

## **Mike's personal story...**

As a block worker living in East Harlem, my first task was to knock on each of the 250 doors on that block, and ask each resident about their lives and concerns. In addition to learning a lot about the local community, I learned a lot about myself, and definitely learned the importance for community work to be present, genuine and a good trustable listener. I was able to earn the trust of my neighbors, including the local gang that ruled the block. I even helped some of the gang members to get jobs.

When I was moving from the block, I was paid a huge compliment by one of the gang leaders, when he said "Why would you want to leave? Here, everyone knows and trusts you and you are safe. If you move anywhere else, you're gonna have to start all over again..."

When I did leave the block, I continued to work with a local group of kids there, on finding and expressing their voice theatrically, until the next Spring, when a car drove through the front of the storefront where we were working, and the kids decided they would rather go to Central Park and play baseball.

At that point I knew it was time to take my organizing skills back to my home community, the West Side, where over the next years, I organized a community drop in center in the basement of a single room occupancy flophouse/ we called it, appropriately, "the Basement" where we held weekly folk concerts, poetry readings, discussion groups, a drop-in childcare project, mask making workshop, a street theater group, and more.

Eventually what started at the Basement spawned a community newspaper, food co-ops, a documentary video organization, and more.

Soon after we had painted the place, a woman rushed in and said she had been told to find me for an urgent matter. The director of theater at a well-known settlement house in Greenwich Village had retired, and her replacement did not want to keep the fifty-year accumulation of costumes and props. We rescued six trunkfuls of costumes, stored and used them at the Basement, and then those trunks went on journeys of their own.

Following their journey to other community groups, the basement of an arts movie house, and various other stops, tells the story of social change movements at a vital time, from the unique viewpoint of those trunks. The last of those items remain in the last trunk, in my home today

I was a founding member of The Gut Theater in East Harlem, and teamed with one of its key leaders, doing antiwar street theater in New York, touring antiwar coffeehouses near army bases in the South, and doing comic antiwar pieces in front of the National Guard at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968.

Using video as a story telling medium, I produced a training orientation piece for Peace Corps volunteers to advise them of what to expect when they arrived in their host country, and participated in the making of over twenty video documentaries.

I produced an hour-long training piece for an ex-offender program, using humor to tell the story of a person who leaves prison and experiences every possible mishap.

A great way to initiate discussions about all these issues it was used by the ex-offender program as part of their orientation programs, for years.!

### **First step into storytelling...**

I was working out at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y, after a day at my job at a consulting firm. I saw a sign on a bulletin board announcing a workshop. The workshop was entitled "Bridge of Dreams." Four Wednesday evenings. I signed up. The person running that workshop was a very young Laura Simms. One of her assignments in the first class was for us to log our dreams. I immediately started having huge hero epic dreams. I have been logging my dreams ever since, filling an entire trunk full of dream books! I believe that this practice has helped keep my creative synapses unclogged!!

After that initial workshop, I started getting involved in storytelling right at the beginnings of the storytelling revival period... and was an active member of the NY storytelling center for many years....