

THE PROVIDENCE PHOENIX

LOCAL HEROES 2008



In this, the eleventh annual edition of the *Providence Phoenix's* "Best" issue, we highlight people and organizations who are doing exceptionally good work. These are local heroes who often labor behind the scenes. Yet they are changing the communities in which they're based for the better. Regardless of what neighborhood you live in, all of us in Rhode Island are in their debt.

BILL HARLEY

HE'S GOT THE STORY

Many Rhode Islanders recognize Bill Harley as a Grammy Award-winning storyteller (for his 2006 album *Blah, Blah, Blah*); a Grammy-nominated songwriter (for his 2007 album *I Wanna Play*, which includes the audience favorite "Barbie's Head is Missing"); and a frequent essayist/commentator on National Public Radio (a recent rumination extolled the comfort of his rubber boots in mud season).

What many may not know is the depth of his commitment to working with kids, to pursuing non-violent social change, to making learning accessible at different levels, and to building community through shared songs and sing-a-longs.

Harley, who grew up in Indiana and Ohio, became a religion major at Hamilton College in upstate New York. While there, he studied the teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.; attended Quaker Meeting (he's a member of the Providence Meeting); and co-organized a summer camp, where he sang and told stories to wrangle the kids. After moving to Providence in 1980 with his wife, Debbie Block, they, along with Hamilton classmate Greg Marsello, founded the Learning Connection.

"The underpinnings were more radical than what we actually offered, such as bread-baking," Harley quips, with characteristic self-deprecating humor. The venture was obviously successful, since the organization celebrated its 25th anniversary last year (Harley left it some time ago).

Along the way, Harley met Joyce Katzberg, Kate Katzberg, Steve Snyder, and a few others, with whom he started the Stone Soup Coffeehouse, now in its 27th year and based in Pawtucket.

"For the first six months, we met at people's houses," Harley remembers, in a recent phone conversation from his home in

Seekonk, Massachusetts, "and then we used the office space of the Learning Connection. It was above a coin shop — they were downstairs selling Krugerrands, and we were upstairs singing political songs."

In the mid-'80s, Harley realized how much he liked enthralling kids and their parents with his stories. He got gigs in schools and libraries around the state and across the country, and his storytelling career took off. When he tried to record his efforts, however, he couldn't get a contract. So he and Block founded their own company, Round River Records, in 1984. He now has 25 recordings of songs and stories under his belt, plus six children's books. He's finishing up a seventh, *The Night of the Spadefoot Toads*.

"I could be a lot farther along in some things, if I didn't work with kids," says Harley, 54. "One element for me is to 'serve the least of these'. Kids really have the least power, and I'm trying to give them some power, in one way or another."

"A lot of adults are very uncomfortable around kids — they don't know what to do with them," he continues. "I don't know, maybe I should be more mature . . . but it's interesting that whoever works with kids is not valued as much. Sometimes it bothers me, but it's part of the deal, and it's a reminder to me that that's the way it is in our culture."

Following through on that commitment, Harley approached the Paul Cuffee School in Providence a few years ago to be its artist-in-residence. Seventy-percent of the charter school's 400-plus students come from families living below the poverty level. Harley has told stories and taught them to tell stories. He has written songs with them, a musical about Paul Cuffee (a black Quaker sea captain), and a school song, which all the students now know.

"How do you create a culture in a school?" Harley asks. "How do songs and stories bind people together? I wanted continued contact



COMPASSIONATE
Serving kids is a big part of Harley's mission.

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with kids, and I wanted to work in a place where I'd be given some free rein, with a population I'm happy to serve."

Not all of Harley's albums are for kids, and one of those aimed at adults has had a long and useful life: *I'm Gonna Let It Shine: A Gathering of Voices for Freedom*. Because he had previously trained at the King Center, Harley got the idea in 1990 to do an album of songs from the Civil Rights Movement, with some of the original leaders involved in the recording.

"There was a lot more history than I knew anything about, a lot of it incredible, a lot horrible," Harley recalls. "So, there was a lot of cultural stuff we had to wade through. It was touch and go, but once we finished, I think people realized we really had something."

Talking about that process reminds Harley of the recent debate over comments by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. "There's a divide there that's hard for us to bridge," he notes. "Anytime you try to do that, you're going to bruise something, because it's really hard. But that's where the real work gets done."

—Johnette Rodriguez