

The Flourishing Art of Storytelling

How Mary Lou Williams Helps Storytelling Thrive Locally

by Savannah Noir

Mary Lou Williams considers herself fortunate to have enjoyed two careers, both of which allowed her to put her deep love of literature to optimal use. Williams' earlier calling as an English teacher and her latest vocation as a professional storyteller have allowed her love affair with storybook characters, such as Ann Shirley, in *Anne of Green Gables* and Tom Sawyer, in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, to flourish. In fact, favored works of literature and folk tales are the plums from which Williams squeezes her own juicy, fractured fairytales, such as *Ugly Cindy and the Magic Glass Slippers* or *Sleeping Beauty and the Rude Awakening*.

In 1993, an Elderhostel weekend at Appalachia University, in Boone, North Carolina, proved to be Williams' first step on the road to professional storytelling. "A professor's hair-raising Appalachian folklore captivated me, and I was hooked. In Appalachian culture, storytelling is not only the way Appalachian people pass along their history; it is also a form of entertainment. When I found out about professional storytelling for adults and the National Storytelling Festival, in Jonesborough, Tennessee, I promised myself that someday I was going to get there. I did in 2006," she enthuses.

Williams has been a member of the Tamiami Tale Tellers of Fort Myers since 2006. Bert and Noel Mac Carry, who taught storytelling classes at the Alliance for the Arts, in Fort Myers, and Cissie Griffin, of Immokalee, originally started the group 25 years ago. Today, Fort Myers residents Marilyn Graham and Lisa Leonhardt co-chair the storytelling guild, which meets on the third Thursday of every month at the



Four Tamiami Tale Tellers after their performance of Florida history stories contributing to the celebration of Viva Florida 500 (from left to right): Lisa Leonhardt, Mary Lou Williams, Marilyn Graham and Dwight Elam

Grand Court Retirement Community, in Fort Myers. The public is welcome. "While our members tell stories using facial expressions, gestures, body movements and eye contact, as well as the appropriate props, everyone refrains from critiquing performances, because we prefer to nurture the love of stories in each other," advises Williams, a board member of the Florida Storytelling Association.

The Florida Storytelling Association's main event, hosted locally each year by the Tamiami Tale Tellers of Fort Myers, is Tellabration, an evening of storytelling for adults and families that takes place each year the Saturday

before Thanksgiving. "We occasionally put on workshops. In March, by popular demand, we brought Kim Weitkamp to do her workshop on how to write and tell personal stories. In 2013, this award-winning storyteller, who is a regular at the National Storytelling Festival, presented her *Story U* workshop. We're hoping to bring Kim back to give storytelling performances in 2015," advises Williams. Weitkamp is a regular at the National Storytelling Festival, which draws more than 10,000 listeners, as well as top-notch storytellers.

In 2013, Tamiami Tale Teller members performed at several locations around the state for Viva Florida 500, a state initiative commemorating 500 years of Florida history. Williams will teach a class on Tall Tales at Hodges University's Naples campus on August 28. She also has a repertoire of 43 stories to perform for community organizations, libraries and gated communities.

For more information, call 239-267-6480 or visit Story-Theatre.com.