

Telling tall tales

Hagood Mill storytelling event set for Saturday

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THE JOURNAL



As an old-time banjo and harmonic master, resident storyteller Johnny Fowler incorporates music into his performances.

PICKENS — Everyone's a storyteller. Some take it to the stage, and others take it to the living room.

That's how Johnny Fowler, coordinator of the 14th annual Hagood Mill Storytelling Festival, describes this intrinsic art.

The festival started as an offshoot from Hagood's annual fiddlers convention. People would gather around in the late afternoon and share their tall tales and memories. When the mill was ready to expand its activities, the storytelling festival seemed a natural addition.

Admission is free, but there's a \$5 parking fee. Storytellers from West Virginia, Tennessee and the Catskill Mountains will perform this Saturday at Hagood Mill from 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Featured storyteller Kim Weitkamp is a humorist, keynote speaker, presenter, singer and songwriter. The common thread among all her titles is the talent of storytelling. She performs in front of thousands of people per year and has won numerous awards.

For 18 years she integrated storytelling into her counseling of at-risk youth. But for the last six years, she's been storytelling professionally full-time, and onstage at least 20 days each month.

Although one can earn a master's degree in storytelling, what Weitkamp does comes naturally.

"I've always been a storyteller — my mom will tell you that. They'd have people over for dinner, and I

would do Barbra Streisand impersonations," she said. "I'd write plays and tell stories to anybody that would listen."

Weitkamp no longer performs in her parents' living room — instead she entertains crowds of hundreds of people at national storytelling festivals. Her latest project, a folk operetta, has received high praise within the music industry and storytelling community.

"Operetta means music and speaking. 'The Ballad of Ronnie Calloway' has a bluegrass, folk, Americana feel to it," Weitkamp said. "The story is beautiful. People email me about how much they laughed and cried."

It's not uncommon for someone to tell Weitkamp that her stories have changed their life. Storytellers usually draw on their own experiences and talk about lessons they've learned in humorous or poignant ways, so audience members identify with the stories and thus the tales shed light on their own lives.

"I've had people tell me they've forgiven their mother or come to terms with their father. Any good counselor, preacher or teacher knows that storytelling is a compelling vehicle," she said. "The greatest tool for persua-

sion is storytelling, and that's not just me talking — that's Cambridge, Harvard and 'Scientific American Mind.' This is not a novel idea — we just happen to have fun with it."

Weitkamp said the most common misconception about storytelling is that it's for kids. However, this weekend's festival will be filled with comedy, music and drama that is kid-safe but written for adults.

"If they like 'Prairie Home Companion,' if they like Bill Engvall of the 'Blue Collar Comedy Tour,' then they'll enjoy Saturday's festival," she said. "That's what they're going to get, along with a good dose of Appalachian music and history."

She believes that storytelling is built into the human DNA. People tell stories every day — to their siblings, to their kids, to their coworkers — it's a main avenue for communication.

"There are challenges with cellphones, but if TV didn't wipe out human-to-human stories, then cellphones won't either," Weitkamp said. "Storytellers have a dual role. We not only gift our stories, but we stir up stories within others to gift to those around them."



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL