

Tall Tales to Tell

Local Storyteller Captivates Her Audiences

by Lydia Foster

Lifted eyebrows, smiles, gasps, sighs, chuckles and belly laughs comprise the audience feedback that Mary Lou Williams needs to rev up the amps of her performing engine. Born to ham it up and spin flabbergasting tales, Williams revels in opportunities to exercise her professional storytelling muscles, which she first began flexing in 1993.

A deep love of literature followed Williams from early childhood into adulthood and provided the inspiration for her earlier career as an English teacher. Love affairs with storybook characters like Ann Shirley, in *Anne of Green Gables* and Tom Sawyer, in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, still fuel the rich imagination that enlivens her stories. Favored pieces 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 yellow brick road to storytelling. "My husband and I were fans of accruing fun learning experiences rather than credits," says Williams. "So, we took a course on Appalachian culture. We discovered that storytelling is not only the way Appalachian people pass along their history, it is also a form of entertainment."

Their professor's hair-raising folklore captivated Williams. "I was hooked," she declares. "When I found out there was such a thing as professional storytelling for adults and a national storytelling festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee, I promised myself that someday I was going to get there. I finally did, in 2006."

Along the 13-year journey to Jonesboro, Williams stopped to pursue her other current passion as a nutrition lecturer. Informational presentations

on the subject evolved into a nutrition column for local newspapers. Later, an interest in public speaking led her to Fort Myers Toastmasters, where she earned the advanced Toastmaster Silver Award, specializing in the categories of Speaking to Inform and Storytelling.

"I thought the storytelling category would not only enhance my ability to give informational speeches, but also move me forward in my intention to become a professional storyteller," Williams recalls. "The first story I told was the Appalachian version of *Romeo and Juliet* that Professor Ross shared that first revelatory weekend. It cast the same spell, and I discovered that my fellow Toastmasters enjoyed my storytelling more than my informational talks."

Williams' first requirement for spellbinding oratory is that the story must be a good one. To capture the imagination of an audience, it must be executed to perfection, with facial expressions, gestures, body movements and eye contact, as well as the appropriate props. "These are the tools of an actor's trade," says Williams, "and I use them all."

Williams and other storytellers have a cornucopia of categories from which to choose: traditional stories, recounted orally from generation to



Mary Lou Williams

generation; folktales and fairytales; tall tales; legends and myths; fables; and stories of personal experiences. Literary stories are for reading, but good storytellers like Williams can turn one into a gastronomic delight for the mind.

She weaves her magic for community organizations, including Red Hat clubs, as well as for patrons of local coffee shops, such as Nita's Sweet Bean Café and the Manna Coffeehouse, in Fort Myers. "I started telling stories at local retirement communities and moved on from there," notes Williams. "Now, I'm focusing on gated communities."

"I have a repertoire of 23 stories to share, and I've rewritten some of the classic fairytales. I like to tell them from a modern perspective, which pokes fun at the characters."

A member of the Tamiami Tale Tellers of Fort Myers, Mary Lou Williams can be heard, along with other storytellers, at a special "Tellabration" on November 22. The event, at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Fort Myers, is free to the public. For information, call 239-267-6480 or visit Story-Theatre.com.



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