

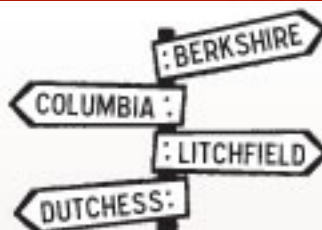


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# Rural Intelligence



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## To Tell The Truth: Speak Up Storytelling Comes To The Mount



By Amy Krzanik

“My friends have always said that I’ve lived one of the most unfortunate lives (including surviving homelessness and an armed robbery), so I’ve got a lot of material for stories,” says **Matthew Dicks** [left] who will be at **The Mount** in Lenox with his Hartford-based storytelling group **Speak Up** on Saturday, October 18 and Sunday,

October 19. Saturday night’s show will feature true stories based around the theme of “Love and Marriage” and told by five performers including Dicks and NPR’s **Ophira Eisenberg**. The Speak Up competition is similar to the **Moth’s StorySLAM** (which Dicks has won a whopping 14 times). On Sunday, Dicks will lead an intro-to-storytelling workshop for folks looking to perfect their gift of gab.

After the success of last fall’s **Literary Death Match**, The Mount’s Communications Director, Rebecka McDougall, knew there was a hunger for this type of event in the region that wasn’t being met. “It’s an accessible way to bring the written word to audiences. Storytelling and the oral tradition have an even longer history that text does. Plus audiences really enjoy the interactions and being a part of the event.”

Kelsey Mullen, Director of Public Programs and Education at The Mount, agrees. “Audiences want to engage with the authors and vice versa. When you attend an event like this, you never know what will happen; it’s spontaneous and dynamic. You go home and talk about it with friends, so the conversation continues after the show is over.” The appeal of a storytelling event is widespread, as speakers don’t have to be published authors to participate. “Everybody has a story and storytelling is an important skill,” she says.

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In Hartford, Dicks and his wife Elysha [right] co-produce a Speak Up show every other month that features both beginners and seasoned locals, along with NYC StorySLAM veterans. “We like to bring in one or two professionals from the city for every show since there are a lot of first timers who come to the events and I want them to be able to experience great storytelling,” he says.



The combination must be working because the group sells out every show. Dicks says a lot of the credit for that goes to Elysha, whom he calls “the perfect host, because she knows everyone and everyone loves her.” The Monterey, Mass. native emcees each show and tells a story of her own. “She’s really the face of Speak Up!” says Dicks. “I’ll see people on the street and they’ll say ‘you’re married to the Speak Up girl’ and I’m like hey, I’m a part of this, too!”

The couple chooses a theme for each show and coaches participants before the big night. Dicks is uniquely qualified to train budding storytellers, as he’s been in 26 SLAMs and won more than half of them. “I won the first storySLAM I entered, in 2011, and figured I got lucky and found something I was good at. But my wife said ‘you’re such an idiot; you’ve been DJing for 17 years, speaking in front of 200 people at a time.’ I also teach my students through stories, so really I’ve been in training for 20 years.”

Besides running Speak Up and raising two children with his wife, Dicks teaches fifth grade and has penned three novels and two musicals. Does he ever sleep? “Not much, about five hours a night,” he says. “Most of my stories are from my childhood, ages 0 to 28, but I also do an exercise every night where I say to myself, ‘if you had to write a story about something that happened today, what would you pick?’”

Dicks figures he has around 172 stories stored away. “I always think I’m going to die, so I’m constantly afraid at all times, and I want to use every second possible,” he laughs.

**Love and Marriage: Storytelling at the Mount**  
**October 18, 2014 @ 8 p.m.; \$15**  
**Speaking Your Mind: An Introduction to Storytelling**  
**October 19, 2014 @ 9 a.m.; \$25**  
**The Mount, 2 Plunkett Street, Lenox, MA**  
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