

## 15 MINUTES

## Ancient art form practiced at L.A. coffeehouse

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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“It’s taking a chance, because Lehigh (Acres) is not known as a literary center,” said Marge Phelps, a member of the Gulf Coast Writers Association. The group held an open mike at The Lehigh Acres Café and Coffee House last week.

Headlining the event was Mary Lou Williams, 74, who looked both ancient and young in a countrified patchwork dress, with streaked grey hair in a bun and expressive eyes that must have once been fierce.

She stepped to the microphone and related the story of a young man at war and his beautiful, distant love whom he returns to and identifies because of her bouquet of red roses.

Williams is a professional storyteller who rewrites classic tales to make them suitable for spoken-word venues. The art of oral storytelling has been practiced since the dawn of man, she said, and is still popular, but struggling. “There’s a whole world that main stream America doesn’t know about. It’s vast and growing.

“Before reading and writing, before mass media, before the industrial revolution – people entertained themselves, taught their children and recorded their history through storytelling.”

Williams taught English and mathematics in New York City (she grew up in Queens) for 35 years, and holds a bachelor’s degree in English from Queens College and a master’s

in education from Columbia University. But she first became interested in out-loud storytelling when she visited Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C. on a vacation with her husband in 1993.

“The people that inhabited that area are of Scottish-Irish decent,” she said. “Storytelling was a great part of their heritage.”

There, she met professor Charlotte T. Ross, who told her a story she never forgot (and still tells) called “An Appalachian Romeo and Juliet.” The title alludes to its tragic ending.

“It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up,” Williams said. “I was mesmerized by it. The whole room was...”

“A good storyteller is an artist. And like all good artists there is something that is reverent about that that is inspiring. This was the first time I ever came across (oral) storytelling as an art form for adults.”

The stories Williams tells now are also for adults – subtle, complex and witty.

So when she promotes herself to marketing and activity directors at venues in Southwest Florida, she begins by telling them her name. Then she says, “I’m an X-rated storyteller.”

Then there’s a pause, and she explains. “No, I’m not risqué, I tell stories for adults.”

She also attends storytelling festivals, the biggest being The National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tenn., which draws about 10,000 people every year during the



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Mary Lou Williams

first weekend in October. This year will be her third trip there.

“You see the super stars,” she said. “The world-class storytellers.”

Williams knows about 15 stories by heart and is working on more – adaptations of authors like Anton Chekhov (“The Bet”) and W.W. Jacobs (“The Monkey’s Paw,” one of her favorite ghost stories).

She recently rewrote one by Nathaniel Hawthorn.

“His style is completely archaic and very literary,” she said. “I rewrote the story completely so that it’s intelligible to a modern audience.”

Cell phones, iPods and other modern devices often appear in William’s versions to bring the stories up to date.

“I only tell stories that I personally love myself and those stories almost all come from literary works,” she said. “When the storyteller makes eye contact with the audience, there is a reaction that creates this chemistry and synergy between them that is electric and magical.”

Williams moved to Fort Myers in 1999 to be near family, after her husband died. She’s been telling stories since then – usually in her patchwork dress, and with exuberant expressions. (She admitted to being a drama student in high school, and often, a ham).

“I bought that dress to go square dancing and when I started storytelling, I said, ‘Gee, I should have an appropriate storytelling dress. The patchwork has a homey, homespun quality to it. My grandniece called it a ‘Hansel and Gretel’ dress and I say that’s perfect. That’s what I’m going to wear.”

To catch Williams on the circuit, at upcoming performances of her “fractured fairy tales” and other stories: May 9 at 1 p.m. at the Lakes Regional Library in Fort Myers on Bass Road; May 21 at 7 p.m. at the Chateau at Moorings Park in Naples; and June 19 at Terracina Grand in Naples at 7 p.m. You may also find her at The Lehigh Acres Café, where Gulf Coast Writers Association members and the public practice the ancient art of storytelling, every other Thursday. The next meeting is June 5 at 7 p.m. ☛