

BABA JAMAL VISITS THE MOUNTAIN STATE

by Ilene Evans of Thomas

What a full week it was in Thomas, West Virginia - full of laughter, smiles and wonder! It was my pleasure to host Baba Jamal's visit to the schools of Tucker County as he focused on character education through storytelling on the topic of respect. We sang and played drums, but most of all we heard stories. Baba Jamal, Storyteller and Griot, brought stories to grace our table, to carry us across the ocean, up the mountain, over the river and through the woods, and back home safely. Our intent was to use stories as a way of helping the children learn about the value of others and the kind of diversity which makes us strong. At the root of Baba Jamal's storytelling was always the legacy of Africa, its history, dignity, and brilliance.

Voices from the Earth has a fund raiser in the spring of every year to raise money to bring special artists to enrich the children of Tucker County. When Voices brought Baba Jamal to work with Youth at Risk in the county in 2008, it was such a success, we wanted to invite him back again and expand his visit to include more students. In 2008, he went to the Alldredge Academy and the Davis Center, both detention centers for teens who had had an infraction with the law. This year, when I contacted the principals in the county, they all wanted to be included when such a marvelous storyteller was coming and they helped make it happen.

Our first stop was Tucker County High School. Baba Jamal told stories about his journey from New York, to Philadelphia, from Hawaii, to South Africa, from Ghana to Arkansas. Students learned of people far away who were like them, but different - in good ways. The students' world got bigger and smaller all at the same time. At the high school, Baba Jamal told stories about his home in New York and the difficulties he faced in high school after healing from a serious car accident. The accident left him scared and broken in ways that made him a target for bullies and teasing. But his heart was strong and through so many challenges he found his gifts. He told the students that all of us have gifts of great power and we need to use them and learn to manage them.

He said, "I just came to give you a message - that you have a tremendous job in front of you as young folks growing into adulthood. You may think you're grown now, but the fact is you have a lot of growing to do." His message included traditional wisdom ways. "Spend time with and listen to the elders." He told students to get still, listen, and recognize their gifts. "Everyone has a gift," and sometimes we do not want the gifts we are given. Sometimes we do not recognize our gifts until someone asks great things of us. Our gifts are not for us alone; others need us to use and share the gifts we have. He reminded students that wisdom is remembering what you have been told and following through.

With the older students, at the Rubenstein Center, he used a metaphor of the wilderness and described in story, the things that help one to survive the wilderness. There were stories about growing up in a difficult world, in troubled times, in

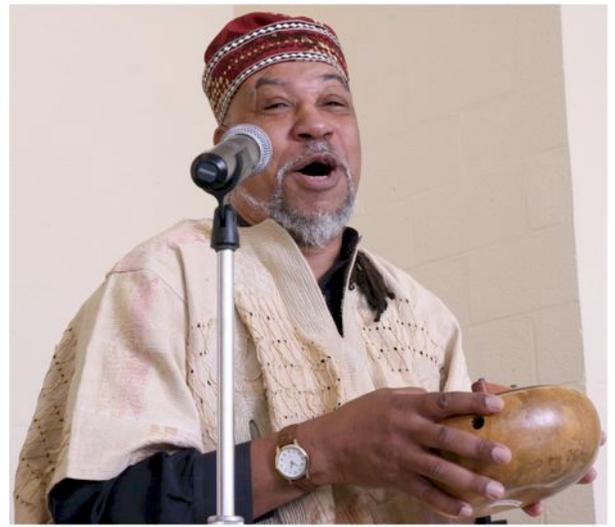


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changing reality, in a hostile wilderness. I learn as much as the students do on his visits and this week proved to be enriching for all of us, old and young alike. "Each of you have a gift. You may not recognize that gift now."

The next day was Tucker Valley - 5th and 6th grades, about 200 students in the gym. While in Hawaii, telling stories at libraries there, Baba Jamal met up with a storyteller friend who shared a story with him and he brought that story about mother earth and her amazing ways to Tucker County students. He told another story from the American rural south in the 1930s about a boy who was born with a cowl over his face. That story spanned three generations, listeners traveled from Arkansas, to the big city, to WWII in Northern Africa, and back again. Other stories demonstrated the need to keep your promises, to help those in need who are ready for help. Baba Jamal kept his Djembe drum and his mbira close by to accompany some of his stories and to make the mood right for the listeners. The students were full of questions about his instruments and travels. "Do you have to speak the language of the countries you visit?" "Usually," he replied, "there are people in these places who speak English. In The Republic of South Africa, I had an interpreter who spoke eight languages, five different African languages and English, German, French and others." There was a song "Akyloyey, Why your head so hard?" In that story the students understood that there is always a price to pay when you don't listen. Then he told one of his favorite stories, the legend of Sundiata, the king of Mali. We traveled so far in such a short span of time. The students were fully engaged and held onto the lessons.

At Davis Thomas Elementary Middle School students heard a story about three brothers who were to go out into the wilderness and make their living. The Father said, "Do not leave your brothers alone." So long as the brothers stayed together all would be well, but when one brother got stung by a scorpion, two of the brothers left the other to die. It was a story of betrayal and second chances - "everybody needs a second chance." Baba Jamal told another story about a man who woke up one morning with a tree growing out of his head. The story made us laugh, but it also gave a clear picture of the value of keeping one's word and caring for our elders. He helped students practice the art of making friends, of listening and making others welcome. You can teach anything through storytelling. The effect is long lasting; the learning is deep and the experience multidimensional.