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# NEWSLETTER

Fall 2003 VOLUME 8 NUMBER 3



## A Case For Global “Cultural Literacy”... by Rex Enoch

A few years ago, we were introduced to the concept of “cultural literacy” through a best-seller of the same name written by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (1987). Hirsch, an English Professor at the University of Virginia, made a strong argument that we have tended to emphasize *functional literacy* through our educational system, at the expense of *cultural literacy*. Some interpreted his book as an attack on all formal and technical approaches to the teaching of language arts, but that was not his intent. Rather, he felt that there is a body of knowledge that must be known and shared within a culture for anyone to be able to read the literature of that culture with any understanding, and he feared that this knowledge was being lost, or at least too often ignored. Reading is communicating, not merely identifying words, and unless the reader has a context for understanding the printed words, then little can be gained by the ability to read those words.

Hirsch’s primary concern was to re-emphasize the high correlation between the *ability to read* and the *ability to learn*. He argued that both require knowledge of a wide range of subjects. In teaching children to read, we need to help them see an association of the words with things they already know. Words used that have no reference in the basic experiences of a new reader will have no meaning. In the subsequent publication on this topic, The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy (1988), Hirsch states, “As a consequence of the fact that we learn most easily when we attach the new to the old, people who already know a lot tend to learn new things faster and more easily than people who do not know very much. Mainly this is because knowledgeable people will have less to learn; they already know many of the key elements in the new concept.” (p. xii)

### About this issue...

We are always happy to welcome back Rex Enoch (pg. 1) as he has a knack of challenging us. This article is no exception.

Two articles are devoted to the “World Affairs Challenge” developed by the University of Denver Graduate School of International Relations. Kerry Ruetenik (pg 3) an intern with Project Spera relates her experiences observing participants in the “challenge.” A reporter for the Denver Post, Diane Carman, (pg. 5) tells the heartwarming story of the group that won the event.

Larrissa Scott, a 16 year old student, strongly *suggests* that “the United States has a ways to go before it becomes an equal opportunity employer.”

A fact sheet developed by the American Dietetic Association Hunger & Environmental Nutrition Practice Group is a special feature of this newsletter. We hope that it is the first of many such teaching aids to appear in future issues.

**Please read “Fall has come and gone” (bottom of page 4).**

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But we need more than just lots of information; we need *specific* broad knowledge. When we can read with understanding, a special level of communication is taking place between the writer and the reader. With some knowledge of the issues being addressed, we can better understand the *implied meanings* of the written word which takes us to new levels of understanding. We have too often conveyed that the importance of knowing [anything] is in order to “pass the test”. As a teacher, I communicated to my students that my least favorite question was always, “Do I need to know this for the test?” The implication seemed obvious; if it was not on the test, why know it? If there was not an immediate pay-off for acquiring particular information, then why bother. But I would argue that there was value in just knowing something for the sake of knowing it. All that we learn opens up ultimate new possibilities for us.

This was brought home to me one semester when I was teaching a graduate seminar in Family at my University. Near the end of the semester, a student in the class told about something that she had read in the newspaper during the past week, and she wanted to share it in class since it related to a topic that we had been discussing. At that, another student spoke up, innocently, and said, “You know, I have been surprised at all the things that have been going on during this semester that relate to issues we have been discussing in this class. Isn’t it interesting that they are happening while I am taking this class?” And I responded, “They have been going on all along! The difference is that you are tuned in.” The information she had missed earlier now had special meaning for this student because she had a context – a knowledge base – for identifying and understanding this information. This is a good example of *cultural literacy*. It is not just a set of skills or techniques needed to identify information; it is the ability to interpret and understand that information in a way that it will become *our* information.

As a teacher, I often tried to accomplish this goal by throwing in all kinds of related information on whatever topic we might be discussing in class. While teaching in the Governor’s School for International Studies at The University of Memphis (for 12 years), we required the students to pass a map test – i.e., they had to be able to identify all of the countries of the world. We reasoned that once students had a better sense of geography, their knowledge of and interest in world events would be enhanced. In helping the students to

learn about the world they lived in, I did not teach it by rote memorization, only to pass a test, but by talking about the countries and discussing whatever kinds of information about the countries which I might have to share with the students (and letting them do the same). As we talked about each country, as much as possible we learned bits and pieces of information about each which gave that country a unique identity. Then when they would hear the country mentioned on the radio or read about it in the paper, they could put the country in context – geographically and politically or economically.

In our global education efforts here at Heifer International, we are not just teaching about Heifer; we are teaching about the world in which we live and work, and the global issues that impact our decisions about our work. We feel that the more these learners know about the world in which we live, the more they will absorb and understand the Heifer information we are sharing with them. And the more they learn about other worlds, the more they will understand their own world.

When I was the Director of International Studies at Memphis, I coordinated travel/study programs for students. In the orientation meetings as they prepared for the experience, I would try to emphasize, “you are going to learn much about the country you are visiting, but you are going to learn even more about yourself and your own country!” In seeing ourselves through the lens of a different cultural experience, the “taken for granted” can take on new meaning. And just as we would hope that the people indigenous to the culture we are experiencing will be knowledgeable about their system, they have a right to expect us to be knowledgeable about our cultural system. They will want to know who we are, what makes things happen as they do within our society, why do we interact with the rest of the world as we do, what are the core values that guide us, etc. *Cultural literacy* emphasizes the importance of knowing these things about our own society, and with *global cultural literacy* we will know more about the world in which we live. If we are going to effectively train for “global citizenship”, we really have no alternative.

*Rex Enoch, Ph.D. is the Global Education Director for Heifer International. He has been involved in education all of his life, spending most of his pre-Heifer career in higher education. He may be contacted at [rex.enoch@heifer.org](mailto:rex.enoch@heifer.org).*

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# California Students Take The Hunger Challenge...

by Kerry Ruetenik

**T**hough filled to capacity with ninety middle and high school students, the largest auditorium of the World Affairs Council of Northern California was quiet, save for the soft scratching of pencils on paper. Here and there, a head tipped back as a student scanned the ceiling, searching for an answer to one of the tougher questions. A few volunteer proctors strolled between the rows of tables, scanning the room for errant

*Project Spera is a San Francisco-based educational nonprofit whose mission is to raise youth's awareness about international affairs. Project Spera runs two programs: the Global Citizenship After-school Program (of which the World Affairs Challenge is a component) and a Professional Development Program for teachers.*

*Learn about Project Spera at [www.projectspera.org](http://www.projectspera.org) or 415-292-7421 or [info@projectspera.org](mailto:info@projectspera.org).*

and left the auditorium quickly. And so, while many young people began their Saturday with cereal and cartoons, the competitors of San Francisco's 2003 World Affairs Challenge™ began their Saturday with a quiz.

Administered by the Center for Teaching International Relations (CTIR) at the University of Denver, the World Affairs Challenge is an academic competition that brings students head-to-head with some of today's most daunting global problems. San Francisco was the first expansion site for CTIR, supported by a partnership with the United Nations Foundation. While previous years' topics have been World Health and Water, this year's global issue was World Hunger. By pitting local youth against our planet's toughest problems, the creators of the Challenge have sought to match the energy and idealism of adolescence

with the poverty and degradation that plagues communities the world over. While expectations are high and the potential for disappointment great, students typically rise to the pressure of the moment, often with startling and provocative results.

2003 World Affairs Challenge competitors were asked to compete in 4 categories--the Quiz, the Discovery Poster, the Collaborative Question, and the Formal Presentation. Students had up to ten weeks to prepare for the event, many of them dedicating lunchtime hours to their work. With hands-off assistance from teachers and Challenge coaches, the students were encouraged to search for creative and practical solutions to global problems, rather than dwell upon the negative, as less-proactive projects are prone to do.

The students who convened in San Francisco came from various racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Many approached this event without a profound understanding of world hunger, and yet the Challenge provided them with an opportunity to grapple with these weighty issues in a meaningful way. Students were drawn to the program for different reasons, including the creative and performative aspects of the event. To that effect, the participants brought many unique talents to the table. Madiha Murshed, Executive Director of Project Spera, the organizational host of the 2003 Challenge, notes, "One great thing about the Challenge, that sets it apart from other competitions, is that it attracts students from non-traditional backgrounds. We have students who would not typically participate in an extra-curricular academic event, who are drawn instead to the subject matter of world hunger or who are interested in designing the Discovery Poster or a creative aspect of the Formal Presentation."

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## KIDS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE® NEWSLETTER

*A PROGRAM OF WORLD HUNGER YEAR (WHY)*

Published by:

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One element of the Challenge that elicited much positive student feedback was the Collaborative Question (the CQ). In this project, students were assigned to groups consisting of youth from different schools--an arrangement designed to encourage cooperation. Each student group was given a hypothetical assignment to distribute five categories of monetary aid based on statistical and issue-based characterizations of three different developing countries. The students had thirty minutes to discuss the needs and differences of the three nations, and twenty minutes to present and justify their choices to a panel of judges.

As a volunteer at the Challenge, I was assigned to help administer some of the CQ's. Faced with a group of jittery middle schoolers, newly seated at a long conference table for their first CQ event, I tried to encourage them to remain calm. Meanwhile, I browsed the materials and wondered how capable I would be in this event. Which nation was more deserving of immediate aid--Burundi, where the average life expectancy at birth is 46 years, Bangladesh, where the average daily wage for the most workers is equivalent to eighty cents, or Vietnam, which has the highest child malnutrition rate in East Asia and the Pacific region?

For many, the CQ element of the Challenge proved to be extraordinarily validating, as the pressure to collaborate culminated in a series of focused questions from professional and highly educated judges. While some students were not up to the task of a detailed defense, many of them appreciated the fact that the judges were intently concerned with their responses. One student wrote, "My ideas and theories were listened to and that gave me an incredible feeling of accomplishment... I felt like I could propose any solution and people would actually listen."

As I watched the students defend their solutions to the CQ, I observed their reactions to the pressure of the moment. Some young people withdrew, becoming even shyer, while others grew more outspoken, jumping in to respond first to the judges' questions. Part of the grading criteria for this event, however, demanded an evenly collaborative approach to the platform. In one middle school group, a young man who disagreed with the consensus of his peers interrupted his group's presentation several times to interject his own opinion. The judges requested his solution to the CQ, which he gave, until he became stumped by a question on Vietnam. His group continued the presentation and suddenly he exclaimed, "Vietnam is a country? I thought it was just a war. That's why these numbers were confusing!" The other students giggled, but continued presenting. Ultimately, each student gleaned something different from his or her experience in the competition.

In the context of student remarks about their experience in the Challenge, the events of May 31, 2003 gave participants a remarkable opportunity to move beyond the walls of their schools and communities, to learn about their roles in the global community and to accept a small portion of the responsibility that comes with greater knowledge of the world. The members of host organization Project Spera look forward to working with the 2004 participants as they prepare for the next Northern California Challenge, location to be announced.

*Kerry Ruetenik is an intern with Project Spera and was involved in the planning of the World Affairs Challenge™. She holds an undergraduate degree in English from UC Berkeley and has traveled widely. She currently resides in Alameda, California. For more information on the World Affairs Challenge in San Francisco, please visit [www.projectspera.org](http://www.projectspera.org).*

### **Fall has come...and gone!**

Our move which started on June 26th, has finally come to an end. At least we hope so! During this period, we are happy to report that we continued to operate and meet the needs of many of you. We are sorry if during this time we did not respond as quickly as usual, but sometimes "life happens."

There were two areas where the move greatly affected our operations: (1) this issue of the newsletter was delayed. It is evident that "fall has come and gone", but we hope you will find this issue worth the wait; and (2) our annual fund raising effort is far behind schedule. We will not make a "real sales pitch" at this time, but hope that you will send a contribution to KIDS so we will not need to "bug" you! Remember that there are no paid staff members and no rent to pay, so 100% of the money raised goes directly to the program.

We hope that you will respond with any amount that you are able!

# Latino Teens Find A Reason For Learning...

by Diane Carman

Special to The Denver Post

Sunday, May 25, 2003 -

**Y**olanda Vallejo didn't care. The Rifle High School student said she never felt like she belonged in school. School seemed irrelevant.

"I had family problems," she said. "I always learned a lot when things happened to me." School was not happening. So she decided she was going to quit, get a job, do something real.

Then the unexpected happened.

School got real.

Rifle High School Spanish teacher Maria Carrion-Kozak saw some information about a program at the University of Denver Center for Teaching International Relations. She was the adviser for the International Affairs Club. This looked interesting.

Carrion-Kozak is from Venezuela, and, as it turned out, the 20 students who joined the club were all Latinos - some first-generation immigrants from Mexico and El Salvador.

In many ways, the club was a refuge for them. Many were struggling with English, and some were barely passing their courses. Most knew what it was like to feel isolated and foreign even in their own hometown. In the club, they translated for each other. In the club, they stuck up for each other.

Elizabeth Beindorff, project director for the DU World

Affairs Challenge, invited them to participate in a state-wide competition for a student project on world hunger. But International Affairs was just a little club at a rural school with no money. It seemed impossible.

No problem, Beindorff said. She offered to waive the registration fee. She sent the materials and urged them to try.

Carrion-Kozak admits she was freaked. "I was not prepared for this at all," she said. "I'm a Spanish teacher. I have no background in this."

But the students were eager, so she enlisted Kim Goossens, a school board member, to help with the project, and they went to work. The kids began doing research after school. None of them had a personal computer at home, so most of the work was done at the homes of Carrion-Kozak and Goossens.

The students identified the 25 hungriest countries in the world and the causes of hunger in each of them. They learned that 1 billion people don't have enough to eat, that nearly half of them are children.

Once the students began to realize the scope of the problem, they mobilized quickly. They organized a hunger strike at school, asking students to forgo lunch to experience what it's like to be hungry. They urged them to contribute their lunch money for hunger relief. They raised nearly \$400.

*(Continued on page 6)*



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They volunteered in a soup kitchen. They researched the hunger relief organization Heifer International, and used their money to buy a water buffalo to help starving villagers in the developing world. And they wrote and performed a skit, complete with a video presentation and music produced by a student rock band and the school choir.

Then they held more fundraisers, this time to pay for transportation to Denver for the competition in March at DU.

Despite all their work, they were prepared to get creamed. Many of their competitors were from tony suburban schools. Some of them were from gifted-and-talented programs. They were just poor Latino kids from Rifle.

They smoked them.

On Thursday, they brought their winning project, "Giving a Face to Hunger," to the World Trade Day business conference in Denver. In front of a painted cardboard set, wearing handmade costumes and few signs of nerves, the students delivered their poignant, powerful dramatization of the plight of the hungry to a roomful of buttontown business types.

When the students finished, the place erupted. The businessmen and women wiped tears from their eyes and gave them a standing ovation.

It wasn't just the skit.

At a time when a third of Latino students don't finish high school and teachers struggle to make school more compelling than a \$6- an-hour job in a fast-food joint, a bunch of brown-faced kids with mediocre grades and limited English skills discovered their own remarkable ability.

"A lot of people didn't believe in us because the club is 100 percent Latino. Then we won," Leidy Ruiz said.

"We proved to ourselves and others that we don't all drop out and that we're smarter than we look," said Vallejo, who admits she's decided to stay in school - and not just because of the sudden acclaim.

Winning the competition was great, she said, but to her something else was more important. She discovered that even a bunch of poor kids from Rifle could make a difference.

"To be able to change even one person's life, that was the best thing."

As she spoke, Carrion-Kozak passed a tissue to Beindorff. The tears were welling up again.

They knew just what she meant.

## **The World Affairs Challenge... What it is and how you can participate**

The World Affairs Challenge develops international awareness and critical problem solving skills in middle and high school students. Highly creative yet academically rigorous, the Challenge enables students to explore global issues in a way that alerts them to the complex interrelationships of international trade, human rights, economic development, and democratization. The 2003 World Affairs Challenge™ theme is **Feeding the World: A Menu of Possibilities**. Administered by the Center for Teaching International Relations at the University of Denver Graduate School of International Studies, the World Affairs Challenge strives to present global issues in a balanced, academically rigorous way that forces students to move beyond political agendas or causes.

To learn more about the World Affairs Challenge™ and next year's theme, **The Rights of the Child**, please visit [www.du.edu/ctir/wac.html](http://www.du.edu/ctir/wac.html) or contact Liz Beindorff at 303-871-7442 or [ebeindor@du.edu](mailto:ebeindor@du.edu).

# This Is The United States of America...

by Larrissa Scott

This is the United States of America, the land of opportunity, the land of the free. A place where no matter what race, background, ethnicity, or religion you are, you will be accepted. So why are people who are living in the United States still fighting for basic human rights? Why are the people who we need to grow our food, milk our cows and pick our apples and oranges, still fighting for equality in the nation that says every human being is created equal?

The farm workers in this country are the people who are going through this unjust and unfair battle for their rights. They work long shifts for low pay, breathe in pesticides, do not have a day of rest or overtime pay, and do not have the right to collective bargaining. They suffer because they can barely see family members or afford decent housing, or have the ability to change jobs. They are stuck in a job that pays low wages and treats them badly. The only way for them to be free is to have people fight for them, since they can't do the fighting themselves without fear of being fired. The law prohibits farm workers from having the same rights as regular workers. The law denies the farm workers rights that other workers don't even have to ask for. Therefore, by excluding the farm workers from the basic labor laws, they are being enslaved. That is why for the past few years there has been Farm worker Advocacy Day in New York. This day is for farm workers and the farm worker advocates to join together and demand equality for these unfortunate people.

This year's Farm worker Advocacy Day was held on the last day of a march that started in two different points, in eastern and western New York, meeting in the capital, Albany, New York, on April 30, 2003. All together the march was 330 miles long. In fact, that is what it was called, "330 Miles Towards Justice." There were a lot of supporters who joined the march, along with the main walkers, which brought hope to a lot of the marchers and farmworkers alike. When the march

ended there was a big rally at the Capitol. There were speakers and dance performances as well as a monologue read by the Youth Arts Group from Rural and Migrant Ministry, about the trouble that farmworker women have to deal with on a regular basis. It was a good thing to know that the march not only showed the amount of support that farmworkers had, but also educated people who didn't know about the conditions that face migrant workers on the farms. I walked on two occasions in the march: one day in Ossining, New York and again on the final day in the capital. The people who were marching were so inspirational, they were still laughing and cheering even after marching for ten days. When we all met up in Albany, people were hugging each other and cheering, "Equal Rights!" It felt like it could be heard for miles.

So just remember that this is the United States of America, and that this is the land of opportunity. And that even though this is a place where people, no matter what race, religion, or ethnicity, will be accepted, everything is not equal. There are laws that separate us from the ultimate goal of equality. Laws that show how unequal some of the people in America are. The fact that people have to suffer, working like dogs everyday for practically nothing, shows that the United States has a ways to go before it becomes an equal opportunity employer.

*Larrissa Scott is 16 years old and an honors student at Middletown High School in Middletown, New York. She is a member of the Youth Arts Group (YAG), a youth empowerment program of Rural and Migrant Ministry in the Mid-Hudson Valley. YAG is a group of high school students who are committed to social justice and development of leadership skills so that they can become change agents in their communities. Larrissa is proud to have participated in the march for justice for farmworkers in New York state.*

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*Joan Dye Gussow, Professor Emeritus,  
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