

History comes alive

Living Voices brings plight of migrant workers to Big Foot

By Lisa Seiser
Lake Geneva Regional News

Living Voices, a theater arts organization based in Seattle, showed Big Foot High School students last week how history can "come alive."

Students sat quietly in the school auditorium Jan. 26 listening to the story of Mexican-American migrant farm workers and the efforts of Cesar Chavez in the 1960s and 1970s.

The students watched more than a one-person play about the times. Living Voices combines the drama, video and interactive performer to create an experience that allows the audience to discover history's relevance to their lives.

"It was very powerful," Big Foot social studies teacher Marsha Ries said. "I wanted to show (the students) that history is alive and it lives on. I truly believe that people make history, and if you can understand people, you understand history."

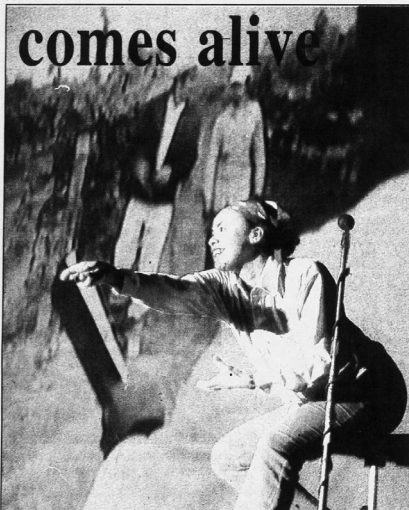
Ries, who scheduled the three special presentations, each about 45 minutes long, believed the students learned from the experience. When she saw the presentation about a year-and-a-half ago, she was "blown away."

"I don't think anyone had really seen anything like that before," Ries said. "The kids said they were really impressed with it. One junior girl said after the performance that she felt like joining a cause to help people."

That was exactly the response Living Voices performer Valerie Viramontes wanted to draw from the Big Foot students.

"My mission is to change them in some way because Living Voices uses the emotional art of acting, it can really engage someone," Viramontes said. "Usually it can lead to serious changes in a person."

Viramontes played the character of Maria Hernandez, the daughter of Mexican-American migrant farm workers who became involved in the movement led by Chavez in the 1960s and 1970s known as



LIVING VOICES performer Valerie Viramontes acts out a scene from the story of Mexican-American migrant farm workers and the efforts of Cesar Chavez in the 1960s and 1970s in front of a screen that showed video footage of people involved in the workers' movement. Regional News Photo

"La Causa."

"Basically, we show the major events in history through the eyes of a young person," Viramontes told the juniors and seniors. "This event in history is not always included in the history books, so I am here to bring this information to you."

The performance

While black-and-white film footage of crops, migrant workers, Chavez, and the people involved in pickets and the movement faced by on a screen behind her, Viramontes played the part of Hernandez.

She talked and acted out her experiences as a young child growing up and having to go to work in the farm fields with her parents.

Later, when her father joined Chavez and the United Farm Workers movement, Hernandez joined in, writing for the organization's newspaper.

Viramontes also talked about the living conditions migrant farm workers had then and still have today.

"They go where the crops are at that time of the year," Viramontes told the students. "The kids are constantly changing schools and living in shacks like the pioneers."

In the 1940s, people were brought to America from Mexico to work, she said. In 1965, migrant farm workers were making

PLEASE SEE HISTORY PAGE 28

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History

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

85 cents an hour and were still working in unsafe, terrible conditions.

That is when Chavez started "La Causa," the movement to help the migrant farm workers, Viramontes said.

Although some things have improved, there still are unsafe work environments and extremely underpaid migrant workers, Viramontes said.

"Wherever there is agriculture, this is happening," Viramontes said. "Right here in Wisconsin, this is happening."

Ries said she hoped another aspect students would take from the presentation was that these practices still continue today.

"The discussions were very good in class that this was not done," Ries said. "The kids got a lot out of it, and it was valuable to them."

Viramontes' main concern was that the students left the program with more knowledge than when they came in.

"My goal is basically to try to change my audience in some way," Viramontes said. "With this type of presentation, this is talking about something that is way bigger than an average character. These characters are literally participating in a period of history where they are making moves and changes and putting themselves out there."

"I want the young people watching to see how much they have and the opportunity to change this world, because changes still need to be made."

Reaching the students

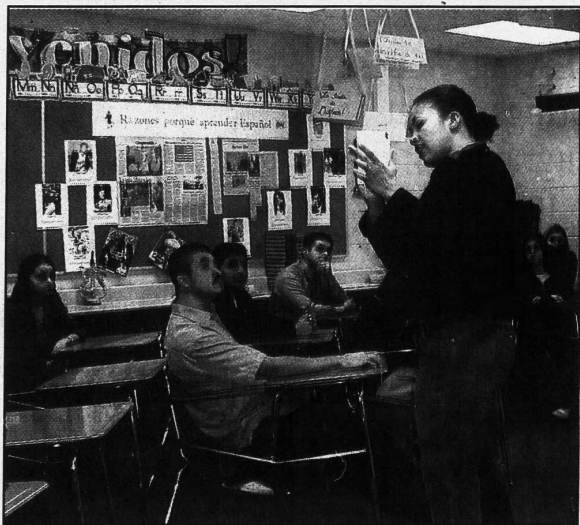
Viramontes also was able to spend time with some of the school's Hispanic population after her two performances in front of all four high school grades.

In a smaller classroom situation, Viramontes discussed more in depth about the movement and the current work by the United Farm Workers organization.

Ries said the idea was to make the growing Hispanic population in the school understand their own history a little better.

"A lot of times, Hispanics are overlooked or underlooked," Ries said. "I think this was a great program for all."

Viramontes urged the students to take their education seriously in order to change their family tree.



LIVING VOICES performer Valerie Viramontes discusses the past and present work done by the United Farm Workers. Regional News Photo

"You have so many opportunities here," Viramontes said. "The reason I am saying this is because the farm workers never had a chance at education so it is important that you take it seriously so you don't have to work the way they do."

Although the comments about taking education seriously may be annoying now, she said the students will thank her and others later.

"When you are 23 or 24 and you are looking at a better paycheck or you feel pretty proud of the life that you live, you will thank everybody," Viramontes said.

She also said pride involves finding a cause to pursue.

"Can you imagine sacrificing your life for something," Viramontes said. "That is what these people did."

Viramontes said the youth of today don't know how much power they have.

"They have so much power, they don't even realize it," she said. "The power of the young and the mainstream is huge. They recognized that in the 1950s and 1960s, but they don't realize that now."

Ries said she was pleased with the program, and agreed that it brought the migrant farm workers plight closer to home.

"This made it much more real than anything I could have done in the classroom," Ries said. "One of my goals is to get the kids to understand and empathize with people, and I think this worked."

Viramontes called the work inspiring. "If I affect one person that is great," she said. "I feel like we affect more than one person through this work."