



# Storytelling

## *Laugh, Cry, Cheer, Repeat*

It's an event where grown men cry unashamedly, where grown women laugh so hard they can't catch their breath. It has been – now for 40 years – the same every year and completely different every year. Come on along to the National Storytelling Festival in beautiful downtown Jonesborough, Tenn.

*by Laurie McClellan*

**I WAS SURROUNDED** by the hills of East Tennessee, sitting on the edge of my seat, when I heard Gene Tagaban tell the true story of how a deer saved his cousin's life. When this cousin came back from Vietnam, he came back different. He was no longer the carefree kid who loved hunting in the woods, searching for the gigantic buck that people in his town had been chasing for years, the one no one had ever managed to sneak up on. One day, he parked his car on the road, took out his rifle, and started hiking toward his favorite spot in the woods, a large clearing about a mile away. The rifle held just a single bullet, because he only needed one – it was intended, of course, for himself.

When the boy reached the clearing, he sat down and started to say goodbye. Just then, the famous buck stepped out of the trees. It looked right at him. The boy couldn't resist; he leveled his gun and pulled the trigger. The deer bounded away, unhurt. By the time the boy had hiked back to his car for another bullet, he'd changed his mind. From then on, he started learning the traditional songs and dances of his Tlingit Indian ancestors, and he started to recover.

I heard Tagaban's story at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tenn. I can't remember what year it was. They all blur together, because I've been there 20 times in a row, without a break.

### TELLABRATION!

Each November on the weekend before Thanksgiving, nearly every state along the Blue Ridge joins communities across the country and the world to celebrate the power of sharing stories. From Storytelling in the Canyon in Alabama and Tellabration! at Tamarack in Beckley, W.Va. to gatherings held right on the Blue Ridge Parkway at the Asheville Folk Art Center in North Carolina, these events seek to honor the art of storytelling and, as founder J. G. Pinkerton said, remind us "of our common humanity." Founded in 1988 and held on every continent but Antarctica, these events range in size but always focus on local storytellers. Many Tellabration! events are free and some are fun for the whole family. Search [tellabration.org](http://tellabration.org) by state to find an event close to you.

—Mandy Yokim

## GOING THIS YEAR?

The 40th annual National Storytelling Festival takes place October 5-7, 2012 in Jonesborough, Tenn. For more information: [StoryTellingCenter.net](http://StoryTellingCenter.net)

My story starts in 1991, when I was looking for a room to rent in Washington, D.C. I went to see a group house and was met by a young woman wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with the words "National Storytelling Festival." When I asked her what a storytelling festival was, she explained that it was like a theater event. Professional storytellers came from all over the world, and you sat on folding chairs in these giant tents and just listened. "Sounds like fun," I said.

I moved into the house, and the next October, we went to the 20th annual National Storytelling Festival together. We were so young and broke, and Robyn's Honda Civic was so old, that somewhere in Virginia, the muffler fell halfway off and started dragging on the highway, sending sparks flying past the rear window. We managed to tie it back on with a piece of string. The two of us have gone to the festival every year since, and this October will be the 40th annual event.

Let me give you some advice. No matter how old your car is, or how broke you are, you should be there



Festival crowds are always supportive.

too, on the first weekend in October. When you get to Jonesborough, you'll find a small town where the streets are lined with brick storefronts from a century ago. Autumn leaves skitter down the sidewalks, and from a tent in the distance, you'll hear a distant roar of laughter carried on the breeze. That's when you start



1.



2.



3.

1. The late Doc McConnell was an early fixture.
2. Donald Davis is a star of recent fests.
3. Story Man Baba Jamal Koram entertains.

hurrying to get there in time for the next story. Except that you may have to stop at the booth operated by the public library on the way, to buy a hot apple cider.

Every year feels the same, but the stories are always different. Have you ever heard a traditional Japanese ghost story? They often take place in winter, and they're always creepy. I have seen grown men sit in those tents with tears spilling down their faces, not moving to wipe them away. I have seen women laugh so hard that they couldn't catch their breath and started hiccupping. I was once part of an audience that leapt to its feet and clapped and cheered for a full five minutes, and the storyteller on stage was powerless to get us to sit down. I have heard a cowboy from Montana tell stories about his life, in poetry, followed by a Minnesotan who remembered trick-or-treating at the house of a neighbor who specialized in making the sourest pickles imaginable. On October 31st, the kids could choose from two pickle jars: one marked "Edible," the other marked "Halloween."

You will come back from this festival feeling a little bit better, as if you were not so alone, perhaps, as if, like the Grinch, your heart had grown a few sizes from all that exercise: laugh, cry, cheer, repeat. While you're there, be sure to buy one of the quesadillas from the One World Kitchen stand. I like the pesto ones, but Robyn and Sandy prefer the black bean. We'll save you a spot in line. ❧