



# THE PAST IS PRESENT

A dedicated troupe of storytellers keeps Appalachian heritage alive.

BY EMILY MCINTYRE | PHOTOS BY JILLY BURNS

Off to the left of the circulation desk inside Athens Public Library, there are a couple of storytellers settling into a semicircle of chairs. As they talk, they do an inventory of equipment: a tambourine, harmonica, drums and more. A woman adjusts the strings of two unfamiliar instruments, while a few more storytellers join the group. There is quiet conversation about beef stew, biscuits and French toast. As a small audience eagerly waits, little do they know that the tales they're about to hear are far from fantasy.

A nonprofit organization of performers, better known as the Appalachian Ohio Storytelling Project (AOSP), was established in 2011 to preserve Appalachian Ohio's cultural heritage. The members accomplish this through the promotion of storytelling and related performance arts throughout the Southeast Ohio region, featuring several narrative-style stories based on their own experiences.

## MILLENNIAL DIFFERENCE

Although those in tech-savvy Generation Y — composed of individuals born between the 1980s and early 2000s — had video games and computers to enhance their childhoods, the AOSP storytellers relied on imagination and each other to entertain themselves while growing up during the post-Depression era and World War II.

In addition, AOSP actor Jon Miller says that his generation didn't have the digital programming and entertainment that people use today. Modes of communication have certainly evolved among generations, particularly through the development of computers, cell phones and the Internet.

"We played outside, and we played imagination games, we made up whole towns, we played dirt road, and we dug tunnels and we could play and play with all the kids in the neighborhood," says Adele Browne, an actress in the group.

## THE GREATEST GENERATION

Though both generations had been happily occupied as children, issues of poverty provided challenges back then that are unfamiliar to many in Generation Y. Families did a significant amount of sharing, especially when it came to food, explains AOSP storyteller Sue Witte.

"People grew up doing without, because they didn't have anything. And now, this generation doesn't have... that poverty that's behind them. They pretty much have better than what their parents had," Witte says.

Once families had recovered from those tough economic times, Kubisek explains that another challenge presented itself.

"1958 — it was time for every 18-year-old boy to register for the draft — including me," Kubisek recalls. "I said to my mom, 'I am not going to register for the draft. If I do, I'm going to register as a peace activist.' And she said, 'No you won't.' I said, 'Yes, I will.' I lost that fight, I had to register. I never got called up."

Thomas Burnett, the founder of AOSP, remembers the societal pressure that came with the draft.

"My father and grandfather said, 'if you don't register for the draft and you refuse service, you're not in the family and we'd rather you were dead,'" he says.

Tough family virtues are included in their storytelling to help explain some of the realities the "Greatest Generation" had to experience first-hand.

"Storytelling is a vehicle for transferring histories, lessons and values from one generation to another," Burnett explains.

"It's also a vehicle for identity," Browne adds.

As limitless as the AOSP imaginations are when it comes to telling their tales, they did experience one limit few young people experience today: the ability to pursue the career of their dreams.

Witte wanted to be a game warden, someone who supervised hunting in a specific region, but her mother told her she had to become a secretary just like her. While in art school, Burnett's father frowned at the job outlook for artists. His grandfather urged him to get a job working for the city so Burnett could take care of his family members as they aged.

With every obstacle the AOSP individuals faced, they all agree that, in the end, their parents wanted what was best for them. Likewise, the feeling is mutual among these members about supporting Generation Y's future. The storytellers can't emphasize enough how crucial it is to know the past, yet they understand how the focus on the present has become much more prominent over time.

## LASTING PERFORMANCE

Storytelling is one of the few pastimes that every generation shares. Browne explains that research has shown the brain cannot encode a memory unless the event is sequenced into story form with a beginning, middle and end. Because of this, storytelling is essential to the learning process, which applies especially to the developing memories of young



children and to the elderly.

For plays and musicals, actors are confined to a script. In contrast, AOSP members break down the fourth wall mentioned in theater to modify their tales.

"We encourage the audience to be co-creators in the process of telling the story. Stories change all the time and little bits and pieces have changed sometimes," Burnett says.

What happens once the story reaches its end?

"Well, now it's in your head, and you're able to play with it," Burnett exclaims. ▀

[www.backdropmagazine.com](http://www.backdropmagazine.com)