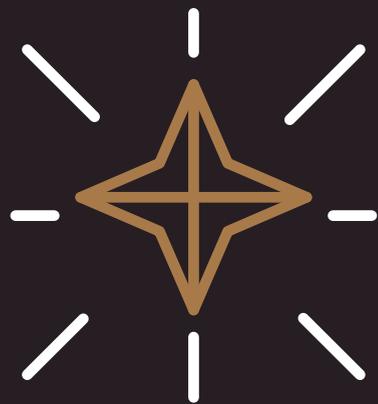


FEATURE



TALES OF





THE CRYPT

Kelly Klober
kklober@dps-littlejohns.net



When I tell people I'm from Danville, they generally respond with, "Oh? Where's that?" You see, we're rural. We have no Walmart, no McDonald's, and no stoplight. Our nearest Target requires a two-hour round-trip drive and half a tank of gas. In addition to being rural, we live in a high-poverty area. Roughly four out of five of our students across the district receive free or reduced-price lunches. The majority of our students are Hispanic; we have a high ESL population. At Danville, though, our stakeholders have never let demographics define us, and we deliver an incredible education program and experiences to our learners. They deserve nothing less.

So, when I tell people I'm from Danville, and they ask where it is, I've quit saying, "Half an hour south of Russellville," and started replacing it with, "It's home to the best learners, educators, and community in Arkansas." Because that's the piece that matters.

As the school librarian for Danville's sole elementary school, it's my pleasure to provide school library services for our three hundred and

twenty-five students. With the help and support of our learners, faculty and staff, and the community-at-large, together we have transformed the school library from a place that houses books into a hub of learning during the school day and beyond. Our school library provides classes, holds contests, and creates book displays. We're also responsible for the digital signage in our building and house a wide assortment of STEAM kits and materials for check-out. We have iPads on hand and a Chromebook cart, too. We have a makerspace with a 3-D printer. We Skype with authors, and we host them at our school. We solve breakout boxes, and we build breakout boxes, and we take field trips to escape rooms. We host a spring play. We do all of this, and more, on a regular basis, but, by far, our most ambitious journey in recent years has been our Living History program.

The Idea

I have long been a fan of Tales from the Crypt productions at Mount Holly Cemetery in Little Rock, put on by Parkview Art Science Magnet High School. Drama students from the school research someone buried

in the cemetery and then deliver a monologue next to the subject's grave one October evening. The audience walks through the production, picking up some history lessons along the way. For many years I've wanted to gather up our students and take them to Little Rock, our state capitol, to enjoy the experience. As Little Rock is an almost two-hour drive away, however, and the Mount Holly experience is offered only on a weeknight (and with a long wait in line to boot), taking our students to this experience seemed destined to remain a dream.

A few years ago, I had another thought. We have a very old cemetery in the middle of our town—one in which our founding fathers are buried. It certainly has a rich history, and, now that many of those who have loved ones buried there have passed, too, our local cemetery needs a bit more love and care than many others. In short, pairing this cemetery in my mind with the likes of Mount Holly, I developed a plan. I thought what a wonderful undertaking it would be for our school library to put on a similar program! We could clean up the cemetery, learn about the history,

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involve our community, and deliver a hometown program.

So we did.

Participation

The final product was to be an in-cemetery production. We would choose one late October evening, get our actors in period clothing, and take over the cemetery. Actors were to stand by graves and, when approached by a lantern-lit group led by a tour guide, actors would tell the story of the bereaved in first person.

I knew immediately that an undertaking this large would require an incredible number of volunteers, from students, to staff, to community members. I also knew just who to call on to help me think through the logistics—a retired school librarian! She not only helped me brainstorm and organize both things and people that first year, but she's also stuck around the following years, continuing to organize practices, whip up costumes and props, and even act in the production.

She and I needed a bank of student actors—and quickly. School begins in mid-August, and the Living History

production would debut just prior to Halloween. Thankfully, one of the things our district does incredibly well is run an engaging, well-attended 21st Century Community Learning Centers after-school program. That first year, we were able to dig out a time for drama practice within the after-school Learning Center time, pulling interested students to participate in our Living History event. We had self-acclaimed town historians come in and tell our students tales of those buried in the cemetery. Our young actors used the local public library, courthouse records, and the Internet to research the lives and deaths of those buried on the property. We took field trips to the cemetery and cleaned headstones. I didn't want our students to simply recite words from a script come opening night. Instead, I wanted them to emotionally connect with the stories of the people who came before them.

To begin, students chose three names of people interred in the cemetery from the census records in the city office. From there, they went to the Yell County Library in Danville to use the public library's genealogy sources, and I set up interviews with

townspeople who may have known the deceased. Additionally, learners checked records from the local newspaper for information. Once these tasks had been accomplished, each student chose one (from among the three people the student had researched) to be the focus of the story to be told. Leo, an eighth grader, said, "It's so cool this soldier's story is getting told. No one would know it if I didn't choose him. He was a hero, and people should know about him."

Although we have incredible students, we did need some older participants, too. In addition to playing a role in the production, we asked adult staff and community members to watch over and guide our students during the production, as they would be spread out in the cemetery. We recruited teachers and paraprofessionals to watch the donation table and lead tour groups by lamplight. A retired school teacher and musician played the Civil War song "Aura Lea" at the graves of three young siblings, and three elementary school students dressed in white sang songs from years gone by. Adults wrote and told stories, too. (Students helped with some of the research and provided



feedback on the adults' drafts.) The mayor volunteered to tell the tale of a banker who was killed during an explosion while at work and to dress for the part. A parent put on a riveting portrayal of a criminal who was hanged and buried in an unmarked grave at the corner of the cemetery. It took a community to pull off our first Living History production, and it was an astounding success.

Results

As with any big undertaking, there were some results we weren't expecting. The night of the production, many more people attended than we expected. I had to pull friends from the crowd and hand each of them a lantern, recruiting them to lead tour groups—with no training and little guidance. It worked out, though, and alleviated bottlenecks.

We did not charge an entrance fee, but we did have a donation jar on the way out. The donations we collected were more than we expected, and we also had a very generous donation from a local family who had relatives buried in the cemetery.

As I write this in fall 2018, we've just wrapped up our fourth annual Living History production. Many of the actors are the same, and we've welcomed a good number of new faces, too. Every year we continue to be astounded by the number of people willing to brave the weather and join us at the cemetery. Every year, we have donations that have allowed us to help keep the cemetery clean. Over the past four years, a total of more than \$5,000 was donated, allowing us to have a sign made for the cemetery, renovate the entrance to the graveyard, and repair monuments.

Looking Forward

As the recipient of ALA's 2018 Sara Jaffarian School Library Program Award for Exemplary Humanities Programming, I've been able to share our program on a national platform. What I really want people to know is that opportunities exist in every town, regardless of size or demographics, to learn, to engage with the community, and to help. To get started with our Living History project, it cost our school library program nothing more than elbow grease and some time. I hope that we can inspire another school librarian and her learners to look around their community and see what opportunities are there.

In the immediate future, Danville Schools will continue with the Living History program, honoring those who came before us locally. Any funding we acquire, whether through donations or grants, goes back into the program for research materials, props, costumes, and cemetery upkeep.

It's been bittersweet to watch some of my young learners who started the program in elementary school take on more-adolescent roles. And it's always a blessing to watch our town elders interact with young students during practices and the production.

Advice

If anyone would like to imitate our program, it's quite easy to do so, but very time-consuming. Allow me to share the big lessons:

- Make sure you find the right participants. You need people of all ages who will come to practices regularly.
- Take the time to get people invested in those they are portraying. It shows.

- Make friends with the press. We always have incredible coverage from our local newspaper, and our high school's senior seminar class has always been kind enough to video the event.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. Not everyone can act, but everyone can do something. Ask for a volunteer seamstress, someone to make hot cider, people to gather lanterns, etc. Generally, people like to be asked for help based on their abilities. It makes them feel good that you thought of them.
- This is a great opportunity to wrangle in a few students who may have a hard time fitting in elsewhere. Just because a student may struggle academically, may not be athletically inclined, or may have trouble socially doesn't mean he's a poor fit for this program. He may light up as an actor or excel as a prop master. Keep your eyes open.
- Enjoy the journey. It's a fantastic one.



Kelly Klober is the elementary and middle school librarian in the Danville (AR) Public School District. In 2018

she received an IMPACT Fellowship to study educational leadership at the University of Arkansas as well as ALA's 2018 Sara Jaffarian School Library Program Award for Exemplary Humanities Programming. In 2017 she was selected to participate in the ALA Leadership Institute. In 2016 the Arkansas Association of Instructional Media named Kelly School Library Media Specialist of the Year. That year she was also selected to attend a Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History seminar at Princeton University. She is a member of AASL.