

The Heartstone Odyssey Book Festival and Story Circles in Halton

Introduction

Heartstone is seeking to work with local authorities across the North West region beyond Lancashire to participate in a new Book Festival taking shape in November this year. The festival, detailed further below, is centred on The Heartstone Odyssey, a fictional story, an adventure story in its own right which also tackles the issues of prejudice/intolerance/hate for age group, 9-12, (cutting across top two years primary and first year secondary, the key transition years). Its deeper thread makes it just as appealing for many adults as well. This project thus far has been funded and led from Lancashire through the support of the Lord Lieutenant of Lancashire, several Deputy Lieutenants, the Police & Crime Commissioner, Lancashire Partnership Against Crime (LANPAC) and Preston & West Lancashire Racial Equality and Diversity Council (PWLREDC). Following the successful online event staged on March 19th by Heartstone, partnering with PWLREDC to mark the UN International Day for Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Heartstone business sponsors have now provided additional matchfunding for projects in local authorities beyond Lancashire, particularly those in the surrounding NW Region, to help bring their participation in what has been recognised as a timely new concept, covering priority issues and with particular relevance as the country starts to come out of the pandemic.

HEARTSTONE is a non-profit organisation which produces story - fiction, photodocumentary, history - presented through exhibitions, events, publications and online. All Heartstone stories have an underlying message - to see past prejudice and stereotypes and recognise a common human experience. The Story Circle project, which follows main events, reaches children in the age group 9-12 and uses The Heartstone Odyssey and a linked set of exhibition images and historical engravings as a vehicle to generate discussion and debate. As well as supporting victims, challenging perpetrators and raising awareness of all aspects of intolerance and hate, the process brings people together who would otherwise not meet, building inclusion and cohesion, helping to reduce isolation, and builds both literacy and critical thinking for the age group. You will be able to find out more about Heartstone at website: www.heartstonechandra.com and Heartstone Story Circles at the following link: <http://heartstonechandra.com/projects/heartstone-education-projects/anti-hate-crime/> Heartstone has no political or religious affiliation and has been funded through national and local government, numerous charities and trusts and corporate sponsors.

The Book Festival

This is being shaped as a 3-day online event to include actors – including Sir Derek Jacobi, Heartstone’s Patron, and other well known names from the world of theatre, artists and other creative inputs together with historians/curators from north west and UK Museums, as well as Heartstone’s international partners such as Rosa Parks Museum, Alabama, our Native American partners, those based in India and Singapore and others.

A section will be devoted to the contributions from each area participating and the event provides an opportunity for the children and staff involved in the new authorities to connect with our global partners, including world-class practitioners, and be part of a national event with the purpose of challenging intolerance/hate, building inclusion and community cohesion in an innovative way, thus further helping to reduce isolation and build contact.

The Halton Project

Matchfunding is in place to support **3 Story Circles** in Halton with the purpose of ensuring there will be a presence from these authorities at the Book Festival. These can be placed in either primary or secondary schools, or associated libraries. A Story Circle is based on a class group of children ie. around 30, who will reach out to (1) the rest of the school and (2) the surrounding community.

What will be achieved

The focus in this project is participation in the Book Festival through the Story Circle, which will:

- help support young victims, challenge perpetrators and raise awareness of all forms of intolerance and hate;
- help children become better readers, writers, communicators and critical thinkers;
- empower, raise self-esteem and confidence, build resilience
- reduce isolation, build contact

It will also give children and staff working with them a simple, sustainable, innovative and creative practical tool to deal with hate incidents and hate crime. The Story Circle creates a 'safe space' in which uncomfortable/difficult ideas can be voiced, where positive interventions can be worked out. The project helps children build a greater understanding of the world around them, and a stimulus to break away from learned behaviour thus leading to long term impact.

The project is unique and complementary to other approaches as it is **child-led**, with an uplifting fantasy story as its main resource, The Heartstone Odyssey, together with photodocumentary connecting with the current day and historical images related to the north west linked to the period covered in the story, the early 1800's. The three story inputs allow exploration of the issues from a number of directions, including seeing history from different perspectives during a key historical period, the early 1800's, which saw significant social change and includes the Industrial Revolution, European colonial expansion and the abolition of slavery.

Requirement from schools/libraries for Heartstone Story Circles

The minimum requirement from the schools/libraries is that they will:

1. ensure teachers/librarians/police officers/community officers leading or supporting the Story Circles participate in a 2 ½ hour introductory training session, delivered online as either a single session or 2 shorter sessions;
2. Undertake the project which will involve:
 - (1) reading the book, using the photos and historical images in the Story Circle pack as the stimulus to generate discussion/debate on the issues raised with the children;
 - (2) create artwork presenting the ideas, thoughts, feelings expressed by the children for presentation at the Book Festival taking shape in November 2021, taking shape as a 3-day online event AND
 - (3) for presentation in a finale exhibition in the authority at the end of the Spring term 2022 when the work will be displayed - online or live if this becomes possible by that time - and provide a mechanism to further promote the project across the authority.

The work produced will also form an exhibition for presentation in the school itself to reach the whole school and surrounding community, making each school a community hub for this project.

Curriculum connections for schools, role of libraries and time required

In schools, the project can be delivered as part of the English curriculum eg, many schools use the book as their class reader for the two terms of the project, but this initiative also impacts on mental health and wellbeing, under which heading it has been supported in several areas, including Scotland. There are no set rules and most schools tend to deliver the project in around 50 minutes-1 hour each week in a range of different ways to suit each individual setting, flexibility being an important factor in a Covid-recovery period. The optimum time to see the changes described as above is two terms. A project starting in September would therefore conclude at the end of the spring term. However, the project is designed to bring benefit from whatever time is given to it. It takes time for old ideas to be challenged and new ideas to embed – the more time given therefore, the better.

The project is child-led and thus reflects their own experiences and the changes seen take shape because of this approach. This means advance preparation is minimal – there are no lesson plans, what happens in each session depends on the children in that group as discussion is led by them with staff ensuring the pace is sufficient and key points they want to see raised are covered in each session using the story as the ‘vehicle’. This is not a workshop approach. Heartstone trains the adult staff to deliver this and then supports them so that the concept is sustainable.

If libraries are leading the project, they may wish to do this through supporting Story Circles in schools they are linked with, with a librarian or library assistant reading the book and using the other story input with the participating children as a weekly **online** input. Libraries and local museums have a further role – they will have access to documents and artefacts bringing the local historical angle to the period covered in the story to complement the historical engravings the groups receive in their packs from Heartstone.

Introductory training session

Training will be delivered by Sitakumari, Director of Heartstone, as a single 2 ½ hour online videoconference session, or split into two equal sessions, at the end of the summer term or beginning autumn term for the teachers/librarians/other professionals leading the project. This will be **‘by invitation’** only for the participating groups. Zoom or Teams are the preferred options although schools can also join by telephone conference. Schools therefore do not need to leave their own venues to participate. A timetable for the project will be set at this session.

The Story Circle pack

Prior to the training session, by June, participating schools/libraries will receive their Story Circle pack including:

- a class set of 30 books + Discussion Topics
- photodocumentary exhibition resource
- a set of historical engravings
- Charters Pack and Art ideas

THE STORY CIRCLE PACKS WILL REMAIN WITH THE SCHOOLS/LIBRARIES AT THE END OF THE PROJECT TO ENSURE FUTURE GROUPS CAN PARTICIPATE OVER SEVERAL YEARS. IT IS A SUSTAINABLE PROJECT.

Continued support

Over the period of the project from June 2021 to Spring 2022, Heartstone will be running monthly follow-up interactive support sessions, also via Teams/Zoom, for participating schools/libraries, in which participants will be able to ask questions and share work. Each session will include a guest presenter and a guest teacher from another area alongside Sitakumari, who will lead the session.

Storytelling videos with Sitakumari in her role as the Indian dancer/storyteller for use with the children and providing additional storytelling guidance for Story Circle leaders will also be supplied over the course of the project. This brings another culturally diverse component into the project.

In addition, schools/libraries can book 1-1 support sessions with Sitakumari by telephone conference call through the Heartstone office, over the period of the project.

Local Contact Point

The authority will need to nominate one link officer who will maintain contact with the 3 participating groups and with Heartstone. This is not a major task as the project is run by the groups themselves. The link officer's role will be to:

1. ensure all the lead teachers/librarians and others involved in the project attend the videoconference introductory training session;
2. follow-up at regular intervals by email with the Story Circles to check the project is progressing and relay any issues needing to be addressed back to Heartstone;
3. share dates/times of the monthly support sessions and if possible, lead an online 'sharing' session at intervals themselves;
4. ensure artwork and other items created through the project to be used for the Book Festival are forwarded to Heartstone and make sure the items are posted online for a local finale (if live events still remain difficult by Spring 2022).

Monitoring and evaluation

Over the period of the project, Heartstone will maintain contact with the local contact point to keep an eye on progress and help address any queries or issues arising.

The items produced for the Book Festival and a finale report from each of the 3 locations at the end of the project will be used for evaluation.

Summary of outcomes and outputs

This project is:

- tackling the subject of prejudice/intolerance/hate - challenging perpetrators, supporting victims, raising awareness using a child-centred approach with a particularly important age group – 9-12, the transition years;
- helping children define the meaning of the term 'hate crime' and 'hate incident' - what it is, how it manifests itself – micro-aggression, name-calling, physical abuse, online hate, graffiti – what you can do if you see it happening and who is there to support you;
- reaching **all** communities through an uplifting story about winning against the odds;
- dealing with all types of intolerance, building empathy and understanding;
- bringing families from different cultural and socioeconomic groups together in a new way;
- building contact, reducing isolation;
- building resilience – for potential victims against the effects of prejudice/hate, for potential perpetrators against messages of hate they are seeing/hearing from wider society and older peers;
- building literacy, discussion/debating and presentation skills, self-esteem/confidence;
- building understanding of identity and being proud of yourself - who you are and where you live;

- positive, exciting and inspirational (see attached document with photos/quotes/statements from other Story Circles and website);
- sustainable allowing successive generation of children to participate.

In schools, it does not need extra time as it can be incorporated into the curriculum.

At this time, as the UK is starting to come out of the pandemic, the project has a further relevance in the context of facilitating recovery:

- it will help areas address educational attainment, particularly literacy, when children have been away from school for a substantial period of time;
- it will help children who have been particularly affected by online hate, which has been noted to have increased substantially over the period of the pandemic – many incidents are going unreported and this project will assist children who are living with hate to feel safe enough to talk about incidents which are taking place, to build resilience and help build practical strategies;
- it will help social development, including reducing isolation and increasing contact through the process of discussion/debate and through those they will be in touch with, helping to build new relationships with people who can assist eg. police officers;
- it will deal with other issues eg. bereavement, which are covered in The Heartstone Odyssey through the fantasy story, a normal part of growing up but sadly exacerbated for some as a result of the impact of Covid-19.

The project will reach initially approx. 100 children in the first Story Circle programme, directly, and 600 through the exhibition outreach in the 3 locations. It will then reach out across Halton as events staged, including the Book Festival, are online, thus allowing involvement of every school, library and community group in the authority. Follow-on Story Circle projects beyond the first programme in the identified schools/libraries will reach similar numbers with no additional funding required.

Local publicity

This project provides multiple opportunities for local publicity from the outset – to highlight the involvement of the children and the authority in a project proactively tackling these issues, building literacy and in a Book Festival which has the components and contributors described.

Projects which successfully tackle prejudice/intolerance at this particularly vulnerable and impressionable age group which are also positive, uplifting and inspirational are rare, hence the endorsement and support from the Home Office and Police for the initiative which led to the initial House of Commons event in 2016 from which this current Story Circle project has followed. This project in addition reaches significant numbers through its sustainability. It upskills existing staff and provides a practical positive intervention which is permanently in place at the end of the project.

We hope we can involve Halton in The Heartstone Odyssey Book Festival as described, which is providing a special opportunity to bring an exciting positive event, on timely, high priority and relevant issues, with inclusion, cohesion, cultural diversity and challenging hate at its heart, with the ability to reach all the children, their families and the adults who work with them across the authority.

Acknowledgement of support

We will be able to acknowledge support through:

- use of logos at the Book Festival
- all media press releases
- on Heartstone's website

BUDGET BREAKDOWN

3-Story Circle programme

Expenditure:

3 Story Circles @ £600 £1,800

Each Story Circle pack includes:

- 30 copies of The Heartstone Odyssey book @ £10=£300
- 15 images exhibition photoset - £150
- Historical engravings to connect with local area - £100
- Story Captions, Discussion Notes - £50

Training / support – contribution £ 400
(for 2-hour introductory training session, monthly
Online support sessions, 1-1 sessions if required,
Provision of storytelling videos from online events
over 6-months of project)

*Management/administration of project, all office
costs, origination of material (photoassignments,
access to photolibrary, caption research/writing,
book production), balance costs of training + support £2,200
(to matchfund Story Circles)

TOTAL £4,400

Income:

*Heartstone sponsors £2,200

BALANCE TO RAISE: £2,200



Above: Sitakumari, principal dancer/storyteller for Heartstone – pose: ‘reading a story’. She will bring the mudras (hand gestures) and drama components, to augment the storytelling training provided in this project.



Above: Artwork by Mario Kkounnous, UCLan – the elephant Spirit of the Land carrying the broken fragments of the Heartstone north to the Himalayas surrounded by mice, the central Heartstone Odyssey fantasy characters, with lanterns. UCLan are supporting the project through their digital animation dept led by Mario and his prizewinning students.

