History comes alive

Living Voices brings plight of migrant workers to Big Foot

By Lisa Sauner
Lake Geneva Regional News

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

Students sat quietly in the school auditorium as the story of Mexican-American migrant farm workers in the efforts of Cesar Chavez in the 1960s and 70s was explained. The students listened more than one person play the roles. Living Voices combines the drama, video and interviews to bring the story to life, and allows the audience to discover history's reasons for their tears.

"It was very powerful," Big Foot social studies teacher Pam Ries said. "I wanted to show the students that history is alive and it isn't just on TV. I truly believe that people, if you show them the situation, people, you understand history.

Ries, who scheduled the four special presentations, each about 45 minutes long that the students learned from the experience. When she saw the presentation about 45-year-old sign, she was overcome.

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

"This is a living, breathing lesson. The Living Voices performer Valerie Viramontes wants the students to think about the Big Foot students.

"My reason is to change them in some way, so that they become the emotionalized of acting. It can really engage them," Viramontes said. "They can identify. They can identify.

Viramontes played the character of Yolanda, one of the daughters of Mexican-American farm workers who became active and leaders in the movement led by Chavez in the 1960s and 1970s in the story of Mexican-American migrant farm workers in the efforts of Cesar Chavez in the 1960s and 1970s.

"Le Causa." "Basically, we show the major events in history through the eyes of a young person," Viramontes said. The Living Voices performer showed the students that history is not just a story that is read in the history books, but it is here to bring the information to you.

The performance

While black-and-white film footage of crops, migrant workers, Chavez and the people affected in Mexico and the United States was shown, Viramontes played the part of Carmen. 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.

"My mission is to change them in some way because Living Voices uses the emotional art of acting, it can really engage them.

Viramontes main concern was that the students learn from performance, that it is something that is way bigger than an average character. These characters are literally participating in a period of history where they are making 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 students after the presentation 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 being done in the United Farm Workers organization.

Ries said she was able to talk about the growing Hispanic population in the school and understand their own history a little better.

"A lot of times, Hispanics are overlooked or understood," 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 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 individuals involved in the workers' movement. Regional News Photo

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

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

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

Although some things have improved, there still are working conditions in the fields and extremely underpaid migrant workers, Viramontes said.

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

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 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 learn from performance, that it is something that is way bigger than an average character. These characters are literally participating in a period of history where they are making changes and putting themselves out there.

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

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 recognize 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."