'll get it back to you sometime this weekend. (**To the audience:** The muscle in his left jaw moved a little to show that he had smiled. Then he jerked his head toward the wall, a sign that I should go around to the other side of the Rainbow Club and see what I could get in there. So, I went through the side door into the café. It was much more brightly lit than the bar, warmer, and you could smell the food from the kitchen. Thelma was behind the counter, near the cash register.)

**Thelma Claiborne:** Well, look what the cat dragged in.

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* I had been at the Rainbow quite a few times lately, but I had not eaten at the café. I told Thelma about the radio. I told her that Claiborne had donated something to help pay for the radio.)

**Thelma:** You hungry?

**Grant:** No, I ate before I came. (*To the audience:* She looked at me like she didn't believe me.)

**Thelma:** I got smothered steaks there, shrimps, chicken.

**Grant:** I'm not hungry.

**Thelma:** You want to get that radio now?

**Grant:** I would like to get it this afternoon.

**Thelma:** How much they cost?

**Grant:** About twenty dollars.

**Thelma:** Eat something, I'll make up the rest.

**Narrator:** She went back into the kitchen and dished up some rice and beefsteak and sweet peas, and she added a little lettuce-and-tomato salad and a couple of slices of light bread.

**Thelma:** How much more you need?

**Grant:** About ten bucks. But, listen, Thelma, I can borrow some of that money from Vivian.

**Thelma:** I can let you have it.

**Grant:** I'll bring it back tomorrow.

**Thelma:** I ain't in no hurry.

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* I ate the food hungrily because I had not had dinner, and I sopped up the gravy with the light bread. Thelma watched me all the time. When I was finished, she put a wrinkled ten-dollar bill on the counter by my plate.)

**Thelma:** Here.

**Narrator:** It was the kind of “here” your mother or your big sister or your great-aunt or your grandmother would have said. It was the kind of “here” that let you know this was hard-earned money, but also that you needed it more than she did, and the kind of “here” that said she wished you had it and didn’t have to borrow it from her, but since you did not have it, and she did, then “here” it was, with a kind of love. It was the kind of “here” that asked the question, When will this all end? When will a man not have to struggle to get what he needs “here”?

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* I took the money without looking at her. I didn’t say thanks. I knew she didn’t want to hear it.)

**Narrator:** Later that evening, Grant visits Vivian at her house. Vivian is fixing supper for the two of them.

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* I could smell the red beans warming on the stove. I couldn’t smell the rice – you don’t smell rice unless it’s burning – and I didn’t smell the pork chops either. Vivian was at the sink, making a salad. I went up to her and put my right arm around her waist.) What are you doing, honey? Do you want to know what happened today, honey?

**Vivian:** I already know what happened today.

**Narrator:** She went on with her salad. Now she was slicing up a cucumber to add to the lettuce and tomato.

**Grant:** It went well today, honey. It went very well.

**Narrator:** She put the sliced cucumber into the bowl with the cut-up tomato and the lettuce, then she added oil and vinegar. She took the salad to the table. She dished up the rice and spread red beans over the rice and placed a pork chop on each plate. She brought the two plates to the table and sat down.

**Grant:** (*To the audience:* I sat opposite her.) You want me to ask the blessing, honey?

***All readers close script books, take a deep bow, and stand silently facing the audience.***

## **Appendix B**

### **Excerpt from classroom support material, *Close to Home: Photographing, Reading, Talking, and Writing About Issues of Social Relevance in Our Community*, by Leigh Van Horn**

Note: Today, so we could try things out and collaborate, I have compressed the experiences described below. Ideally, you would spend some time with the students reading and talking about texts, give students an opportunity to take photographs in the community, take a day in class to discuss the photographs and possible topics/genres, and so on.

- You may want to read and talk about children’s literature, young adult literature, short stories, or poems on topics of social relevance to develop concepts about issues of social relevance. See the annotated list of texts below for suggestions. This is only a beginning. Together you can build on this list as you find texts that reach your students and share them with one another.

### **Annotated List of Literature That Portrays Issues of Social Relevance**

#### **Young Adult Fiction – Novels, Short Stories, Poetry**

##### ***Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson**

The story of one girl’s lonely fight against anorexia. Lia has lost her best friend to the disease. Now she must decide her own future. This book powerfully demonstrates the inner struggle and emotional turmoil of a girl suffering from an eating disorder.

##### ***Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson**



Melinda works so hard not to think about what has happened to her that she loses the ability to speak aloud. The story of a high school party, a rape, and the isolation and pain that results. Winner of numerous awards, including ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults and School Library Journal Best Book of the Year.

***Forged by Fire* by Sharon Draper**

Gerald must be strong to protect his stepsister and himself from an abusive stepfather and a drug-addicted mother. A painful story that demonstrates the world through the eyes of a child who cannot be a child. Winner of the Coretta Scott King Award.

***Tears of a Tiger* by Sharon Draper**

A novel told through articles, prayers, memoirs, and other genres. The story of a young basketball player and the aftermath of a disaster in which he drinks too much, tries to drive home, and ends up killing his best friend, a passenger in the car.

***Who Am I Without Him?* by Sharon G. Flake (short stories)**

A collection of short stories about boys and girls turning into young men and women; it's about looks, parents, fear, uncertainty, anger, and becoming. Winner of the Coretta Scott King Award.

***The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson**

On his sixteenth birthday, Bobby learns that his girlfriend Nia is pregnant. In a story that alternates between "then" and "now," Bobby describes his experience at being a high school student and a father. Winner of the Coretta Scott King Award.

***Silent to the Bone* by E. L. Konigsburg**

Branwell's half sister has been injured and is comatose. Branwell has been put in a juvenile behavioral center, suspected of the crime of hurting her. In shock and unable to utter a sound, he must rely on his best friend, Connor, to unravel the truth. A powerful story, perhaps inspired by reports of nannies who neglect and/or brutalize the children in their care. An ALA Best Book for Young Adults, Booklist Editors' Choice, School Library Journal Best Book, and Edgar Allan Poe Award Nominee.

***Monster* by Walter Dean Myers**

A novel that reads like a journal and a movie script – the chilling story of high school student Steve Harmon’s arrest and trial for murder. Begins with the words, “Sometimes I feel like I have walked into the middle of a movie. Maybe I can make my own movie. The film will be the story of my life. No, not my life, but of this experience. I’ll call it what the lady prosecutor called me ... MONSTER.” Winner of the Coretta Scott King Award and Printz Award for Young Adult Literature, National Book Award Finalist.

***Neighborhood Odes* by Gary Soto (poetry)**

A collection of poems about the everyday good times and bad times in a neighborhood. There are odes to the library and the park, to fireworks and family photographs, among others. Includes Spanish words and phrases and a glossary of definitions. Received starred reviews from Horn Book and School Library Journal.

***Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli**

Palmer LaRue may be turning ten, but he is facing major dilemmas in his life. He must fight against peer pressure and parent pressure from his father to avoid the dubious honor of becoming a “wringer” on his tenth birthday. His love for a pigeon who roosts on his window gives him the courage to stand up for what he believes. This is a Newbery Honor Book.

***Loser* by Jerry Spinelli**

The story of Zinkoff, from first grade through sixth grade. Zinkoff is a young boy who has a great enthusiasm for everything around him and the curiosity to match. The other kids in school make fun of him and isolate him, but Zinkoff carries on with his own rich life, and in the end, everyone learns something from him.

***Miracle’s Boys* by Jaqueline Woodson**

The story of three young boys who have lost their parents and have to work together to survive. Lafayette’s struggles to understand how they will survive and what happened to change his older brother, Charlie, reminds readers of *The Outsiders*. Winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and the Coretta Scott King Award.

**Children’s Literature – Concept/Picture Books**

***The Curious Garden* by Peter Brown**

A boy who lives in the city finds a struggling garden and cares for it; one thing leads to another, and soon gardens are thriving on rooftops and abandoned railroad trestles.

***Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne**

The voices and points of view of two parents and their two children in a city park; emphasizes the different ways we have of looking at the same event. A School Library Journal Best Book, ALA Notable Book, and Horn Book Fanfare Book.

***Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting**

A young boy and his father are homeless and living in an airport. Demonstrates the hardship and coping skills of homeless individuals.

***Dandelions* by Eve Bunting**

A pioneer family moves westward, and the mother experiences depression and loneliness. The story of a family and how they cope with hardship and care for one another.

***Terrible Things* by Eve Bunting**

An allegory about the Holocaust that also demonstrates how people often look the other way when a problem or troubles are not directly affecting their own lives. A Notable Book in the Field of Social Science and a Book of the Year choice of the Child Study Children's Book Committee.

***Smoky Night* by Eve Bunting**

Based upon the Los Angeles riots, this story describes a neighborhood and its citizens and how they feel during a night of rioting. This is a story of people (and animals) who could not understand one another or get along until a night of riots showed them a new way of thinking.

***How to Heal a Broken Wing* by Bob Graham**

Told largely through the illustrations, this is the story of a boy who sees an injured pigeon in the city. He and his parents bring the bird home to their apartment and care for it until it is well and can fly again. It is about noticing the needs of others and caring patiently for others.

***Sister Anne's Hands* by Marybeth Lorbiecki**

This story takes place in the 1960s, when Anna, who has never seen a dark-skinned person, is taught by an African-American nun. When someone sails a paper airplane with a cruel message on it to her, the sister shows the children how to respond to cruelty. As noted in the Horn Book, "With humor and understanding, Lorbiecki writes about a young girl's coming to terms with racial differences and about the pain that ignorance can cause." A Child Study Children's Book Committee Children's Book of the Year.

***A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams**

When a fire destroys their home and everything in it, a young girl, her mother, and her grandmother save pennies in a jar to buy a chair to sit in. Just after the fire, the neighbors all help the family by bringing what they can to set up a new home. This is a story of perseverance and love. A Reading Rainbow book, a Caldecott Honor Book, an ALA Notable Book, and winner of the Boston Globe/Horn Book Award for Illustration.

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**Appendix C**

These following scenes were performed by the four actors. Each scene was intended to address different topics relevant in the book, including social responsibility and racial profiling. The facilitator in each scene stepped out of the scene to ask the audience what should come next in the scene. The reference below to "AUD +" indicates that whatever the audience contributed has been added to the beginning of the final line of the scene. All of these scenes included an audience interaction element. The goal was to challenge the members of the audience to be active participants in the development of the outcome AND to consider their own ideas about the subject being addressed.

**SCENE 1**

LITTLE GIRL: Mommy. What's the matter with that lady?

MOM: Don't stare and come on

LITTLE GIRL: But you told me just yesterday to help everybody (she runs and gives candy).

FACILITATOR: What does the mommy say?

MOM: AUD + a single person can make things change.

## **SCENE 2**

SALESWOMAN: Can I help you find anything?

SHOPPER: No thanks ... really?

SALESWOMAN: Just watching you shop.

FACILITATOR: How might the shopper respond to this?

SHOPPER: AUD + it's a vicious cycle.

## **SCENE 3**

HOMELESS MAN: Can you help me? Can someone help me?

PASSERBY: You can stop. They won't.

HOMELESS MAN: But, I know him. We used to be in class together.

FACILITATOR: What might she say to him?

PASSERBY: AUD + society has a duty to help the individual.

## **SCENE 4**

MAN: Excuse me. Ola. Are you Hispanic?

WOMAN: Absolutely not. You couldn't be further from the truth.

MAN: But you look ...

FACILITATOR: How might she respond to him?

WOMAN: AUD + why does race matter?

**SCENE 5**

CHANTERS: Vote here, right this way (ad lib).

PERSON 1: Get out of my way.

CHANTERS: Vote, vote this way!

PERSON 1: Isn't nobody got time for that!

FACILITATOR: Why does she think he should vote?

CHANTER: AUD + you have a duty to society.

**SCENE 6**

UNDERDOG: I've always been the underdog

ALL OTHERS: You can do it. Go. Make us proud. Do it.

UNDERDOG: No. I can't.

FACILITATOR: What should they tell her?

ALL OTHERS: AUD + you are an underdog only if you chose to make that part of your identity.