

# what's your story?

## THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF TELLING TALES

**O**n a drizzly Tuesday night, a line has formed outside the Nuyorican Poets Café in lower Manhattan. The attraction inside is not a musical performance or a comedy act, or even a fine meal. It's a StorySLAM, an open-mike competition for people eager to tell the tales of their lives to an audience of rapt listeners. This evening's theme is "blunders," and the beginner raconteurs take the stage one at a time, regaling the crowd about such mishaps as unwittingly luring a bear into a tent while camping.

The event's sponsor, The Moth, is a unique storytelling society founded in 1997 by novelist George Dawes Green, author of *The Juror* (Warner, 1995) and other books. The Moth's success, reports *The New York Times*, "is one example of the phenomenon of storytelling that is gaining momentum nationwide." Green and those who run The Moth view storytelling as a way not only to entertain, but also to celebrate both our diversity and our commonality as human beings.

BY JULIE JACOBS



“I think storytelling is primal and linked to something that goes far back in our DNA,” Green says. “Narratives have this intense power. Just look at how we tend to gather in the kitchen at the end of an evening and swap stories, or how small children pick up on the nuances of even the simplest of stories. In this high-tech age, each step of technology distances us a little more from what we’re really seeking, which is human contact. Storytelling helps satisfy our need for connection.”

“It builds community,” adds Lea Thau, The Moth’s executive and creative director. “Technology is great at facilitating communication, but it doesn’t enable us to understand our humanity. That’s what storytelling can do, by fostering exchange and providing opportunities for people to be physically together. There’s great value in that.”

It’s also therapeutic, she says. “For storytellers, it’s a very introspective process where they have to dig really deep into themselves. And when they craft a good story, it can be cathartic for listeners. There are archetypes of

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the human experience that we all go through. I may never have gone to war or been in a tsunami, but I have felt loss, excitement, betrayal, sadness.”

The genesis of the nonprofit began in Green’s home state of Georgia. There he and a small circle of confidantes congregated regularly on a friend’s screened porch to spin yarns. The group took its name from the insects that, attracted by the light, fluttered in through a hole in the screen. When Green moved to New York, he sought to recreate the intimacy and connection of these gatherings and started by inviting a few pals over to his apartment. Word spread quickly and The Moth began gathering at different venues throughout Manhattan.

The group has since created a range of storytelling programs, hit the road across the country and abroad, and brought more than 3,000 tales live to more than 100,000 audience members. Every show to date has sold out, and notable personalities such as Ethan Hawke, Rosie O’Donnell and Dominick Dunne have taken part in The Moth’s Mainstage series.

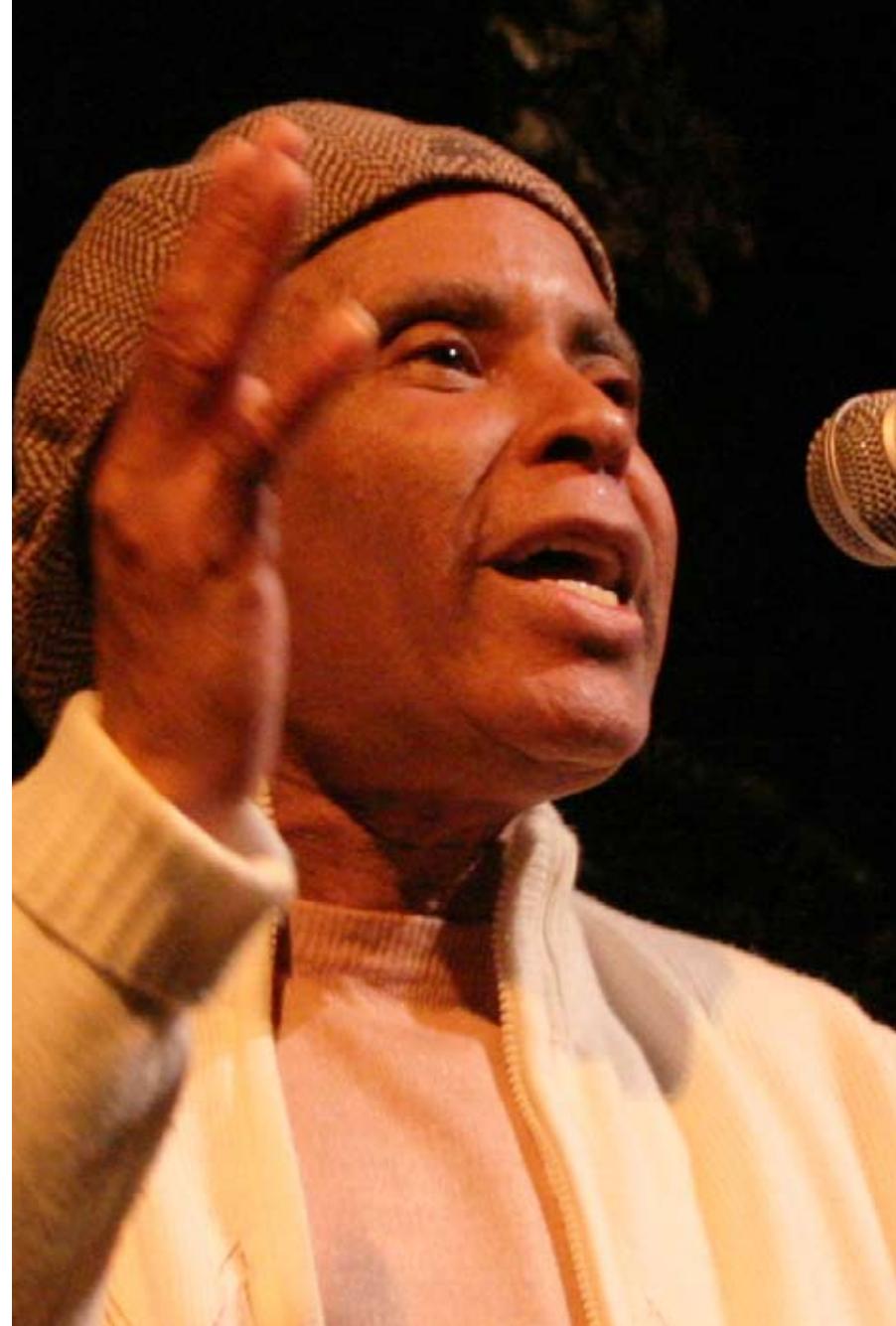
“When I came to New York, I found that it was impossible to tell any kind of long story at a cocktail party. Everyone was looking to jump in and interrupt,” remembers Green. “But I knew there were great stories in the city and that people wanted to hear them. Our first shows weren’t very good, but there were moments that were great and there was a huge, magnetic response. The telling of unscripted personal stories is an amazing art form that all of us have some capability for.”

The more polished Mainstage shows frequently draw celebrities, writers, and other performers. Thau works with participants in advance to perfect their five- to 10-minute stories, guiding them in finding the emotional core of the tale and then helping them to structure it properly. Such development is not rehearsal for reciting a monologue, she stresses, because the final story must be loose enough to be almost a dialogue with the audience.

While the StorySLAMS are much less formal, all Moth presentations feature stories both silly and serious—and the telling can be frightening at first. “The Moth is a high-wire act,” says Thau. “Even the pros are scared. They have to stand there as themselves and can’t hide behind characters or costumes. But if they do it well, the audience responds to their openness. They start to feel exhilarated and at ease.”

Green, who serves on The Moth board and still performs himself, says, “People go up there and they’re absolutely terrified. Then, when they sense the audience is with them, you can literally see them relax and become more confident. It’s one of the most revealing, vulnerable, explosive, and exciting things you can do.”

Recognizing the power of the spoken word, in 1999 The Moth began bringing storytelling into the community, specifically to teens from underserved neighborhoods and adults in social rehabilitation programs in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. Through its MothShop Community Program, instructors and trained volunteers teach the rules of narrative to participants during weeks of workshops that culminate in live performances at schools and affiliated social service organizations. The experience enhances self-confidence and public-speaking skills, fosters empathy and tolerance, and provides a sense of empowerment and



## TIPS FOR TALE-TELLING

- **Determine the conflict:** Understand what’s at stake for the characters, as this drives your story forward. The conflict should involve you as the narrator and at least one other person.
- **Develop a strong arc as your organizing principle:** Story structure can be governed by the chronology of events or even an underlying theme. You also can employ such “tricks” as presenting a character early in the story and then leaving him or her out until the very end; in this way, you come full circle and surprise the audience, who may have forgotten all about that character.
- **Keep it simple and stay on track:** Your conflict/theme is your editing tool as you take your audience on a journey. Storytelling requires a tight economy, so you risk losing your listeners if you wind up pulling vaguely related anecdotes together.
- **Use pauses, but avoid props:** Manipulating silence by pausing can be put to great effect, whether before a heavy, emotional moment or in anticipation of a laugh. Props, on the other hand, create distraction.

a realization of cause and effect. Perhaps most important, it helps participants gain control over their lives and interact more successfully with society.

“We work with a lot of people who are in some form of social rehabilitation and are trying to get back on track,” says Thau. “They may have been recently released from prison or are homeless or are overcoming drug and alcohol abuse. For many years, they’ve felt derailed by their circumstances.”

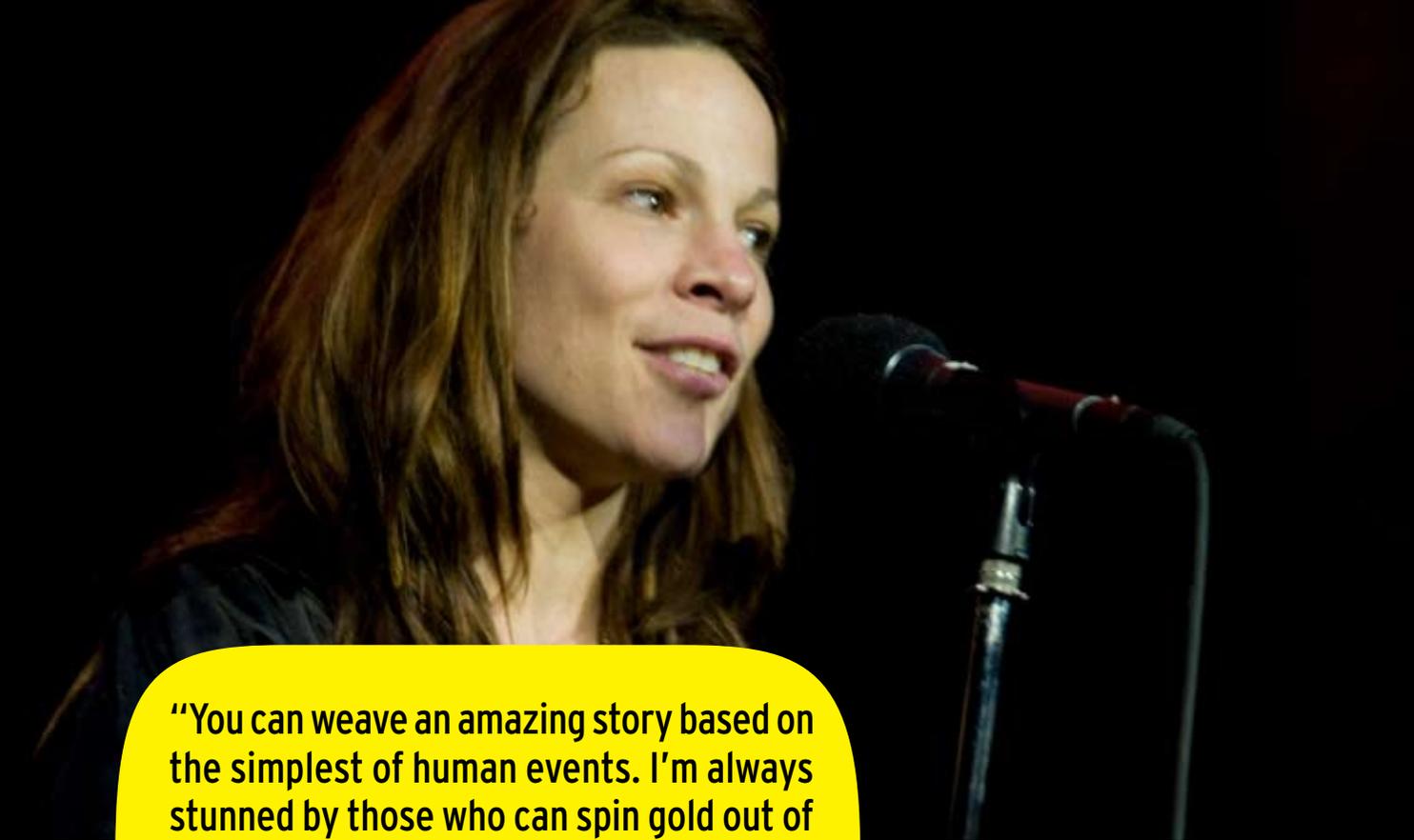
The outreach effort has “graduated” more than 6,000 people. “We see such wonderful benefits,” adds Thau. “Typically on day one, some people are so shy that you can’t hear what they’re saying. By the program’s end, they’re on stage in front of an audience of 200, telling their story. It’s enormously empowering for them.”

For Sherman O.T. Powell, 62, a retired pickpocket with numerous past incarcerations who had health problems resulting from substance abuse, things started turning

around the day The Moth visited Project Renewal, the shelter he had called home for a year. He was recruited into the Community Program, groomed to talk about his colorful escapades, and then scheduled to perform, first before his shelter peers and then at an official Moth show. His story, which told how he became acquainted with pick-pocketing as a youth, garnered great cheers and gave him the boost he needed to maintain his sobriety. Powell since has toured nationally with The Moth and, on a personal front, left the shelter and reconnected with long-lost family. He also does speaking engagements for Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous.

“The Moth helped me get my life together and direct myself toward something positive,” Powell says. “I learned that I wasn’t a bad guy and that a lot of what I did was out of sickness.”

What teenager Isis Richardson learned from her Moth experience was that “we are powerful beyond measure.”



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The Community Program gave me more confidence and a more eloquent way to tell my struggles. It also made me realize how sensitive I am and that that’s okay.”

Richardson, now an 18-year-old high-school senior, was introduced to The Moth when she was in middle school in the South Bronx. Her teachers recommended her to the organization, which came to assist students with public speaking. Although Richardson was on the debate team, the thought was she could refine her “fighting” skills by learning storytelling techniques. She did so well in the program that she was invited to appear in a Mainstage production and, at age 14, became the youngest Moth participant.

“The audience laughed and it felt so good,” recalls Richardson, who is a Moth scholarship recipient. “It was the first time I was able to branch out and do something beyond my comfort zone.”

Another offshoot of The Moth is its MothShop Business Program, which takes storytelling to corporate America to teach executives to be better communicators. The initiative, started in 2002, offers tools for team building, perfecting pitches, advancing concepts and making better connections with internal and external audiences.

The Inter-American Development Bank in Washing-

ton, D.C., signed up for the program in 2008. IDB partners with governments and companies in Latin America and the Caribbean to provide solutions to development challenges in those areas. The bank had gone through a major restructuring, and the goal with the Business Program was to educate specialists throughout the institution in the principles of storytelling, so their presentations to the media and clients would be more compelling.

“We wanted to change how they sell the bank and saw this as a fun but powerful way to get them engaged about the work we do, as well as learn about their colleagues,” says Angela Funez, IDB communications specialist, whose department coordinated the training and the subsequent cabaret-inspired storytelling performance for staff. “People have changed their perceptions about one another, and there’s now more camaraderie. I think storytelling reveals who we really are.”

So does everyone have at least one great story to tell? “Yes, definitely,” Green says. “You can weave an amazing story based on the simplest of human events. I’m always stunned by those who can spin gold out of anything. My pride is to have produced a venue for this brilliant, magical art form so that it can flourish.”

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*Julie Jacobs is a freelance writer based in Scotch Plains, New Jersey. For more information on The Moth, including schedules of upcoming events, go to [www.themoth.org](http://www.themoth.org).*