

Storytellers entertain under Murray Park's trees

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Rachel Hedman founder and director of Story Crossroads. (Loren Niemi/Minnesota resident)



By Alisha Soeken | alisha.s@mycityjournals.com

Greece had Homer, England had Charles Dickens, and for two days the city of Murray had great storytellers like Mara Menzies, Sean Buvala, Loren Niemi and Jan C. Smith.

Among the trees and flowing water at Murray Park, 15 professional story artists joined with 50 community tellers to speak at the 2nd Annual Story Crossroads.

"Story Crossroads aims to gather and unify people across generations and cultures to celebrate story and promote creative communities that thrive through strengthened communication, preservation, and empathy," said Rachel Hedman, founder and director of Story Crossroads.

Hedman started storytelling as a sophomore in high school. She later received a master's degree in storytelling and used that education to realize her longtime dream.

"Before the inaugural year of Story Crossroads, I had dreamed about it for 15 years," Hedman said.

Last year, Hedman's dream was realized in a two-day story-telling event.

"We launched Story Crossroads in April 2016. We had 14 different languages spoken from the stage and over 2,000 people," Hedman said.

The success of such a young festival was due in part to groundwork previously laid. Holly Robison and Mary Ann Kirk were the creators of the Murray Storytelling festival, the largest feed-in festival for Story Crossroads.

"I am so thankful to Holly Robison and Mary Ann Kirk for starting that festival so to strengthen Story Crossroads down the road. This is a shared dream and is ever-expanding as we connect with community members," Hedman said.

Connecting with community members is essential for the future success of the festival and storytellers like Mara Menzies handle the task with ease.

"Though Mara has traveled the world telling stories, The Story Crossroads Festival was her first time in the United States. She has certainly been discovered and well loved as a teller and person in this country. It was a great honor to have her," Hedman said.

Menzies is a mother of two. She grew up in Kenya and moved to Scotland as a teenager. She speaks French, Swahili, English and is learning Spanish. She is a professional storyteller and travels the world presenting stories from her dual African and Scottish heritage.

"I love and live for stories and storytelling. Stories change people, and people change the world," Menzies said.

Menzies and her stories charm. Stories of the Yoruba people, Scottish children swapped by fairies and the famous story of Tam Linn.

"Stories are powerful beyond measure. They teach us how to live and show us how others live. They open us up to worlds to which we are familiar and others that we would never have imagined. They teach us the many ways to be human. They make us laugh and entertain us. They make us cry and teach us to question ourselves which ultimately makes us better versions of ourselves. Stories have immense power," Menzies said.

Hedman agreed adding how it shapes a person's outlook.

"Today, people seem to want to take sides. Perhaps more important than anything now is that storytelling is a peace-making art while simultaneously pushing people to see things in another way. Storytelling is rounded in perspective, it provides many views," Hedman said.

Even Hedman's view of her 15-year dream has changed with time.

"The dream is ever-evolving. At the time of dreaming I was blind to the fact that we had a refugee center here or what could be done to empower these people through storytelling. What is happening now is even more exciting than what I had hoped in those early years of dreaming," Hedman said.

And Hedman keeps dreaming. Her hope is for the festival to be an Olympic-level, six-day storytelling event held every four years. Yet the roots of the festival will always be individual story and purpose.

"At the end of the event we say together as an audience, 'I have a story, you have a story, we all have stories.' I want Story Crossroads to be a crossroads of generations, cultures, languages, styles, and views," Hedman said.