

The Story in Place—How to Change Your City by Changing its Story

By Christina Baldwin

www.peerspirit.com

In November 1979, the city of Greensboro, North Carolina experienced a community tragedy that changed the story of that city. During a period of intense union organizing citizens had gathered to further their cause when members of the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan drove into housing projects where people were gathering and opened fire. Five people were killed and eleven injured, much of the carnage recorded by local television crews. No police were present. Forty Klansmen and Nazis were involved, but only sixteen were arrested, only six brought to trial, and two trials resulted in acquitting all defendants. The city of Greensboro quickly distanced its civic self-image from these events and moved on.

Twenty-five years later, a group of visionary faculty at The University of North Carolina-Greensboro, decided to revisit this event and shape a story that included honoring survivors, inviting people to look at the progress of social justice and offering the community as a whole a chance to expand their understanding of community story.

Author, trainer Christina Baldwin, coached the faculty group through a yearlong process, working together under the banner of The Race and Gender Institute and the leadership of then Associate Dean, Dr. M. K. Sanford. That work became the basis leading her to explore the power of collective story. “I discovered the ability of people in communities to stay attached to the facts of their histories, *and* review the stories of past experiences. Stories can become lessons that provide a new foundation for the community’s future.” In her most recent book, *Storycatcher, Making Sense of our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*, Baldwin shares what she has learned about both personal and societal story.

“Stories build bridges, opinions build walls. “I remember a town hall meeting where a passionately involved citizen was ranting at elected officials. One of them rapped for pause and managed to say to the man—‘Could you tell us that again, but only as a story?’ The man had to stop and think. Then he started over and spoke of his personal experience in such a way that everyone understood his point of view and attachment to the issue.”

“When seeking to understand how to create alliances within communities, I always inquire what stories might bridge people’s differences? How could people in warring factions in a community, discover—through story—a shared value? I have done work around environmental issues, social acceptance, development pressure and farmlands... and I have helped people in leadership learn to use the power of story with integrity and heart. In Greensboro, the University sponsored a play entitled, ‘Requiem for Greensboro,’ that included survivors and family members speaking from the audience—telling their real stories with the perspective of additional years. Finally, these voices were heard.”

In 2005, a citizen group inspired by the social healing processes that occurred in South Africa after Apartheid, sponsored a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Greensboro. Unfortunately this commission was opposed by the city council. “It takes courage to trust the story, but when civic leaders understand its full potential to heal, they become story’s greatest supporter.”