

Marin Snapshot: A story of bliss for Mill Valley actor

Jim Staats
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MILL VALLEY ACTOR Phil Sheridan may get recognized from roles in TV shows such as "Nash Bridges" or voice-over work including "Grandpa" of Sim City video games, but his biggest fans are the youngsters for whom he serves as storyteller at local libraries - twice a week at the Mill Valley Public Library and once a week for the Sausalito Public Library.

A one-time librarian and bookstore owner who moved to the area from Long Beach in 1964 to attend University of California at Berkeley, Sheridan caught the acting bug for good as part of a traveling troupe of performers in the '70s. The 73-year-old father to four grown sons and two grandchildren slipped into a variety of fairy tale characters to recount his passion for telling stories.

Q: How did you get into storytelling?

A: About seven years ago, a Mill Valley librarian fell ill and one of the jobs of children's librarians is to tell stories. I started subbing, got to be quite popular and saw this as a good way to pass the rest of my life.

Q: Describe your typical audience.

A: I average about 25 kids, usually preschool age of about 4 years old, over a few weekly events. Schools bring classes into the libraries, especially on weekdays. I encourage parents to bring infants. They don't understand much, but they pick up the vibes. I read about six books for 30 to 40 minutes. Kids get restless after that time.

Q: What is your favorite part about being a storyteller?

A: The ecstasy I feel every time I share this

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Q: What makes a good storyteller?

A: Love, because you have to love what you are doing and are glad to be there. Authenticity, because you can't fake it. You can fool some adults, but you can't fool kids. And courage - if there's a character that frightens you in real life, your job is to become that scary creature like the wolf in "The Three Little Pigs."

Q: How do you keep your audience entertained in these days of so much electronic entertainment options?

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Mill Valley resident Phil Sheridan, a professional actor and storyteller,... (IJ photo/Jeff Vendset)

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stuff with the kids, introducing them to the value of living things, the power of words and the value of language. To share something so pleasurable and exciting for the audience, it's a place of bliss. I'm really becoming young again.

Q: How are the stories chosen and do you have a favorite?

A: I started with stories I told my own kids. I keep a log at home and if I haven't read a story for about six weeks, I might re-read it. I have the luxury of choosing what I'm in the mood for, but being a librarian, I like to see people fall in love with books. My favorite is "Dawn" by Uri Shulevitz, a story illustrated with watercolors about a boy and his grandfather camping on the edge of a lake. I've probably read it about 100 times.

Q: How does acting lend itself to storytelling?

A: Acting is what storytelling is. I started acting out the stories and kids liked it. I like to do different characters. That's not the only way to do it. Some people who are quiet as church mice are able to relate to kids. My way is just more demonstrative. Each story is a one-man performance. I like playing the fool and having fun.

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A: I'm so outlandish at becoming other people, brave people, bad people, whatever. Four-year-olds are just not used to seeing someone being so outlandish live. It's entertaining for them.

Contact Jim Staats via e-mail at jstaats@marinij.com.

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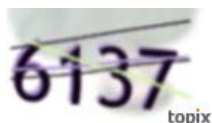
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