

## Starting and Building a Storytelling Guild

Experiences and Suggestions from the Northeast Guilds

- I. Guild experiences
- II. Suggestions for starting a guild

- I. This document is built from the generous sharing by Storytelling Guilds from all over the Northeast. When you wish to begin a new guild, read their experiences for ideas to help you take the first steps.

The Story Circle of the Capital District of New York grew out of a weeklong retreat on storytelling in 1983. The interest generated in that retreat led to a few tellers getting together to meet monthly to practice works in progress. Since that time, 1983, the Story Circle has grown into a robust group that presents public performances, runs open mics, and produces a public access TV show about storytelling. They have published their own collection of stories by members.

The WOODS Storytelling Guild in Farmington, Maine, started with one dynamic member teaching a storytelling class at the local Senior College. Some of the earliest members came from that original class. The Guild itself started with a small advertisement in the local newspaper. WOODS very quickly stepped forward to produce the Western Maine Storytelling Festival, an ambitious project that brought professional tellers to Farmington for two days of events. The Guild advertised their festival by participating in the local 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade with a float they decorated themselves. Now, they spread public events out through the summer months, entertaining at local Fairs and festivals.

The Mountain Storytellers Guild in New Hampshire began with a get together of storytellers. Over dinner, the discussion of how each teller developed and practiced their stories led to talk of Guilds. The new Mountain Tellers Guild started meeting once a month. They advertised their meetings in the calendar section of the local newspaper. After several years as a small gathering, they moved to a larger setting and hosted the Granite State Story Swap one year. Like many smaller Guilds, Mountain Storytellers networked with other groups, and shared the joy of stories. Mountain Storytellers doesn't meet formally at the moment, but stands as an example of the support and cooperation that even small Guilds can offer. As Matt says, "My advice to anyone who wants to start a guild is: just set a regular time and place- then get together and tell those stories, create a friendly, supportive space, and keep telling stories, even if there are just three people who come each time."

Farther south, the Long Island Storytelling Network (LISN) was formed from a defunct Guild. They are also a small Guild, but monthly in Setauket, NY. They

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have an email notification list of over 90 people. Like most Guilds, it is very informal, with no Guilds and no fixed membership list. They do have a webpage and are working on ways to promote themselves better. In the meantime, they meet regularly to share the art of storytelling, and perform at gigs for local libraries, museums, and adult community residences. They have videos of their performers on their website, as well as all the stories they have shared since 2007.

New Haven Connecticut is the home of the Institute Library. This library, a center for community-based artistic and intellectual life, has made storytelling part of its ongoing program. This guild started with a series of four workshops in 2014. These workshops were open to all. At the end of the series, six tellers from the workshop performed in a successful public Tellabration.

From this auspicious beginning has grown a group that meets monthly to informally share stories in any stage of development. The group uses the feedback method in Doug Lipman's Storytelling Coach. Any kind of story is permitted.

A second successful workshop series and Tellabration were held in the Fall of 2015. The group is considering opportunities to perform as a group.

The Black Dirt Storytelling Guild has a fifteen year history at the Library in Florida, New York. Storyteller Madelyn Folino is Library Director and catalyst for this active group. At the first Tellabration (the month after the library opened) the attendees chose to form a guild. They meet monthly, have no membership fee, and are open to all aged 16 and up.

This Guild picks a theme for each meeting. They begin with refreshments (of course), news of conferences, new storytelling books, and reports on events. They have no rules for the length of stories, and use a feedback style similar to Doug Lipman's. This group has run into a challenge that many guilds face from time to time: an occasional participant who seems to need therapy and is not committed to storytelling per se.

The group is comfortable, despite some changes in membership over the years, but remained at a relatively stable number of members. When attendance began to drop, however, Madelyn rolled the group into a Spoken Word series, to market it differently. This includes poetry, readers' theatre, storytelling cafes, poetry cafes (3 poets and an open mic) and workshops with tellers from other locales.

In this guild, one person (Madelyn) screens requests, suggests fees, sets up programs, etc. for the group. They do not charge fees for many local groups (scouts, schools, 4H, etc.) but do charge for entities like libraries, agencies and individuals. They perform together at times, and split the fee. The list of events at which they have performed is extensive.

This guild publicizes its meeting in three newspapers as well as in monthly flyers of library programs.

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In Trenton, Maine, is a guild known as LOONS (Lovers Of Old & New Stories). This guild began with students who took part in several storytelling courses at the local senior colleges. The group has remained small (5-10 participants) since its inception five years ago. Like other guilds, it meets monthly. There are no dues or official membership lists, but notes are kept from each meeting and sent out to all who attend. The meeting begins with "Tales from the Web," a selected video of an accomplished teller performing. In this way, the guild members have learned about different styles of telling, and the different skills demonstrated by a broad range of tellers. The group enjoys discussing each performance.

After Tales from the Web, the floor is open to anyone in the group who has prepared a tale. A "challenge theme" has been sent out a month ahead, and stories often reflect widely varying approaches to the challenge. Traditional, personal and historical (character reenactment) stories are typically on the docket. Some members have recently become interested in puppets. Members range from 12 years old to "older than dirt"

The guild collaborates with other guilds in Maine to produce an annual event (The Maine Muster of Storytellers) which includes workshop and performance elements. The guild members perform both independently and together.

After the stories, the group takes some time to discuss events, opportunities and plans.

LOONS is publicized mostly through word of mouth and Facebook.

Sandra Kelley has added a different perspective from the Jonesborough Storytelling Guild. This is Guild is a longstanding and well established one. Jonesborough itself is at the heart of storytelling and, as Sandra relates, some people move to Jonesborough for the purpose of participating in and learning from this impressive group. Sandra herself has developed a workshop entitled "Build a Better Storytelling Guild" and has generously extended her permission to include some pointers from her experience here.

The Jonesborough Guild follows a clearly defined mission statement and bylaws. What stands out about this Guild, however, is its mentoring program. In her workshop outline, Sandra writes about the Jonesborough mentoring program:

Having satisfied the requirement of serving as a Supporting Member no less than 6-months to a year (depending on storytelling background and experience,) member seeking Performing Member status applies to the Executive Board for an interview to request a mentor. If the board approves the request – and sometimes they do not, a mentor is assigned. \*Apprentice must have a minimum of two hours of performance-ready material prior to beginning process.

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Although the responding guilds in the Northeast are not as robust as the Jonesborough Guild, the subject of mentoring is particularly valuable to consider.

Storytelling Guilds serve several purposes. Saundra includes support and education for Guild members, mentoring, community engagement, goal setting and network building as some of the cornerstones of a successful guild. How each guild undertakes and balances the challenge to support both storytellers and storytelling is a unique journey.

## II. Suggestions for Starting Guilds

1. First suggestion, send an email to the list serve about your nascent group, giving a list of the towns, etc. that are close by and see if anyone bites.
2. Seek advice from those who have gone before you.
3. Develop a clear picture of how the guild will be organized and led.
4. Define the goals you wish to meet through creating this guild.
5. Contact LANES' administrator, Deb Roe, at [director@LANES.org](mailto:director@LANES.org). Ask her what LANES members are within your area, search for them online and see if you know them... then call them personally..
6. Make sure you list the event on the calendar on the LANES website.
7. List the event in the community announcements section of your local newspaper.
8. Develop colorful rack cards to display at the area Visitors Center, the library and at the B&B's around town.
9. Take out an advertisement in the local newspaper.
10. Arrange to teach a course on storytelling at your local Senior College.
11. See if a local business will offer a small prize, and host a story slam
12. Decorate a float about your storytelling and walk in your local 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade.
13. Meet with the Director of your local library to discuss possible shared programming goals, meeting site, etc.
14. Hire an accomplished teller and workshop leader to come and offer a workshop in your area: publicize widely, drag your friends along.
15. Begin holding a monthly meeting to tell stories, work on new tales and support each other. Even if there are only a few of you, keep meeting. Build an email list, publicize widely.
16. Suggestion from Saundra Kelley: one of our performing members, Larry Kelley, suggested we have a day of mini-workshops featuring the most basic of storytelling issues. We had everything from how to cast a story on the arc, to timing issues, topic appropriateness, traditional vs personal narrative - you name it. As a result we were flooded with new folk we'd not seen before, some of whom joined us and one or two are telling now. Others took the information home

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with them and stirred things up outside our boundaries. We are considering another one in the near future.

17. Start a Social Media presence (Facebook page, etc.) and start posting stories, reviews of storytelling books, video story clips from YouTube.
18. Think about starting a website so all your information can be in one place and you will be searchable. Include videos and stories.
19. Contact local organizations that might be open to hosting a performance.
20. Contact your local libraries about summer programs, holiday programs, etc.
21. Hand out flyers everywhere you go.
22. Consider connections with local schools and colleges.
23. Offer a free course on "sharing stories" through your adult education extension, elder center, community center, YMCA, Library, etc.
24. Offer a free night of entertainment at a local restaurant, and then book about 2-4 fellow tellers to share the bill with you. Pass the hat, if you need to.
25. Go busking in the nearby town or park. (Get a permit first.) Then engage your audience and hand out flyers.
26. Put up posters at the local laudromat, library, YMCA, etc.
27. Put up a call at Sharing the Fire to meet folks from your area.