

Dear friends,

On behalf of everyone who worked to put together the 2023 Georgia Mountain Storytelling Festival, we are happy to share with you some highlights of the event.



As we celebrated the festival's ninth year, we were excited to return to in-person programming in a gorgeous venue: The Ridges Resort on Lake Chatuge. The event showcased five storytellers who are well-known on the national storytelling circuit (L to R in photo): Josh Goforth, Carolina Quiroga, Donald Davis, Donna Washington, and Kathi Littlejohn. We also enjoyed the talents of ten acclaimed tellers from across our region, a local historian, and a group of eleven open-mic tellers new to our stage.

Photos by Nathan Baerreis



Donna Washington delighting the crowd with folk tales



Donald Davis teaching how to turn memories into stories

Both days of the festival featured storytelling from 9AM-9PM. Educational programming included six "how-to" workshops on topics ranging from gathering family memories to turning stories into songs. These were taught by our featured and regional tellers. Dr. Joel Ying, a physician and storyteller from Florida, taught a special workshop on the relationship between storytelling and healing.

100% of festival visitors responding to survey questions expressed that they learned something about storytelling and area organizations/events.

100% said they would attend the festival again and recommend it to others

The festival presented programming especially for local school groups and for children and their families.



Kathi Littlejohn (in blue) engaging local students in acting out a Cherokee story
Photo by festival volunteer



6th graders enjoying tall tales told by Judy Baker, Terrell Shaw, and Leslie Shelley
Photo by Union County Middle School

Other special events included an informal Q&A with the featured tellers; a session on local history stories by Texana, North Carolina native Zula Cox; and opportunities for festival visitors to claim their voices by telling their own stories, including an open mic hour and two “drop in and tell” story swaps.



Open Mic Tellers
Photo courtesy of Kanute Rarey



Story Swap
Photo by Nathan Baerreis



Zula Cox
Photo by Nathan Baerreis



Josh Goforth singing Appalachian ballads against a backdrop of quilts on loan from local quilters and collectors
Photo by festival volunteer

Visitors also learned the stories of the 34 quilts on display during the festival. By reading information cards to answer questions about the quilts, they could win prizes in our popular quilt hunt.

The event drew visitors of all ages, from toddlers to octogenarians. Our in-person audience of 816 came from Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida, Michigan, and other states and included hundreds of students and teachers who attended free of charge. We also made recordings of the festival available online; these were enjoyed by 2,005 viewers from across the country.

We once again provided sign language interpreting and Braille programs for our visitors with hearing and visual impairment. We also expanded our community outreach by offering free tickets to low-income individuals and to individuals with disabilities and their families and were pleased to welcome a large number of new attendees from these groups.



Sign language interpreter Courtney Sanders keeping up with Donald Davis
Photo by Nathan Baerreis



Festival visitors commented on the “great variety of cultural perspectives” shared during the event. Carolina Quiroga’s Latin American myths and stories from her Colombian childhood were festival favorites for many attendees.

Photo by festival volunteer: Carolina Quiroga (right) and sign language interpreter Marti Slaughter (left)

*“Very different storytellers with different genres. All grabbed the audience’s attention and held it.”
– festival visitor*



Area organizations such as Mountain Area Storytellers, the Georgia Storytelling Network, and the Cherokee County Arts Council set up displays to share information, and our featured tellers made books and recordings of their work available for purchase. All of them were able to engage a wider audience, strengthening current bonds and creating new ones.

Photo by Nathan Baerreis

The festival was made possible by the assistance of many organizations, business sponsors, and individual donors and by our 40+ volunteers. Thanks to their help, festival participants found community in a joyous celebration of the rich heritage of the Appalachians and of all places where story is honored.



Photos courtesy of Karen Hurtubise

We are especially grateful for the generous grants we received from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Georgia Council for the Arts, South Arts, the Nora Roberts Foundation, and Blairsville Walmart #3485, all of whom recognized the importance of this project and helped it to thrive; for the warm welcome from The Ridges Resort on Lake Chatuge, the City of Young Harris, and the City of Hiawassee; for the assistance of the Chambers of Commerce in Blairsville, Hiawassee, Hayesville, and Blue Ridge with spreading the word; and for the ongoing support of our individual and business sponsors and our wonderfully enthusiastic audience.

Thank you for keeping the flame burning for nine years!

"It was a great return to live, in-person storytelling! I'm so glad we were able to gather as an extended storytelling family and enjoy this time together!" – festival visitor

"My 7-year-old grandson thinks it should happen more than once a year!!!" – festival visitor

We hope to see you April 12-13, 2024, for the 10th annual Georgia Mountain Storytelling Festival. The event will once again be held at The Ridges Resort on Lake Chatuge. We have an outstanding group of tellers lined up, and we have some terrific programming in the works as we expand the festival's community outreach.



Nestor Gomez



Megan Hicks



Len Cabral



Michael Reno Harrell



Anne Rutherford

To stay up to date as plans develop for the 2024 festival, find us online:

Website: www.gamountainstoryfest.org

Facebook: Georgia Mountain Storytelling Festival

Email: info@gamountainstoryfest.org

To find out more about how you can be involved in our 2024 programming as a volunteer, teller, or sponsor, please send us an email at info@gamountainstoryfest.org.

We wish you all the best and look forward to seeing you in 2024!

Amanda Lawrence, Ruth Looper, Nathan Baerreis, Bob Whitaker-Lea, and Tom Wilkerson
GMSF Board of Directors

"This was my first festival, but it won't be my last." – festival visitor
