

# One River Mississippi

## Report from the Artistic Director

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[onerivermississippi.org](http://onerivermississippi.org)



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*"Y'all brought us to the river. I really feel closer to the river."*

Plaquemines Parish Participant

### Note from the Director

The ripples from this immense event have not all reached the shore. People continue to comment on the power of the project, and I am still digesting all that happened on June 24th.

Visit our website to see stunning photographs of the event at each site and to read the media coverage accounts. And if you haven't yet sent us your photos or media clippings, please do so! <http://onerivermississippi.org/performancecdays.html>

Profuse THANKS go to all of the hundreds of individuals who

gave their time and energy to this project. It couldn't have been done without the river community making the commitments that they did.

The One River Mississippi performances were astounding!! There are hundreds and hundreds of people who helped to put this on – from the barge companies to the choral directors, the telephone installation guys who were operating cherry pickers in St. Louis and the Quad Cities to install the phone lines out in the middle of very long bridges; the kayak groups, the seamstresses, the people who tightened the brass couplings on our "disks" that were at each site.

I especially want to thank the choreographers, my

*A big thanks to the Barge Companies such as the one in Quad Cities who contributed the barge at left. Photo by Joe Maciejko*

[Itasca](#)

[Twin Cities](#)

[Quad Cities](#)

[St. Louis](#)

[E. St. Louis](#)

[Memphis](#)

[New Orleans](#)

[Plaquemines](#)

[Parish](#)



fellow artists without whom this project would have never happened. The choreographers had one conference call the day after the performance, and I am looking forward to having another connection with them all, except we will have to get along without our choreographer from the Quad Cities, Johanne Jakhelln. She has returned to her native Norway with her American husband and family; One River Mississippi was her last production and off she went!

And, of course, I am exceptionally grateful to the wonderful people who funded this project – over 200 individuals and foundations.

Close to two months after the event, I remain very appreciative, amazed and delighted. It is humbling and inspiring to see a vision become a reality.

*Marylee Hardenbergh, Artistic Director*



*People saw the Mississippi River is a new way: St. Louis photo by Bob Morrison.*

### Post-performance comments about One River Mississippi:



*Audience in Itasca doing the "Roll, Roll Reach" gesture that all seven audiences performed. Photo by Melanie Metz*

*"It was a once in a lifetime experience"*

*"I was blown away by the experience and the connections that happened throughout."*

*"It had not made such an impact on me until I shared in it, and then the grandeur of the scale of the event suddenly seemed of a piece with the grandeur of the Mississippi itself."*

*"Everyone was so pleased to be there and be part of something meaningful and beautiful... and thought-provoking. ... we continue to find something new to mention even a week later."*

*"We were all carried along by something far more powerful...the*

*performance felt magical."*

*"I feel grateful, joyous and elevated to a special plane of existence"*

## Intention Fulfilled

The project was an amazing success. Over 550 performers joined to create the seven performances, and audiences totaled 10,500!!

We sought to draw attention to the Mississippi River and to have people see the river with renewed eyes and heart. After the performance we heard from scores of both audience and performers who saw the river in a new light. Some created poems about the river because of the performance. Some painted pictures. One child was heard to say that he would never call the Mississippi River yucky again. More than one person wrote that this event was actually life-changing!

Our intention to create beauty, joy, and healing by combining art, community, and ecology was fulfilled marvelously.

## Community and Healing

At each site there was a Water Blessing – some done by Native Americans, including the Dakota, Lakota, and Houma Nation members – some done by church leaders – and some done by African Healers. At each site there was an expert in creating group cohesion among the audiences, the Dance/Movement Therapist, who lent their expertise to lead the audiences, and there was also a Reiki master to bring healing to the water.



*Water Blessing by the Houma Indian Chief, encircled by the dancers on top of the river levee.  
Photo by J. D. Barrios*

Both performers and audience felt a sense of community. While many of the performers stated that they made new connections within their communities, many audience members remarked how powerful they felt the performance was, particularly knowing that six other cities were experiencing the event with them.

In New Orleans, the audience could not keep their seats when the dancers on the fireboat strewed more than 1,000 white flowers into the river – one for each person who died as a result of Hurricane Katrina. At that point in the performance, the audience spontaneously rose as one and rushed to get a better view. In Plaquemines Parish, which was as hard hit by Katrina as any part of the country, one participant remarked that the One River Mississippi performance was the “most heartwarming and healing event since the destruction.”



Dancers in New Orleans helped create a strong sense of community. Photo by Patti Perret

*Dancers in New Orleans helped create a strong sense of community. Photo by Patti Perret*

## Beauty

Over and over again, we heard comments about how absolutely beautiful and moving the performances were. Each of the seven performances had their own unique version of portraying the beauty at their site.

Everyone who worked on the dance performances did a stellar job!

## Connection

*Each site portrayed beauty in its own way. Here the Itasca choreographer crosses the Mississippi River at its narrowest point. Photo by Melanie Metz*



Connections occurred all along the Mississippi, but perhaps the most remarkable one was forged between St. Louis and East St. Louis during our performance. The Mayor of East St. Louis and the Mayor of St. Louis strolled together along the length of the Eads Bridge. Dancers from both sides of the river performed together. Members of the community said they felt for the first time the connection between the two cities across the river from each other.

We planned to connect all seven audiences via telephone technology. Although many audio engineers made a valiant effort, only some of the audiences could hear each other. When we created “The Chord”, all of the audiences, led by Dance Therapists, lustily called out their site names and sang their note. The Chord was broadcast by many radio stations, and recorded by our Itasca radio and sound engineers. As several people have commented, The Chord sounds like a transmission from the moon!! Perhaps our Webmaster might find a way to put it on the web?

## The Weather was a Miracle

St. Louis skies were clear and beautiful, ditto for Memphis. Both the top (Itasca) and the bottom (Plaquemines Parish) had dark clouds with lightning, but not a drop of rain fell on the sites. In New Orleans, clouds covered the sky, yet some found a silver lining: the New Orleans weather was perfect because the cloud cover made it cool and comfortable for them. It sprinkled during the Water Blessing.

*The weather was perfect in Memphis. Photo by Veronica Neal Klawetter*



In Minneapolis, light rain came down until literally a minute before the performance. Then the rain held off, and the sun even shone through briefly. As the performance ended with the audience holding on to the 1200-foot long strip of blue fabric symbolizing the river and called the Blue Highway, rain began again.

### Inspiration for Future Projects

We wished to model how a community event like this could take place and to inspire communities to undertake future projects. After the performance, many people in each site wanted to do it again. Some sites want to do this event annually. This enthusiasm means we achieved our goal of instilling in each community the confidence and vision needed to launch a river performance tradition.

### Wrap Up

Wrap up for the project is about mid-way. Two of the five grant reports have been submitted. We are sending reports to our individual donors, showing them photographs from all the sites. The Project Managers have written up their final reports and are finishing their budgets. Postcards encouraging our US Congress to take care of the southern-most end of the Mississippi River and the Louisiana Coastal wetlands are now numbering over 1184 with more to still arrive. We have had fun taking the zip codes of the postcard signers, finding out their US Representative, and then mailing that in, along with the two for each of their state senators. Writers were asked to please note the theme of Twenty Senators, Ten States, One River Mississippi on the front of the postcards and tell their representatives that the performance drew attention to the Mississippi River and moved attendees to care more deeply about the river.



*Running along the Blue Highway at the end of the Minneapolis performance: audience members send waves down the highway and children run underneath.  
Photo by Nicky Hardenbergh*



We are also counting the environmental surveys taken by the seven audiences, and have in hand over 675. The survey will be tabulated and scored and a follow-up survey will take place in the fall. Stay tuned for the results of that!!

Footage from each site is in the hands of our Jana Larson, who is making use of her graduate degree in film. She is out in California editing the film as we speak. She is

*We have beautiful photos from each site; our official Minneapolis photographer Bruce Goodman captured the children performing in the Mill Ruins Park.*

planning to make a 30-minute film combining the dance and the beauty of the river.

## About One River Mississippi

The One River Mississippi newsletter provides updates about our project, which encompassed seven simultaneous performances in seven venues along the river on June 24, 2006.

This public art event, free and open to the public, honored the “One River” that spans our nation, through the tools of art, ecology, and community awareness.

For complete information on the entire project, visit our website: <http://onerivermississippi.org>



*Circle of hands photo shows the One River Mississippi choreographers' hands. Concept and photo by Marylee Hardenbergh*

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**This project was presented as a collaboration between Global Site Performance and Hamline University's Center for Global Environmental Education, which is committed to environmental and community building efforts.**