

Telling the Whole Story

The Florida Storytelling Festival brings national talent to nearby Mount Dora.

By Julie Capps



Sit back and let me tell you a story about a well-established storytelling festival found just down the road in Mount Dora. Back in 1984, a group of storytellers held an informal gathering at the Lake Yale Conference Center, just west of Eustis, with the goal of simply sharing a love for the art of storytelling. Little did that group know that their intimate gathering would eventually evolve into a nationally known 4-day event featuring established storytellers from across the nation.

A key milestone in the growth of the annual Florida Storytelling Festival occurred in 2011, when representatives of the city of Mount Dora, the Lakeside Inn, the Mount Dora Area Chamber of Commerce and the nonprofit Visit Mount Dora Inc. reached out to the Florida Storytelling Association and presented the opportunity to move the annual event to Mount Dora. 2012 marked the first year the festival took place at the new location. According to festival director Kaye Byrnes, the partnership in Mount Dora “has just been a fantastic success.”

The festival’s committee sends out invitations to members of the national storytelling community every spring with the goal of bringing in fresh and innovative voices. “We very much avoid bringing people back repeatedly,” says Byrnes. “Our goal is to always bring tellers people have not necessarily heard, so that when [people] come, they are going to just continually experience different voices, different styles, different repertoires.” Adding that storytelling runs such an

“enormous gamut,” Byrnes says, “we want our audiences to come back every year and experience a broader and broader range.”

Emphasizing the variety of storytelling skills found at the festival, Byrnes adds, “Storytelling, like music and dance and theater, is a performing art. And so there is a spectrum. People who want to tell stories for fun, as a hobby, that is one level. And it will go always up the spectrum to those of us who work as professionals and who focus on the art as a true craft and vocation. And we market ourselves and we are continually building our repertoires and expanding our audiences.”

Throughout the weekend (this year, it’s held March 30–April 2), there are multiple opportunities to drop in and check out what’s happening. Daily workshops teach everything from the use of puppetry to collage work with the presentation of a story. The Featured Tellers Concert, held both Friday and Saturday night, spotlights the invited professional storytellers. Open-mic sessions are held at 10 p.m. both Friday and Saturday night, at which anyone at any level of experience can get up on stage and present a story. And Sunday afternoon features an afternoon cruise around Lake Dora—with storytelling on board.

Byrnes says the festival’s goal is “to bring storytelling to the public and to let those curious people come and experience the art.” That accessibility includes front-porch storytelling sessions held on the veranda of

the Lakeside Inn from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. both Friday and Saturday, which are free to the general public. “Anyone can drift right up to the veranda and grab a rocking chair and listen to storytellers,” says Byrnes.

The festival also aims to foster and grow the next generation of storytelling voices with its Youthful Voices of Florida program. Begun in the late ’90s, the program allows committee members to go out and promote participation in the festival. Videotapes from young storytellers seeking to participate at the annual festival are then accepted for consideration. The youth who make the final cut have their own concert on Saturday evening. Byrnes calls the performance “an absolute delight,” saying, “it never fails to just amaze people that these young people can get up to the microphone and can get up in front of all these people and tell these wonderful stories.” An extension of the Youthful Voices program includes designated family activities at the festival on Saturday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., featuring workshops, storytelling crafts and open mic.

“Anybody can tell stories. As human beings, we are hardwired for story narrative. It is quite often how we communicate, how we express ourselves,” comments Byrnes. “No matter your age, to sit and listen to a story of any kind is a very engaging and relatable experience.”

*Florida Storytelling Festival
March 30–April 2, Mount Dora
Some events are ticketed; more information at
FLStory.com/Festival*