Local Author's Novel to Help Youth from Sarajevo and Dayton Explore Feelings About Racial and Ethnic Conflicts

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LOCAL AUTHOR’S NOVEL TO HELP YOUTH FROM SARAJEVO AND DAYTON EXPLORE FEELINGS ABOUT RACIAL AND ETHNIC CONFLICTS

DAYTON, Ohio — When Trudy Krisher wrote *Spite Fences*, a novel dealing with the tensions in the South at the brink of the civil rights movement, she never envisioned that one day it would be used to help teens from war-torn Sarajevo and racially divided Dayton explore their own feelings about racial and ethnic conflicts.

“It’s real exciting,” says Krisher, a writing instructor at the University of Dayton. “The thought that you can, from your typewriter from your home, make other people think more deeply about race and ethnicity and peace is wonderful. It’s surprising, but it’s one of those wonderful things that can happen when you write.”

Area teachers and some of Dayton’s best-known artists, musicians and writers will use language and images from the book to inspire a dozen Sarajevo freshman and sophomore students and 68 youth from public and private high schools from around the region to make art projects, write a song, choreograph a dance and create a dramatic piece — all in the hopes of encouraging the youth to talk about conflict resolution. It’s part of a Nov. 10-12 conference at the Dayton Art Institute called “Art, Culture and War: Dreams, Fears and Hopes of Our Lives,” which will feature an exhibit of student art from Dayton and Sarajevo. The 102-piece show, which will include graphics, sculpture, painting, drawing and ceramics, will be on display Nov. 10-14.

Sponsored by the Dayton Peace Accords Project in cooperation with the Muse Machine, the conference is supported by $37,000 worth of grants from the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, Iddings Foundation, Mead Corp. and the Dayton Rotary Club.

The youth and three of their teachers from the School for the Applied Arts and the School of Music in Sarajevo will live with area host families from Nov. 6-15. Twenty copies of Krisher’s book, which won the 1995 International Reading Association Children’s Book Award, along with teaching guides were shipped to Sarajevo teachers to help them prepare the students to use the novel as a springboard for artistic — and verbal — expression at the conference.

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Krisher's tale of a white, 14-year-old girl from the wrong side of the tracks unflinchingly scrutinizes the racial and social prejudices and injustices in the American South in 1960. In a Georgia town called Kinship, protagonist Maggie Pugh discovers how barriers separate family members, social classes and racial groups—and with the help of her best friend Pert Wilson, an "R.C." or Roman Catholic, and black friends Zeke Freeman and George Hardy, she discovers how barriers can be overcome.

"It's a very good read," says Sharon Rab, adjunct professor in the School of Education and Allied Professions at UD and one of the conference coordinators. "There are some real touchy circumstances in the book, but nothing that these kids haven't come face to face with."

The ambitious plan to bring youth from war-torn Sarajevo to Dayton grew out of a University of Dayton-sponsored trip to the region in February. After spending four days in the former Yugoslavia, Janet Lasley, an art teacher at Chaminade-Julienne High School, became impassioned about using the arts to help youth resolve conflicts. She envisioned tapping into the Dayton area's cultural community and bringing Bosnian students to the U.S. to interact with American high school students in the city that gave birth to the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995.

The response from local educators and artists has been heartening, according to organizers. Teachers from Beavercreek, Miamisburg, Oakwood, Centerville, Stivers, Chaminade-Julienne, Valley View and Jefferson high schools have helped plan the curriculum. In addition, Miami Valley School and Brookville, Vandalia-Butler, Tipp City, Chaminade-Julienne and Springfield Catholic Central high schools are sending students to the two-and-a-half-day conference, which will be facilitated by George Otero, a New Mexico educator and author who conducts conflict resolution workshops around the world.

Sessions in visual art, writing, drama, dance and music will be led by Rab, executive director of the Muse Machine's Creative Education Institute; Bing Davis, artist-in-residence at the University of Dayton; Kaye Carlile, art teacher at Oakwood High School and Muse Machine adviser; Sheila Ramsey, theater director and adjunct drama instructor at Colonel White High School for the Arts; Jim McCutcheon, classical guitarist and adjunct professor of music at UD; and Bev Sheridan, music teacher at Watts Middle School in Washington Twp. The Columbus-based Zivili, the world's only professional company specializing in the dance of the Southern Slavic nations, will be on hand to teach the students traditional dance steps.

Why use the arts as a medium for coming to terms with such stark topics as ethnic cleansing, war and racism?

"All forms of the arts are therapy for kids and adults," Lasley says. "When you experience the arts, especially directly like playing an instrument or being part of a theater group, it can help you work through whatever problems you have in a vicarious way. This gives
kids some power over their problems. They can be free to express what they want to express. I’ll bet most of the art coming from Bosnia will show pictures of guns. Kids express a fear or dream in their artwork, then they’ll encouraged to talk about it. It’s a way to communicate.”

Dayton is used to playing host to high-ranking officials from the former Yugoslavia, but not its youth. “You can’t change the future without influencing the people who will be the leaders in the future,” Lasley says. “We are affecting the future.”

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