

Masks for Good: Fight the Stigma

B4 Youth Theatre Outreach Work in Liberia and Ghana

Even though the Ebola outbreak has been contained in parts of Africa like Liberia and Ghana, some survivors of the Ebola epidemic face are now dealing with exclusion and discrimination in their local communities. According to an article on unfpa.org (United Nations Population Fund), many survivors return home to find their possessions destroyed. Fear and miseducation in local communities make it difficult for Ebola survivors to find work.

Impacted by this discrimination are women and children. Children are the most innocent victims, not having an outlet or maturity to deal with such social issues.

B4 Youth Theatre - Masks For Good

As a part of this summer's B4 outreach work in Ghana and Liberia, executive director, Jasmine Blanks, is using moon masks to enable underprivileged youth to express their feelings on social issues occurring in their local communities. In partnership with director, Tara Carioso, of Waxing Moon Masks, created moon masks to assist with this effort.

"Emotion" masks representing the feelings of joy, sorrow, fear, anger, awe, disgust, shame, ambivalence, and pride are used in the physical theatre play with the children. These are appropriate emotions to use because they touch on almost every one of our human experiences.

According to Mrs. Carioso, using the masks to create characters gives the young actor the freedom to speak about social challenges without having to speak from their own experience. It is freedom in its purist state – the freedom to express unfiltered truth.

Three "Generational" masks represent the characters of Baby, Adult, and Elder. These masks help the participants to consider the perspectives of others on social issues. When the young actors understand the view point of older generations, honest plays are created and become the catalyst for community change.

Since the Liberian Civil War, an educational disparity was created between the younger and older generations. According to the 2014 demographics profile posted on indexmudi.com, over 60% of Liberia's population are aged 24 and under. The plays help the B4 executive committee make adjustments to the outreach curriculum. This goal of this work to help bridge the gap between the younger and older generations in Liberia.

Why Use Moon Masks?

The moon mask is an effective tool to use to facilitate artistic expression. The old saying goes, "Give the man a mask and he'll tell you the truth". Mrs. Carioso concurs with this statement. She believes unprivileged youth need an opportunity to express strong emotions associated with hurtful experiences. Physical theatre creates the environment for children to share their struggles without fear or judgment. The role-play promotes emotional healing and the process of moving on from negative experiences.

A Likely But Coincidental Partnership

Jasmine Blanks and Tara Cariaso met at a Teaching Artist networking event in Baltimore, MD. As Jasmine was sharing what she does for the B4 Youth Theatre, Tara was, in her words, “awe-struck”. Who knew their artistic core values were aligned. In Tara’s experience, making plays with young people empowers them in the long run.

While waiting for her ride after the event, Tara had the opportunity to express to Jasmine her admiration of the work she does for B4. As Jasmine was turning to walk away, Tara said, “If there’s any I could do to help...”

Almost as if an out of body experience was occurring, Tara added, “I’d make masks for you if you wanted...” Jasmine stopped in her tracks, turned around, and expressed interests in the mask.

In that moment, the partnership between B4 Youth Theatre and Waxing Moon Mask was born. Now “Masks For Good” is helping the outreach efforts in Ghana and Liberia.

What an awesome testimony of what can occur when positive energy is put into the universe.

For more information on the B4 Youth Theatre, go to www.b4youththeatre.org or B4 Youth Theatre on Facebook.

For more information on Waxing Moon Masks, go to www.waxingmoonmasks.com.

- Roshanna Washington with Tara Cariaso and Jasmine Blanks