

# the power of story

A Kindergarten to grade 8 resource that links the experiences of Canadian girls and women to the curriculum.

By JOAN BEECROFT, CAROL BROWN, MARGARET NEIGH, CATHERINE PAWIS, PAT WRIGHT and SHERRY RAMRATTAN SMITH

Lesson  
Plans

“Each time you tell your story,  
remember that you make  
a difference for someone.”

(MODELL, 1992)

Life stories provide a valid means of transmitting history. They allow us to draw connections between the past and present, yesterday and today. In our society there exist oppressive structures that constrain some voices. Storytelling, or narrative, creates rich conditions that enable those who are silenced to transform their contributions and concerns from hidden or intimate spoken stories into shared text. Yvonna S. Lincoln says “It takes an extended amount of time for the silenced to seek and find their voices and to frame their stories.” The women featured in this collection have finally reached such a stage. They lead rich, full lives and view the world as optimists. Each story unfolds to demonstrate how these women rose to the occasion, whether it meant facing an illness, helping a friend, speaking out on behalf of another, or achieving career and personal goals.

“In a world where the meaning of  
events and incidents must be quite  
puzzling, the story offers a haven  
of clarity.” (EGAN, 1986)

Stories provide a means for provoking thought and examining our attitudes and assumptions. Even though we may not be experiencing a situation directly, by allowing our minds to be open to diverse perspectives, we are able to learn through the life experiences of others around us. When we share anecdotes, the concentration and energy levels of our audience changes. This is because ideas and facts take on a human face and become real.

“Stories are gifts.” (HARDING, 1992)

The writers hope that the stories crafted in this book will help students to realize the worth and contributions that ordinary people bring to one another on a daily basis. As long as one person benefits from an action that we as individuals have taken, the world becomes a better place.

## Why create this resource?

This collection of stories provides a way to teach students that

- storytelling validates our life experiences.
- storytelling is an art.
- storytelling is a valid means of transmitting history.

In the complete *Power of Story* document, teachers are encouraged to read all the stories and not to feel limited by the grade levels suggested.

Some stories have lesson plans for more than one grade. Teachers may wish to use particular stories at school-wide events or to highlight special themes, such as White Cane Week, United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Cancer Awareness Month, International Women’s Day, Arthritis Month, African Heritage Month, Gay and Lesbian Pride Week, National Aboriginal Day and cultural celebrations. Many of the stories complement the 10 monthly themes from ETFO’s anti-bias resource *We’re Erasing Prejudice for Good*.

We attempted to tell the stories of women whose voices have not been heard. Some stories offer simple messages, while others deal with more complex issues. Both kinds are equally important since they reflect the way we live and learn.

As you read the sample story that follows, remember that children have their own experiences that need to be validated. This model can be used to encourage students to relate their own life stories.

## Hidden Talent

*Brenda Kaufman lives in Listowel, Ontario, with her husband, Bob, and daughter Nicole. When she discovered she had a gift, her life took off in a new direction.*

Have you ever wondered if you have a talent for something you haven’t discovered yet? That’s what happened to Brenda Kaufman. When she was in school, she loved sports – mostly baseball, badminton and volleyball. She loved to sing, too. When she was in grade 12, her school choir travelled all the way to Cork, Ireland, to sing in a music festival. She loved doing all those things and was pretty good at them, but she still hadn’t discovered her big talent.

After she left school, she went to the University of Toronto and became a dental hygienist. She married Bob Kaufman and had no trouble finding a job in her field. She settled down to married life in the town of Listowel, Ontario, where she had lived most of her life. Her mother had a talent with a needle and thread and had made many clothes for Brenda and her sisters as they were growing up. Brenda did some sewing as a young woman and sang with a local singing group, but she still hadn’t discovered her big talent.

Then Brenda was dealt a blow. She developed rheumatoid arthritis. This is a degenerative disease that causes damage to various joints in the body. It also causes a lot of pain and debilitating fatigue. Her hands were so painful that sewing became very difficult for her and, even more devastatingly, so did working as a dental hygienist.

Brenda worked part-time over several years, during which she gave birth to a daughter, Nicole.

In 1995, she faced another blow. Her much loved sister, Jodeyne, died suddenly. Brenda felt this loss deeply and was looking for a new direction in her life. Her daughter was in grade 4 by this time and was taking art classes to learn how to paint with watercolour. Brenda thought she would like to try that too. Have you guessed? She was about to discover her big talent!

Of course, she didn’t realize this at first. Brenda was painting for her own enjoyment. She enjoyed learning the techniques involved in painting with watercolour. The gentle touch required suited her hands well.

She took a painting to a frame shop where a friend saw it. This woman became her first customer and commissioned a painting from her. As more people saw her work, orders for paintings increased. One day her husband said to her “I didn’t know you could paint.” Brenda replied, “Well, I didn’t know either!”

Brenda always saved photocopies of her paintings. Someone suggested to her that her paintings would make very good cards. Now she and her husband run a small business, producing paintings and cards that are sold in stores in a number of towns in southwestern Ontario.

Watercolour is the best medium for her because the sable brushes she uses are very soft and offer little resistance to her hands. She has tried working with acrylics, but finds that too much pressure is required and can cause pain in her hands. She takes courses whenever she can, to learn new things about the various techniques and to stimulate her creativity.

Brenda says that she derives great pleasure from “being able to put colours down and have a painting come out beautiful.” Having given up a lot because of her physical health, she finds it very satisfying to be able to do something and to make a contribution to the world.

Her advice to anyone is “Be what you want to be at that time. Allow yourself to change and be open to new directions.” Her advice to people with disabilities is “If you have a love of something, there are different ways of achieving it. Don’t put stress on yourself to keep up with others. We often put on our own limits and don’t allow ourselves to think bigger.”

After having surgery, Brenda has discovered you can be in a wheelchair and still sing in a choir. People can become famous, pursuing their talent, in spite of a physical challenge.

Remember, also, that Brenda discovered her talent as a result of her daughter taking art classes. Maybe you will have an effect on someone’s life too. Maybe you will inspire someone in your life to move in a new direction and discover a hidden talent!



Brenda Kaufman

Brenda describes herself as assertive, creative and blessed. The following inscription composed by her sister appears on the back of each card she sells:

*The Creator distributes talents in  
unique ways  
and for different reasons.  
The expressions of life and the  
beauty of nature  
shown in  
Brenda Kaufman's watercolours  
are such gifts.  
Even though rheumatoid arthritis  
has challenged  
Brenda's physical being, she  
has found a way to share how  
she sees, loves and cherishes  
life.  
There is no need to ask how this  
creativity happens.  
Enjoy!*



#### Grade 5

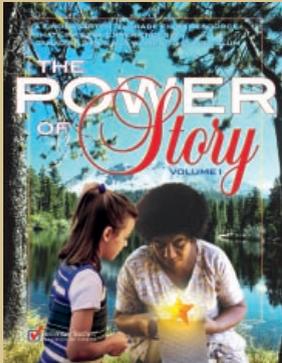
### Hidden Talent

#### Expectations - Language

- 5e2:** Use writing for various purposes and in a range of contexts, including school work. For example, to summarize information from materials they have read, to reflect on their thoughts, feelings and imaginings.
- 5e3:** Organize information to convey a central idea using well-developed paragraphs that focus on a main idea and give some relevant supporting details.
- 5e7:** Revise and edit their work, seeking feedback from others and focusing on content, organization and appropriateness of vocabulary for audience.

#### Expectations - The Arts

- 5a36:** Describe the strengths and limitations of various art tools, materials and techniques. For example, identify drawing tools, such as charcoal, pencil crayons and pastels, and describe their effectiveness on specific surfaces.
- 5a37:** Select the most appropriate tools, materials and techniques for a particular purpose, and use them correctly.
- 5a38:** Organize their art works to create a specific effect, using the elements of design. For example, create a still life depicting their favourite foods, and explain how they used colour, texture and shape to appeal to the viewer's senses.



### Suggested activities

- Write about someone you know who discovered a hidden talent later in life.
- Describe how you might have “inspired” someone in your life to do something new, as Brenda’s daughter did. For example, have you inspired your learning buddy, sister, brother, grandmother, grandfather?
- Experiment with watercolour techniques to discover how to acquire a soft touch and how different effects are achieved.
- Produce a painting with watercolour, then choose a different medium to capture the same subject. Compare the two. Give examples of appropriate uses for each.
- Use a Venn diagram to compare one medium you used in the above activity with the other.

### Extensions

Find examples of famous and not well-known people with a disability who have contributed to society, both famous and not well known – for example Jean Little, Ludwig van Beethoven, Stevie Wonder, Jeff Healey, Auguste Renoir. Make an oral presentation. List new interests that you would like to explore. Select one and plan the steps to do so.

### About the Authors

**JOAN BEECROFT** teaches for the Bluewater District School Board. She has experience at all grade levels (1-8) in English as a second language, French, special education and in the regular classroom. Joan is involved with her local as school steward and works to promote equity issues.

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Prior to her promotion to vice-principal, **CATHERINE PAWIS** was an instructional leader for Native Studies, kindergarten to oac, with the Toronto District School Board. She also worked for three years as a special education consultant. Catherine has taught grades 3-8, as well as special education and French.

Presently with the Niagara District School Board, **PAT WRIGHT**'s teaching experience includes grades 1-8. Through her federation involvement, specifically in the area of collective bargaining, and her role as classroom teacher, Pat continues to promote equity in the workplace.

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**The Power of Story**, published in the spring 2002, is available through The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. ShopETFO on line at [www.etfo.ca](http://www.etfo.ca) or by calling 416.962.3836/1.888.838.3836.

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- Egan, Kieran. *Literacy, Society and Schooling: A Reader*. Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge. 1986.
- Harding, Susan. *The Afterlife of Stories: Genesis of a Man of God*. In Rosenwald, George C. & Ochberg, Richard L. Eds. 'Storyed Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding.' New Haven: Yale University Press. 1992.
- Modell, Judith. *How Do You Introduce Yourself as a Childless Mother? Birthparent Interpretations of Parenthood*, in Rosenwald, George C. & Ochberg, Richard L., Eds. 'Storyed Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding.' New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

### RESOURCES

- Nichol, Barbara. *Beethoven Lives Upstairs*. Lester Publishing. 1993.
- Ennis' Gift. Meet actors, scientists, business leaders, a polar explorer, a teacher and dozens of others who have one thing in common - they all have learning differences. Contact the Ennis Cosby Foundation: [www.hellofriend.org](http://www.hellofriend.org)
- We're Erasing Prejudice for Good Anti-Bias Resource*. A school-wide, annotated, K-8 kit of anti-bias resources and lessons for the classroom. ETFO 1999. Available from ShopETFO - [www.etfo.ca](http://www.etfo.ca)