

Van Buren County Library) and Clare Graham (Malvern-Hot Springs County Library) were our keynote speakers this year. They discussed Act 372 as it currently pertains to libraries around the state. McGraw and Graham also discussed the current state of the lawsuit to make changes to the existing act (which will be addressed in October of this year).

April Sheppard of Arkansas State University reprised her discussion topic from the 2023 ArLA Conference, *Adventures in Artificial Intelligence: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. This year InfoBits had two sessions on book clubs, one with the Bookworm Babes Book Club (a public book club operating out of Little Rock and active on Facebook), as well as one on book club programming for libraries with Jill Wheeler of North Little Rock's Laman Library.

Additional sessions included how to navigate health information resources with Jordan Ford from



L-R: John McGraw, Clare Graham, and Amy DeVooght.



the UAMS medical library, professional development opportunities with Janine Jamison-Miller (Arkansas State Library), as well as an LGBTQ+ presentation (just in time for Pride Month!) with J. Jobe of the Central Arkansas Library System.

The feedback for InfoBits has been positive, with people also offering suggestions on how to make next year's event even better. ALPs thanks ArLA for the opportunity to host InfoBits as a way for paraprofessionals and other library workers to network and learn from their peers.

Amy DeVooght is the circulation manager at Hendrix College's Bailey Library. She is the current chair of the ALPs Community of Interest.

The Story of a Storyteller

by *Cindy King Phillips*,
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When I was eight years old my younger sister, an early and voracious reader, borrowed a book of French-Canadian folktales from the school library at McCrory Elementary. She was so delighted by those tales that she immediately told them to me with great enthusiasm. We were sitting on the black and white shag carpet in our old living room when I heard the tale of "Scurvyhead" for the first time, not read, but spoken in my sister's own words. The spell was cast, and it settled into my bones. I've been craving stories ever since. My need for stories led to a love of reading. But every time I had an opportunity to listen to a storyteller, the feeling of enchantment returned. It took three decades before it occurred to me that I could be a story teller, as well as a story listener. It was guilt that gave me the final nudge.

Halloween parties were a big deal at our house when my children were young. Orange and black construction paper pennants swayed above the living room. Our table held up green slime punch and bat-shaped brownies. String lights and paper lanterns lit the backyard for boisterous games. And of course there had to be a spooky story or two, told around a campfire! I asked my English-professor friend, a natural raconteuse, to tell us scary tales. She showed up, in costume, and performed stories which she'd altered to be more fun and participatory than the originals. I knew enough about storytelling back then to realize how much time and effort she'd put into it. It was amazing and wonderful, but it was also too much to ask of my friend mid-semester when she had *so many papers* to grade. For the future I resolved to find and learn spooky stories that I could tell.

I was at this time working toward an MLIS degree through Florida State University, and I took a class on storytelling with Dr. Christie Koontz.

Although we did talk about traditional storytelling, the course covered the topic more broadly. Seeking more in-depth practical instruction, I turned to books. Enter the wonderful and generous storyteller-writer-librarian Margaret Read MacDonald, who writes the most accessible books for beginning storytellers, including but not limited to *The Storyteller's Start-Up Book: Finding, Learning, Performing and Using Folktales*. Like her many other helpful collections, this title holds twenty tried-and-true tales in a tellable format with detailed source notes and excellent bibliographies. Ms. MacDonald encourages aspiring storytellers with practical, digestible advice, which boils down to this: Just go do it; there is no substitute for experience, and you WILL get better. This turned out to be true! But first I had to find some listeners on which to practice regularly. Halloween doesn't happen nearly often enough.

The teachers who taught my own children in early elementary school welcomed me back into their classrooms to try telling stories. At first I told one story each month. I have never felt like a "natural" storyteller. I spent a lot of time learning and practicing stories. Not everything worked as I expected. There were flops and mis-steps, and sometimes the humor didn't land, but most of the time the stories were happily received. As one third-grader said to me recently through his smiling applause, "We are NOT a tough audience!" Many of the listeners, even in the beginning, seemed to get pulled into the stories just as I had been all those years ago when my sister shared tales of Petit Jean. So I kept trying, slowly adding to my repertoire, believing that experience would make me a better

storyteller, if never a professional one. Eventually, I felt ready to share stories every two weeks. And now, after ten years, I tell stories every week, in as many classrooms as will open their doors.

But, you might well ask, Why? Why spend so much time and effort when there are thousands of beautiful books to read aloud, when there are excellent films and other high-quality recorded media conveying wonderful stories at our fingertips? Why volunteer hours and hours at something for which there has been no request, no expressed need? Why *am* I always talking about storytelling, looking for new stories and working at learning to tell them? Because it is absolutely joyful. And there is a need for storytelling, we've just forgotten about it. It is currently overshadowed by the dazzling convenience of mass media, but storytelling has been with us for a long, long time. Probably since the beginning, people gathered in small groups around firelight and listened to each other's stories, learned from each other, laughed together, and built community. The sharing of stories connects us, and in our current digital world of isolating and divisive "social" media, more human connection seems like a really good idea. The ancient technology of storytelling provides a connective, shared experience. There is something magical about the way young listeners dive headfirst into the centuries-old tales I tell. The joy they find in them makes me want to bring more.

Without the buffer of a book between teller and listener, storytelling is intimate and interactive in a way that reading is not. When a story is told, the teller and the listeners create the story together. We go on the same journey, getting into scrapes, facing



Storytelling on Halloween.

down monsters, and solving problems, but it looks slightly different in each individual's imagination. Young listeners feel the stories intensely. They empathize with imagined characters. I look into their faces, and I see them going with me on the journey, feeling scared or excited or outraged or amused, thinking ahead a little to what must happen next. When they occupy the imaginary realm of story, children become completely unselfconscious. They sing and chant with me, they crow like roosters or rattle like rattlesnakes, they stomp and clap and howl like coyotes, and we all enjoy ourselves very much.

Storytelling allows struggling and non-readers to experience what those of us who love to read call "getting lost in" a good book. When they relax and listen, the words are effortlessly transformed into vivid scenes that play out in their own wonderful imaginations. Because their imaging engines are churning at full capacity, young listeners tend to remember and re-tell the stories. I know this because they tell me about it later. "I tell all my little cousins that story with the baby," a third grader reported, two years after she heard me tell it. And this year, after Halloween, a sweet six-year-old girl held on to my hand to say, "I loved that ghost story you told us. I told my mama and all her co-workers at the Waffle House, and they loved it, too!" Hearing about their re-tellings warms my heart and makes me want to continue working at this storytelling thing even more.

Slow and steadfast, like the tortoise, working at it outside of my paid jobs, I've become the middle-level storyteller: no longer a novice, but not yet a professional. Progress! I am not planning to quit my day job, but I secretly wish I could. How fun it

would be to travel around Arkansas sharing the joy of storytelling. To my astonishment, I got to live a little bit of that dream last year when the SEARK Concert Association hired me to tell stories to early elementary students in Monticello. In preparation for that event, I took time off from my regular work, and I rehearsed and rehearsed. It was the first time anyone offered to pay me to tell stories. I did not want to disappoint them! I think it worked. I have been invited back to tell stories in additional schools in the region this November. The chance to introduce the idea of storytelling to more children feels like a gift. I'll be spending time this summer digging through folktale collections, looking for the right stories to tell, listening to my favorite storytellers, and looking forward to telling the old tales to new listeners come September.

Cindy Phillips grew up in eastern Arkansas on a family farm where she and her sister played outside all day and made a whole lot of mud pies. Her parents sent her to Hendrix College back in 1987, for which she is eternally grateful. A love of learning led to further degrees, and now she works part-time as a music librarian at Ouachita Baptist University. She has been telling folktales and fairy tales to children in Arkadelphia since 2013. She loves to talk about storytelling, so if you want to connect with her or have her visit your library, please contact her at cindykingphillips@gmail.com.



Storytelling to first grade students in Monticello.