

Suburban Life

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Shy Violet Storyteller with a bag full of tales

By Lorraine McClash
staff writer

The prepubescent reads, "Watch and listen as Violet Altschuler tells a story and becomes Shy Violet the Clown before your eyes."

And so she does. When the professional storyteller is introduced, she makes her entrance in street clothes. Then, pulling a tale from her vast repertoire, she begins a story while simultaneously applying grease paint and then the costume that transforms her into Shy Violet. That completed, Shy Violet takes over to tell more stories to fill the storytelling hour.

"Small children love a clown — but at a distance," the Farmington Hills resident said. "I've seen that same reluctance to come up close when clowns perform for the mentally impaired. When they see me putting on the make-up they know there is a real live person there they can touch if they choose, which is a little more real than a purple clown. The transformation was devised to ward off that original fright."

"Shy Violet works very well for mixed groups, any mixed group, mother-daughter banquets, the handicapped. Residents in nursing homes get a big kick out of the transformation, even the silliness of the secret of the purple shoes, but the stories are always changed, depending on the group," she said.

SINCE ALTSCHULER turned professional storyteller she has created two costumes, one for the Mother Goose stories she tells in local shopping malls, the other for Shy Violet, fashioned especially to allay the fears of children. But she brushes aside any comments on the intricate detail she gave the costumes, saying, "I'm basically a storyteller. Most of the time I perform I wear the same type clothes

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— Violet Altschuler

I'm wearing now."

Storytelling was a part of her studies when Altschuler took her masters degree in library science from Wayne State University. She practiced the art when she worked as a librarian for St. Michael Elementary School in Southfield. But it wasn't until after she joined Detroit Story League about five years ago that her engagements brought her before audiences ranging from ages 2-90.

"League members are on their own to make up their own repertoire. Some prefer working with only teens, or with only adults, or have their own specialties. Linda Aldrich (a resident of Plymouth and a former president of the league) has an apron with a dozen pockets and each pocket contains a poem she recites. Some members use puppets. One woman has a beautiful singing voice and she sings because the song is an integral part of the story, not because she is giving a solo performance. I would have just skipped that story. Another member plays the harmonica, again as part of the story. I would have skipped that one too," she said.

"I studied clowning with Ricky the Clown in the (Farmington) community center and combined what I learned from him with the storytelling to fill what I thought was a need to help kids lose their up-close fear of clowns."

DETROIT STORY League, founded in 1912, was formed to perpetuate the art of storytelling. Members meet on the third Saturday of each month to tell stories, participate in workshops and learn from one another. Members come from diverse backgrounds throughout southern Michigan and are on call to tell stories to any group for a moderate fee.

"There are about 50 of us who are active now and that gets a little sticky, meeting in one another's homes, when you have to have one room for 50 to gather in, so sometimes we meet in a library or a church," she said.

"The advantage is that we are all different, our repertoires are all different and it's good to know that when you are working in teams of two or three you can rely on that other person."

The teams of two or three generally come about during "Book Week" or a Book Fair when storytelling assignments might stretch to a four-to-five hour day with back-to-back programs.

"Having a bag of stories to pull from is especially important when you think you are going to be meeting a group of five-year-olds and you find yourself in a roomful of teens," she said. "That's happened. That's when the folk tales come out. They're always good to fall back on," Altschuler said, who is now working as a children's librarian for West Bloomfield Public Library.

"And Halloween stories are another batch that are good for Plan B when Plan A falls through. They are used all through the fall, and are biggies for scout groups' overnight camp trips, no matter what time of the year. Christmas stories are something else, they have to be reviewed year after year."

THE NEXT storytelling date for Shy Violet is set for 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 19, during the students' winter break, in Farmington Community Center. The fee is \$5 and advanced reservations are taken in the center on Farmington Road, north of 10 Mile.

Persons wishing information on membership in Detroit Story League, or those wishing to arrange for a storytelling engagement, are invited to call Roberta Bullough, a Livonia resident, at 464-7084, or Ruth Kroepel, a Farmington resident, at 477-5622.

Staff photos by Randy Borst



Children's tales are the order of the day when Violet Altschuler dons her Mother Goose regalia. The storyteller put together her own costume at the request of Northland Shopping Center for her appearance there.



Violet Altschuler, who considers herself a storyteller rather than a performer, meets her audience in street clothes such as she's wearing at left. While she begins her storytelling session, she gradually transforms herself into Shy Violet (at right) and then allows Shy Violet to continue on with more stories. No two clowns are ever the same so clowns are on their own to devise their own make-up, and costumes and props.



Nominations wanted Commission sets ball rolling to recognize area artists

Farmington Area Arts Commission has started its artists-recognition awards project rolling by calling for nominations for 1985's Artist-in-Residence, the individual who has given most in service to the arts, and the group to be recognized for its service to the arts.

The Artist-in-Residence award symbolizes the accomplishment of a resident of either of the sister cities who has already achieved recognition for his or her talents locally or beyond the local boundaries. This could be in any of the art disciplines, visual art, dance, drama, literature or music.

The same applies to the individual or the group service award, but here the persons involved do not have to be residents, though the service must have been given within the cities' boundaries.

"There are many creative people in the area who have achieved a high standard of achievement in their work and we want to know about them," said Alice Nichols, a former winner of the Artist-in-Residence Award who is co-chairing the committee which will receive nominations and select this year's winners.

"There are also individuals and groups who are sharing their talents in service related to the arts beyond their job limits, and we want to know about them, too," she said.

NICHOLS co-chairperson on the committee chosen by the arts commission to select the winners is Ellen Wallis, an area art teacher.

The committee is rounded out with Joan Taylor, Theresa Solinas, John Davenport, O. Herbert Henry and Fern Barber.

The committee will examine visual and written materials for the nominees and then select the honorees.

"We are hopeful of receiving many nominations," Wallis said. "There are so many deserving individuals and groups in the community. Those nominated in the past can be nominated again because we want to consider everyone who might be deserving."

Since the Artist-in-Residence award was conceived in 1976, photography, architecture, painting, music and poetry disciplines have been recognized.

Former service award recipients have been involved in teaching, drama, music and garden therapy.

The Artist-in-Residence receives a cash award, a plaque and will display his or her work during the awards day reception, an open-to-the-public event hosted by the arts commission. In the past, each honoree has given a representative work to the cities for its collection and there are on display in city buildings.

The service award recipients receive a plaque and are among the guests of

honor during the reception.

SOME NOMINATION forms have already been sent out, but they are available on request by calling Wallis at 474-0419 or Nichols, at 474-5137. Deadline for nominations is March 15.

Any supporting materials received by the committee will be returned.

All area residents are invited to meet the honorees during the recognition reception, set this year for Sunday afternoon, June 2, in Farmington Community Center.