

February 19, 2009

Dear Mr. Oscar Mokeme,

I want to thank you so much for coming to Unity School last week. Your presentation required my students to think more deeply than they are typically asked to do. I believe that while the students, and perhaps the staff as well, expected entertainment, what they received was education of a high caliber.

In my follow-up conversations with art classes in the next two days the students were animated and engaged when I asked them to comment on various aspects of the presentation. They clearly had been thinking about some of the gently challenging questions you raised. It was wonderful to see that the children realized the universality of human 'family values' across culture, as well as the uniqueness of masking, drumming, and storytelling traditions from Africa. Because of the way you queried the Grade 3-6 students, they all were required to think not only about African cultures, but about their own, and their own place in their culture and their world. This sparked follow-up mention of things such as their relationship with nature, human origins, power in the world, discomfort with aging and death, respectful behavior, inhibitions about dance and expressing emotion, all of which were raised by your presentation. You presented the truly important aspects of human culture rather than just the superficial.

For example, I asked the students how the grown-ups reacted when the ancestor blessed them. Of course their keen eyes did not miss the way one adult stiffened as the ancestor approached, and then straightened her hair and recomposed herself after you had passed! They noted that three grown-ups (the art teacher, the music teacher, and the guidance counselor) welcomed the ancestor's blessing with gratitude and delight. The PK-2 children smiled with approval when one teacher really danced with the ancestor, even though they themselves were too shy to do so. They spoke about the smell of incense in the hair wand, and I explained how important the primal sense of smell is to memory and ritual. They admitted feeling ambivalent about how old people look, and a little fearful, especially when the ancestor is a 300 year old spirit! Yet most of them came to the conclusion that you were blessing them. They sensed a positive intent, although not exactly the aroma of chocolate chip cookies from their own white haired grandmother!

Please consider me a major supporter of your efforts to educate children in rural Maine. In the limited world that rural Waldo County children often inhabit, the opportunity to meet you was very, very valuable. It would not have been possible at all without the support of the Fairpoint grant, for which I and my 454 students are grateful.

Please use this letter, or portions of it, in any way. I would also appreciate knowing about any video of your presentation, should one be ultimately produced for the general public. I have explored the Museum's website, and look forward to visiting the Museum with my own two children soon.

Peace,

Ms. Kelly Desrosiers  
Art Teacher  
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