

Storytelling With Donna Washington

Before and After the Assembly

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WHAT IS THIS?

If you received this packet then you are planning to have **author and storyteller Donna Washington** visit your school.

Storytelling is a great way to explore and accomplish many of the **core knowledge requirements for theatre and writing**. It also addresses character education (including bullying behavior), presentation, and language acquisition skills.

The exercises in this guide are designed to reinforce collaborative work efforts, presentation and articulation skills as well as inspire creativity by encouraging descriptive and imaginative expression in writing as well as enhance, creative problem solving skills and ingenuity.

You will also find some **background about Ms. Washington** as well as recommendations for things to discuss before the assembly.

It is not necessary to discuss the art of storytelling with your students prior to the assembly, but if you do it will give them a better idea of what a storyteller does if they have never seen one, and it will get them thinking about how storytelling fits into the realm of theatre and how it differs from a stage play with costumes and props.

Donna Washington
DLW Storyteller Inc.

Biography

Donna L. Washington was born October 6, 1967 in Colorado Springs, Colorado to Sgt. Don Washington and his wife Gwendolyn. Growing up as an Army brat meant Donna lived in Colorado, Texas, Georgia, Germany, Korea, Indiana, Japan, Oklahoma, Indiana, and Virginia before she graduated from High School. She has visited almost every state in the union except Alaska. The Washington Family has seven children. Anney, Don, Donna, Joseph, Darren, Milton, and Duyen.

In 1989 Donna graduated from Northwestern University with a Bachelor's of Science in Speech. She remained in Evanston, Il for seven years after graduation. She toured to Brussels with the Chicago Children's Theatre and did a few other shows in the area before becoming a full time professional storyteller.

Donna travels the world telling stories, and has been featured at hundreds of storytelling festivals all over the country, including the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, TN. She has won Gold Parent's Choice Awards, Silver Parent's Choice Awards, Children's Music Web Awards, IParenting Excellence in Media Awards, National Association of Parenting Awards, and Storytelling World Awards for her nine recordings of stories.

Donna is also a published author. Her credits include many articles for magazines and books about storytelling as well as some picture books. Her titles include: A Big Spooky House, A Pride of African Tales, The Story of Kwanzaa, Li'l Rabbit's kwanzaa, and Boo Stew which will be out at a future date.

These days, Donna lives in Durham, NC with her husband David and their two cats Love Bug, and Flash.

A Brief History of Storytelling

Human beings have encouraged literacy as a widely practiced public skill for about two hundred years. In America, about fourteen percent of the adult population cannot read above a basic level. Reading is not an innate skill for human beings, and in order to do it, the brain must borrow space from different areas to cobble together the functions to master the ability. Humans have been writing for about seven thousand years. The first type of writing we find is called cuneiform (cue-na-i-form), and arose in Mesopotamia. Most of the populace did not use Cuneiform. It was the province of a small number of priests and merchants. Scientists calculate that people have been speaking for over one hundred thousand years. Emerging research suggests that human beings have been telling stories longer than they've been talking to each other! The brain started making stories before it had a way to communicate them orally. In order to communicate in any cohesive manner, the brain has to be able to organize thoughts into a structure that allows them to be presented intelligibly. Neuroscientists are now saying that structural organization is in the form of story.

Storytelling is at the heart of all communication between human beings whether it be dance, theatre, rituals, religion, music, politics, or just everyday life. The ability to shape ideas into comprehensive narrative so that they move the listener or persuade an audience is a power that can be used to change lives for good or ill. The stories from religious texts are meant to inspire us to lead more conscientious lives. The stories from the theatre run the gamut from the entertainment of Broadway musicals like *Wicked*, to calls for social action from the traveling groups like Bread and Puppets, or comments on civilization itself like Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Storytelling

has been shaping the course of humanity for centuries. In many cases, he or she who tells the best tales...wins.

Raconteurs (ra-con-tours) lived in medieval Europe and they were hired to entertain at feasts and festivals. We use the word to this day to describe anyone who is good at telling stories using wit and anecdotes. European Troubadours (troo-buh-dores) traveled the land and told stories with music. Irish and English Bards used stringed instruments like harps and lutes as they went across the land singing their stories for food and shelter. The most honored storytellers in every country would be able to find a place at the courts of kings, nobility, and rich merchants. They were given wealth and status for singing the praises and telling the stories of their patrons. Rulers had stories of their exploits and goodness composed so that their glory would live long after they'd passed into history. Bards were also hired to sing of the wickedness and evil of a kingdom's enemies.

Historically, those in power have always known that stories could change how nations looked at themselves. Strong narratives can move entire countries to act. People enjoy being part of the story, and they often buy wholesale what they are hearing. A good example of persuasive storytelling can be seen in American politics. Each of our political parties works hard to sell the American public the story of America as they see it. People identify with the narratives, and choose to buy into the story that they feel best fits the future of our country.

We no longer have bards roaming the land shaping political messages. We have the television, internet and radio for that. You can turn on the talking heads at any hour of the day and hear them spew out their attitudes, opinions and messages about the world as we find it. The biggest thing that politicians, corporations, and organizations of

all kinds are worried about is ‘controlling the narrative’. They are worried about how the story is going to be told. One of the masters of manipulating the story of society was a fellow named Joseph Goebbles.

Joseph Goebbles (1897 – 1945) was a master of propaganda. He was in charge of crafting and disseminating the story that fueled Nazi Germany during World War II. If you ever ask yourself how an entire population can be talked into doing or believing something horrific or destructive, you need look no further than those who sell carefully crafted propaganda. This type of storytelling can be used to turn people against each other or to make a really bad idea seem like a good one. A good propaganda artist knows how to twist and turn a narrative until it becomes a story that inspires people, and makes them want to be part of a hopeful movement even though the thing they are joining might be dark and scary.

Not all modern uses of storytelling are terrifying. Stories can also be used to heal old wounds or build bridges. Uplifting stories are often to be found in the religious philosophies of the world. Parables are a very specific type of story designed to urge the listener to think deeply about life and consider the choices they are making. Fables are also a type of tale employed to both entertain and instruct. Teachers of all cultures use stories to help youngsters learn the rules about the societies into which they have been born. A long time ago, you could figure out where someone was born by listening to the stories they heard as children. These days, you can pop down to your local public library, go onto youtube, or find a storyteller.

Anansi, Coyote, Little Red Hen, Reynard, Pedro, Babba Yagga, Jack, Sedna, Rumpelstilskin, The Ugly Duckling, Little Red Riding Hood...how many of those did you recognize? How many of their stories do you know? These are just some of the

characters that people the folktales of the world. Storytellers are always looking for tales. Even so, not all storytellers tell fables, parables, beast fables (stories where animals are personified), epics or fiction whether historical or otherwise, or personal narratives. Some storytellers are expected to be the record keepers of the culture.

In Africa storytellers are traditionally treated with great respect. Some are called Griots (gree-oes). Griots play instruments, sing and tell stories. They travel and share the news between villages. They are sometimes responsible for knowing the entire family history of particular tribes. In this instance, storytelling is not only used to share information between groups who are widely separated without reliable ways of communication, but to entertain and bring some fun into an existence that can be labor intensive and difficult.

Being able to trace ones family through storytelling has always been important in different parts of the world. In America today, people spend money and time tracking down the scraps of their past and learning as much about them as possible. This pursuit of the story of who we are is not limited to personal curiosity. The United States government creates teams of people to go out and record the stories of people who lived through difficult times. There was a project to record the stories of the last of the men and women who'd been slaves before their stories were lost. There was a project to record the traditional stories of Appalachia. We've launched projects to record forms of traditional music that were being lost or traditions that were in decline. The stories of how all of these things shaped our country and our current culture have been captured and saved for anyone willing to explore them.

In today's parlance, Donna Washington is considered an artist teacher, author, and itinerant performer. That means she writes books, educates through the arts, and

travels to tell her stories. She is also an award winning recording artist of the spoken word. She is most known for presenting international folklore, but she also does literary material, a bit of personal narrative, and original works. In performance, Washington is a minimalist who uses her voice, face and gesture to create stories without music, dance or puppetry.

What Kinds of stories will she tell?

The stories for Middle School are selected based on the social and emotional development of the audience.

6th grade. The stories that will be selected for sixth grade are all about how we treat each other and making choices. Greek Mythology is a great choice for sixth grade because the gods act like adolescents. Students can relate to the overblown sense of importance, the extreme feelings and the desire to have control over their own lives. This is also a perfect age for stories like Morgan and the Pot of Brains, which is about a young man who has been teased throughout his life and is convinced he's stupid. His journey is a painful one, but in the end he realizes that he is not stupid. Not only that, the other people in town can't remember why they thought he was stupid. The stories are about not letting others decide who you are. They are fun and fast paced and they present truths in a consumable way for this transitional year.

7th grade Seventh graders are feeling the need to begin to pull away from their parents. They are getting taller and feeling more like adults, but they are most definitely still children. The stories I share with this age group are family tales about some of the decisions I made that were not good. Everyone, including adults, will be able to relate to these stories of human foibles and family interactions. It is a reminder that we are part of our family dynamics. Even thirteen year olds have their faults and many of the things that happen to them are a direct result of their own behavior.

8th grade Eighth grade stories are about showing respect for the opposite sex. This is the first age where students start really wanting to have a girlfriend or a boyfriend situation. The stories in this set range from a PG-13 version of Chaucer's Gawain and the Green Knight about seeing beyond the exterior to a Chinese story called The Blanket and The Bowl about forgiveness.

If the assembly is not grade specific, then there will be a mixture of tales that are appropriate for the sixth and seventh grade, but none of the eighth grade stories will be shared. The eighth graders will enjoy the tales anyway, so bring them along!

Before the Performance

Storytelling is one of the oldest art forms, and it is around us all the time. We get stories from television, songs, dance, theatre, and newspapers. We share stories around the table, on the playground, between classes, at holidays, on the phone, in the kitchen or anywhere else people gather together.

Can you think of other places, times or events when people tell stories?

What are some of your favorite stories?

Are there stories your family likes to tell when they get together?

Are there any stories that every single person in your class knows?

What is the difference between lying and telling stories?

Are folktales based in fact?

What role do folktales play in society?

What role do folktales play in cultural identity?

What is the difference between a folktale, a fairytale and a myth?

Do you think every culture in the world has stories?

Can you think of some questions you'd like to ask the storyteller?

In theatre, the actors often use make-up, music, sound effects, lighting, costumes and props to help them tell stories. Donna Washington doesn't use any of that, and yet she still creates a theatrical experience. What sorts of tools is she using? How is it different from a play? How is it the same? Are there some similarities to theatre? Dance? Music? What do you think?

A Storyteller's Tools

How do you use your face to tell parts of a story? If you wanted to someone to know how you felt, what would you do to your face? How many different expressions can you think of? How many can you show? What happens to your face when you are trying to let someone else know how you feel without words?

Face

- Expressions – disgust, anger, joy, hope
- Eyes – surprised, suspicious, sad
- Mouth – shock, something tastes bad, mocking

Your body is also a good tool you can use to tell a story. What sorts of things can your body tell you? Can it tell how you feel? Can it tell what you want? Can it tell whether or not you are uncomfortable? What can it tell you? How could you use your body to tell a story?

Hands

- Gesture – warning gesture, welcoming, confusion
- Movement – indicate size, show location, holding something in mime space

Your voice can certainly tell a story, but it does more than just give the audience words. The voice is a fantastic tool that conveys many types of sounds and meanings using tone and pitch and pacing. Think of some ways a storyteller or actor could use their voice to make a story or character come to life. How could you change how old you sound? How could you change the speed? What does speed do to your voice? What changes if you speak very high or very low?

Voice

- Sounds
- Character Voices
- Pace
- Pitch
- Volume

The most important tool a performer has is the audience. A storyteller uses the audience in a very particular way. What do you think the storyteller is going to do with an audience? Make a list of guesses. It might surprise you just how important the audience is during a storytelling presentation.

Questions for After the Performance

How did the storyteller use gesture to enhance the stories?

How did the storyteller use the voice to illustrate the stories?

How did the storyteller use the audience?

Do you know any stories similar to the ones the teller told?

What images can you recall from the stories?

If you were going to tell a story, what kind of story would you choose?

Why would you choose that kind of story?

How was the performance different from a play or monologue?

How was the performance different than a dance?

How was the performance similar to a play or monologue?

Do you think a storyteller has a director?

Do you think a storyteller has a choreographer?

Do you think a storyteller has a script?

Do you think a storyteller ever uses visual art to create stories?

Rock Paper Scissors, Everything!

A Jaunt Through Imagination

Rock, Paper, Scissors, Everything! Is a lovely game that my son started playing with us when he was about five.

It is easy. You set it up like the traditional game, only after you say, ‘one, two three – go!’ you can be anything.

Anything you can think of no matter what is fair game. Afterwards, the negotiations begin. Each participant must explain why he/she believes the thing they have come up with could actually trump their opponent. If both have good cases and it is not at all clear which wins, they call it a draw and start again. If neither party will yield, you have to ask up to three people what they think. Take turns giving the reasons you think your thing tops the other. If your judges can’t decide or if it is a split decision, then you call it a draw and go on to the next hand.

It is not necessary to win every hand. The idea is to see who can come up with the most creative things and the most creative reasoning.

Sometimes the pairings can be obvious like...worm/tractor

Sometimes the pairings could be much less obvious...measles/amoeba

Sometimes they are just silly....Superman/habanero peppers

This is about creative thinking, imagination and good old fashioned debate skills.

So, have fun!

How Does It Start, Where Does It End?

Every student writes the beginning of a story. You can either give them a list of possible characters, or they can come up with their own. Here are the steps.

1 Each student takes out a sheet of paper. Each student writes the beginning of a story.

2 Pass the paper to another person in the class. Each student reads the new paragraph. Then, they write the middle of the story. Pass the paper to another student.

3 This student reads the first two parts, turns the paper over and writes the ending of the story on the BOTTOM of the page on the back. Pass it to another student.

4 This student reads the end of the story WITHOUT TURNING IT OVER TO READ THE FIRST TWO PARTS! After reading the end, this student writes the middle that goes with the end. Then, the paper is passed to the last student.

5 The last student writes the beginning of the story. Then, the paper is passed to the student who wrote the first paragraph.

Now you have two stories: One built from the first paragraph, and the second built from the ending. This is a fun writing exercise that students tend to enjoy.

Tongue Twisters!

There are wonderful places to find tongue twisters!

Mother Goose is a good place. Most people have an old copy of Mother Goose lying around the house from when they were little. Look in it now and you'll find some wonderful tongue twisters.

Tongue Twisters are great because they force you to annunciate. Many performers like to use tongue twisters to warm up their vocal apparatus before they perform. Here are two of my favorite tongue twisters from Mother Goose.

Peter Piper

Peter Piper picked a peck of purple pickled peppers

A peck of purple pickled peppers Peter Piper picked.

If Peter Piper picked a peck of purple pickled peppers

Where's the peck of purple pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?

Betty Boughta

Betty Boughta bought some butter,

But, she says, this butter's bitter

If I put it in my batter, it will make my batter bitter,

But a bit of better butter that would make my batter better.

So, she bought a bit of butter better than the bitter butter.

And she put it in her batter and her batter was not bitter,

So, it was better.

Betty Boughta bought a bit of better butter.

The Skunk Stump

A skunk sat on a stump

And thunk the stump stunk

The stump thunk the skunk stunk

One Word Story Circle Stories

Students sit in a circle. You need at least five people per circle. Each person can only say one word. The idea is that you are trying to build a story one word at a time.

The participants not only put in words, but the punctuation.

Example: 6 people.

1. Once
2. Upon
3. A
4. Time
5. There
6. Was

Going around again

1. A
2. (this person is now stuck with one word to really start the tale it could be anything. Let us say they use the word “Lazy”)
3. Dog
4. (They might decide to do the punctuation.) Period.

You keep going around with each person providing only one word.

This can be a tricky exercise since it requires everyone to not only listen to what everyone else is saying, but keep track of what has already been said.

The most frustrating part is when someone adds a word you would not have added or takes the story off in a different direction. It is a great way to begin a creative writing activity.

Resources

Compiled by Janice M. Del Negro PhD

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