

# 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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