

Biog-5 5-30-84

Once upon a time: a storyteller's story

By NANCY BARR

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Ruthmarie who loved to read and to tell her family about the stories she read.

When that little girl grew up, she learned that all along she had been practicing a rich and ancient folk art.

She studied and practiced and became a professional storyteller, traveling around the world to share tales of past and present with the people she met.

Ruthmarie Arguello-Sheehan has been on storytelling trips to the Middle East, Africa, China, Europe, and throughout the United States.

Ruthmarie, who goes by her first name professionally, is the founder of the American Storytelling Resource Center, which provides assistance to professional and amateur storytellers. She is a Santa Cruz resident and has been a professional storyteller for 30 years.

Telling stories properly involves a lot of work and practice.

"Hours and hours of research go into it, and learning the techniques of retelling stories," Ruthmarie said, adding that the best way to prepare for a storytelling session is to go over the story until it is "so fixed in my mind I can tell it like it's happening now."

As a seventh-generation Californian, Ruthmarie is proud of her California heritage and wants to teach others about it.

"I'm sort of on a soapbox around the world to tell people about California," she said.

California history is full of stories of unusual and interesting people, she said, including the same types of characters as in stories passed down from generation to generation in other parts of the U.S. and in other cultures.

Telling stories about old California is espe-

cially important for children, Ruthmarie said, because it will give those who are second- and third-generation Californians a sense of their heritage. Even those who have lived in California only a short time should become familiar with the state's folklore, she said.

Storytelling is for everyone, no matter how old, she said.

"Many people say, 'Oh, storytelling. That's darling for little children'; but 80 percent of my bookings now are for adult audiences."

Ruthmarie teaches storytelling and gives performances for all kinds of people. She has taught people in business and science storytelling techniques because they can benefit from the organizational skills learned in the

endeavor.

Storytelling is an art form, Ruthmarie said, although it has been difficult to convince some people of that. More and more people are being attracted to the unique art form, she said.

"People are longing to go back to as intimate an art form as this can be," she said. "You're giving out pictures but you're not telling people what they have to see."

When telling a story to a large audience, Ruthmarie knows that although everyone may have heard the same story, each will conjure up a slightly different picture in his mind and provide a different interpretation for the words he hears.

Speaking to an audience of 6,000, she said, is like speaking to 6,000 individuals rather than to one group.