



HONORS PROGRAM

JAMES A. BUTLER, Ph.D.
Director

February 23, 2009

Mr. Edward Reidell
Fonthill Museum
84 South Pine St.
Doylestown, PA 18901

Dear Mr. Reidell:

My “critical testimony” of the impact of Once Upon A Nation Storytelling draws on two evaluations that I have conducted for the Pennsylvania Humanities Council of the “Benstitute” training sessions for storytellers and on a number of visits to the Independence National Park area (and to Valley Forge) to hear the storytellers.

The most significant themes in our country’s history (democracy, free speech, freedom of religion, the institution and then abolition of slavery, among them) are at the center of what these storytellers do: communicate vitally important American issues of the colonial period—and in many cases of the present—and embody those big ideas in the lives of the ordinary and extraordinary men and women that the performers portray. The Storytellers’ Program aims at a kind of personalized history by contextualizing big issues in individual stories—and by bringing those stories (with a human touch) to small groups that cannot evade the issues by becoming lost in the crowd. As for the wider audience per year—estimated by Once Upon A Nation at about 150,000 listeners to the storytellers—by its very nature, the telling of stories binds together a community and preserves its history.

What makes the impact of these storytellers so profound is their careful training. Actors are not simply let loose onto the streets and benches. Instead there is a two-week training session that grounds these actors in colonial history. A number of the academic lecturers and performing arts teachers whom I have observed in the training are—there is no other word for it—“inspiring” in showing the effect that historically accurate storytelling can have. This training is, I think, one of the very few programs in the country that provides such an intensive historical education for storytellers.

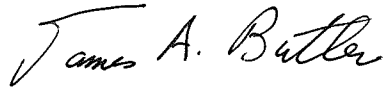
I end, as is appropriate, with a story—a tale about my observing a Once Upon A Nation storyteller in performance:

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At a storyteller's bench outside the Constitution Center, a dozen of us gathered to hear a story about a black man who bought his way out of slavery and came north in search of the remnants of his family. As the woman started to tell her story, a six-year-old child was particularly fidgety. It was hot. She had been dragged around to "historic places." And now she had to wrap her mind around concepts such as slavery and the Underground Railroad. As the story teller continued, the story became one of longing for freedom and for family—of disappointment and pain and ultimate joy. The six-year-old and all of us present were enthralled. The storyteller sang the clear notes of "Amazing Grace" and then ended her tale. The six-year-old went up to the story teller whom she a while back had no interest in hearing. She said what we all felt in some way but were too "adult" to express: "I want you to be my special friend."

My account is, of course, a tiny "impact statement." But if one wants to appreciate what Once Upon A Nation is doing, multiply my example by 150,000 listeners per year. And the recent publication of a book preserving these beautiful, poignant, and scrupulously-researched stories spreads the impact well beyond the benches at Independence Park and Valley Forge. Any one who says that he or she "doesn't like history" has not experienced Once Upon A Nation.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James A. Butler". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

James A. Butler, Ph.D.
Director, Honors Program
Director, Undergraduate Research
Curator, Wister Family Special Collection