



WHO ARE YOUR HEROES?

"People become the stories they hear, and the stories they tell."

— Elie Wiesel

OVERVIEW

After hearing stories of heroes from the Giraffe Heroes Project, students nominate heroes and discuss the risks they took and whom they helped, cultivating an understanding of what makes a true hero. In small groups, students then creatively present a chosen hero's story.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime, to inspire positive, courageous action
- When a classroom, school, or community issue arises that calls for courageous action
- As part of a unit on service and compassionate action

TIME REQUIRED

- Multiple sessions

LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- A [searchable database of heroes' stories](#) from the Giraffe Heroes Project:

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Become inspired by the courageous action of heroes
- Understand what makes a true hero (as contrasted with a celebrity or action figure)
- Embody the hero's courageous actions by creatively presenting a chosen hero's story
- Collaborate with other students in a small group to create a presentation about a hero

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making
- How to Do It

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to peruse the [Giraffe Heroes Project site](#) and read a few stories of heroes who stuck their necks out.
- What stories inspire you? Why?
- Select at least two heroes' stories that might be especially meaningful to your students.

INSTRUCTIONS

INTRODUCTION

- Ask students who their heroes are. Write them all on the board without comment, and don't attach students' names to the heroes.
- Tell the stories of at least two "Giraffes" from the [Giraffe Heroes Project Website](#).
- Spark a class discussion about the Giraffes, the risks they took, and the common good that their actions served. Tell them that "Giraffe" heroes stick their necks out for others.
- Go through the list of heroes on the board and ask what risks each of them has taken and who they helped by their actions.
- Without embarrassing the nominators, guide the class through a discussion that helps them see that being rich, talented, gorgeous, or bulletproof can make people celebrities, but not necessarily heroes. (For the bulletproof ones, remind them that it isn't brave to do something courageous if you know you can't get hurt).

COLLABORATING ON A PRESENTATION

- Divide the class into small teams. Ask each one to brainstorm several possible Giraffe heroes and to select one to present to the class. Different teams could be asked to focus on heroes in the news, literature, history, movies, the community, etc.
- Each group presents its hero's story using drama, art, narrative, song—encourage them to be imaginative.

CLOSURE

- Ask the class to discuss each hero's story, focusing on the risks taken and the caring shown. Make a new list of class heroes, including all those who have indeed stuck their necks out for others. Don't forget to include anyone from the first list who turned out to be a real hero.
- Students can present these heroes to the school in a Hall of Heroes display, at an assembly, and/or in P.A. announcements.
- Throughout the school day, mention opportunities to stick one's neck out to help others (e.g, when someone is bullied, insulted, or excluded, or when a school or community problem arises).

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Were students inspired by this process and these stories of heroes? If so, in what way? Do you notice students taking courageous action to help individuals, the class, or larger community?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Studies suggest that stories can make us more [empathic](#), help us [navigate our complex social world](#), are an effective way to [transmit values](#), and may [encourage us to help others](#).

Stories and storytelling can also improve students' learning. For example, a study of low-performing science students found that [reading stories of the struggles of famous scientists](#) led to better grades. In addition, a study of young African-American students found that their [storytelling skills](#) were linked to their early reading skills, which, according to the authors of the study, possibly stems from the cultural and historical influences that have fostered a [preference for orality](#) among African-Americans.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Stories are what make us human--and schools are in the business of nurturing humans. From the first time they step inside a classroom, students are immersed in stories. Thus, the stories that teachers choose can have a profound impact on shaping the identities—and ultimately the lives of their students.

Telling stories of real people who act in heroic ways—especially ones with whom students can identify—can help [remind them of their connectedness to each other](#), encouraging them to act upon their own innate goodness.

SOURCE

[Giraffe Heroes Project](#) honors compassionate risk-takers who are largely unknown, people who have the courage to stick their necks out for the common good, in the US and around the world. When we tell their stories over social and traditional media, others are moved to stick their necks out too, helping solve significant public problems important to them. As long as there are Giraffe Heroes, there's hope.

Telling the stories of heroes may be the oldest strategy in the world for motivating people into brave, compassionate action—and it works. See www.giraffe.org for books, blogs, curricula, speeches and trainings that can help your school succeed in inspiring students to courageous and compassionate action. Two full curricula can be downloaded for free from The Giraffe Heroes Project.