

Storytelling a timeless, universal art

Wild Onion event marks 6th year of spinning tales

By **MARK LAWTON**
Correspondent

When a prehistoric man returned to his cave after hunting, he probably didn't immediately cut his mastadon into woolly tenderloins. No, first he told the story of the hunt: how brave he was, how his spear broke at a crucial moment, how he's developed carpal tunnel syndrome from throwing too many rocks.

Ten thousand or so years later, the tenderloins have been replaced by tofu burgers, the spears by golf clubs and the hunt by weekend trips to Wisconsin. The telling of stories, however, continues with the sixth annual Wild Onion Storytelling Celebration at St. Scholastica High School Feb. 3 to 5.

Up to four separate performances will take place every hour on such themes as "Mirrors and Enchantments," "Memories of the Future," "Giants and Wee Ones," "Money and Madness."

Though the titles sound like fables, many of the tales are autobiographical. For example, Susan O'Halloran of Wilmette deals with racism in a tale about the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. marching through her neighborhood. Half the sessions are ranked as appropriate for children, while many deal with adult themes.

So, why tell stories?

"It's one of the base ways we know ourselves and the world," Nancy Donoval says. "Your image of yourself is of the stories you tell and remember."

A Rogers Park resident, Donoval has been exclusively a storyteller for the last seven years, though she includes teaching public speaking

Storytelling

Wild Onion Storytelling Celebration

- ▶ Feb. 3 to 5
- ▶ St. Scholastica High School
7416 N. Ridge Blvd.
- ▶ \$5 to \$10
- ▶ ☎ (312) 743-9200

and creative writing in her job description.

Donoval and O'Halloran take stories from their own lives and attempt to structure them in ways that give them universal meaning.

"It's very satisfying as a teller when an audience member comes up and says 'Yeah, that happened in my life, too,'" O'Halloran says.

Storytellers are also interested in connecting with the audience. In a world of technology where so many stories no longer involve two-way interaction, storytellers are looking for intimacy with their listeners.

"In this high-tech world, some people also want high-touch," O'Halloran says.

Besides their own lives, tellers get stories from each other at the 20-year-old national festival in Jonesboro, Tenn., the first weekend of October, and the Illinois festival in Spring Grove the last weekend in July.

More regular meetings are held in Chicago-area guilds, of which the North Shore Storytelling Guild in Evanston — which is sponsoring the Wild Onion — is the largest.

While some classic fables are memorized, stories are considered a process rather than a fixed form.



Kathleen Visovatti (left), Susan O'Halloran and Shanta will spin some tales at the Wild Onion Storytelling Celebration Feb. 3 to 5 at St. Scholastica High School.

"There are often five, six, 10 different versions of a story," O'Halloran says. "You can hear the story told by another teller and you might think it's a different story."

This lack of formal structure is deliberate. "You get your pace, timing from audience faces," O'Halloran says. "You know you have to quicken up if someone's fidgeting."

Storytellers can't stand to tell the same story in the same way.

"You come up with new things to make it stay alive for you," O'Halloran says with a laugh. "Most of us can't stand to listen to our tapes two years later."

For those interested in telling tales, workshops in characterization and telling scary stories will be offered. A swap session will take place Feb. 5 for those inspired to tell stories of their own.



Clockwise from top: Gerald Fierst, Anne Shimojima, Kathleen Visovatti and Shanta.