

The Story Acorn

How it Works

My name is Billy Field and I love history, not so much the names and dates, but the stories -- because they are fascinating and true and tell us all kinds of things about what it means to be alive.

I started this program because I believe in project-based learning. I was not good with the talk and the chalk, but give me a project and I did a great job - - and I actually, really learned something in the process.

In my junior year at the University of Alabama, we were supposed to read a book on race in America and write a paper. My dad had just read a book by Dan Carter, *Scottsboro, a Tragedy of the American South*. He told me it was a great book, and so I got his copy and started reading. About a third of the way through, something spoke to me and said, "Write a play about this instead." I asked my professor, Jim Salem, if I could do that, and he said, "Sure, go for it." I burned through that book in two weeks, making notes and writing character dialogue as I went along.

Now, it's important to note here that I had never written a play before in my life. I had never even thought about writing a play.

I finished it and was ready to turn it in. I was sure Dr. Salem would hate it and kick me outta the class, but he loved it and even said he wanted to produce it. And that was my awakening moment that I could write a play.

I went on to write in Hollywood, a career I loved and still love. But what if Dr. Salem had said, “No. You can’t write a play. You have to write a paper – that’s the assignment” -- then maybe I never would have written that first play -- and I never would have discovered that I had this talent.

So, what am I saying? I’m saying that project-based learning works -- at least it did for me --and there are X number of people in the world like me.

And here’s something else I learned about writing that play, because I was reading the book for a purpose -- to write the play -- I read it in a way that the information, the history of what took place in that American tragedy, really mattered to me. And so, guess what? I retained it. It was over 50 years ago that I read that book, and I can still tell you detailed information about that story.

Right now, today, we are doing the same thing here at The Story Acorn.

These are true life stories, told by those who lived them, and we’re asking your students, some of them, to take any one of these stories or any part of one of these stories, and react to it in their own creative way, by writing a poem, writing a song, writing a short story, creating a piece of artwork or download the recording app on their phone and gather oral history from their own community, and -- in doing so -- they will actually, really learn the history of those times, and they may actually, really discover that they have a talent that they never knew they had, all while working with

one of the most valuable educational resources in your community – your elders.

In being part of this project, your students will learn how to interview. They'll learn history, community building, character building, writing and art, taught by some of the best teachers in Alabama.

Ashley Jones, Alabama School of Fine Arts and Alabama's first African American Poet Laureate teaches how to write poetry.

T.J. Beitelman, Chair of the Creative Writing program at Alabama School of Fine Arts teaches how to write fiction.

Marlin Barton, who has published three novels and three books of short stories, teaches how to write fiction.

Sarah Lee Langdon teaches how to write songs about history.

Julia Brock, History Department at the University of Alabama, teaches students how to use their phone to gather oral history from their own communities, make a podcast of that history and share it with the world on our website.

(To listen to our first student podcast submission, go to our Home Page, then click on Student Work, then click on the story of Reverend H.K. Matthews, produced by students at T.R. Miller high school in Brewton,

Alabama. Reverend Matthews is a 95-year-old minister who tells a story of conflict and courage that those students will always remember.)

There's a student right now in some small town in Alabama who thinks she might want to write a poem but doesn't know where to begin -- maybe because her friends don't seem to be interested. But her friends on our website will be interested -- because they care about their own work.

The Story Acorn is a chance for students to meet kindred spirits, work together over the internet, and have their own work appreciated, and in doing so, learn that there are other people in the world like them -- and that they have value. And remember, this is not for all students. Nobody's expecting you to get an entire class involved, just those who want it.

Football is sometimes called "Friday Night Lights," but -- yet -- every student doesn't play football. Think of The Story Acorn in the same way -- it's Friday Night Lights for our future artists, writers, poets and historians.

The novelist Graham Greene said, "In every young life, a door opens that lets the future in."

Maybe, just maybe, The Story Acorn might be that door for you.

Special note to teachers: I come from a long line of teachers, going back four generations. I know the pressure you're under. I also understand the pressure your principals and superintendents are under, from the community

and maybe from some elected officials. And I know there is a controversy right now about teaching African American history and this thing some call “Critical Race Theory.” Well, I can assure you that no one is teaching critical race theory here. These are the true-life stories of the people who lived them – the person next door – who tell our students what it was like during America’s struggle for social justice. But, yet, I know that some of your principals will still say that you can’t do this. I know because we’ve already run into this obstacle. And nobody is blaming that on the principals or the teachers. We know that you’re under pressure. But if those above you can keep their eyes on the prize – that this is about writing and community building and character building and teaching our students that we can peacefully and nonviolently solve our problems, then maybe your principal could help those who might be against this to understand the real purpose of The Story Acorn -- to help develop citizens who will learn that our democracy matters and that *We the People* can solve our problems nonviolently and maybe, in doing so, help keep our democracy alive.

But if your students can’t do it through their school, we understand. That’s why we created an optional approach to our program, one where students can come onto our site, not being part of any school, and write, sing, tell stories, share their work the same as if they had been in school and -- in doing so -- come to meet a whole new world of friends who may just help them discover that “still small voice” really did have something to say -- and that by discovering that voice and using it, those young people might find their place in the world.

If that is the case, that your school cannot be involved, please direct those students who you think might be interest to the tab: “How it Works if you’re Working Independently”

Thank you for all the hard work that you do. I still have the rocking chair my mother sat in the grade papers ‘til 1:00 in the morning. I understand.

Project-based learning works. Let’s make it work together.

Billy Field

TheStoryAcorn.com

Carrying our Stories to the Next Generation