


GETTING TO KNOW YOU

*This issue features **John Edgar Tidwell** of Lawrence, a longtime KHC Speakers Bureau and Talk About Literature in Kansas (TALK) scholar. Tidwell is a professor of English at the University of Kansas where his research specialties are African American and American literatures. He has edited seven books, including the memoirs, collected poems, and selected journalism of Kansas-born writer Frank Marshall Davis. His current Speakers Bureau topic, "Creativity As Art and Labor," explores the works of Davis and fellow Kansas authors Langston Hughes and Gordon Parks. "Edgar's small town upbringing led him to the humanities early on," observed Julie Mulvihill, KHC executive director. "Now his scholarship and community engagement as a KHC discussion leader takes his early humanities education to the next level."*

My humanities training began in Independence, a somnolent little town nestled between two rivers in southeast Kansas. Mrs. Esther Teal, driving her 1955 dark green Chevy, would dutifully pick us young children up and carry us to Maple Street Baptist Church to rehearse our "pieces" or little speeches for Christmas, Easter, and other holidays. In between those opportunities to learn self-confidence by presenting ourselves before a church filled with appreciative members, Mom would recite poems by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, especially his "Little Brown Baby." When our uncle, E.W. Collins, came, we were treated to a marvelous performance as they took turns reciting long passages of Dunbar's melodic verse, which they had memorized more than thirty years earlier in a country school near Boynton, Oklahoma. Little did I know that their eloquence was instilling in me an understanding of the nature of humanities, in a process even more profound because the setting was not typically known for having such a shaping influence. As I travel about the state for KHC, making presentations via the TALK program or Speakers Bureau, I am often

reminded of my own inauspicious beginnings. I now see that perhaps I'm reenacting the devotion of those instructors who patiently instilled in me an enduring love of the humanities. Many of my discussions focus on the experiences of African Americans as expressed in a body of literature often unknown to the participants. Such works can have their challenges. How do I avoid the potential for simple political or sociological analyses and strive instead for the far more fruitful inquiry into the humanity of a people? For instance, while the narrator in Gordon Parks's *The Learning Tree* describes Cherokee Flats (modeled on Fort Scott) as "a land of uncertainty," my charge is to present the participants with ways of seeing how the novel's experiences are both distinctive and general. In other words, they are racially-specific at the same time they are revelations of the human condition.

Therein lies the hope for a successful presentation. If participants can see the possibilities of a cross-cultural exchange, then they are able to perceive how their own lives are revealed in the work being considered. What follows is the sine qua non of the discussion: its incentive for participants to engage in a rigorous self-examination. Armed with this new self-knowledge, participants can better situate themselves in the wider world. In so doing, the boundaries that separate people slowly dissolve and give way to a more profound, collective understanding of us as human beings—which I take to be the quintessential definition of humanities. 

John Edgar Tidwell

