Telling the tales of Southwest Virginia

BY ASHLEY SPINKS

It's a Saturday evening in August at the June Bug Center for Art and Education, and around 50 people are enthralled by a darkhaired woman sitting in the middle of the room on a big red throne. She's just voiced a fear that many in the audience likely hold tight to their chests: "I've always been afraid I was going to die." Her story's just begun—no one is sure how it will end or sure if they should feel sympathy, anxiety or despair. Then, the woman cuts through the tension with a welltimed quip, "I've heard it's definitely going to happen

eventually.' The audience laughs, some shrug or nod knowingly, and the story moves on. The woman currently in the "hot seat" of the monthly Blue Ridge Story Space event is surprisingly candid, sharing with the audience how she had a health scare that led to medical tests and an extended stay in the hospital. At one point, she describes the hospital staff becoming "like her new little family," and that's how this room feels, too. In the span of a few minutes, everyone in the room has spontaneously formed a bond and a sense of trust permeates the space. Trust, and the smell of popcorn being served in the next room.

The Blue Ridge Story Space is the brainchild and personal project of Christal Trivett-Presley and her partner Jane, who moved to Floyd seeking to "slow down their lives." The pair ran a similar program in their previous community in Georgia and was inspired by "The Moth" radio hour program on National Public Radio. The premise is simple: if you like to tell and listen to stories, stop on by. The program is held in the black box theater of the June Bug Center on the first Saturday of each month, and has been for the past 17 months, Christal said.

It is surprising—and heartening—how many people have shown up just to listen to their neighbors and friends share stories. The unabashed willingness of participants to be vulnerable in public is also unexpected and refreshing. Everyone in attendance lives nearby, but the stories told vary widely—attending Story Space helps one appreciate the vast diversity in experience, perspective and beliefs that exists even in this

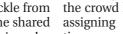


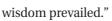


small corner of Southwest wisdom prevailed." Virginia.

Another storyteller told the tale of himself, his wife and another couple kayaking in Michigan. Before long the story took a turn—because the kayak took a turn. "What had happened was...I found realized: "What we do next myself standing in a is more important than Michigan river," he said. how we got here." He told He elicited a chuckle from the crowd when he shared that his "first impulse was to explain to my wife Instead, he turned his at-

servations soon gave way to serious life lessons a trajectory many of the stories followed. Standing in the middle of a river, flipped boat, soaked clothes and all, the man the crowd how he resisted assigning blame, or getting angry or discouraged. where her error was...but tention toward moving





But the lighthearted ob-





Storytellers and audience members enjoy the show at Story Space.

forward, and bettering the situation. He told a comedic story of a kayaking mishap, and it's not clear if imparting wisdom was his intention all along, but he certainly achieved it.

Something about inhabiting that black box theatre, facing a big red armchair and listening to people bare their souls—whether amusing embarrassments or heartbreaking lossesmade everything feel like a metaphor but somehow, not heavy-handed. Steve Garay told a story about completing a triathlon.

The prompt for the August iteration of Story Space was, "What had bit like attending church.

happened was..." and on theme, that is exactly how Garay began his story. "What had happened was... I was dumb," he said. "I decided I was going to do a triathlon." Garay went on to recount myriad obstacles he faced in pursuit of the finish line—including a huge rainstorm hitting the race. "The storm passed over, and I decided I was going to push on," Garay said. Again, the metaphors aren't subtle here.

Garay had travelled from Stewartsville to attend Story Space, and as a former pastor said he has no to approximately seven trouble speaking in front minutes. You can learn of crowds.

Garay's occupation is apt, because going to Blue Ridge Story Space feels a <u>ridge-story-space/</u>.

It's 90 minutes where you have the opportunity to relate to your fellow human beings, practice empathy, learn something new about yourself, root yourself in a community and internalize stories akin to parables. As Jane Trivett-Presley said, it's a

chance to "just be." Blue Ridge Story Space takes place on the first Saturday of each month at the June Bug Center. The next meeting will be Sept. 7 at 5:30 p.m., with the theme "Life and Death." Storytellers are encouraged to limit their presentations more about the program at https://blueridgewrit- ingacademy.com/blue-

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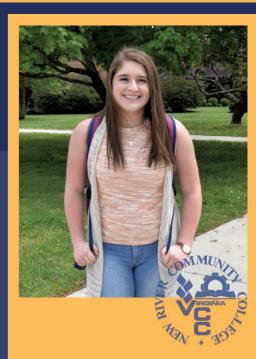
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