

National Storytelling Festival



A FESTIVAL GUIDE BROUGHT TO YOU BY

TimesNews

Johnson City Press



Storytelling Festival 2025

Welcome to the National Storytelling Festival

By Contributed from ISC

Whether you're joining us in Jonesborough for the first time – or returning has become an annual tradition – we warmly welcome you to the 52nd annual National Storytelling Festival.

This year carries special meaning. Last year Hurricane Helene struck the region a few days before the Festival, leading us to cancel the event for the first time in its history. The storm brought hardship to many in our region, but it also revealed the resilience of this community as neighbors came together to support one another.

As recovery continues, we are reminded that some of the most powerful stories rise from adversity. Sharing stories has carried us through hard times before, and it continues to connect us in ways both timeless and timely.

A lot has happened in this town, and in the world, since the first National Storytelling Festival in 1973. Earlier this year, we lost ISC's founder and president emeritus Jimmy Neil Smith. His vision to use storytelling to enrich lives and build a better world held us steady through our first 50 years. We're very proud to celebrate and perpetuate that work.

On Oct 3 – 5, we invite you to wander the historic streets of Tennessee's oldest town, take in the colors of autumn, and settle under the tents where stories of every kind are waiting: folk tales, personal journeys, history, humor, and more. And stop by the International Storytelling Center on Main Street to learn more about our work, the history of storytelling, and Jimmy Neil's life and legacy.

Join us as we celebrate more than half a century of connection through the power of story.

Warmest Wishes,
The International Storytelling Center

The Story of the Storytelling Festival

By **GABRIELLE JONES**
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Tucked away in the Appalachian mountains, the National Storytelling Festival has become one of America's foremost showcases for the oral tradition. What started as a small event in Jonesborough, Tennessee, is now a yearly gathering for thousands of listeners.

In October 1973, the festival's spark was ignited by a storyteller and comedian from Mississippi, Jerry Clower, who captivated a crowd in a hot and cramped high school gym.

The following afternoon, an old farm wagon in Courthouse Square was repurposed as a stage for a diverse lineup of

tellers, including a former Arkansas congressman, a Tennessee banker, a college professor, and a western North Carolina farmer.

Together, they spun tales that would mark the birth of a new storytelling renaissance.

Over the decades, the festival has grown in both size and scope, showcasing a stunning array of world-class talent and rich oral traditions from every corner of the globe. The event has become a vibrant platform for cultural representation, featuring performers from communities as varied as the African American, Jewish, Aboriginal, Egyptian, Asian, Hispanic and Native American, as well as the deaf community.

This rich tapestry



CONTRIBUTED

of voices has ensured the festival has truly

grown into its ambitious name, cele-

brating the timeless art of storytelling and

its power to connect us all.



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Left to Right: Vice-Mayor Adam Dickson, Alderman Zachary Jenkins, Alderman Virginia Causey, Alderman Terry Countermine, Mayor Kelly Wolfe

Town of Jonesborough

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We proudly welcome you to the 52nd Anniversary of the National Storytelling Festival and to our town, where history, and storytelling is a way of life!

Have a safe and joyous weekend and please come back soon.



National Storytelling Festival announces 2025 roster

By **SETH HARRELL**
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JONESBOROUGH – The International Storytelling Center has revealed the lineup for its 52nd annual National Storytelling Festival, scheduled for Oct. 3 to 5.

This year promises a blend of legendary and familiar voices, rising stars and opportunities for anyone with a story to tell. The festival will be home to a diverse range of storytellers from around the country. With over 20 tellers in five major events – Story Slam, the Swappin' Ground, the Exchange Place, After Hours and Ghost Stories – each event at the festival will feature a unique storytelling experience for a variety of audiences.



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The International Storytelling Center announced its line-up for the National Storytelling Festival.

“Anyone can be a storyteller,” said Angela White, commu-

nications associate with the International Storytelling Center. “Our job is to make sure that the art form is progressing, and that means creating more storytellers. At the Festival, we make sure there is a stage for everyone.”

The scheduled lineup includes the following storytellers:

April Armstrong, Sheila Arnold, Adam Booth, Mitch Capel, Regi Carpenter, Alton Chung, Willy Claffin, Donald Davis, Tim Ereneta, Diana Ferlatte, Bil Lepp, Tim Lowry, Lipbone Redding, Mo Reynolds, Anne Rutherford, Corinne Stavish, Dovie Thomason and Sufian Zhemukhov.

Kevin Kling and



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More than 20 storytellers will attend over five major events at the festival.



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This year's lineup balances fan favorites, new and upcoming voices and more, ensuring there's something for everyone.

Simone Perrin will perform at After Hours, while Janice del Negro and Megan Wells will perform at the Ghost Stories

event.

This year's lineup balances fan favorites, new and upcoming voices and more, ensuring there's some-

thing for everyone.

For the full schedule, ticket information and more, visit the festival's website at storytellingcenter.net

Storytelling Festival warms-up with two special concerts

By **SETH HARRELL**
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JONESBOROUGH – Jonesborough gears up for the 52nd National Storytelling Festival with two pre-festival concerts featuring storytelling legends.

The International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough will host the festival from Oct. 3 to 5 in Jonesborough, but before the festivities, the center will present two special concerts.

Donald Davis, a longtime storytelling legend and fan favorite, returns to the ISC stage at 7:30 p.m. on Oct. 1. Davis brings his tales based on the better-than-fiction verities of everyday life.

Tickets for his show start at \$20 and are available online.

The second concert will be held at 8 p.m. on Oct. 2 in the “Library Tent” in downtown Jonesborough. It will feature “The Uncalled-for Trio,” made up of Kim Weitkamp, Bil Lepp and Andy Offutt Irwin.

“They all perform individually, but the trio is somewhat retired, so it will be good to welcome them back to the stage,” said Angela White, communications associate at the ISC.

White added that the concerts serve



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“The Uncalled-for Trio,” made up of Kim Weitkamp, Bil Lepp (pictured) and Andy Offutt Irwin will perform live at 8 p.m. on Oct. 2.

both visitors and locals who arrive early for the festival.

“People travel from all 50 states and often several countries to attend the festival, so they spend more than just the weekend here,” she said.

Tickets for “The Uncalled-for Trio” are available now. More information on the festival, including tickets, schedules and more can be found at www.storytelling-center.net.



CONTRIBUTED

Donald Davis, a longtime storytelling legend and fan favorite, returns to the ISC stage at 7:30 p.m. on Oct. 1.



JAY HURON

A Ghost Stories event from a previous year.

Where Darkness Becomes Community

By **GABRIELLE JONES**
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The National Storytelling Festival, a gathering of gifted storytellers, offers an experience unlike the others: a ghost stories event.

As the sun sets and a darkness settles over the historic town, the event takes place at Mill Spring Park from 7:30 — 9 p.m. on Oct. 3 and Oct. 4.

Storyteller Megan Wells describes the experience with “I don’t think there is a more tangible community feeling than sitting in the dark sky... listening to world class storytellers”. In this communal darkness, the sound of a rustling leaf, the catch of a collective breath, and the hushed voice of the storyteller become the threads that weave the audience together.

The ghost stories told at the festival are

“old and new at the same time.” They tap into a primal, age-old human fascination with the unknown, the supernatural, and the things that go bump in the night. Yet, the stories themselves are fresh and vibrant. The tales are different every year, chosen by the storytellers themselves.

“People don’t listen

to these stories to get scared,” she explains. Instead, they come to “get courage.”

The ghost event at the National Storytelling Festival is more than just a collection of scary stories; under the silent witness of the dark sky attendees don’t just hear ghost stories, they find the courage to face their own.





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Meet “New Voice” Lipbone Redding

By Contributed by ISC

One of four New Voices at the National Storytelling Festival, Lipbone Redding will bring his singular sound and global sensibility to the tents in October.

A wandering spirit, Lipbone has traveled all over the world, picking up eclectic techniques in unexpected places.

His adventurous lifestyle was a leap of faith from his quiet upbringing in eastern North Carolina, which he left as a young man to pursue a career in theater.

He started in New York City, where he quickly transitioned from working as an actor to music and busking in the subway system. “I’ve always been on a mission to find my most authentic self,” Lipbone says. “I don’t like other people’s words coming out of my mouth, which is an important part of how I became a musician. I wanted to discover my own story.”

At the time, New York was a center of experimentation for musicians who worked with household objects and unconventional instruments. (STOMP and the Blue Man Group were popular shows on Broadway.) While Lipbone plays traditional instruments like the guitar, his musical signature is voice instrumentation – the imitation of sounds from trumpets and other instruments as well as throat singing, which involves the fascinating practice of holding two tones at once.

“Everybody has a different idea of what music is, and I think mine is somewhere far to the left of center,” he says.

Much of Lipbone’s training has involved listening to music from around the globe and adapting different traditions during the course of his travels. The influences he cites are stylistically and geographically diverse, including Tom Waits, Ethiopian pop, Bach, James Brown, and even opera (which he says he “just picked up here and there”). “I think as an artist, you can call me an assemblagist because I like to take pieces from different places and



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Lipbone Redding

bring them all together into one cohesive idea,” Lipbone says. “To me, it’s all a conversation. Sometimes you don’t use words for your conversations; you use a sound.”

Above all, he says, he likes to play feel-good music. Lipbone’s performances often involve interactive elements that give his audiences the chance to sing along.

Now in his late fifties, the storyteller and musician has settled down, at least relatively, reducing his travel from 300 days a year to 100. But he still prioritizes time

for adventures, going on an unplanned international journey about once a year with just a backpack and a guitar.

While his stories and songs reflect the places he has been, Lipbone considers his work to be about his fundamental and abiding love for humanity. “I love people, I really do,” he says. “And I believe in us. I think we have a lot of potential. In the United States,

we’re very focused on our little group of ideas. By traveling, I feel like you get opened up.”

While this will be Lipbone’s first appearance at the National Storytelling Festival, he isn’t a stranger to the area. He has performed in Jonesborough twice for the town’s Music on the Square series.

For those who aren’t yet familiar with his work, Lipbone advises they can expect the unexpected. “Some of the songs are stories and some of the stories turn into songs,” he says. “And some of the songs turn into weird creatures that walk around on the stage.

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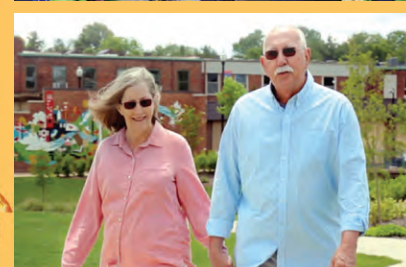
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The Story of Storytelling On Display

By Contributed By ISC

Since its beginning, the National Storytelling Festival has offered folktales, stories of Appalachia, humor, history and more. But, for the first time, this year's festival will feature the story of storytelling in Jonesborough.

You can take a journey through the history of the National Storytelling Festival and the International Storytelling Center with the upcoming exhibit curated by the Jonesborough-based organization, The Heritage Alliance of Northeast Tennessee & Southwest Virginia. The exhibit is set for the lobby of the ISC and kicks off during this year's festival on Oct. 3-5.

"The premise behind the exhibit is to tell the story of storytelling," said Ryan Nedrow, the Heritage Alliance's museum manager, "focusing not only on the long history of the building and the location, but on achievements and milestones therein."

The exhibit will take guests through the history of the various businesses that once stood where the ISC is today.

"Being that the ISC is the newest structure in the downtown," Nedrow said, "there is a host of history that lays in the foundation — and every good story has a good foundation."

You can learn more about John D. Cox Sr., who made his fortune in the Gold Rush, and brought Cox Block with various businesses to life in the 1800s before his son, John D. Cox Jr., created the hotel and coffee shop, the Andrew Jackson Tavern. The interior featured detailed marble accents, but suffered two fires before its demolition in 1942.

The exhibit also takes guests through time to the 1950s, when local World War II veteran Walter Lavender opened Lavender's Market, the last business to precede the International Storytelling Center. The building was complete



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The "Story of Storytelling" exhibit at the National Storytelling Festival will showcase the history of the location where the International Storytelling Center is today.

in 2002 as a two-story Greek revival-style building with Federal and Victorian-era features, serving as a nod to Jonesborough's past architectural styles.

Each of those eras are represented in the exhibit with artifacts from the property's past.

"We have a brick from the original Cox Block" Nedrow said. "We have some artifacts relating to the history of the businesses that were there on that block. We're hoping to feature an artifact or two

relating to each of these eras. There's not much that remained of the Andrew Jackson Tavern, except the huge sign that we're hoping we can get a good picture of to put in that exhibit."

Washington County's smallest will and testament will also be represented in the display.

"In working through the research for this exhibit, I did encounter the smallest will in the history of Washington County," Nedrow said. "John D. Cox Jr. has

a will the size of a sticky note. Despite having hundreds of thousands worth of property and investments, he had no kids and his sister was his only remaining family member. So he ends up writing, 'I give all my belongings to my sister,' and then adds the addendum, 'real and personal.' It's basically the least amount of words necessary to make it legal. And it was witnessed by Paul Fink, the locally noted historian and folklorist. It's a neat little piece of his

DISPLAY from page 8

tory you'd rarely see today — a will the size of a Post-It note.”

The exhibit also details the festival's history dating back to its start in 1973, when Jonesborough native and local school teacher Jimmy Neil Smith gathered eager listeners on hay bales in Jonesborough to hear stories told from the back of a flatbed truck.

“It's grassroots at its heart,” Nedrow said. “The storytelling festival was the brainchild of Jimmy Neil Smith. He was listening to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio with his students and seeing their interest. If this can interest young people, if this storytelling can really connect with folks of all ages, this might be a way to revitalize the town particularly. This movement was highly tied in to preservation.”

This year's festival will be the first since Smith's death at age 77 on March 15, 2025. But his contributions will live on once again through storytellers under large, white tents during the annual festival and on display as part of the history exhibit.

“We talk about the leaders of storytelling and the visionaries over the

years,” Nedrow said. “What has become evident is that it's not the people, it's what they did and the impact they had. Jimmy Neil Smith had a huge impact and we want to feature that as well, this being a sort of tribute.”

The exhibit will also feature various recordings, giving visitors a taste of National Storytelling Festivals enjoyed long ago.

“We're hoping to take a couple of the audio recordings from the CDs and vinyls that we've been working through and provide QR codes, that way a visitor could scan and get a snippet of the story here or a bit of a song here,” Nedrow said. “It would be very engaging for visitation.”

The hope is to connect visitors with the history of the festival and the ISC, all in Tennessee's oldest town and the Storytelling Capital of the World.

“I think the best thing about this is, if you're standing in the lobby for the next show, or if you're waiting to get into the theater to see another storyteller,” Nedrow said, “you can be immersed in those moments in history and know why you're there

in the first place.”

The exhibit also serves as a connection between organizations within the Jonesborough community.

“We want to work with our community partners and stakeholders here in Jonesborough,” Nedrow said. “A big part of this town is collaboration and being able to work closely with the town, with the ISC and other organizations around town. A rising tide lifts all ships. In working as an entity that helps bridge community barriers, community gaps and fills that role of historic preservation and education, that's vital to the success of our town since the 1970's shift toward tourism.”

Pieces of the National Storytelling Festival and the ISC's past are also part of the history exhibit found in the Jonesborough Visitor Center, located at 117 Boone St., Jonesborough. The displays contain everything from old magazines and books on storytelling (one of which was edited by Jimmy Neil Smith) to local newspaper sections dedicated to early iterations of the festival and

event a flier for the first-ever storytelling gathering that started it all.

The Heritage Alliance is dedicated to the preservation of the architectural, historical and cultural heritage of our region and to providing educational experiences related to history and heritage for a wide range of audiences. The Heritage Alliance headquarters is located in the historic Duncan House in Jonesborough. The organization also operates the restored schoolhouse, Oak Hill School, and the Chester Inn Historic Site and Museum in downtown Jonesborough. For more information on the Heritage Alliance, call (423) 753-9580 or go to <https://www.heritageall.org/>.

The International Storytelling Center is a tax-exempt nonprofit organization and the premiere educational, arts, and cultural institution dedicated to enriching lives and building a better world through the power of storytelling. The ISC is located at 100 W. Main St., Jonesborough. For more information, go to <https://www.storytelling-center.net/>.

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Decorated POW Fighter Pilot turned Poet Featured in Storytelling Festival's Legacy Series

By Contributed by ISC

One might expect devastatingly sad stories from a former prisoner of war, but as soon as Retired Major General John Borling launches into one of his fighter pilot jokes or offers a humorous comment, even about his time in captivity in Hanoi, Vietnam, it's clear how he's made it through great adversity — with a dash of perspective and a great deal of humor.

Borling, an 85-year-old highly decorated fighter pilot, published author, and poet, will share his story twice during the National Storytelling Festival, with shows set for 4 p.m. Friday, Oct. 3, and 2:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 4, at the Jackson

Theatre, located at 121 W. Main Street, Jonesborough. Borling will appear as a part of the Festival's Legacy Series, which celebrates the voices of unsung heroes whose experiences have contributed to American history.

Borling served 33 years in high-level command and staff positions across the globe. He was shot down in North Vietnam on his 97th combat mission in June 1966, and spent the next six and half years in captivity. He survived, in part, by writing — with no pen and paper — various poems he would share through tap code with a nearby prisoner. He memorized the poems,



CONTRIBUTED

Retired Major General John Borling

and, upon release, he wrote down what would eventually become his book, "Taps on the Walls: Poems from the Hanoi Hilton."

We chatted with Borling in lead-up to his festival visit.

On his book, *Taps on the Walls*, written without pen or paper...

Taps on the Walls is a book that I wrote in my mind as a POW in Vietnam. I didn't have anything to write with. It was a way to stay sane and to provide legacy for my little girl, who was three months old when I left and seven-and-a-half when I walked back through the door, and my wife — in case I didn't make it, frankly. So, I tapped these poems and other creations through the wall to guys. That's how we communicated, at risk, I may say, because they hurt you if they caught you communicating.

Over the years, I actually made a book. I

kept it constantly refreshed, memorized it and actually went through the whole content once a day. Everyone had to find their own way. My way was to write this book in my mind.

Upon leaving, after all those years when the Peace Accords were signed and we were released in February of 1973, the first thing I did was get a tape recorder and start to download — that was not even a verb in '73. I downloaded the contents of this thing and buried the book for 40 years before publishing.

On the POW bracelets worn by U.S. citizens during the war...

In those days, back in the states, people wore bracelets with our name on it. We were listed as missing, and in my case, presumed dead, but I fooled them. These bracelets, by the hundreds and thousands, have come back to me from great citi-

zens. And my wife, Myrna, and I have spent months literally answering these notes from people where they pour out their hearts. Even today, these many years later, 40, 50 years later, we get back half a dozen or a dozen bracelets a year from people saying, "Gee, I found this in my drawer and I got on the web and found you."

On traveling to Vietnam since his release...

We actually went back in Vietnam in 2002. In fact, we met with Vo Nguyen Giap. That's not a name that you're familiar with but he was the defense minister and the number three revolutionary in the Viet Minh. He fought the French. He was still alive in 2002. We were there with the White House Fellows Delegation. He was going to give us five minutes because he had a bunch of veterans from Dien Bien Phu waiting. I went into the hall. And I said, "I know you well." And he said "I know you too, General Borling." And he took me by the hand and we walked into the large briefing room. There was not only our delegation, but there was a lot of international press and several hundred people. We sat down and he gave us an hour. And I did a little translation. Mostly he didn't need it. He had his own official trans-

lator there too. And I didn't ask a question. I was just kind of the moderation or interlocutor. From time to time, when the questioning got tough, he would take my hand and, on the table, and he would pat my hand.

There's a curious bond that exists between people who've been in combat, not only together, but against one another. There's an understanding. There's an inexplicable warmth that can occur. It doesn't always occur. But it occurred in this circumstance. I remember in the course of that conversation, in a quite agitated way, he said "We were the victors." There was a pause. And he said, "And you too. And you too." Then he added again, "The cost, the cost."

At that point, I had an inexplicable sense of camaraderie, or at least common paths walked. Remember, we were hurt bad. We were tortured and beat up. And even I find that to be a strange reaction on my part. But if man's inhumanity to man is pervasive, so is the humanity aspect. It just often takes time.

Festival-goers will have two opportunities to hear General Borling speak and answer questions from the audience. You can purchase tickets to hear his remarkable story at storytellingcenter.net.

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The National Storytelling Festival returns Oct. 3.

By Contributed By ISC

JONESBOROUGH, TENN. Tickets are now available for the **National Storytelling Festival**, set for **October 3–5, 2025**, in the heart of Tennessee's oldest town. Produced by the **International Storytelling Center**, the Festival sparked the American storytelling revival when it debuted in 1973—and more than 50 years later, it remains the world's premier event celebrating the power of stories.

This year's Festival brings together more than **two dozen master storytellers from across the country** for a weekend of performances under big-top tents along the streets of historic Jonesborough. From folklore and tall tales to personal narratives and character portrayals, the Festival offers something for everyone—with moments that will make you laugh, cry, and see the world with new eyes.

Returning fan favorites include:

- **Bil Lepp**, West Virginia's "Champion Liar," known for his razor-sharp wit and wild yarns;
- **Dovie Thomason**, whose compelling stories draw from Native American heritage;
- **Alton Chung**, blending history and myth in evocative tales from Hawaii and Japan;
- and **Donald Davis**, a Festival icon beloved for his timeless, heart-warming stories that have moved multiple generations.

The Festival also introduces audiences to **New Voices**, a spotlight on sto-

rytellers making their mainstage debut. Among them is **Tim Ereneta**, a California-based artist who combines his background in theater with a deep passion for folktales.

"When I first learned about the American storytelling revival in the 1980s, I knew that someday I would make the pilgrimage as a listener. I finally got to attend in 1993, and it was everything I had hoped: an immersion into the world of imagination..." says Ereneta. "I'm excited to perform at the National Storytelling Festival, because it's a place where the audience knows how to listen. The Festival knows the magic of storytelling, and how teller and listener work together to imagine the stories. As a performer, it's rare to get to spend time with such an engaged audience."

Festivalgoers can choose from a **variety of ticket options**, including full weekend passes, day passes, or single-event tickets to standalone shows like the annual Ghost Story Concerts. Core programming runs **10 a.m.–9 p.m. on Friday and Saturday**, and **10 a.m.–4 p.m. on Sunday**. Passholders are welcome to come and go throughout the weekend.

Can't make it to Jonesborough? **The Festival will also be livestreamed from our Family Tent on October 3** bringing the magic of storytelling to audiences around the world.

Visit www.storytellingcenter.net to explore the full lineup, event details, and ticket options.

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National Storytelling Festival workshops center around practical application

By **ALLISON WINTERS**
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JONESBOROUGH — As the National Storytelling Festival nears, so does the trove of events surrounding it. That includes this year's lineup of pre-festival storytelling workshops.

Featured storytellers for this year's workshops are Josh Goforth, Kim Weitkamp, Lyn Ford and Megan Wells. Workshops run throughout the day on Thursday, Oct. 2, before the festival.

Angela White, communications associate for the International Storytelling Center, said many storytellers who lead the workshops bring their own areas of expertise outside of the art form.

"While we have workshops that involve storytelling, we also have workshops for different areas that involve the practical application of storytelling," White said. "That's one of our missions at the Storytelling Center; beyond the performance of storytelling and the preservation of the art form, is the practical application of oral storytelling."

White said workshop storyteller Wells will also serve as one of the ghost storytellers for the festival. The other three workshop storytellers will serve as emcees throughout the Storytelling Festival weekend.

Each workshop will take place at the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough. There is a cost associated with attending each workshop, which is separate from the cost of admission to the festival.

The list of scheduled workshops includes:

- Josh Goforth - "Being Yourself on Stage" (1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.)

- Kim Weitkamp - "Mapping Memories: Family Stories and Living Histories" (1 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.)

- Lyn Ford - "Laughter, Breath, Joy" (10 a.m. to noon)

- Megan Wells - "Storytelling for Caregivers" (9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.)
'Being Yourself on Stage'

White said Goforth has been a musician his whole life and also serves as a teacher at the Academy for the Arts in Asheville.

"He went to ETSU and studied music education, and he was part of the Bluegrass program, she said. "So he not only is a very talented storyteller, a very educated musician, but he's also a teacher. He's taking all of these skills that he's very qualified to teach and bringing that education to us to teach others."

The ISC website describes Goforth as "Grammy-nominated musician and storyteller" who has performed at the Grand Ole Opry, the Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall.

'Mapping Memories: Family Stories and Living Histories'

Weitkamp is an award-winning storyteller, author, singer-songwriter and humorist with roots stemming from Amish Country. According to her website, Weitkamp has led coaching/speaking events for companies like Purina or Habitat for Humanity.

"In this general interest workshop, you'll learn simple ways to gather and share the stories of your family," the ISC workshop description states. "You will also learn about 'memory maps' – a fun and quick way to gather memories and a great exercise for storytellers and writers. The techniques Kim teaches are great for bringing generations together."

'Laughter, Breath, Joy'

Ford's workshop description states she is a teaching artist with the Ohio Teaching Artists Roster and the Ohio Alliance for Arts Education — as well as a certified laughter yoga teacher and laughter wellness ambassador.

"Laughing alone energizes and relaxes the body and mind," the ISC website states. "With gentle breathing exercises, shared laughter, mindful silliness, and relaxed rhythmic movement,



INTERNATIONAL STORYTELLING CENTER

this session is for anyone who wants to learn easy and joyful techniques for stress reduction."

'Storytelling for Caregivers'

Wells will bring her experience as a grief coach certified in transformative coaching to the storytelling stage for her workshop. According to the workshop description, Wells brings her experience in caring for dying family members and will allow attendees to tap into the "medicinal power" of storytelling.

According to White, there is a history of intersection between local health care providers and utilization of storytelling as a way to communicate with patients.

"Before the hurricane, we would go into hospitals, specifically the Unicoi hospital," White said. "We had a partnership with them to go in and train their nurses and have workshops with their nurses on how they could use storytelling to connect with their patients who oftentimes in Appalachia are more skeptical of the healthcare system."

She said as the one year anniversary of Hurricane Helene approaches, the ISC has spent time considering the practical application of storytelling and how it can be used during the remembrance

and healing process of the event.

White said that also means taking into consideration the high emotions many community members associate with what happened last year.

"That's been a big concern for us because we don't want to open up trauma," she mentioned. "We don't want to open up wounds. People have to be in a really good mental state to have those conversations and to share those stories."

This year marks the return of the National Storytelling Festival after last year's cancellation in the aftermath of Helene. White said many people are enthusiastic about the festival's return.

"People are so excited to be back, and we are making sure that they know that Hurricane Helene long-term recovery efforts are in the forefront of their minds," she said.

For more information about the National Storytelling Festival workshops, visit <https://www.storytelling-center.net/festival/pre-festival-workshops/>.

Meet 'New Voice' Tim Ereneta

By CONTRIBUTED BY ISC

On the heels of his winning debut as an Exchange Place performer at the 2023 National Storytelling Festival, Tim Ereneta will return to Jonesborough in October as a first-time featured performer. He's one of four "New Voices" in attendance this year.

Apart from a brief interlude at Northwestern University, Ereneta has always lived in California. (He currently resides in Berkeley.) He went to school to take advantage of Northwestern's killer theater program, expecting to emerge as a stage actor or a playwright. A chance encounter with a storyteller who performed in his English class changed the course of his career.

"All the stuff I thought a good actor would do, that performer wasn't doing," Ereneta says. "But after 30 seconds, all that judgment went out the window. I was lost in the story." He was interested to note that his fellow classmates felt the same way. When the story had a jump scare, an entire room of college students almost fell out of their seats.

Ereneta soon learned that a professor in his theater department had deep ties to the storytelling world. Thus he became one of the few trained actors who was aware of



CONTRIBUTED

Tim Ereneta

storytelling as its own art form early in the game. (It's more common for actors to stumble upon storytelling after a phase of experimentation, under the proud, if false, impression that they invented a whole new mode of art making.) Ereneta attended the National Storytelling Festival for the first time in the early 1990s, and

found himself "spell-bound." He hung on every word of Ray Hicks and other tellers.

Back in California, Ereneta was still pursuing acting and writing. But stories just kept bubbling up in his performances, often unexpectedly. On one occasion he found that he was the only person telling stories at a theater-f-

were laughing. They were cringing. They were jumping out of their seats. They were so excited to hear this fairy tale. I think these people hadn't heard anyone tell them a story since they were young."

Ereneta began to recognize he had a special talent, but observing that audience, he also identified a need.

"Everybody should get to exercise their imaginations," he says. "Not just five- and six-year-olds."

Today, Ereneta focuses on traditional folk and fairy tales from Europe and Central Asia, as well as epic tales from the Kalevala, sourced from the Finnish oral tradition. To bring these stories to life, he works within a cinematic scope. "It's a

very visual art form for me as a performer, all about creating images," he says. "I'm happy to use words instead of drawing or putting them on film."

Indeed, Ereneta compares his work and traditional stories in general to popular TV shows like "Severance" or "Game of Thrones." "These stories are juicy and compelling," he says. "I like to remind people that we've been telling them for eons. It's not just since the invention of cable TV and prestige streaming services."

Just don't expect him to tell any personal stories — Ereneta finds real life far too boring. In Jonesborough, expect gripping folk lore and absorbing epics if you seek him out in the tents.



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Meet 'New Voice' April Armstrong

By CONTRIBUTED BY ISC

Before April Armstrong decided to become a storyteller, she had a different dream: to win the Little Miss America pageant.

It was a dream that involved a very special dress from her grandmother, patent leather shoes with little white socks (you know the ones), a portfolio of finger paintings to prove her talent, and a very long bus ride with her mother from their home in New York City to some far reach of New Jersey. In the rain.

That was the first time little April had reached for some-

thing big, and it ended in bitter disappointment. But the next year, in third grade, she landed the lead in the school play, and a star was (re)born.

The little girl had a new dream: she would be on television. And this time, she would not be disappointed.

Later in life, Armstrong was working as an actress and educator in New York for many years when storytelling found her. She had done serious work on the stage and fun stuff for TV, including a recurring role on "Law & Order." (She played a reporter, not a sus-

pect or a victim.) Storytelling was a natural fit because it combined

Armstrong's considerable talents as a musician — she had long since moved on from finger painting — with her passion for drama. She honed her craft first as an educator, moving on to adult audiences once she had developed her skills and established a solid repertoire.

Since then, Armstrong has been expanding her story collection for some 20 years. But in Jonesborough, she'll be a "New Voice" at the National Storytelling Festival, the honorable title



CONTRIBUTED/JAY HURON

April Armstrong

for performers who are serving as featured tellers for the first time. Her official debut, at the Festival's Exchange Place in 2023, was short but sweet — a warm and rousing folk tale that left her audience wanting more.

At the Festival this year, Armstrong will perform her signature one-woman show, a zippy biography of aviatrix and daredevil stunt-woman Bessie

Coleman, the first Black female pilot in the United States. "She was really an extraordinary person, a very daring person" Armstrong says. "Personally, that couldn't have been me."

Armstrong will also bring a wide range of folk tales and personal stories with her to Jonesborough. A lively song or two are almost always in the mix. "Music tends to be an

anchor for me," the storyteller says. Several of her original songs are featured in the Bessie Coleman piece, and singing with drums punctuates her other tales.

She won't be wearing the patent shoes or the little socks. But if you watch very closely when Armstrong takes the stage at the National Storytelling Festival, a trace of Little Miss America might just be there.

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Great Selection!

Meet “New Voice” Sufian Zhemukhov

By Contributed by ISC

When Sufian Zhemukhov immigrated from Russia to the United States at the age of 40, the last thing he expected was to become a storytelling sensation.

At the time, he was a professor teaching international politics. Though you might assume that's a serious and humorless field, he liked to tell his students stories about his former life. He enjoyed that so much that it was a natural step to enter local storytelling competitions as a way to practice English, which was his second language. He was there solely to learn, or so he thought. His was an unusual and accelerated path, moving from amateur to featured teller in an incredibly short amount of time. By 2018, Zhemukhov had placed third at the National Storytelling Festival's Story Slam. He was an Exchange Place teller in 2022 and was invited to Jonesborough to be a teller in residence for the 2023 Storytelling Live series. He describes that run as one of the best weeks of his life.

His style is conversational, funny, and relatively low key, bringing a unique sensibility to our stage in Jonesborough. His work has been featured on PBS, NPR, and off Broadway, and he has been compared to the great humorist David Sedaris.

While Zhemukhov's quick ascendance on



Sufian Zhemukhov

the storytelling scene has impressed his colleagues, he stays humble by remembering that his family at home would be deeply unimpressed. He descends from a long line of storytellers who were well known in their Russian village. Zhemukhov says his family had a storytelling gene that blessed one person from each generation, counting his grandfather and his cousin among the family geniuses. Zhemukhov

jokes that the gene skipped him, and he would not even rank at home.

As a featured teller at the Festival, Zhemukhov plans to share a range of his fascinating personal stories. Many explore the hilarity of having to adjust to life in the United States, which was obviously a big cultural shift from his decades in Russia.

After coming to Jonesborough for the first time in 2018 and watching tellers like

Donald Davis, Zhemukhov began developing stories

about his childhood to add to his repertoire. “For the audience,

these are almost like fairy tales,” he says. “A Soviet boy growing up behind the Iron Curtain — most of the audience has no idea of what I’m talking about.” There’s a distancing effect that audience members might experience, unlike when they hear stories about an artist who, say, grew up in North Carolina.

At the same time, Zhemukhov has come to believe that everyone’s stories about childhood are a little like fairy tales. “They imply a different way of thinking,” he observes. “The narrator’s character is naïve.”

The multitalented performer also plays classical guitar, and he plans to include music in all of his sets.

Zhemukhov is almost as thrilled to be returning to Jonesborough for his first round as a featured performer as we are to have him. “This is such an honor,” he says. “Especially as an immigrant, I still can’t believe that I’m invited. It’s like a miracle.”

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OCT 18	JOSH TURNER: THIS COUNTRY MUSIC THING TOUR
OCT 22	DISNEY'S MOANA: LIVE-TO-FILM CONCERT*
OCT 25	FLOYD NATION: "WISH WE WERE THERE" TOUR
NOV 02	STRAIGHT NO CHASER: HOLIDAY ROAD TOUR
NOV 08	DARCI LYNNE & FRIENDS: UP CLOSE & PERSONAL TOUR
NOV 09	MARK CHESNUTT
NOV 15	BEN FULLER
NOV 20	ATLANTA RHYTHM SECTION & ORLEANS
DEC 07	THE OAK RIDGE BOYS: AMERICAN MADE CHRISTMAS FAREWELL TOUR
DEC 12	NATALIE GRANT & DANNY GOKEY: CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS TOUR
DEC 14	TOMMY EMMANUEL, C.G.P.
JAN 17	TWITTY & LYNN: A SALUTE TO CONWAY & LORETTA
JAN 20	STOMP
JAN 30	THUNDERSTRUCK: AMERICA'S AC/DC TRIBUTE
FEB 06	WIZARD OF OZ ON ICE*
FEB 09	DEAN Z: THE ULTIMATE ELVIS
FEB 11	38 SPECIAL
MAR 07	RHYTHM OF THE DANCE
MAR 20	THE BREAKERS: A TRIBUTE TO TOM PETTY
MAR 28	TBA
APR 11	DAILEY & VINCENT
APR 17	1964 THE TRIBUTE
APR 25	YACHT ROCK THE DOCK WITH AMBROSIA & JOHN FORD COLEY
MAY 03	THE TEXAS TENORS
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MAY 19	BROTHERS OF THE HEART
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