

## THE EARLY DAYS OF THE SEATTLE STORYTELLERS GUILD.

By Virginia Rankin—Reprinted from *In The Wind* Vol. 30.2 Spring 2007

**PART 1— THE EARLY DAYS** Clare Cuddy arrived in Seattle in 1979 with a vision and a mission; she wanted to start a storytelling group, and to promote storytelling as an art form for adults. She put up flyers everywhere: schools, coffee houses, museums, libraries. Never averse to dipping into her own pocket, she placed an ad in a weekly paper looking for people interested in storytelling. (Claire Cuddy pictured in Seattle, 2015)



Her most brilliant strategy was to offer a storytelling class at the Experimental College at UW. She saw it as an effective way to get people involved because they "are making an investment in the art that can't be achieved by just sitting and listening." Once the Guild was founded in 1982, class tuition also covered participants' dues.

One of those first students declared, "We all grew up together." They were all, including Clare, under thirty. Early Guild members recall Clare as a go-getter, a risk taker, a champion of storytelling. She never thought, "Will we fail?" She never asked, "Will we lose money?"

Donald Braid, a young physicist with an interest in folklore, became part of the group. Early board members paint him as a complicated person, apparently combining the dreamy and the practical. They agree he had "a passion for storytelling," and "inspired people to work with him."

Donald had strong opinions and strong ethics, and these apparently made him both a driving force and a braking one as people tried to hammer out a mission statement. Everything was decided by consensus back then, so it's amazing to hear the story of the lengthy discussions, and then look at the single, clear paragraph the Guild's founders struggled to compose.

The mission statement became part of the 1982 articles of incorporation making the Guild a non-profit organization. Incorporating was necessary if they were going to apply for grants, and useful because it brought tax-free status. The consensus process was valued, despite the difficulties it sometimes caused, because when a decision was finally reached, everyone owned it.

Long time Guild members probably recall Story and Snack at Naomi Baltuck's house. It was part of what Cathryn Wellner describes, along with the Experimental College classes, as the "connective tissue" of the Guild. "You showed up, you became involved, you were put to work." The early public face of SSG was the monthly Sunday night performance at the Boiserie coffeehouse in the Burke Museum on the UW campus.



The UW also provided fertile soil for storytellers. Merna Hecht remembers how Spencer Shaw's storytelling class generated excitement among his young students at the Library School, Mae Benne taught a highly regarded children's literature class, and children's theatre was important in the Drama Department.

NAPPS, the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling connected Seattle to the national storytelling scene. Tellers who moved to Seattle from other parts of the country already knew about SSG. Seattle tellers recruited real stars to come and perform to packed houses. Jay O'Callahan, Jackie Torrence, Donald Davis, Laura Simms, and Diane Wolkstein all visited during the early 80s. (Pictured at left, Dr. Spencer Shaw telling tales)

Thanks to the sources mentioned above for all the time they took to bring this period to life for me. And thanks also to Pat Peterson and Cherie Trebon for helpful leads.

[The history of the Guild will continue in the next several ITW issues.]

## THE GOLDEN YEARS OF THE SEATTLE STORYTELLERS GUILD.

By Virginia Rankin—Reprinted from *In The Wind* Vol. 30.3 Summer 2007

"We all believed storytelling was an absolutely wonderful, marvelous thing. It was exciting to bring it to new audiences." This is the way Donald Braid remembers his fellow Guild founders.



Donald still has a list of every program and workshop the Guild offered from 1982 to 1988. The variety of performances and venues is staggering. In addition to the beloved Boiserie Coffee House, there were programs at Meany Hall, North and South Seattle Community Colleges, MOHAI, University Friends Center, a series at an unnamed spot of the Eastside, and even a dinner theatre show with Jay O'Callahan.

The list of workshops is ambitious and varied. Here's just a small sampler of topics and presenters: "Voice Techniques" - Augusto Paglialunga, "Writing and Telling: To Make a Story Live" — Margaret Scarborough, "Folktale Sources for the Storyteller" — Margaret Read McDonald, "Kudziya Mota: Fire Sharing" — Ephat Mujuru, "LaRaconteur" — Clare Cuddy, "Every Body Tells a Story: Movement Workshop" — Klauniada.

And there were master classes with the likes of Diane Wolkstein — "The Meaning of Isis and Osiris," Jay O'Callahan — "Creating Stories, Scenes, and Moods," Laura Simms - "Bringing Your Story to Life," and Gioia Tampanelli — "Telling Stories."

There were extensive discussions about what was and was not storytelling, whether local tellers were to be preferred over national ones, and whether competitions were a good or bad thing. In the end, members decided to go for diversity in their programming. People took the sensible approach that it was okay to present a teller

whose style they might not personally like when many others clearly did. And contests? Well the Liars Contest has become the most popular storytelling event at Folklife.

Those original members had nerve as well as enthusiasm. Sharon Creeden marched into the office of the Folklife Festival in 1983, and asked for a space and time slot to spotlight storytelling. From an hour in a cramped classroom with tiny desks in a basement, the Guild presence at Folklife has grown to five well attended events over the four festival days. Sharon credits Cherie Trebon for establishing the Guild as a major player at Folklife. Our newsletter, "In the Wind" is as old as the Guild itself. While everybody believes it played a crucial role in building the Guild, no one can remember the original editor's name. Donald paints a vivid picture of work parties getting out a mailing. "There was a lot of volunteer effort. Very generous people," he says, "gave a lot of time."

With this solid volunteer base, the Guild became even more ambitious. In 1987, a weekend-long "Traditional Tellers Seminar" was held at Fort Worden. In 1988, the Guild presented the first "Northwest Storytelling Festival" at the Lakeside School.

BY 1992, the Guild had over 400 members. All agree the crowning achievement came, in 1993, when we hosted the **16th Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement and Promotion of Storytelling**, here in Seattle, for 5 days. Margie McDonald was the key mover and shaker in making this enormous event come together smoothly.

And speaking of Margie, we'll let her have the final words.

"Look what has become of those early guild founders.... Donald and I have PhD's in Folklore. Claire Cuddy uses her storytelling in museum work. Kathy Spagnoli, Cathryn Wenner, Merna Hecht, Naomi Baltuck, Sue Grizzel, and myself are all professional tellers. Naomi, Donald, Kathy, and I have published extensively in the folklore and storytelling genres."



In the Next Issue of *In The Wind*, we will have **Part 3 : Changes and Challenges, 1994-2005**

If you would like to explore the history of our Guild—There is an [In The Wind Archive](http://www.seattlestorytellers.org/ssg/inTheWind.html) of newsletters on our web site going back to 1980. Those issues are filled with lots of interesting articles and stories about the Guild's people and events!! [https://www.seattlestorytellers.org/ssg/inTheWind.html](http://www.seattlestorytellers.org/ssg/inTheWind.html)

## Part 3 — Changes and Challenges, 1994-2007

by Virginia Rankin—Reprinted from *In the Wind* Vol 31.1 Winter 2007



In 1993, the 400 member Seattle Storytellers Guild was riding high. Nobody anticipated the challenges of the next decade, when slowly but surely both membership and attendance at events would decline.

Dawn Kuhlman, who served as Guild president and treasurer during some of those years, hypothesizes that storytelling enjoyed enormous local popularity in the eighties, because people were still curious about heritage and roots. The same sixties impulse that had prompted an interest in folk music and crafts led to a fascination with storytelling.

Now things were changing. Seattle lost several highly regarded theatres. Older audiences didn't get out as much. Younger audiences increasingly found their entertainment in technology, and fast-paced, interactive performances like improv and stand-up comedy

The Guild lost its regular performance home at the Burke Museum, and became nomadic. A variety of venues were tried but none proved as comfortable. Sometimes parking was an issue. Sometimes a place became too expensive. For a variety of reasons, the Guild was on the move, and not always easy to find.



At some point in the late nineties, nobody can remember exactly when, Chauni Haslet offered the Guild the use of her wonderful bookstore, All for Kids, and it became the home for "Teller's Night Out." AFK hosted the Guild's story swap on the second Friday of each month.

There were fewer willing volunteers, but those who served on the board and the others who turned up to help, managed a number of achievements, not least of which was surviving. At one point, there was almost no money in the treasury, but creativity and determination kept the organization going.

The Guild produced several small festivals at the Nordic Heritage Museum. By telling for the museum's own program, the Guild managed to pile up a credit that meant the facility was rent-free. (Watch for us to continue to spend down that credit in 2008 by running a series of workshops in the museum's classrooms.)



At the end of the nineties, Bill Ptacek, Director of the King County Library System, decided KCLS would sponsor a celebration of storytelling. From 2000 to 2005, the library budgeted \$40,000, and committed considerable staff time to an annual Storyfest International. The festival ran all weekend at the Bellevue Regional Library, with as many as three events happening at the same time. But the large, anticipated audiences never came. By 2005, the library felt it could no longer justify the expense in dollars and staff time.



Debra Schneider, director of programming for KCLS, believes that with the event might have become a success with the addition of music, and puppets. She believes most people don't see storytelling as something for adults. "They don't understand the live theatre aspect — movement, gesture, voice, facial expressions." It is a message the Guild is still trying to communicate.

Though not entirely successful, Storyfest was an opportunity for the Guild. For some of you, it was the gateway to membership. Folklife is another such gateway. Thanks to Cherie Trebon's efforts, we have storytelling events on all four days, and we attract audiences who would never have come out specifically for storytelling. But they try it and they like it.



In 2004, Lenore Jackson was the driving force in establishing an electronic gateway. Our website has proved vital in attracting the attention of people who are searching for stories, but are unaware of the Guild. Kim Pearson is now updating the website with features like online dues payment and ticket ordering.

Both Guild membership and attendance at events have been rising in the past year. 140 people celebrated the Guild's 25th anniversary at Tellabration 2007 in the Ethnic Cultural Theatre in Seattle. Tellers included Tom Rawson, Merna Hecht, Sharon Creeden, Cherie Trebon, Eva Abram and Pat Peterson. It was the biggest audience we have attracted in a long time. Our second quarter century was starting out well. To quote the always quotable Pat Peterson, "We are still here!"



Anne Brendler will bring us from 2007 to the present in this series of articles about The Seattle Storytellers Guild's history in the Fall 2022 Issue of *In The Wind*

## The Bright Side: The Seattle Storytellers' Guild's Past Fifteen Years By Anne Brendler



Fifteen years ago, Virginia Rankin wrote a three-part history of the first twenty-five years of The Seattle Storytellers' Guild. Published in 2007 and 2008 issues of *In the Wind*, Virginia took us through "The Early Days", "The Golden Years", and "Changes and Challenges". As we come upon the Guild's fortieth anniversary, I will make a brave attempt here to pick up where she left off and make a record of our most recent fifteen years.

In the first paragraph of her Part III, Virginia reflects on our drop in membership and attendance numbers. In the following paragraphs of this third chapter in her history, Virginia explains the decreases and what various very creative volunteers have attempted to turn the situation around. She cites lost venues, an aging audience that used to get out more to theater-type events, an upcoming younger audience that seeks out more interactive and fast-paced entertainment, and a loss of ready volunteers.

Fifteen years later, we note the same problems. However, we can also look on the bright side and note many achievements and accomplishments of which the Guild can be proud. We have abided by our Mission and sustained our presence.

### Let's take a look:

We have had a number of enthusiastic and very capable Presidents, including Naomi Baltuck, Avery Hill, Norm Brecke, MaryAnne Moorman, Cynthia Westby, Samantha Desmond, and Barry McWilliams. Some of these generous volunteers served more than one term as President.

We have contributed (with financial and/or volunteer support) to the Forest Storytelling Festival, the PowellsWood Story Festival, and the Northwest Folklife Festival. (For many years, this was Cherie Trebon's pet project!)

We have maintained a Guild membership in the National Storytelling Network and in the new Story Crossroads, both of which expand the learning opportunities for storytellers of all levels.

We have created and sponsored presentations of Irish myths, the Finnish National Epic (the Kalevala), Nordic Myths, and the great Arabian tales, "1001 Nights" (with Arabic music and dance). We also co-created, with the Puget Sound Welsh Association, a special evening of Welsh stories and music.

We have sponsored expanded Earth Day programs, and lately these have included tellers such as Paul Che-Oke-Ten Wagner, Harvest Moon, and Gene Tagaban. Originally with the leadership of John Wasko, we have continued our focus on inclusion of Native American tellers, having been guided years ago by the great Salish teller Vi Hilbert. That focus persists in our upcoming November 2022 Tellabration™ with Indigenous Tellers Alicia Retes and BZ Smith.

We have had a hand in bringing to our area tellers representing many different places in the United States and even the world, for example: Eth-Noh-Tec, Charlotte Blake Alston, Donald Davis, Antonio Rocha, Kevin Kling, Motoko, Lyn Ford, Tuaratini Ra, Johnny Moses, Sheila Arnold, and Carmen Agra Deedy. From the Middle East, we have welcomed and listened to the stories of Noa Baum and Dr. Haji abi-Nashem, and our own Afifi Durr.

We have offered all kinds of story guides and information in our newsletter of forty years, *In the Wind*. We have also added to storytellers' education and promoted the art of storytelling (part of our Mission Statement!) through numerous workshops, sometimes featuring famous tellers and often offered through our connection with the Nordic Heritage Museum. We have had the opportunity to learn from the likes of: Diane Wolkstein, Eva Abram, Norm Brecke, Nancy Mellon, Doug Lipman, Margaret Read Macdonald, Jennifer Ferris, Will Hornyak, Annette Botsford, Susy Irwin, Naomi Baltuck, Loren Niemi, and Anne Rutherford, just to name a few.

Members of the Guild have taught story classes at local colleges or universities, and we have extended complimentary one-year memberships in the Guild to those taking the classes. Cherie Trebon taught classes for years, and Susy Irwin has continued that tradition.

Teaching articles and reviews of books that are story resources have frequently appeared in *In the Wind*. We have seen, for example, articles by Jay O'Callahan, Allison Cox, Jill Johnson, Barry McWilliams, and Margaret Read Macdonald.

The use of story in fostering mental health has been a powerful tool in our reaching out to others. Allison Cox has been involved with this for many years, and her stories often reflect her intense compassion in this endeavor.

We have been represented at other events in other cities and countries by our travelling members, who have brought us back reports on storytelling in places they visited and told stories there as well as here from those places when they returned. A few of these "troubadours" who have helped spread the joy and the art of story include: Jill Johnson, Cathy Spagnoli, Margaret Read Macdonald, Chana Mills, Judith Alexander, and Allison Cox.

We have kept alive funds for members who want to attend story workshops or classes or learning events in the form of the Gene Friese Fund, specifically established for that purpose by Gene Friese before he passed away. This fund has even enabled some of our members to have subsidized story learning adventures in Vancouver, Canada!

We have furthered the establishment of our offshoot groups of tellers, one being Under the Rainbow, designed for the LBGTQIA+ community (although open to all), and its own offshoot, Writing Rainbow. These have been largely the creation of Naomi Baltuck, our longtime member. Naomi and her family have been the frequent hosts of story concerts in their home in nearby Edmonds. Another new group has been the Little Liars' Group, for learners of that particular genre of storytelling, with Marte Fallshore at the helm. Workshops in this field have been offered by Ingrid Nixon and, coming soon, this November, Paul Strickland.

MaryAnne Moorman (aka AuntMama), one of our Past Presidents, has established yet another offering, this one for stories and music, at her home on Bainbridge Island. Totally funded by donations to her specific project, not to the Guild, she has created The Third Stage, a venue for creative artists to learn and create. It is mentioned here because with her roots in story, AuntMama has extended near and far the art of storytelling in the Northwest. AuntMama maintained her presence and furthering story on radio, on KBCS 91.3 FM now on alternate Sunday mornings.

We have also recently had for some years a story program for folks at senior living facilities. This was called Elder Tales, ably organized by Judith Alexander. In small groups of two or three tellers, we would present an hour's program of stories at various retirement homes. Unfortunately, this had to be paused during the pandemic.

Many of our less-active members now have donated over 200 books to our fledgling Storytellers' Library. We have storybooks of all kinds, including "how-to" books to help story beginners. The library is currently housed at the Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Church, through that organization's generosity.

We have maintained various venues for our monthly gatherings, at All For Kids Bookshop, Santoro's Bookshop, Home Street Bank, The Couth Buzzard, and the Nordic Heritage Museum. and more recently, The Bridge Coffee House, Haller Lake Community Center and the Haller Lake United Methodist Church. We have been especially fortunate that Under the Rainbow has been offered space at the Edmonds Public Library. Story Swaps (opportunities to learn and practice stories) were also held at the homes of Afifi Durr or of her neighbors; and the home of Virginia Rankin and David Klein.

Perhaps our largest venue, of course, has been the World of Zoom, where we have been forced by the pandemic, to hold our events for two years and running. We have all learned Tech skills from our Tech Guru and outgoing President, Barry McWilliams. He has not only learned how to run these events, but he has taught those of us willing to learn how to assist. This has allowed us to open new doors to tellers and listeners from all over the country and, in the case of Tuaratini Ra, the world.

Tech advances are one way the Seattle Storytellers' Guild has advanced and changed a good deal in these last fifteen years. Zoom has enabled us to reach out to a widely varied audience who find out about us through our different online advertising, such as on our website and on Facebook and with Meet-up. Through Zoom, we have listeners joining our events, performances as well as workshops, from places near and far. Our website, initiated by Maia London Hammer in 2012, has been the province of Larry Hohm since 2014. It is a varied place to visit. It brings word of upcoming story events in Seattle and the surrounding area, highlights our tellers, carries e-copies of forty years' worth of In the Wind newsletters, and allows for interested folks to join the Guild or donate to our story events.

Beginning fifteen years ago, we offered members the opportunity to receive their copies of the newsletter either by regular mail or by email. Email keeps our printing and postage costs at a minimum, and many members have chosen this method of delivery. Because the electronic version of the newsletter also carries live links for registering and/or donating for events, this makes it easy for people to sign up.

In the very last two years, when the Board has had to meet or vote on questions between the Board meetings, we have had to use Zoom. This has proved invaluable. We had already switched to meeting as a Board in-person and meeting on Zoom on alternate months, but COVID made it necessary on a more frequent basis. We have successfully used this format to change our By-Laws to reflect that nowadays it may be necessary to meet and vote electronically. Again, while we have always preferred live and in-person storytelling, electronic changes have helped our organization create a future and keep the art of oral storytelling alive in Seattle!

