

Funda-Mental Storytelling: The esteemed fest celebrates 25 years

Funda is a Zulu word meaning “to learn.” This month, the Rhode Island Black Storytellers (RIBS) are hoping you learn about the art of storytelling in all forms and have fun doing it. Their annual Funda Fest is celebrating its 25th year, as well as their return to live performances, rather than the online version of the festival that they’ve had the last two years. **Valerie Tutson**, one of the founders of RIBS, said that the online festival had aspects that were good, like being able to invite storytellers from all over, “but it’s nice to have it in person for the 25th anniversary.” They are, however, still offering online options as well.

The theme of the festival this year is “sankofa.” This African word, symbolized by a mythical bird, means “to look back and learn from the past, to assess from the present, and to create and build for the future.” Tutson believes such reflection is important to society. “Every generation has felt the way we feel,” she says, a fact she finds comforting. “This is why we tell stories. Our personal being doesn’t stand on its own. We are folk of the world. Isn’t that a wonderful thing?”

Tutson has been involved in Funda Fest for the full 25 years of its story so far. In that time, she’s seen technology’s interaction with storytelling advance and transform many aspects of the art. “People are really using technology to find ways to tell stories, which I would say is the biggest change I’ve seen over the years.”



Photo of Len Cabral provided by Ann Clanton

“But one of the things that Funda has always done, that is so much a part of Black storytelling traditions, is really the notion of call and response,” says Tutson. “The audience’s immediate response is so important to the experience, and that’s a shared thing between the storyteller and the listeners. You don’t get the same immediacy through a technological device.” Tutson is excited and curious to see how this year’s new hybrid approach will work. For the last two years, Funda Fest has been online only. This year, most events are live and also streamed for an online audience. “Zoom is pretty darn good. But just

broadcasting it out there in the world is really hard, is really different.”

Regardless of technology changes, there are enduring aspects of storytelling that will always draw us back to it. “Storytelling is the thing that helps us know who we are, in whatever time we’re in. But also in the sankofa way. I think storytelling is what helps us remember that even if we’re having our own experiences, we are part of the human continuum. And the human experience,” says Tutson.

This year, the festival starts with a birthday party co-hosted by **Haus of Glitter** on Jan 14, with a VIP reception from 5 - 7pm and a dance party from 7 - 9pm, all at the Roger Williams Park Casino. The next day, Haus of Glitter and **RI Latino Arts** (RILA) meet at the Southside Cultural Center of RI from 3 - 5pm for performances featuring Magnolia Perez and Sussy Santana. After this, another VIP reception follows. The next weekend, on Jan 21, it’s Black History Live! They’ll be at the Southside Cultural Center all day, with a storytelling workshop at 10am and a variety of performances all day from artists like **Rochelle Garner Coleman**, **Antonio Rocha**, and **Becky Bass**. The following day features an event full of spoken word and poetry from the folks at **Outspoken! PVD: Rudy “Rudacious” Cabrera** and **Ginay Lopes** are featured, plus there’s an open mic. This event runs from 4 - 6pm.

Janice Curtis Greene, a griot from Maryland and current President of the National Association of Black Storytellers (NABS), will wow audiences with her performance as Harriet Tubman at South Kingstown High School on Wednesday, Jan 25. RI PBS is cosponsoring this event as part of their documentary on Underground Railroad legends. Thursday at the Southside Cultural Center, from 5 - 7pm, the Community Flavors event, sponsored by Higher Ground International (HGI), will have plenty of food, RIBS story prompts, and a traditional Grand March led by the Sweeties.

ANTONIO ROCHA



AMINA BLACKWOOD-MEEKS



TEJU OLOGBONI



Guest storytellers image provided by Ann Clanton

You can find the RIBS FIBS **Liar’s Contest** at the MPACT Stage in Pawtucket on Friday, where competitors will make up their best untrue stories and aim to convince the others in the room that they’re 100% true. Anyone can enter to win a cash prize! Register as a contestant online on the RIBS site: ribsfest.org.

On Saturday, Jan 28, the festival’s **Free Family Fun Day** is split between Pawtucket’s Black Lives Matter Innovation Center and the MPACT Stage. There will be workshops, poetry, youth and family storytelling, & vendors available. Sunday is the last day of the festival, with Sacred Storytelling at the MPACT Stage from 2 - 4pm, featuring the **Mixed Magic Theatre** Exult Choir, Worship Arts Restoration, Inc. (WAR), and featured guests. There will also be a session of Storytelling for Grown Folk

at 7:30 PM, a lot of fun for the adults.

The events on Saturday, Jan 28 and the performance at South Kingstown High School are free and open to the public but require registration; all the other events cost \$20. You can buy tickets to these events separately or pay \$75 for a festival pass, good for everything except the birthday party. The pass is good for both live & online attendance. More info is available on the RIBS website: ribsfest.org.