

# Storytelling: an Ithaca tradition

BY KATHERINE KLEIN

**A**LTHOUGH she's heading into her junior year of high school and she's performed in many theater productions since, Lucy Rose Davidoff of Ithaca remembers the story she told in third grade.

"How the Brazilian Beetle Got His Colors." She even says it with some of the panache she developed as a third-grader at Belle Sherman Elementary School.

"Everybody remembers the story they did," says Davidoff, even the students who weren't, as she is, naturally inclined to performance. For example, telling a story in front of the whole class helped Davidoff's best friend, a shy girl, come out of her shell.

"It can be a life-changing thing," says Davidoff.

Stories have the power to change the lives of children, say Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss, an Ithaca couple known together as Beauty and the Beast Storytellers. For more than 20 years, teachers and students in the Ithaca Community Schools, as well as schools across the U.S., Canada and overseas, have found this to be true.

Teachers and students at Belle Sherman and other Ithaca Community Schools have established a tradition of storytelling, with the help and encouragement of Beauty and the Beast Storytellers. Each year, Weiss and Hamilton tell stories in school-wide presentations, then work with smaller groups, helping students tell their own stories.

"We always say it's the power of story," says Hamilton during an interview in the back yard of their Ithaca home. "It's really different than reading to kids — a connection is made."

Beauty and the Beast Storytellers make that connection with students when they work with schools. The stories arrive first.

Weiss and Hamilton sent packets of stories they've compiled to the school a month before they visit. Then, they introduce the storytelling unit by performing in a school assembly. Finally, they work in workshops with individual classrooms as students start to bring the written stories to life.

#### AN EDUCATIONAL KEY

"This is always very exciting for the children and they look forward to learning to tell stories by themselves," says Nancy Thompson, a third grade teacher at Belle Sherman. "The stories come to life for the children."

It's not just exciting for the students, say Weiss and Hamilton. It's also a key component of education.

"To be successful in life you need to be able to communicate," says Hamilton. "I think everyone uses speaking and listening."

Thompson sees the results of storytelling skills in her third grade classroom.

"The children develop presentation and

speaking skills, as well as learning how to listen and be a supportive member of the audience," she says. "Although the children don't memorize the stories, they learn new vocabulary and valuable strategies about how to read and fully understand a story."

Moreover, storytelling units develop skills that are essential for fulfilling New York State learning standards, which include listening, reading and speaking for information and understanding, using American and world literature, as well as analytical and social interaction skills.

"The storytelling unit encompasses all of these objectives as students read, analyze, discuss, and write about their stories, listen to the stories of their classmates, and learn to tell their own story," says Thompson.

Speaking and listening skills are high on new state educational standards, Hamilton says. She and Weiss have been saying from the beginning that storytelling teaches essential skills.

In the first session with third grade classes, Hamilton and Weiss work on basic storytelling skills, such as voice and characters. Simple stories make the best opportunities for storytelling, they say, with repetition, dialogue and simple vocabulary.

For these reasons, storytelling can especially help students for whom English is a second language, like many in

Thompson's class, a clustered ESL classroom.

Thompson recalls Adoni, a new student from Mexico. He learned to tell "Sneezy," a story with few words and lots of sound effects, the very first day he arrived in an English-speaking classroom.

She also remembers that the mother of one student from China was so inspired by her son's storytelling, she borrowed the storytelling books and tapes to use at home, to teach herself English.

#### A LIFE'S WORK

Weiss and Hamilton discovered their life work of teaching kids to tell stories, and rewriting stories for kids to tell. Storytelling has always been a key part of this couple's relationship.

Hamilton worked as a reference librarian early in her career, but always had an interest in children's literature, planted by a high school English teacher who read E.B. White's *Stuart Little* to the class, "just to bring back this joy."

Years later, at a library conference, Hamilton found herself in the wrong room, in a storytelling conference. She decided to stay, beginning a career as a storyteller.

She was already a storyteller when she

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met Weiss.

"Mitch is a storyteller and doesn't know it," a mutual friend told her. Indeed, Weiss had been active in theater, but never thought of storytelling.

"I loved it," he says, when Hamilton and other friends introduced him to the craft. "I've never had trouble learning stories."

The couple has dedicated their lives to the art form, and believe strongly that children gain not just speaking and communication tools but confidence and life skills when they tell stories.

They first shared with a school in Enfield; they've now been associated with Ithaca Community Schools for over 20 years.

"As soon as you begin to tell a story, it's just innate, it's something they crave," says Hamilton. "They just get quiet."

Weiss and Hamilton have built up an extensive collection of stories over the years and they are continually adding new stories.

"We try and find stories kids don't know," says Hamilton. "There are a gazillion folk tales."

The latest book of stories compiled by Weiss and Hamilton, *Scared Witless: Thirteen Erie Tales to Tell*, was published in September 2006.

They will perform stories from the book in a special "Friday Night Fright Night" at Ithaca's Bookery II at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 20. The event is for families with children age six and older.

Their published books of stories suitable for out-loud telling include *Stories in My Pocket: Tales Kids Can Tell, How & Why*; *Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read & Tell*, and the recent *The Hidden Feast: A Folk tale from the American South*.

Their classic teaching reference *Children Tell Stories* has been a classroom guide for teachers since 1990. The second edition was just published in 2005 by Richard Owen Publishers, Inc.

Through the past 25 years, Beauty and the Beast Storytellers have contributed to a growing enthusiasm for storytelling in the United States.

"It's a pretty big movement in this country," says Weiss. When he and Hamilton started out, they knew everyone, he says. Now he's astounded at how many people are out there telling stories. Hundreds of regional festivals take place each year and many school systems are, like Ithaca, starting to incorporate storytelling as a key part of the curriculum, and not just entertainment.

The effects of the third grade storytelling unit show in students' lives years later.

Davidoff and many of her classmates have been inspired by the experience to explore theater.

Weiss and Hamilton remain active encouragers of the thriving theater program at Ithaca High School, she says.

Like Davidoff, hundreds of Ithaca area students remember the stories they told in third grade, thanks to Beauty and the Beast Storytellers.

"It sort of becomes your own," says Davidoff. "It's sort of magic."

*Scared Witless, the latest book of stories compiled by Mitch Weiss and Martha Hamilton, is now available in bookstores.*

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Visit [www.beautyandthebeaststorytellers.com](http://www.beautyandthebeaststorytellers.com).