

Storyline: Telling tales that teach transforms a once 'deathly shy' kid

The story, as Lisa Facciponti tells it, goes something like this:

Once there was a man who worked for a king, and the man boasted that he could do anything the king asked.

The king got word of the man's boast, and the king wasn't happy. So the king gave the man an impossible task: to find something that would make a sad man happy, and a happy man sad.

The man searched and searched.

The day came for him to present his findings to the king, and still the man found nothing

"I like stories that teach lessons," says Facciponti, the Lehigh Valley's uncrowned queen of storytelling on this Tuesday morning, Facciponti sits outside her Lower Nazareth Township home and leans on an African drum called a djembe (JIM-bay). In the house, the poodles Elvis and Daisey - be careful, she bites - scratch at the windows.

Facciponti is one of the few people in the Lehigh Valley making a living at storytelling. She uses traditional folk stories from cultures around the world as teaching tools.

"You can use storytelling to teach anything — math, self-esteem, public speaking skills," she says. "It makes it fun."

The 37-year-old's schedule through May and most of June is packed with engagements at places as diverse as Godfrey Daniels in Bethlehem, the National Canal Museum in Easton, Hanover Elementary School and a storytelling festival in Rhode Island.

Facciponti's ears first opened to the power of the story when she was "a deathly shy" student at Easton Area High School in the late 1970s. One of her classmates got up in front of most of the school and told a story from the perspective of a 3-year-old, Facciponti says.

"It was so simple, and so hilarious," she says. "All these people I was scared of were in stitches."

The man visited the marketplace, and he came across a blacksmith making rings. He told the blacksmith that he had to find the object that would make a happy man sad and a sad man happy.

"I have such an object," the blacksmith said. The craftsman then engraved something on a plain gold ring, and handed it to the man.

The man read what was on the ring,



and he smiled.

"Thank you," he told the blacksmith, and tried to offer him money. But the blacksmith wouldn't take the money, and the man went before the king...

Facciponti got involved in storytelling in the early 1900s. She taught marine science classes to preschool and elementary school students at Mystic Marinelife Aquarium in Connecticut.

Storytelling was a way to boost her teaching skills, she says. One of the world's oldest folk arts, storytelling, as Facciponti saw it, connected with children.

"One of the most important parts of education is sparking people's interest, getting them to learn on their own," she says.

While working at Mystic and living in nearby Rhode Island, Facciponti founded a storytelling guild with some friends.

"They pushed me out on stage, and I've been there ever since," she says.

Her favorite part of the whole process, she says, is using storytelling to bring a foreign culture to students in the Lehigh Valley.

She often incorporates African and American Indian drumming and traditional folk dances, all of which she teaches, into her stories so that people get a vignette of what other cultures are like.

"I really like to tell stories that give a cultural understanding, that promote tolerance and peace," she says.

The tough part for Facciponti is in turning storytelling, dance and drumming into a living. Nationally, the demand for storytellers is booming, she says.

But working so far outside the mainstream is difficult, she admits. In the Lehigh Valley there is a market for storytelling, she says, because the simple lessons of the folktale need to be told.

"But I don't know if it's going to be enough to live on," she says. "I'm not disheartened yet. If there's a space for it, it'll catch on."

The king was holding a great feast when the man entered the hall. "Have you found the object that will make a happy man sad and a sad man happy" the king asked.

The man handed the king the plain gold ring, and the king, laughed for he thought such an object did not exist.

Inscribed on the ring were the words: "This too shall pass."

And the king grew sad in the midst of his great feast.

From The Express-Times, 5/24/1999, A-1, Express-Times photo by Bruce Winter.