


Tell Me a Story

• Keep 'em Reading •

Grades
K-5

by | Nancy K. Wallace

A Hometown Storytelling Festival



The September sun dips below the tree line and twilight creeps quietly over the park. Preschoolers who had been running and rolling in the grass only moments before sit in rapt silence, their faces flushed by firelight as the last storyteller begins. Families have left their televisions and computers, the comfort of recliners and air conditioning, to gather in the primitive glow of a bonfire to celebrate the age-old oral tradition of storytelling. Together they sing, laugh and listen in the warmth and security of this community gathering.

Ellwood City's Storytelling Festival provides a variety of experiences for children and families in its four and a half hour time span. Here, children are exposed to diverse cultural heritages through the spoken word. They respond to the gestures, expressions, and body language of the storytellers as they participate in music, movement and art. Afternoon craft activities are designed to reinforce the most important aspects of these stories and give children tangible reminders of their experience to take home.

Wandering entertainers, portraying characters from mythology and folklore, sing folk songs, juggle, and interact with the participants. A local magician makes hundreds of balloon animals. The Historical Society hosts a booth to record oral histories and provides families with materials to



document their own family stories. A team of shiny black Percherons pulls a trolley that seats twenty people, features a guitarist on board, and travels in a loop around the community park stopping to view vignettes from the upcoming high school musical, *Cinderella*.

Everything at the festival is free, courtesy of local businesses and grants, except for the refreshment booth, which provides a major fundraising opportunity for Friends of the Library.

This year's festival attracted over 630 people. It is hard to believe that six short years ago, the precursor to the festival began in our one room public library with sixty people in attendance.

Think Big, Start Small

The original festival began with a dream and a vision of bringing the oral tradition of storytelling to our small town. Our library holdings represented tens of thousands of books, but there seemed to be limited opportunities to share the art of storytelling. I studied folktales and fairytales, choosing ones that could be included in Story Time and family programs but I wanted to do something more for our community as a whole. In 2002, we asked three local storytellers to volunteer their time to do half-hour time slots on a Saturday morning at the library. One was a retired French teacher who not only told stories, but entertained us with French songs and guitar playing, as well. A retired



school librarian told cat stories and brought an assortment of stuffed cats and cat puppets to supplement her “tails.” A local storyteller tapped into memories of one-room schools and sled riding from years gone by. The library provided donuts, cider and coffee. We advertised the event with posters and a small story in our local paper. Sixty people attended; most were families, but we had a few senior citizens, as well. The response was enthusiastic! We were asked to make this an annual affair and we did.

The second year we imposed on our librarian friends to tell stories. They, in turn, imposed on their spouses and friends to provide live music. A high school teacher dressed as a Greek goddess and introduced the group to mythology in a whole new way! Our storytellers numbered four with musical segments inbetween performers. Our attendance jumped to eighty-five, straining the capacity of our little library. We didn't have enough chairs and some people had to stand. We ran out of cookies and a staff member scurried out to buy more.

We sat down afterwards to regroup. Apparently, we had started something big! This was becoming something larger than our four brick walls could hold, and we needed help before we attempted next year's program.

First of all, we needed more space. Fall seemed the ideal time for an outdoor festival and our town had a beautiful community park complete with a covered stage, electrical hookups, bathrooms and bench seating. We could use it for free; we just had to sign up in January. The other issue was a lack of local storytelling talent. We had already tapped everyone we could think of and didn't want to use the same storytellers year after year.

Partnering Works Wonders!

The Director of our Chamber of Commerce happened to be a regular library patron. We corralled her when she stopped to pick up her children after school the next week and presented a litany of problems: our idea of using the community park, the shortage of local storytellers and our perpetual lack of money.

She told us about a subdivision of the Chamber of Commerce called “Community Enrichment.” It sponsored concerts and other cul-

tural events that were open to the public. She asked us to write a proposal outlining the benefits of the program for the community and submit it for their consideration. After reviewing our proposal, funds were allocated. Because of its commitment to oral histories, the Ellwood City Area Historical Society also expressed interest in helping.

Now in this, our sixth year, those two organizations continue to support the festival, but we have also gained support from other agencies in our community, county and state. These are things you will want to explore, should your library want to start a similar festival in your community. Below are some suggestions for duplicating our Storytelling Festival.

Location, Location, Location!

While it may be an advantage to start small, try to pick a location that will allow you to grow. Space is limited in some libraries. A community park or community center allows for future expansion. Consider available parking in your plans too. Most storytellers don't travel light. Provide parking close to your stage for the performers.



Date

Our festival began in September and we have continued that tradition. Fall in Pennsylvania not only has the advantage of spectacular foliage, but the cooler weather is more comfortable for people sitting outside for long periods of time. Try to plan around events that are already scheduled in your community. Ellwood City has a Fourth of July Arts and Crafts Festival, and Christmas in the Park in December. Both events attract out of town guests. The Storytelling Festival falls neatly in between the two.

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Time

Originally a Saturday morning program, our festival now begins at 3:30 in the afternoon and runs till 8:00 p.m.. We have five storytellers on stage for thirty minutes at a time, followed by fifteen minute breaks. Half an hour seems to be a reasonable amount of time for small children to sit and listen. The fifteen minute intermissions allow for potty breaks, refreshments and wiggle time.

During the last act on stage, our Fire Department starts a bonfire in a clear area adjacent to the stage. At 7:15 p.m., our last storyteller appears, cloaked and dressed in black to tell family-friendly ghost stories. Residents bring lawn chairs and blankets to sprawl around the fire. Ellwood City seems to be famous for special effects. During the story of a train that plunged off a damaged trestle, a train passing through a local railroad crossing provided a ghostly whistle at just the right moment. A particularly humid evening encouraged a flock of bats to appear on cue. Rumbling thunder added atmosphere another year.

No One Can Control the Weather

Any outdoor event runs the chance of being rained out. Rain has dampened our festival twice. Once, a forecast of high winds and damaging hail cut our attendance to about 200. Ironically, the storms never materialized and those who came enjoyed a cool breezy afternoon of fun. Another year, a deluge interrupted the last act. We simply invited everyone on stage and continued the performance. While a few people left the park, most stayed. You could rent a tent and chairs to use in case of inclement weather, but for the most part, we have found September to be cool and dry here.

Storytellers

Professional storytellers are expensive; count on paying between \$400 - \$500 per performance. Some performers run much higher. Most are booked months and even years in advance, so choose a date and start lining up your entertainment early. Web resources (see sidebar) can provide contact information. Many of our performers have come through the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh.

A good way to obtain recommendations is to ask other professional storytellers. Visit renaissance and medieval fairs and other area storytelling events to gather a list of possible candidates. We try to alternate storytellers so that they appear only once every three years, with one exception. Alan Irvine, who tells our ghosts stories, is so good that he has acquired quite a following. Some people attend just to hear him, so we have asked him to return every year.

The man who handles our sound system also provides music during the fifteen minute breaks. If you rely on free local talent, be sure to preview

The Search for Talent

The Internet has many resources to help in the search for storytellers and storytelling information. The National Storytelling Network's Web site at www.storynet.org/ has a "find-a-teller" feature to search by name, or you can use the "Directory" tab for biographies that include regional affiliations. The International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee has an excellent Web site at www.storytellingfestival.net/. It includes the history of their annual festival. If you click on the "Storytelling Festival" tab, you will find a link to "Featured Tellers." The same information can be reached through the "site guide." The Jonesborough Festival was my inspiration. They started out with an audience of sixty, just as we did! Thirty-six years later their festival has more than 10,000 visitors!

One storyteller who might be overlooked is Ronald McDonald. McDonalds makes a point of supporting literacy and Ronald, himself, is a great storyteller. He comes complete with giveaways and is wonderful at promoting audience participation. He appears free for library functions!

your prospective performers to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

Funding

Work up a budget including money for performers, renting a sound system, children's activities, advertising and decorations (we use lots of pumpkins and cornstalks). While we began with no need for a budget in 2002, our 2008 festival cost about \$4500. Both the Chamber of Commerce and the Historical Society were instrumental in finding grants to continue and expand our event. Most states offer grants that promote the performing arts. We are fortunate to have applied and received funds from the Pennsylvania Rural Arts Alliance and the Pennsylvania Humanities Council. Check with your local state representative for funding sources in your area.

Advertising

In addition to using our local newspaper, library newsletter, and the usual in-house posters, we blanket the local schools with fliers advertising the event. This year's fliers contained a coupon for free popcorn. An enthusiastic local teacher, dressed as a fictional character, visited every classroom in his building to plug our festival. We run a commercial on the local cable television channel and distribute posters county-wide to theaters, libraries, and stores. Several large vinyl signs were professionally



made and hung in prominent places in the community for several weeks before the event. We have paper place mats printed and give them out to all area restaurants which are willing to use them.

Food

Our park shelters have electricity and the main shelter includes a kitchen. "Friends of the Library" sells easy-to-prepare refreshments and the proceeds fund special library projects. They sell hot dogs, nachos, cookies, popcorn and beverages. The giant homemade cookies have been a tremendous success.

In the past, we have also had civic groups and churches sell refreshments, but we found that having one food booth avoided duplication of food items and simplified conflicts in sharing one kitchen. We have declined any professional food vendors.



Additional Activities

Originally we avoided anything that might draw attention away from the storytellers, but we soon realized that any activities that kept families in the park were a plus. This year, the horse drawn trolley was a huge success and had a line of eager children waiting the entire time it ran. Face painting and crafts are always a hit. Local art clubs or churches may be willing to provide crafts for a nominal donation.

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Programs

The library prepares programs for the event, listing the schedule on the front, additional information about the storytellers inside, and advertising for future library events on the back. Additional activities are also listed. If your festival site is large, it might be helpful to include a map.

Delegate

One reason our festival runs smoothly is that the responsibility for the event is split among the partners. The library schedules and contacts the storytellers, provides the announcer for the event, and writes up the program. The Historical Society runs the oral history booth and hires wandering entertainment. The Chamber of Commerce finds funding, handles advertising, and secures permits for using park facilities.

End Notes

It is indicative of our library's relationship with the community that the Chamber of Commerce and the Historical Society rallied behind us when we asked for help to make a good event become great. So, make your library indispensable to your community! The consistently cheerful attitude of your staff, your willingness to make your library a gathering place, and your dedication to providing community outreach will enable you to more easily ask for, and receive, support for what you do!



Nancy K. Wallace, Youth Services Coordinator at Ellwood City Area Public Library, oversees programming for infants through young adults, ranging from baby lapsits to teen book discussion groups. She also presents professional multi-district workshops. Her library has received four Best Practices Awards from the Pennsylvania Library Association for excellence in children's programming in addition to the David J. Roberts EXCEL Award in 2008. Her children's poetry and stories have appeared in national magazines and she has reviewed Young Adult Literature for VOYA magazine for the past thirteen years. E-mail her at childrenslib@zoominternet.net.

