

Mignon Hess kicks off "Did That Really Happen?" at Tell Us Something in December, with Denise May vigorously interpreting.







# It's All in the Telling

*Storytellers are going face to face  
with ever bigger audiences*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS LA TRAY

**T**HE LIGHTS DIM AND A SPOTLIGHT GLOWS AGAINST THE RED VELVET CURTAINS SPANNING the stage of the Wilma Theater in downtown Missoula. Marc Moss, accompanied by a woman trailing a step or two behind him, steps into the light and approaches the lone microphone. “Welcome to Tell Us Something,” he says. The woman signs his words with her hands and smiles. A sellout crowd—825 people—cheers loudly. These people are here to listen to eight amateur storytellers, with Moss as the evening’s emcee. With no notes and no props, the storytellers will share honest, true stories.

The ground rules are simple. Moss introduces each preselected storyteller, who then gets 10 minutes to tell a story. At the evening’s mid-point, there is a brief intermission in which volunteers read micro-stories submitted on strips of paper from members of the audience. Then, it’s back to the remaining storytellers to close out the night. Simple, direct, and incredibly popular. It’s exploded in Missoula and has spread to Helena and Butte.



Moss took over the event, originally called “Missoula Moth,” in 2011. The event’s founder, Patrick Duganz, began the series with inspiration born from the popular Moth storytelling series featured on National Public Radio.

Moss, a Missoula resident, was involved from the get-go as a performer. “I was at a point in my life where I wanted to push my boundaries and try something new,” Moss says. “I didn’t think I had a story, but I wanted to try being on the stage. Then I realized I actually have a lot of stories, and everyone else does too.”

The early performances were far less structured than they are today. They had no common theme, and with as many as 12 people telling stories, and no time limit, the night could stretch for hours.

“It was brutal,” Moss says. “Some of the stories were really poignant, and some were just drudgery.”

After four events Duganz moved to Bozeman, and Missoula Moth seemed dead. Months later, the Missoula Art Museum contacted Duganz about organizing a Moth performance as part of a special event at their facility. Duganz said he couldn’t do it, but that maybe Moss would be able to pull it off. Moss—with no experience in event-planning or promoting—did exactly that. He scheduled the event, had posters made, and linked to the national Moth organization via the internet, hoping they might notice and somehow get involved. All that gained him was a cease-and-desist letter from the real Moth people, which forced Moss to rename the Missoula storytelling outlet to Tell Us Something. That’s when Moss realized

he was going to take a run at keeping the event going. He installed some structure into the programs and hasn’t looked back since.

After the museum event, Tell Us Something ran in a few bars, then found a home in the freshly renovated Top Hat Lounge in 2013. That began a partnership with owner Nick Checota, who also owns the Wilma. The bigger venue at the Top Hat provided Tell Us Something with visibility and room to grow. And grow it did.

“LIKE TO DO FUN EVENTS WITH MY PARENTS,” says Juanita Vero Rinella. “Both my parents are good storytellers, and a couple years ago I heard there was some storytelling happening at the Top Hat. So we went and it was so fun. There was so much love there, and I thought to myself, ‘My dad should be up there!’ because he’s got some stories.”

Juanita is one of three partners who operate the E Bar L Ranch in Greenough. Louis is a retired partner who got his start at the ranch as a wrangler back in the 1960s. That career—he grew up as a “Filipino cowboy” in California—is the basis for a plethora of tales Juanita thought others should hear. She convinced her father to get on stage, and he agreed, with one condition. She had to tell a story, too.

“My dad has amazing stories that I want to hear uninterrupted by my mother,” Juanita says. “So I was like, okay, I hate public speaking, but I can do the Top Hat. Let’s do this.”

Weeks later Juanita and Louis learned that Tell Us



Something had been relocated to the venerable Wilma—a very, very big place.

“It was moved to the freakin’ Wilma!” Juanita says. “I have never been so nervous since I don’t know when. That was awful. But it was amazing.”

Speaking to such a large crowd terrifies most people, so preparation is key. Moss realized that staging quality events meant vetting storytellers and running them through a pre-event workshop to tighten up their efforts.

In the months before each quarterly event (Tell Us Something happens four times a year in Missoula), Moss issues an open call for story pitches based on a theme—“It’s Complicated,” for example, or “Did That Really Happen?” There are typically around 20 pitches for every event. Interested storytellers call a telephone number

**Opposite: Marc Moss has been involved with Tell Us Something since its initial appearance as the Missoula Moth. Right: Anna Haslund is the first person to tell her story entirely via ASL (American Sign Language).**



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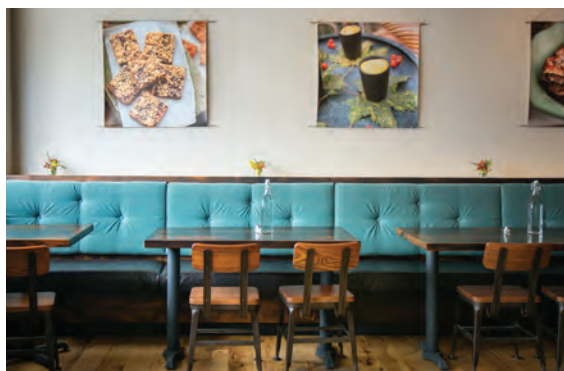
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and can leave a 3-minute voicemail in which they briefly describe their story. The voice mail is saved as an audio file. Then Moss, along with an advisory board of five to eight other people, listens to and votes on the pitches, ultimately deciding on eight storytellers.

Once the lineup is determined, the storytellers gather for a mandatory workshop. Each person tells their story and gets pointers from the other storytellers. This helps them know which parts of the story are strong, and which parts need shoring up. A second, optional workshop is also scheduled, for people who want a follow-up evaluation after reworking their presentation. The goal is to help novice storytellers gain confidence in what they are sharing. After all, confident storytellers make for a happy, engaged audience.

Moss's assistance was critical in helping Louis Vero distill 78 years of experiences into a 10-minute story. At the workshop, Louis started talking about his life, and Moss ultimately interrupted him.

"Louis, you don't have a story here," Moss said. Then he helped the old cowboy streamline some of his anecdotes.

"Marc really helped me," Louis said. "I couldn't have done it without him."

When it came time to tell the story in front of the Wilma crowd, though, Louis froze. He approached the microphone and paused, seconds ticking away. Juanita was in the crowd, stressing over her own story, but became doubly stressed because it seemed her dad was melting down.

"He just stood there, kind of adjusted his hat, and I'm like, 'C'mon, Dad!'" Juanita says. "His opening line was supposed to be 'I was born in 1939,' and I'm thinking 'Dad, you gotta be able to remember that!'"

"Thirty seconds went by and there was silence," Louis said. "I couldn't bring it out. Finally someone from the top balcony yells, 'Do it, Louis!' and then it was fine."

Louis and Juanita have been fans of Tell Us Something ever since, with multiple appearances between them and plans to do more. Both prefer listening to stories over telling them. They enjoy the way people hold forth with deep truths that are rare to hear, particularly in such a public environment. People want to be heard and Tell Us Something provides the opportunity.

"What I love about Tell Us Something," Juanita says, "is that this is our community. It's not polished, it's not professional, it's not even super structured. It's just real people. It's the person you know at the checkout station at Albertsons. It's the guy in your yoga class. It's the people in your community that you don't even know who they are. Then they get up on that stage and make you laugh, or break your heart."





ANNA HASLUND FIRST HEARD OF Tell Us Something when Bonnie Kurien, an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, invited her to the March 20, 2018, event at the Wilma.

“When I first learned of the event,” Haslund says, “I was very excited and full of curiosity. And then when I went, I was so surprised that it was so emotional.”

Haslund is deaf. 2018 was the first year Moss was able to provide ASL interpreters to translate the live stories from the stage. Moss, who had a deaf co-worker at a previous job, felt that particular community was being overlooked and underserved.

“I worked for two years to make it happen.” Moss says, “I finally learned that for any type of public performance, the interpreter has to be certified. Once I figured that out and got connected through the right channels, everything fell into place.”

He contacted Missoula interpreter Denise May, worked out the details, and now every event has two interpreters, who rotate in and out to help tell the stories to those who can’t hear them.

When Anna Haslund took the stage in December, she was the first deaf storyteller to ever grace the Tell Us Something stage. Using her hands, animated facial expressions, and vigorous body language, Haslund told a story of hijacked affections called “Hopeless Romantic,” while an offstage interpreter translated and spoke her signed words into a microphone. It worked flawlessly, and the audience showed their approval—as Moss had directed them to before Haslund took the stage—by waving

**Another sellout crowd—capacity 825—gathers at the Wilma Theater in Missoula for a night of storytelling.**



Storytellers crowd Marc Moss's living room for a pre-event workshop.



their hands in the air instead of clapping them together.

"I didn't expect to share my personal stories with the world," Haslund says, "But I realized there is no one from the deaf community to share their stories onstage. I thought I would take some courage and tell my stories as a humble and respectful person, but also as an ambassador for the deaf. I decided I would tell my story to everyone the same way as I would tell my own children the best stories of my life."

Haslund said she would definitely take the stage again.

"Being a storyteller is a medicine of laughter, smiles, and sharing the best cries together," she says.

Moss doesn't really know what it is that makes Tell Us Something so popular. He deserves some credit for creating a consistently solid lineup of storytellers, and he curates the stories so that there aren't too many of any one emotion, light or heavy, on any given night. He doesn't allow hate speech or sales pitches. What he's managed to do is tap into something deeper. People love to connect, to share experiences with each other, face to face. He's bringing people together from all walks of life to share their experiences, some speaking, but most listening, and listening intently. Through that process we become closer.

**J**USTIN BEEBE WAS A LOLO HOTSHOT WHO DIED FIGHTING the Strawberry Fire in Nevada in August of 2016. Shawn Faiella was his boss on that tragic day and wants to make sure Beebe's story, and the events of that day, are not forgotten.

"Any opportunity I have to share Justin's story, and what hotshots do, I'll grab it," Faiella says.

His wife attended a Tell Us Something event with friends. When she told him about it, Faiella thought it would be a good opportunity to talk about Justin Beebe. As a firefighting instructor, Faiella often speaks in front of crowds and had told Justin's story before at the

Wildland Fire Training and Conference Center (WFTC) in Sacramento, California. When he heard of Tell Us Something, he didn't hesitate.

"To me it was an opportunity to go share the story with a huge group of people, so I just grabbed it."

Faiella's story begins in November of 2015, when the hotshots are reviewing applications of would-be firefighters eager to join the crew.

"That morning a young man walked into my office," Faiella said, almost matter-of-factly. "His name was Justin Beebe, and he wanted to be a Lolo Hotshot."

The story is a sad one, detailing the short firefighting career of an extraordinary young man. We laugh a little along the way, hearing how Beebe looks the part: he "has a nice beard, has a good handshake." We learn of his being "stoked" when he is hired two months later. We learn the process of his training. Then we hear of the fire that claimed his life. "It's not supposed to happen to firefighters," Faiella says, describing the fatal events of the day, as Beebe's body is carried away in a helicopter. "It's not supposed to happen to anybody. Yet here I am. And here we are."

It is a perfect Tell Us Something story, because it is real, and it details a situation few people face but all can relate to. When Faiella finished, there were few dry eyes in the house as he left the stage to resounding cheers.

Faiella doesn't have the storyteller bug, and doesn't expect to take the stage again. He does wonder about his fellow storytellers, though.

"I find myself thinking about them, wondering what they are up to," he says. "We were all people thrown together as strangers, with totally different backgrounds. But during the workshop, and then the event, it's like we faced something together that other people didn't. Kind of like a shared experience in a way not so different from what it's like on a hotshot crew." ■





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