

# Community Drumming

Three hundred drums, talking unity in community

By Mike Macdonald • Photos by Claudia La Cava

Let's get it over at the top, telegraph the punch, and reveal the punch line before the story is all told.

The Monday, March 8th community fundraising dinner and drumming gathering at the elementary school was the best community event, the best political theater I have ever witnessed.

Political? Even the most enthusiastic participant might contest that characterization. Adults, kids, and nearly 300 drums? Finding unity in community? How was that political?

To Aristotle, the *polis* was the logical extension of family household and village, a collection of households. "The polis aims at the highest and most comprehensive good," the much-misinterpreted philosopher wrote. To Aristotle, polis was the natural state of man, the ideal. Fill in your own pejorative for the jacknapes who have turned the term political into a synonym for anything goes questionable ethics.

The students in *Chef 2.0*, a high-school class conducted by Food For Thought, prepared an African-themed dinner that received raves from participants.

"Families and communities who eat together share something more valuable and lasting than a meal," said PTA organizer Debbi Fincher.

The sum of the parts of this remarkable evening was of people working together to create music, so the roles of leaders and the group merged. It was a shared effort, so traditional reporting of who did what is not completely accurate. Fincher pointed out the "Unity in Community" theme, and said it was more than a slogan; it was the operating principle of the evening.

While young and old enjoyed the dinner in the cafeteria, the drums waited, nearly 300 of them on folding chairs in the gym-assembly room.

They were West African *djembe* drums, made of goatskin and hand-carved wood, awaiting hands and direction to give them voice. In one African language, *djembe* contracts from a phrase meaning "everyone gather together."

The audience supplied the hands. Visiting teachers Kenya Masala and Maketa Wilborn, in town to conduct a series of youth leadership and development events, would supply the direction.

Kenya, a master drummer born in Jamaica, stood on a raised platform with a large *djembe* slung around his neck. Tall, fit, with an athletic build and a smile that encompassed everyone in the room, Kenya began demonstrating and teaching the rudiments of the drum.

"The bass tone comes from the hand in the middle of the drum," he said through a wireless mike as he demonstrated the note.

"The tone note comes closer to the rim. Every drum will have a different tone," he said as he demonstrated, asking the audience to respond with their own notes.

What followed was an introduction to drumming via call and response, with Kenya introducing multiple notes in progression, rhythm, and timing into the mix, gradually building complexity and texture on simple elements.

Maketa, playing two dundun drums

unstated goal of revealing the crypto-drummers hiding under layers of self-consciousness and reluctance.

"We can make a lot noise," Kenya said after setting off a thunderstorm of individual thumpings, "or we can have connection," as he overlaid a simple rhythm that the audience took up as naturally as a heartbeat, making the transition from cacophony to music in a few seconds.

"You cannot make a mistake," Kenya said early on

"My job is to keep people collaborating."

Cynthia Stark-Wickman,  
SJI Prevention Coalition



with sticks, grounding the entire company with a solid base beat. It was starting to sound good, even accomplished.

Here we arrive at the fundamental impossibility of using words to describe what was a wordless, visceral experience that slowly drew the audience into Kenya's art and his stated goal of finding unity in community, and

as some descendants of Scandinavian fishermen and German farmers wrestled with the sounds coming from their African drums. "If you do something different, that's called a solo."

Kenya Masala is a teacher who has mastered the most basic skill of showing, not telling. Like a magician, he disappears behind his knowledge, while the students believe they have

One of the events that indirectly led to Kenya's appearance here was a case of bullying in kindergarten several years ago.

"Bullying by a stronger child against a weaker one is never an isolated incident," Debbi Fincher said, "it always has roots in other behavior, and the behavior of others."

The question of how parents and teachers can prevent bullying and what positive steps can be taken to show children alternatives has been a driving force in local educational and family support circles.

"A part-time resident of San Juan Island, with no children or grandchildren here, had heard about Kenya's program and made a significant contribution to enable him to come here," Fincher said.

Wickman said. "Fortunately, we have a lot of help in educating young people about how to question the choices facing them. There are multiple questions, and multiple ways to ask them. Our main focus is building community, getting people to come out and address our mutual interests."

We are lucky to have some talented educators in this community in a dozen different roles and organizations. They are supported by a broad coalition of concerned adults and teens.

When I finally put down the notebook and began following Kenya's drumming instructions, joining my drum with hundreds more, this thought came to me with the beat.

We are all gardeners, and we are all plants. We are all followers and we are all leaders. When we nurture others, we are nurtured ourselves.

The kids will be all right if we pay attention to the soil and root out a few weeds.

Thanks to everyone who had a role in the dinner and the drumming. There is history in community. **ah**



photo by Debbi Fincher



## A Message From Debbi Fincher

The school drum assemblies with Kenya and Maketa are always powerful and engaging. This year we were able to offer two separate assemblies, thanks to a generous private donor from the San Juan Island Community Foundation.

With 300 drums, the kindergarten through third-grade, and fourth through seventh-grade students had the opportunity to play together. The students, teachers, and parent volunteers felt the Unity in Community spirit that was the thread behind Kenya's visit this year.

The room was electric as the students found their rhythm and the beat that brings us together. Whether you've drummed before or not doesn't matter by the looks on the children's faces! We all have something to contribute and it was apparent in their smiles, laughter, and willingness to try.

In the upper grade assembly, Kenya introduced a new element to the program. He offered solo time to anyone that wanted to try. He told the students you'll know if it feels right and then come up and give it your best efforts for a few minutes.

The hands went up around the room. It was great to see so many eager to want to lead their classmates. It takes courage to get up in front of 300 people and find your groove. Those kids that took the chance were beaming with pride and a sense of accomplishment. What a wonderful gift Kenya gave them.

discovered something themselves, because it came from their own hands.

If you don't believe great amounts of information can be passed on by extremely simple means, consider the computer. By keeping track of a sequence of zeros and ones, plus or minus, positive or negative, a computer can perform stunning feats of deduction and compilation.

Concealed in Kenya's two-tone system of noisemaking on a stretched skin were equally impressive layers of meaning. Each could be opened and expanded by further investigation. But the genius of it was that it was the visceral in support of Aristotle's "highest and most comprehensive good," and undeniable demonstration ringing to the rafters that we are all in this together.

That generous woman who wishes to remain anonymous, joins a great coalition of concerned people joined in the process of a village raising its children.

"We're asking a lot of a lot of people," said Prevention Coalition director Cynthia Stark-Wickman. "Our partners include Island Rec, WSU Friday Harbor Extension 4-H program, the San Juan Family Resource Center, the San Juan County Health Department, the District Court Probation Department, Sheriff Bill Cumming, and the youth organization HOTS."

The Prevention Coalition is partially funded by a Federal grant that monitors substance abuse among youth.

"Substance abuse is a product of young people not making healthy choices," Stark-

