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# Utah storytelling festival doesn't forget the jokes

*Public speaking • About 50 professionals arrive for the inaugural Story Crossroads Festival.*



Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune Baba Jamal Koram tells a story at the first Story Crossroads Festival, in West Jordan, at the

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By Peggy Fletcher Stack The Salt Lake Tribune

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West Jordan • If storytelling is a cross between stand-up comedy, theatrical monologues and spiritual wisdom, Baba Jamal Koram is clearly a pro.

"I hear," the man in the mustard-colored tunic and cap calls out to the audience at the Viridian Event Center Saturday, "we are not actually in Salt Lake City."

In unison, 30 or so men, women, and children holler back, "No, West Jordan."

Ah, he replies: "I always knew I would reach Jordan someday."

With that, Koram's warm-up was complete. The audience, clapping and chuckling, was hooked.

Koram was one of three featured artists among the 50 professional storytellers from across the country at the First Annual Story Crossroads Festival held this weekend here. It attracted nearly 2,000 attendees — including 1,305 students who arrived Friday in buses — and dozens of adult and youth "tellers."

The whole festival was the brainchild of Rachel Hedman, who first tried her hand at public storytelling during her childhood in Wisconsin, where "forensic" clubs engage students in the art of public speaking, competitive acting and debate.

Hedman's inaugural speech was, she admits, a dismal failure.

But she learned and practiced and by the time she was a high school senior, she took fifth place in the state's "forensics" contest.

At Brigham Young University, the loquacious young woman majored in communications and marketing, but never forgot her dream of creating a storytelling event for Utah.

It was enormously satisfying to Hedman to watch scores of local tellers, young and old, try their hands at an art form that requires expressive gestures, voice inflections and imitations, subtle cadence, and a strong punchline.

Think Aesop, Jerry Seinfeld or Scheherazade's 1001 Arabian Nights.

Koram led the audience through a series of punctuated gestures – pat, pat, clap, clap, shoulder, shoulder, cabbage patch, arms up – ending with a collective whelp. This all set the scene for engaged listening.

Koram discovered his gift years ago while earning graduate degrees in Charlotte, North Carolina. A friend asked him to share African American stories with school children during Black History Month. The experience so enriched him, he says, that he took it up fulltime — and never looked back.

On Saturday, "Baba [meaning father] Jamal," as he is known, dazzled the audience with tales of an African boy's encounter with a lion and an altered version of the "Gingerbread Man," which he called, "The Cornbread Man."

"Run, Run as fast as you can," he chimed the refrain, accompanied by bongo drums beaten by his longtime friend, Baba Kenyatta Henry, "You can't catch me, I'm the Cornbread Man."

You know how that worked out — and even the kids did, too.

"It was funny," said 6-year-old Meg Hogland, "I liked the cornbread."

This art "creates a house of light," Koram told his listeners. "There is no storytelling without some spirit running through us."

Then, he dropped his voice and added, "stories don't come to us — but through us."