

WHITESBURG, KENTUCKY

Roadside Theater

“It was hard to believe that somebody would want to hear my story, to hear about domestic violence that happened to me. But I realized it’s not just my story either, because there are so many women with the same problem.” So says Nancy Brock, a workshop participant at the HOPE House Women’s Shelter in rural southwest Virginia. In this area, central Appalachia, domestic violence is one legacy of a hundred years of a boom and bust coal economy and a legal system that once viewed women and children as the property of a patrician. In 1998, in just one of the sparsely populated counties served by HOPE House, there were 595 domestic violence calls to the Sheriff’s Office in an eight month period - an average of more than two per day.

In 1998, the Roadside Theater conducted a residency at HOPE House, and created a play from the stories it collected there. Roadside, located across the state line from HOPE House in Whitesburg, KY, is a nationally and internationally recognized theatre company now in its twenty-fifth year.

Joy Smith-Briggs, Executive Director of HOPE House, says “I wanted to do the project because I saw the potential for getting the message out about domestic violence, using the stories of the women who have lived through it, or not survived it. And I wanted to empower the women by letting them tell their stories in a safe atmosphere. But when we read the first draft of the play called *Voices from the Battlefield* – it didn’t sound significant. These were just the stories we hear every day. We didn’t realize what we had created. And then we heard the audiences’ reactions and sat in the story circles after the performances.”

“Story circles” are an integral approach for Roadside in working with its mostly poor and working-class constituents. Small groups of people, guided by a facilitator, tell their stories to each other, and the stories are used both as a playmaking tool and as a way of helping communities identify and discuss a variety of issues that concern them.

Says Smith-Briggs: “We saw that the play’s audiences came to understand this violence as a real problem, and a complex one, and they looked at it with a greater empathy and understanding. In a story circle, which we did after each performance of the play, you need to tell your story as well as listen to others. A story circle isn’t rocket science, you know. If people listen to each other, they learn.”

Dudley Cocke, Roadside Theater’s Director, remembers in particular two comments from story circle participants after they saw *Voices from the Battlefield*:

A police officer said, “My father was very violent, and beat my mother regularly. She left my father and me when I was four years old. Now I see that she knew that he would kill her. If she would have taken me, he would have hunted us down. Either way, I would have lost her.”

A judge said, “I’ve often considered these women’s complaints trivial. I didn’t how understand how violence starts, and how it escalates. I’ll have to more careful weeding out the trivial from the substantial.”

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