

Story Time in Baltimore

Tales represent more than mere entertainment to this national group of griots, or storytellers.

Readlocks flying with each orchestrated move, David Fakunle uses his muscular body to jump, twirl, lie prone, and pop up quickly from the floor. Puffing out his chest, the 17-year-old storyteller crosses his arms dramatically and sneers: "Ha-ha-ha and hee-hee-hee, I may look good, but you won't catch me. You can try, try, try, just as much as you can. You won't catch me because I'm the Pound Cake Man."

On cue, the preschoolers giggle and echo the catchphrase from this modified gingerbread man story. At the story's end, the kids learn the moral: Get an education so the world won't eat you up.

Held at a branch of Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library, today's program also includes Mary, David's 14-year-old sister, and 10-year-old Imani Adrea. Duane Hinton, 17, provides rhythmic breaks, masterfully pounding the *djembe* drum, a West African instrument he's played since age 3.

Deborah Fakunle, mother to David and Mary, and Bunjo Butler, Imani's grandfather, serve as adult leaders of the Growing Griots (pronounced "GRE-os"). The Baltimore-based youth storytelling group falls under the auspices of the Griots' Circle of Maryland, one of 11 affiliates with the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc. (NABS).

This 250-member national group promotes and perpetuates the African oral tradition of black storytelling, including the culture, heritage, and history of African Americans. Baltimore resident Mary Carter Smith cofounded NABS with Linda Goss of Philadelphia. ▶



Deborah Fakunle, a vocalist, became a storyteller after her children, David and Mary, developed an interest in the art form.



above, left: Mary Carter Smith cofounded the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc. above, right: David Fakunle, 17, wants to major in aerospace engineering and Russian linguistics, yet he plans to keep telling stories.

"Everybody is a storyteller, just like there are a number of people who can play saxophone—but not everybody can play like John Coltrane."

Bunjo Butler, member of NABS



“Storytelling is as old as man himself.”

Bunjo Butler, member of NABS

A Need Fulfilled

Even in this technological age, storytelling remains important “because it’s one way of communicating that’s always been,” says the organization’s cofounder, who is known as Mother Mary. A dearth of black storytellers and attendants at the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling conference in Jonesborough, Tennessee, in 1981 prompted the idea of NABS.

“I love all people,” says the tiny woman, age 85, “but I am black, and I’m going to *be* black all my life.” Storytelling helps perpetuate the “underlying bond” among her community, she says. Through storytelling, “We hear the voices of our fathers and our ancestors calling us.”

Mother Mary left behind a 31-year career as a teacher and school librarian to become a professional griot (storyteller and performing folklorist). She decided to make the move immediately after seeing a 1960s riot among young people on the evening news.

“The violence touched and troubled me,” she says in a biography about her life. “I saw the misunder-



top, left: Fellisco Keeling, administrative assistant of the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc., has told stories in Ghana, Scotland, Nova Scotia, France, and many U.S. venues. **left:** Linda J. Brown serves as executive director of NABS.

standing, the frustration etched on the people’s faces, and I didn’t sleep that night. I felt God’s call to be His messenger of peace and justice.”

Since then, Ms. Smith’s extraordinary abilities (*Roots* author Alex Haley called her his “American Griot”) have moved thousands of listeners. She credits her spiritual connection as the source of her talents. “It’s not me,” she says. “It’s what’s moving through me.”

Bound by Tradition

“Stories inspire and change people,” says Bunjo, the immediate past president of NABS. His deep baritone voice makes even ordinary words sound potent with meaning. “When you look at collected stories from all cultures, that which binds them together is the humanness,” he says.

For 27 years, he’s served in the Baltimore public library system. Storyteller Fellisco Keeling, a NABS

Members of the Griots' Circle of Maryland, an affiliate of the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc., enjoy fellowship with each other.



member and library colleague, urged him to try the oral art form.

Requirements include a desire to tell, a comfort level with audiences, and a willingness to know the story far beyond mere memorization. "Everybody is a storyteller," says Bunjo, "just like there are a number of people who can play saxophone—but not everybody can play like John Coltrane. Storytelling is not just picking up a book, reading it, and being able to recite it back." Colorful tales such as "Hot Butter Beans," "Cindy-Ellie," and "Funeral" change with each teller's particular infusion.

Passing It On

"Storytelling is as old as man himself," continues Bunjo. "All cultures have a tradition of sharing stories. It was a way of passing on information." Bequeathing the art form to the next generation remains a tradition among those sharing stories.



above: Longtime librarian Bunjo Butler entrances his audience. "People can take you different places with their ability to shape a story," he says.

**"I love all people,
but I am black,
and I'm going to be
black all my life.**

Mary Carter Smith, NABS cofounder

After accompanying Bunjo to a performance, Imani, then 6, told him, "Granddaddy, I could do this," he recalls. "From that time on, she has stood in front of hundreds of people. It wasn't something I forced her to do," the proud grandfather insists.

The exchange of energy between audience and teller determines the strength of the story's message. "All stories are not for entertainment," Bunjo says. "They should have a teaching aspect. In the African oral tradition, stories were used to pass on morals and values. It's a way of talking about these things, but it has a sugarcoating on it."

Sometimes, there's even a Pound Cake Man involved.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

For more information: National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc., P.O. Box 67722, Baltimore, MD 21215; (410) 947-1117 or www.nabsinc.org.



Wonder Woman

A bio lists Mary's titles as "teacher, librarian, historian, author, poet, philosopher, actress, radio personality, singer, African folklorist and Griot." Awards abound from the arenas of teaching, community involvement, music, writing, and politics. In addition to NABS, she was a founding member of Big Brothers Big Sisters International and The Arena Players of Baltimore.

Mother Mary taught African pride decades before the Civil Rights Movement. "They used to laugh at me because I loved African clothes," says the renowned storyteller.

When her only child was murdered, Mary, the spiritual leader of the NABS, called on her beliefs to summon forgiveness for his convicted killer. She grieved with the perpetrator's mother. She told stories to alleviate the grieving of others. When the jailed woman came up for parole, Mother Mary even helped her find a job. "I've found a source of strength and joy, and I want to share it," she says simply.