

Treloar College is a Specialist College of Further Education for students with physical disabilities. Generous private sponsorship has enabled the college, in recent years, to offer a residency post to a creative artiste in any discipline for a negotiated period of time. The range of talent and skills offered by those people interested in this fairly unusual project was truly inspiring.

The Story of a

STORYTELLING RESIDENCY

by Janice Hopwood

I think it fair to say that anyone who starts their interview by telling a story has something quite original about them. This is exactly what Mike O'Leary, who became the storyteller in residence at Treloar college early in 2006, did. We had provided a job description outlining what the role of the resident artiste would involve: 'to deliver a package of stimulating and developmental workshops to a range of students using your specific skills in your chosen art form/medium. The aim of the Artiste in Residence is to encourage expression and develop skills amongst those students taking part. The shaping of the session work into presentational form for the College Arts Week is often a requirement of the residency,' but it was made clear that how the artiste took the project from A to B would need to be developed between, in this case the storyteller, the students and the staff involved. This year had the theme of world cultures.

Initial requests from tutors for their students to be involved in the residency left room on the timetable for further developments and these came in steadily as word of the storyteller spread.

I was asked many times, 'So what exactly does a storyteller do?' The stereotyped myth of sitting and reading stories was soon dispelled. Mike worked with many students and



staff in a range of ways. With a number of different groups he shared his stories and encouraged students to become aware of the rich and exciting stories across the world. These groups worked hard to remember the outline of stories and to share in the group telling of them, incorporating the developing skills and talents of everyone involved. The art groups used the stimulus of the stories to create story maps, images and patterns which were exhibited during Arts Week. The travel and tourism group wanted to learn more about where and how a storyteller might work and photography students developed oral skills in verbally telling the stories behind the pictures they had taken and printed. English language students focussed on understanding the role storytelling has in the use and development of language. The Performing Arts group incorporated the idea of storytelling into their examination production of *Perception*, an originally scripted performance examining how others perceive us. Students, tutor and storyteller worked together to take individual life stories, change them into representations by folktale motifs and create original personal folktales to be used in the interactive Beacon performance later this year. Additionally, significant cultural events throughout the term were also

marked by storytelling, such as Chinese New Year and St. Patrick's Day. A conference of librarians, held at Treloar College, was also treated to a taste of storytelling and how they might use it in their organisations. The in-house staff training opportunity of a storytelling workshop was taken up by staff who were interested in the possible uses of storytelling in their work at Treloar. We plan to follow the residency through to completion with a focussed storytelling week at Treloar College in July when we hope to explore the art of storytelling further still.

I witnessed students, staff and visitors at Treloar become part of the storytelling experience. Embedding oracy skills into the curriculum had been achieved but the outcomes were so much more than this, - student A can now roar like an ogre, student B can use her artificial communication machine to speak her contribution to group storytelling, inspirational art work was created and dramatic personal folktales encouraged an understanding of and linking with others. The opening up of minds to a revival in storytelling and what this can mean, the personal development of confidence and self-worth in the individual and the unleashing of the artistic creativity in each of the participants was more than could have been anticipated at the beginning of the residency.

I was struck by how the students took ownership of the stories, created them and lived them. We had laughter, nerves, hilarity and angry moments. The stories were fantastical, strange - but always real. There was lots of reality; not all of it comfortable. The stories we created had a range of reactions to the way the world had treated the students, and to the way they reacted to the world: and this taught me a hell of a lot about the way stories recount reality.

This was all interaction; this residency could never be as simple as an audience and an artist - a residency at Treloar is above all else a practical experience. Stories can reach for the sky, but it is very good for the storyteller to have their feet well and truly planted on the ground, and in this case the reality of the student's lives."

And there is more to come!