



Do Tell

The long story of Beauty & the Beast

By CAROLYN BELLE

Would you like to hear a story?"

"...the boy realized it was the stone he was sitting on that had spoken. The boy replied, "What does it mean to tell a story?"

Mitch Weiss and Martha Hamilton, Ithaca's own Beauty and the Beast Storytellers, are celebrating their 20 years of professional storytelling together. They act like the stone in their adaptation of the Seneca Indian story "Where All Stories Come From," in the way they share and teach the art of storytelling.

Our community has been lucky to inspire, nurture and reap the benefits from Beauty and the Beast's elementary-school residencies for teaching children to choose and tell stories. We have an entire generation of young people who have faced the challenge and joy of telling a story in front of their parents, teachers, and friends, under the guidance of Weiss and Hamilton.

Rachel McMichael, now a freshman at Cornell University, clearly recalls her third-grade storytelling experience, more than half her lifetime ago. It is easy to believe that this confident young woman has used the public speaking lessons she learned then: "Keeping eye contact, not jittering, using motions, and talking slowly."

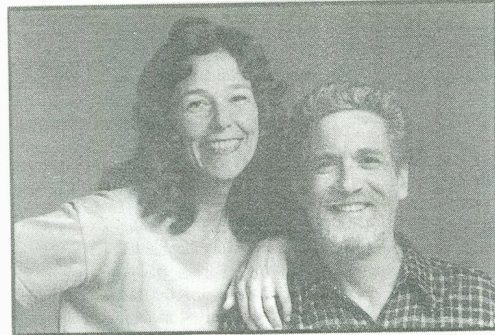
McMichael, while not shy, isn't a performer in search of an audience. She

laughs when I ask if she could tell her story now, but chooses instead to summarize the plot of the ghost story she told years ago. Was it hard for her? In terms of experience, "I was probably in the middle; I couldn't stand up with no problem, but I wasn't too nervous." She feels that getting public speaking experience early on was important for her. "It's a skill you need to know. If your first speech is in middle school, in science, with notecards, and where you are graded, it's going to be hard."

For Hamilton and Weiss, teaching children to tell stories was an outgrowth of performing at elementary schools. Fourteen years ago, Bob Navarro, then principal of the Ithaca district's Enfield Elementary School, suggested, "Why don't you teach the kids?" At that time, they couldn't find anyone else doing such a project, so the couple created their own curriculum and won their first grant from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA). Their success snowballed and, with funds from the district, PTAs and other grants, as well as talent, their residency program has supported the curriculum in all the Ithaca elementary schools as well as many more farther out in the country and world.

In the schools

Weiss and Hamilton, who quickly became "Mitch and Martha" to everyone they work with, begin their three-week residency with storytelling performances for all of the students in a school. The students who will be working with them



photo/Deede Hatch

WHICH IS WHICH?: Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss never tell which one is the beast.

have already begun by choosing their stories from a collection of 60 tales sent out by the storytellers.

"Mitch and Martha give you a packet," explains Allison Andersen, third-grade teacher at South Hill School, who completed the project this March in her classroom. "They do the planning. It's not problematic to fit into our daily routine," she explains. "It fits in with speaking, reading, social studies and more."

Andersen set aside a stack of work to elaborate on the benefits of students

learning and adapting a story for their own telling. In reading alone, the benefits are great. "At this stage, students are becoming fluent readers, but not necessarily stopping at punctuation," she said. "Expressive storytelling helps make words on a page come to life." The hope is that this will extend to their reading as well.

"Picking their stories gets them thinking about the genre that most appeals to them," said Andersen, which is a great step toward creating lifelong readers.

"They are so professional," comments Andersen. "Not a moment is wasted, and they have a great understanding of kids and what they need to say."

The coaching sessions are at the

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heart of the project. On the warmest day of March, Diane Clark's third-graders tumbled in from recess at Belle Sherman school, rushing for drinks before splitting into two groups. Martha took one group to another room. Mitch grinned: "Do I have to work with these sweaty kids?" The tone was set for a playful yet serious work session.

Chantelle Young stood in front of the chalkboard, hands behind her back, head slightly bowed, and launched into her story. She didn't get far before Mitch, leaning back with legs stretched out in front of a small student chair, interrupted: "Remember, it's a dove, and use those hands..."

Down the hall in another sunlit room, Martha sat tall with a straight back and intense attention to her tellers. Her dark eyes shone. "You're coming alive!" and "You've worked so hard on this, we want everyone to hear," and "I love the way you say, 'Not at all.'" She stood up at one point to demonstrate, hunching over, and screwing up her face: "Look mad," she said, in character.

Both storytellers made notes on copies of the student's stories to remind them what to practice. Although the groups have three practice sessions each with the professionals, much of their work is done elsewhere. There is plenty of practice in the classroom, with each other and with other adults.

"In our class, the speech therapist, special education teacher, and teacher aide participated as much as anyone

else," explained Andersen, "and their cooperation made the project more meaningful."

The big night

Ryan Nivison, a third-grader in Andersen's class, expressed his embarrassment about speaking in front of a group in a writing assignment earlier this year. But by the time South Hill had its storytelling evening in March, he enjoyed it. The final school day session with Beauty and the Beast was preparation and a pep talk about the big event. Through his work with Mitch and Martha, Ryan identified himself as a fellow storyteller. At the evening storytelling festival, he was put at ease by their short performance: "Since they told stories in front of the whole big group in the cafeteria, it made me feel better."

When parents and siblings

streamed out of the cafeteria to make three smaller audiences in the third-grade classrooms, the students were ready, with Mitch and Martha's *s-s-snake* voices from a story and a final, short pep talk still ringing in their ears.

And talk about great audiences! Students from Andersen's class reminisced about their performances. "The most fun was at the end, where everyone was clapping for you," said Kendra Wells.

"My friends Caleb and Dan did it, so I tried it, and now I'm not afraid of talking in front of groups anymore," commented Ryan.

The students realized the value of their new skills. Alicia Lewkowicz predicts that "I'll have to do a speech in high school — then it'll be easier for me."

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Katie Eiten adds, "It will help me when I'm speaking. Sometimes at church, my mom and dad have to stand up and say something, and sometime I will, too."

The project brings a classroom community together. "The kids are there for each other," observed Andersen. "Even the kids that don't turn out to be gifted storytellers gain self-esteem and appreciation for each other. You can't teach them that kind of pride and support. It comes from working hard and doing well for your friends and family."

Last year, program alumna McMichaels got to experience the project from the other side, as she volunteered in

Monica Lang's third-grade class at Belle Sherman School. She was impressed with the confidence gained by even the shyest of students as they rehearsed their stories. "You could watch their personalities come out in their stories. The shy kids were able to become the people they'd want to be."

McMichaels smiles. "Mitch and Martha are some of the coolest people I know. We loved them. Those were the best days in third grade for me, and for the kids in Monica's class last year, too."

It's clear that, for Mitch Weiss, Martha Hamilton, and the thousands of young Ithacans who have learned the art of storytelling, the Seneca tale has come true again...

"At last one day, the stone said to the boy, 'I no longer will tell you stories. It is now your job to remember them and tell them to your people. Wherever you go to tell these legends, you will be welcomed and cared for.'"

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"Where All Stories Came From" is from Hamilton and Weiss's newest book, *How and Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell*, which has a companion tape and CD featuring both Beauty and the Beast and local student storytellers.

Carolyn Belle is a regular contributor to *Ithaca Child*.