

Word of Mouth: The cross-cultural magic of storytelling comes alive at Funda Fest



Oral storytelling is one of the oldest traditions known to man; the intimacy of storytelling was how groups of people retold their history, entertained each other and reinforced their cultural values. The Rhode Island Black Storytellers' (RIBS) Funda Fest, which takes place in late January and early February, keeps that tradition alive as storytellers share the cross-cultural magic of African storytelling with the community. Funda Fest is a passion project founded by the creative director of Providence-based RIBS, Valerie Tutson. Inspired by the National Black Storytellers Fest, Tutson brought the experience to Providence in 1998.

RIBS defines black storytelling as African and African-descended oral tradition, an art form that creates a cultural experience for those who witness it. The use of call-and-response demands participation from the audience. "It's the beating of the drum that calls the community together. [Storytelling] isn't a spectator's sport," Tutson shared as we sat at the Coffee Exchange in Providence. "It's an experience that the storyteller and audience feel together."

The RIBS storytellers work to make the storytelling concerts that make up Funda Fest an experience trifecta: cultural, educational and historical. Personal histories, myths and legends, and religious tales are all important to the African oral tradition. The fest also hosts its popular Liars Contest during which participants have five minutes to tell a story that's a believable lie. "Audience members get a chance to share a story and win a small prize. It's a lot of fun," said Tutson.

A lifelong storyteller who has traveled the globe, Tutson's interest in storytelling started in high school. Since then, she's shared her favorite stories, from personal to Biblical, with hundreds of people. During our interview, internationally acclaimed storyteller Len Cabral joined us. Cabral started his journey as a storyteller in the 1970s. He learned the importance of storytelling as an educational tool after seeing its effects on kindergarteners in the classroom and began traveling across the country to share the magic of storytelling with school children and festival goers.

This is the 21st Funda Fest, and Tutson and Cabral have watched the fest evolve over the years. The first

fest was a small event with just four performances over a few days. This year, Funda Fest has a full week of programming and boasts upward of 38 performances all over RI.

Part of the Funda Fest mission is to encourage African-descended peoples to celebrate who they are and their roots before colonialism. In a state that boasts the name “The State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations,” it is important to both Cabral and Tutson to fight ingrained roots of shame and instead start with the notion, “What is African?” By doing this, Tutson explains that the audience realizes that there is a before. “If you start before the position of ‘lesser than,’ then you see that it does not define you as lesser than.” By lifting up and embracing the times pre-slavery and pre-segregation, you embrace the idea that there is a history for African Americans outside of the long history of bondage.

While our interview progressed, the sense that these two are respected members of their community was palpable, and the pride they showed while speaking of Funda Fest and the impact storytelling has had in their lives was inspiring. This month, join the RIBS storytellers and other national guests during the weeklong festivities to witness the magic of storytelling in person.

Funda Fest 2019 Schedule

Jan 26: Westerly Public Library FREE events

10am - noon: Workshop with Ron Daise

1pm: Family Storytelling Concert with Ron Daise and RIBS storytellers

7pm: Storytelling Concert with Ron Daise and RIBS tellers,

Lily Pads Music N’ More Universalist Unitarian Church, Peace Dale, doors open at 6:30pm

Jan 27: 4 - 6pm: Words and Music: Storytellers, Poets, Musicians, Southside Cultural Center, PVD

Jan 28 thru Feb 1: Storytellers in the Schools

Jan 31: 6:30pm: Family Storytelling Concert, YWCA Rhode Island, Woonsocket; FREE

Feb 1: 4:30 - 7pm: Langston Hughes Community Poetry Reading, Youth Voices, Southside Cultural Center, PVD; FREE

Feb 1: 8pm: Liar’s Contest and Awful Awful Singing Contest, Firefighters Hall, PVD. Doors at 7pm

9:30pm: Dance Party

Feb 2: Family Fun Day Southside Cultural Center, PVD; FREE

10am - noon: Storytelling Workshop with Abigail Jefferson

noon: Lunch and Marketplace

1 - 3pm: Family Storytelling Concert

Feb 2: 8pm: Storytelling for Grown Folk Southside Cultural Center, PVD; Doors open at 7pm. Music, Mix, Mingle, Market Place

Feb 3: Langston Hughes Community Poetry Reading

[Celebrating Solstice: Local witches give insight into pagan traditions](#)

Winter solstice marks the official start of winter and the shortest day of the year. For some people, the solstice has a second name: Yule, which holds a special significance. Pagans across the globe take time to celebrate this Sabbat, which is one of eight major occurrences on their calendar. The pagan calendar proceeds like the turning of a clock, and each occurrence celebrates a changing of the season or equinox. The winter solstice is a time of gratitude and giving. The closing of the previous year, the opportunity to plan the future and the rebirth of the Sun God is celebrated. To better understand Yule as celebrated by the original participants, two local witches were gracious enough to provide some insight into the festivities.

Melissa April is a High Priestess with the New England Covens of Traditionalist Witches (NECTW) and former owner of Mother Mystic. April shed some light on how Yule is celebrated among the covens, which are groups of witches who meet regularly. In New England, the 17 covens gather and celebrate together. Since the solstice is a time of rebirth, the celebrants bless the seedlings of trees and wish them strength in being reborn.

The second witch I spoke with is **Roxanne Jasparro**. Owner of Bewitched of Scituate, Jasparro is a Second Degree Cabot witch, whose lineage can be traced to the Kent witches of England. As a solitary witch, she shares the spirit of Yule with her friends. For Jasparro, the importance of the ancestors and honoring the gods and beings that make Yule and the winter solstice possible are key to properly celebrating. While the ancestors are more properly celebrated during Samhain in November, both Christmas and Yule would not be possible with the figures of Father Christmas and the Snow Queen, among others.

Father Christmas and the Snow Queen are the entities who bring gifts to children. Along with la Befana, the Italian witch who rode her broom into town to give young boys and girls presents, they embody the meaning behind Yule. As Jasparro stated, "It's the good feeling you get when you give that is important during Yule." This appreciation for giving, traditionally harvest leftovers, is why so many partake in Yankee Swaps. It is also why Jasparro has held a toy drive for the past two solstices: to follow the traditions set by Father Christmas and pagans of the past.

One of the most important Yule practices revolves around the Yuletide altar, which consists of three main parts: the Yule log, candles and greenery. All three are symbols of bringing the outside in and welcoming the rebirth brought by the Sun. Greens, such as holly and the evergreen trees that are decorated in silver, gold, reds and greens, symbolize rebirth — a miracle that they prosper in the harsh

cold while other plants are barren. For new-age pagans, the festively colored candles are a safer way to bring the warmth of the sun into the home without risking fires that could be caused by burning the ceremonial log.

Traditionally, the ceremonial log is ash. It is decorated in seasonal greens, doused in ale and dusted with flour before being set aflame and left to smolder for 12 days. April described the burning of the Yule log as, "Bringing light into the home and keeping warm during the cold winter months." While feasting on spiced cider, root vegetables and pork, the covens celebrate good will and peace.

Despite the differences between this age-old tradition and Christmas, one thing is clear: It is the season of giving, gratitude, and peace among the creatures who try to survive the harsh winter months. From respecting and honoring nature to sharing a meal with family and friends, Yule is all about being together. When asked what she wanted those who do not take part in these ceremonies to understand, Jsparro said, "There's no wrong way to celebrate Yule. There is beauty in it and you should embrace and celebrate it."

If you are interested in learning more about the winter solstice or just partaking in some Yuletide fun, check out these events!

Winter Solstice Poetry Reading, Dec 19, 5:30pm. International House of Rhode Island, PVD.

Winter Solstice Full Moon Party, Dec 21, 8pm. News Café, Pawtucket.

Silver and Snow Holiday Show, Sun, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sat throughout Dec, 5pm. Artists' Cooperative Gallery of Westerly, Westerly.

Winter Solstice Candlelight Flow, Dec 21, 7pm. Breathing Time Yoga, Pawtucket.

Solstice Celebration/ Toy Drive, Dec 21 - 22, all day. Bewitched of Scituate, Scituate.

Winter Solstice Dance, Dec 22, 8pm. Essence Yoga, Cranston.

[Cranston Calls in the Hounds: Kids Don't Eat Free](#)



Taking on the role of the proverbial school yard bully, the city of Cranston has made its stance known: They want your lunch money. Chief operating officer of Cranston Public Schools, Raymond Votto Jr., sent a notice home to families in December letting them know they hired a debt collection agency. Any student with a debt over \$20 will have the hounds released for the sum come the new year. Imagine making the sentient choice to hire an outside agency to harass families for lunch money?

Cranston has dismissed an estimated \$95,508 in unpaid lunch debt amassed from September 2016 to June 2018. The current school year has racked up \$45,859 in unpaid lunches. Admittedly, that's a lot of money to be lost for the school system. However, those with unpaid debts may undoubtedly know the pains of living at or below the poverty line. Likewise, families could just be using these funds on more pressing matters: rent, electricity and gasoline, or even groceries for the home.

While students will still be fed, the fact that these shaming tactics have reached our state is what's irksome. All over the country, there have been reports of school districts using embarrassing tactics, and at the extreme end, denying children lunches for unpaid balances. In Pennsylvania, a school would much rather throw the food in the trash than allow students with balances to eat. In New Mexico, students can still get a 'special' sandwich: a slice of cheese in between two slices of bread. The argument was that it met federal requirements.

Since when has it been okay to shame children for something they cannot control? Students pay anywhere from \$2.50 to \$3.25, depending on whether they attend elementary school or junior high and up, for greasy pizza and questionable sandwiches. School districts say these meals meet federal requirements for nutrition, but when it's been declared that tomato sauce on pizza is a vegetable, you have to question the validity behind the statement.

While these tactics may eventually get the parents to pay the bills, is it worth it to shame the students in front of their peers? School-aged children already have enough to worry about. Testing has gone through the roof while homework can take upward of five hours a night. They deal with lack of sleep, graduation requirements for seniors and the overall angst of adolescence — being shamed by the people that are in charge of your education shouldn't even be on the list.

This debt should, of course, be paid off, especially if it threatens the food program. The superintendent and staff at Cranston Public Schools, however, should have found a more humanitarian way to accomplish this before calling in the reinforcement of an outside company. Instead, just in time for the holidays, Cranston has let its citizens know where they stand on the importance of the dollar over understanding the condition of its families.

Feed Your Need: RI has as many comic book shops as Batman has wonderful toys

For one glorious weekend each year, Comic Con graces our fair state with its presence. But what's a despondent comic book nerd to do when the weekend's over? Go local, of course. To that end, we've

compiled a list of local comic shops where you can spend your weekends 'til Comic Con rolls around again.

Located in beautiful Newport, **Annex Comics** has an impressive selection of back issues to browse. Annex Comics opened its doors in 1984, making it one of the oldest shops in the state. It specializes in pulp fiction, graphic novels, figures and of course, comics new and old. Fighting against the digitalization of comics, owner Wayne Quackenbush is passionate about his work. *Annex Comics, 308 Broadway, Newport. 401-245-2273*

Opened in 2006, **The Comic Doctor** is known for its reasonable pricing and wide selection. The store that started out with the owner's own collection has grown into one of the best places to find comics, and it also provides comic dry cleaning and pressing. One thing is for sure: It will be hard to leave this shop without a stack of new goodies in your arms. *The Comic Doctor, 828 Atwood Ave, Cranston. 401-275-6400*

Dark Star Comics is less than three years old, making it the youngest shop on our list. It is the definition of a neighborhood shop — the owner, Zack, was born and raised in the area. Along with comic books and figures, Dark Star Comics sells trading cards, posters and figures. They also host games, such as Magic: the Gathering, where you can meet fellow fans. *Dark Star Comics, 1234 Broad St, Central Falls. 401-722-2131*

Fantasy Zone Comics is a family-owned and operated business. After 20 years in operation, Fantasy Zone Comics has an extensive back issue collection and a staggering total collection of 50,000 comics. This gives them the ability put together entire sets, a truly unique offering. From graphic novels and comics to figures, the Fantasy Zone's collection is nothing short of impressive. *Fantasy Zone Comics, 7610 Post Rd, N. Kingstown. 401-294-6044*

Located in Chepachet, **Green Dragon Comic Shop** is another newer store — it's three years old. The shop offers back and new issue comics, and supports titles big and small. Along with comics, they also sell board games, RPGs and Magic: the Gathering cards. The owners strive to make it a place where customers can hang out, play games and talk about their passions. Whether placing a special order or simply guiding fans in the right direction, the Green Dragon family is happy to help. *Green Dragon Comic Shop, 401 Putman Pike, Chepachet. 401-949-2076*

Regan Hurst's **Rah-Coco Collectibles** is a one-stop shop that's been in PVD for 35 years. The shop has a well-rounded collection that includes new and old comics, action figures and even lithographs. Hurst also offers customers a subscription discount, making it easy for fans to keep up with favorite titles. *Rah-Coco Collectibles, 152 W. Park St, PVD. 401-861-3221*

The Time Capsule is famous for their *The Simpsons* window display. Though it's only been open for part of his life, owner Rob has been into comics all his life, and has a vast knowledge to share. The Time Capsule proudly displays special editions on their Comic Wall and offer an indoor sidewalk sale shopping experience. Their product knowledge and diversity is one of the many reasons to visit the gang in Cranston. *The Time Capsule, 537 Pontiac Ave, Cranston. 401-781-5017*

Although they focus more on vintage toys, **The Toy Vault** is also home to a good selection of graphic novels and comics. The only franchise-like shop on our list, The Toy Vault has been around since the 1990s. Among their vast collection of toys new and old is a selection of both popular and indie titles, and they keep up to date with all of your favorite heroes. *The Toy Vault, 400 Baldhill Rd, Warwick.*

401-921-5466

In a time where everything has gone digital, these local shops prove that holding a physical comic book is still important to a lot of fans. And while what they sell is important, the fact that these stores are owned by knowledgeable fans is a huge draw for both casual readers and collectors alike.