



Classroom Guide

Title: **The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush**

Author: **Tomie dePaola**

Illustrator: **Tomie dePaola**

Theme: Like Little Gopher, we all possess gifts and talents that make us special to the people around us.

Program Summary: Little Gopher follows his destiny of becoming an artist for his people and bringing the colors of the sunset down to the earth. LeVar visits the Pueblo Indian people of Taos, New Mexico where Mother Earth plays a crucial role in their art. He interviews a painter, a family of pottery makers, and a family of dancers. Each explains the traditions behind their art and Native American culture.

Topics for Discussion:

Traditional Native American art, including music, artwork, and dance, is tied to nature because Indigenous Peoples believed in the importance of living in harmony with the earth. Discuss with the class any evidence they saw in the program of Native American respect for all living things. What does “living in harmony with nature” mean?

At the end of the story, Little Gopher has a new name. Ask the class why they think Little Gopher’s name was changed.

The program shows families and individuals keeping old traditions alive and practicing them today. Ask students why they think this is important— to Native Americans and to all Americans.

The program presents opportunities to diminish two common stereotypes about Native Americans: that they represent cultures of the past and that they are one cultural group, instead of many nations with unique customs and beliefs. Look for examples in the program that dispel these stereotypes. Continue this discussion as the class reads other stories and learns more about Native Americans.

Curriculum Extension Activities:

The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush is a pourquoi story, a traditional story that explains some natural phenomenon. There are many Native American stories that explain the appearance of animals, plants, the seasons, the sky, the earth—nearly every aspect of life. Enlist the aid of the library media specialist in locating some of these stories to read to the class. Discuss with students why these stories originated (e.g, people have a natural curiosity about the world around them; when they have no other explanation, they create one that fits with their beliefs about the interrelationship of all things).



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Science has explained many of these phenomena, such as why the sun shines in the daytime. What scientific explanations do students know about these natural phenomena? Discuss why there is a place for both legends and science.

The Indian paintbrush is a wildflower. Have students find out what wildflowers grow in their local area or state. What characteristics do wildflowers have that might be different from many garden flowers (they don't require much attention, they can grow under most conditions, they come up every year, they grow in wild places, etc.)? Invite a horticulturist or nursery person into the classroom to talk about wildflowers. Plant some wildflower seeds in containers in the classroom.

Have students do earth paintings. They can make their own earth paint from soil or sand. Have them gather some samples of soil in a yogurt cup or margarine tub. (In most places, soil is usually slightly different colors, so they might want to gather more than one container.) Have the students crumble the soil into a powdery consistency, removing small stones and anything else. Then make a mixture of two parts soil, two parts water, and one part white glue, and stir it well. Have the students sketch a scene on a piece of tagboard and then paint their drawings with their earth paint. When the paintings are dry, the soil will be affixed to the paper.

Have the class research the history of Indigenous Peoples in their local area or state. What stories are associated with these nations? Invite a Native American storyteller into the classroom to tell stories and talk about the traditions of her/his people. (A local Native American Center or Arts and Humanities Council might recommend a speaker.)

It is a Native American belief that people get so much from the earth that we should never take more than we need and always give back when we can. Draw two flowers on the board. In the center of one, write: "What flowers give to us." On petals radiating from the center, have students brainstorm the benefits of having flowers on the earth. In the center of the other flower, write: "What we can give back." On the petals of those flowers, record the students' ideas about what we can give back to all living things.

Locate resources, both print and internet, that show pictures of Native American art from different cultures. This art might include jewelry, pottery, clothing, masks, totem poles, carvings, blankets and rugs, etc. Have students compare and contrast the



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designs, symbols, and colors used in this art. Locate the nations represented by these works of art on a map of the United States (or perhaps North America). Discuss how where the artists live might influence their designs. Do any of the designs, symbols, or colors relate to the legends the students have read or heard about these nations?

Look at photographs of sunsets and sunrises and discuss the blending of the colors. Have students paint watercolor sunrises or sunsets.

Book Reviews:

Rainbow Crow retold by Nancy Van Laan, illustrated by Beatriz Vidal

Indians of the Americas from the “New True Book” series

The Mud Pony retold by Caron Lee Cohen, illustrated by Shonto Begay

Supplementary Booklist:

The Earth Under Sky Bear’s Feet by Joseph Bruchac, illustrated by Thomas Locker

The First Strawberries by Joseph Bruchac, illustrated by Anna Vojtech

The Legend of the Bluebonnet by Tomie dePaola

Her Seven Brothers by Paul Goble

How the Stars Fell into the Sky by Jerrie Oughton, illustrated by Lisa Desimini

Dragonfly’s Tale by Kristina Rodanas

Related Themes:

- Native American music and dance
- Ecology

Related Reading Rainbow Programs:

- Program #10 — The Gift of the Sacred Dog
- Program #129 — Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message



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About the Author & Illustrator: When Tomie dePaola was in first grade, he told his teacher that when he grew up, he was going to make books with pictures. Since then, he has written and/or illustrated well over 100 books for children. Among them are *The Cloud Book*, *What the Mailman Brought*, *The Popcorn Book*, *Bill and Pete Go Down the Nile*, *Nicholas Bentley Stoningpot III*, *The Legend of the Bluebonnet*, and Caldecott Honor Book *Strega Nona*.