

# Story Wizard:

*By Bob Reiser*

Andrea Lovett remembers the moment the dream began. It was Sunday afternoon. She was five years old, crouched with her cousins under the dinner table. From their hiding place they could hear the clink of coffee cups, the clattering of plates and the shouts of grown-ups all talking at once. She still remembers the voice of her dad starting to tell a story and the sudden silence as the family began listening. Most of all, she remembers the explosion of foot stomping at the end of the tale, as all her aunts and uncles burst out laughing!

*“Those stories were magical. No matter how angry or distracted people had been, the stories brought them together. They became a Family! I knew then, that when I grew up I was going to tell stories - like dad.”*

Years later, when her community was torn by fear and anger about the Gulf War, Andrea found herself turning to stories to bring her neighbors together.

By now she had become a visiting storyteller at the high school. *“The kids were confused and frightened about the news from the Middle East. They were either violently pro-war or anti war. Like a thousand other communities, the war was tearing our town apart. Like other people, most students saw war in terms of popular news and Rambo movies; they had no idea what it*

*was really like. That's when it struck me -- what if we could get the kids and the veterans together to hear one another's stories?"*

So she asked students to write a letter to a local veteran whom they or their parents knew, asking them to write back about their war experiences. *"I had no idea whether the vets would respond, but they did, and their answers were amazing! They*

## **Andrea Lovett** *Tending the Flame*

*sent photos of themselves and their buddies, some of whom they had lost during the war. They wrote honestly about what made them proud and what made them ashamed. Mostly they wrote about how alone they had felt when they came home because no one understood what they had been through.*

*The kids were overwhelmed by the responses.*

*War suddenly became a reality. It was not about news reports or politics or patriotism; it was about neighbors, people whom they'd met in the street or in the supermarket."*

Andrea decided to take the project to another level. She asked the youngsters if they would like to meet the vets and speak to them in person.

Overwhelmingly, they agreed. A few months later, nearly a hundred teenagers, teachers, parents and a dozen war veterans met in the public library. They filled the meeting room.

Face to face with vets, the students spoke about their own fears and confusion; the ex-soldiers told their own stories, sharing tales that they had never even told their families.

By the end of the afternoon the kids and the vets were laughing, even weeping together. Andrea walked among them, amazed. *"It was something I had dreamed of, but never really believed could happen."*



12

Andrea still recalls the reaction of a veteran friend whom she had invited. *“I had known him for years, and in all that time, he had not been able to even say the word “Korea” without freezing up and walking away. As I approached, I saw him in deep conversation with a student. The youngster was saying, ‘Thanks, Mister, for telling me the truth. That took guts.’ My friend, the vet, stared at the student and tears started running down his face. ‘Thank you, son,’ he said. ‘Thank you for listening to me.’”*

This was not an anecdotal exchange. I can vouch for it because, by a stroke of luck, Andrea had invited me and I was standing next to her when it happened.

*“After that, my town changed,”* says Andrea. *“There was no more talk in the school about ‘hawks’ and ‘doves.’ There was no more ‘Us’ and ‘Them.’ My town had shared stories. We had become a family.”*

Overwhelmed by the experience, Andrea decided to begin a series of floating swaps, called “Stories on the Porch.” Before her eyes, neighbors who had hardly known one another became fast friends.

*“It lasted only a single summer,”* she admits. *“I got so busy with other commitments that I had to let folks organize their own swaps.”* Unfortunately, without a dedicated organizer and a regular place and time to meet, Stories on the Porch faded away. *“The story flame has to be tended or it will go out. Without a host, the fire just dies.”*

Andrea is not someone who gives up easily. You might even call her stubborn; it is a quality that every story host needs. So she found a local general store where people gathered on Saturdays to drink coffee and chat. *“It seemed like a perfect location.”* With the help of Peter, the owner, she began a series of informal Saturday swaps. People could just drink coffee and listen, or they could join in. It worked for three years!

Last year, Peter sold the store and the swaps ended. *“I am trying to get the new owner on board, but so far he is reluctant to commit himself. ‘Maybe next summer, when the weather gets warmer and we can set up chairs on the lawn,’ he says. ‘I’ll hold you to that,’ I say, and I wink. Sooner or later the magic will get to him, too. That’s how it works.”*

*Besides being a seasoned professional storyteller for children and adults, and an accomplished writer and workshop leader, Andrea has a strong sense of community and of ‘giving back.’ She served as president of LANES for two years, is a co-founder of MassMouth, and is still directly involved in bringing communities together through storytelling by building the popularity of Story Slams throughout Massachusetts. Read more about Andrea at <http://andrealovett.blogspot.com/>.*

*Bob Reiser is a storyteller, teacher, and an award-winning author of books for children and adults. He has been a long-time contributor to the Museletter;*

*this issue’s Story Wizard column is an excerpt from Story Fever, Bob’s upcoming book about the incurable passion for story. <http://www.bobtales.com/>*

