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A Teachable Moment: The Las Vegas Centennial

Jo Anne Kock

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, kockj@unce.unr.edu

Vicki Agao

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, agaov@unce.unr.edu



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Abstract

What an exciting time to learn Las Vegas history! In celebration of the 2005 Las Vegas Centennial, a children's book, *Growing Up in Las Vegas*, and an accompanying activity book for use in childcare provider training was developed. Amply illustrated, this fictional story based on historical facts and photos from 1905, stars five-year-old Ellie and her brother Billy. The curriculum contains 14 different activities that follow the illustrations in the book. Reaching over 1,500 adults and 2,000 children, adult participant evaluations showed a significant knowledge gain. The curriculum can be easily replicated and adapted to fit other geographic areas.

Jo Anne Kock

Area Extension Specialist, Children, Youth and Families
kockj@unce.unr.edu

Vicki Agao

Program Officer I, Children, Youth and Families
agaov@unce.unr.edu

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension
Las Vegas, Nevada

Introduction

As the City of Las Vegas, Nevada celebrated its Centennial 1905-2005 with a mass media blitz, grants for schools to paint centennial murals, the largest birthday cake in the world, parades and Centennial celebrations, a teachable moment arose for the historical education of childcare providers and the children they teach. What an exciting time for children to learn some Las Vegas history (Paher, 1971 & Walker, 2003). All year long in 2005, Las Vegas celebrations became more meaningful for both the provider and the child when the childcare provider presented this curriculum.

Developed primarily for the Centennial year, the curriculum consisted of an original illustrated children's book, *Growing Up in Las Vegas*, and an accompanying activity book. The activities consisted of ways to extend the information in the book, listings of new vocabulary, extended Las Vegas history, as well as directions for providing many hours of educational entertainment for both the child and the provider.

Goals

One of the goals of this program was to reach at least 500 adults and 600 children before the official May 15, 2005 Centennial date, with an overall goal to reach 1,000 adults and 1,200 children by the end of 2005. The overall educational goals of this historical curriculum were to increase participants':

- Knowledge of Las Vegas history,
- Knowledge of how to share history with children through literacy,
- Ability to identify appropriate literary history skills in young children, and
- Use of developmentally appropriate literary history activities in childcare programs.

Program Description

The *Growing Up in Las Vegas* curriculum was designed as an in-service training for childcare providers in Southern Nevada. The book written for the Centennial is a fictional story based on historical facts and photos from 1905 and contains colorful original water color prints. This children's book describes five-year-old Ellie and her brother Billy's varied activities in Las Vegas during the 1905 year. The local Chamber of Commerce and the local historical museum provided valuable background information. The Las Vegas Centennial Education Committee provided a \$750 grant to the illustrator of the book.

The accompanying activity manual provides information and instructions for conducting a 3-hour, three-credit workshop for childcare providers wanting to offer an educational history curriculum. The workshop focus is on working with preschoolers. The program is designed primarily with childcare providers in mind, though others may benefit from the material (e.g., parents, foster parents, teachers and human service professionals).

The activity book has an introduction that talks about the program, an activity preparation section to be used by the presenters that talks about scheduling and publicizing the program, workshop logistics and refreshments, an activity plan that has a pre-workshop checklist, and a list of materials needed for the snack and each of the 14 different activities.

Each activity has a section for younger (2-4 years old) children as well as a section for older preschoolers. The activities all start out with a brief history of Las Vegas, then list the activity, materials needed, activity directions, and then conclude with a vocabulary of new words to introduce. The activity book is to be used as a master so the activity illustrations and their directions can be reproduced.

Using curriculum that includes the book and activity book, participants:

- Took a Centennial journey back to Ellie's Las Vegas world in 1905,
- Learned about the beginning of the dusty western town of Las Vegas through the eyes of a child,
- Met a local Paiute Indian family,
- Helped Ellie celebrate the arrival of the railroad, the fourth of July, and her birthday,
- Saw paintings of the native foliage and the lack thereof (Ferris, 1983),
- Appreciated modern plumbing while learning about an outhouse (Barlow, 1992),
- Learned the hardships of living in a tenthouse and saw paintings of the first Las Vegas and Nevada buildings (Patera, 2001),
- Saw paintings of the original 1905 school house and its unique pot-bellied stove, and
- Enjoyed a history trip back in time as they shared the book and activities with a child.

Conclusions

The goal of reaching 1,000 adults and 1,200 children by the end of 2005 was surpassed by the actual Centennial celebration date of May 15, 2005. Using the evaluation tool developed for this program and included in the activity book, the preliminary adult (n=897) evaluation results on a scale of 1 (low [level of knowledge]) to 5 (high [level of knowledge]) were:

- Knowledge of Las Vegas History before program: 1.7
- Knowledge of Las Vegas History after the program: 4.8
- Confidence of ability to use materials presented in workshop: 4.7
- How do you think your children will like book and activities?: 4.9

Implications

Although the year 2005 was the ideal time to teach Las Vegas Centennial history to childcare providers, the topic is generic enough that it can be taught in future years. A Clark County School District representative has inquired about the possibility of having the curriculum in all first-grade classrooms in the county. The format of this curriculum is easily replicated and would be appropriate for any city, state, or area that is celebrating a Centennial or other founding period. The curriculum could be adapted to a variety of community historical celebrations or a local historical milestone. Collaborating with the local Chamber of Commerce and local museums helps form the "teachable moment."

Acknowledgments

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