

2026 RECIPIENTS





TIMOTHY LIVENGOOD - REGIONAL SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP

Tim Livengood is a planetary scientist and storyteller. When a storytelling club started at work, Tim's wife said, "go do that thing you do, to other people," and so he did. Somehow this transformed into longtime service on the Boards of Voices in the Glen, and the Folklore Society of Greater Washington, which further led to the creation of the Grapevine Storytelling Series in the Takoma Park area of Washington, DC, with longtime partners Renée Brachfeld and Noa Baum, as well as programming storytelling for the Washington Folk Festival. For five years, Tim worked for the Challenger Center for Space Science Education on a team developing education modules for K-12 schools, leading teacher workshops, and presenting Family Science Night programming for audiences as small as three and as large as 1700. Storytelling skills have come in very handy when projectors broke and while cooking up model comets. Tim also teaches astronomy classes at University of Maryland, and led storytelling for several years at the Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival.

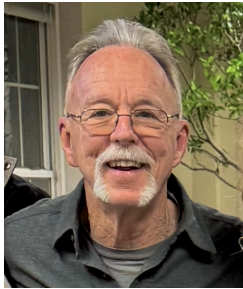


LESLIE R. SHELLEY - REGIONAL SERVICE & LEADERSHIP

Born in the foothills of North Georgia in a very rural agricultural community, Leslie grew up surrounded by stories. Stories of life all stitched together with a liberal sprinkling of tightly held superstitions passed down from Appalachian ancestors. It wasn't until college that she realized everyone didn't share life through story, but that everyone sure needed story. Leslie performs throughout Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Alabama. Her story mission is one of hope and healing through sharing stories of life.

Leslie currently serves on the board of GSN and NSN. She served as co-chair of the 2025 National Storytelling Network Conference held in Georgia. Leslie retired in 2022 after 20 years with the local school district and serves on the board of the local retired educators association.

Her greatest critics and most genuine inspirations come from seven grand little men who keep life filled with questions, adventures, and fun.



STEVEN TATE - REGIONAL SERVICE & LEADERSHIP

The Rev. Dr. Steve Tate grew up on land once at the heart of the world's largest Tall Grass Prairie, rooted in a family of Illinois farmers — and “Big Talkers.” His Daddy's stories planted a seed that never stopped growing. Steve left the farm for higher education, was ordained, and earned his Doctor of Ministry. For twenty years he practiced pastoral counseling, becoming Executive Director of the Samaritan Center in Minneapolis.

In 1995, he and wife Lee followed a wild dream to an abandoned North Carolina tobacco farm and built the beloved Goat Lady Dairy. Now retired, Steve serves as Past President of the NC Storytellers Guild and current Membership Coordinator & Treasurer. In 2020, he co-founded the Monday STORY ZOOM — now in its sixth year with 100 storytellers nationwide meeting weekly for story-sharing and feedback. He has performed five times at Connie Regan Blake's “A Slice of Life” in Black Mountain, and studied with Donald Davis, Megan Wells, and others. His warm, intimate stories of farm life, animals, and the universal human experience entertain, educate, and inspire.



CHESTER WEEMS - REGIONAL SERVICE & LEADERSHIP

Chester Weems is a retired educator and Oklahoma storyteller. A member of Oklahoma's Territory Tellers for over 30 years, he has a fondness for family stories, his own and others. An award-winning photographer of fine arts and people, he likes to photograph storytellers in action and has provided headshots and action photos for many storytellers.

He has served on the Territory Tellers Board and as Treasurer, Vice-President and President. Chester has also been a Tejas member for many years, serving a term on the Board, on the Zoom Tech Team and as a Masterclass presenter. He has been a member of NSN and PRO-SIG for many years and served as the NSN regional representative. He also holds memberships in Missouri's RAPS and Mo-Tel and Colorado's RMS.

Chester is an advocate for encouraging the collecting of family stories and has assisted others in recording their family stories. He also likes to tell stories, though he has said his stories got better when unencumbered by the need for truth.



KATIE KNUTSON - DISTINGUISHED NATIONAL SERVICE

Katie Knutson has spent her adult life serving the storytelling community. This includes 5 years as Executive Director of Northeast Storytelling (NEST) and extensive Board service: 3 years for NSN (one year as Chair), 7 years for YES (4 years as President), 6 years for Northlands, and 7 years for Story Arts of Minnesota. She also Chaired the 2020 NSN Conference Committee – in initial plans for Atlanta, and then forging a new virtual conference after COVID shut everything down. The resulting NSN Connected Conference was the largest, most diverse storytelling conference in US history, featuring 262 storytellers from around the world, spanning every US region and every continent (except Antarctica).

In her 25 years as a storyteller and 18 years as teaching artist, Katie has delivered residencies, performances, and classes to around 40,000 children and adults on four continents. Katie wrote/curated the New Voices column in Storytelling Magazine for 9 years and contributed to 3 storytelling books. Find out more about Katie and her performing/teaching work at www.ripplingstories.com



JESSICA PISCITELLI ROBINSON - DISTINGUISHED NATIONAL SERVICE

Jessica Robinson is the Founding Executive Director of Better Said Than Done, the organization behind the Women's Storytelling Festival. In addition to producing storytelling shows since 2011, **Jessica** has performed at Exchange Place at the National Storytelling Festival, on WGBH's "Stories from the Stage," and for Artists Standing Strong Together, Six Feet Apart Productions, 3 National Storytelling Network (NSN) Conferences, and 4 Good Liars Club Festivals. Jessica was featured at the Stone Soup, the Washington Folk, the Allegheny Highlands, the Florida, and the Hampton Storytelling Festivals and is a 2023 ORACLE Award recipient.

Jessica's stories can be heard on radio and podcasts, including Risk! She is a teaching artist, leading workshops for Story Crossroads, The Story Center at the MCPL, Libraries and Community Centers, and through Better Said Than Done online. Jessica's "Guide to Personal Storytelling" (published October 2024) is available through Story Crossroads. Jessica is the author of the urban fantasy novel *Caged* (p. 2019), as well as the memoir-in-stories, *Stages: My Life in Stories* (p. 2024). More at: Jessicapiscitellirobinson.com



KEVIN CORDI - TALKING LEAVES

Dr. Kevin Cordi is a storyteller who doesn't just tell stories—he tosses them into the room and invites everyone to play. A writer, educator, and champion of the oral tradition, Cordi explores how stories shape who we are and how we listen to one another. He holds a Ph.D. in Storytelling and Education from The Ohio State University and teaches storytelling, literacy, and education at Ohio University Lancaster.

Kevin is the author of *Playing with Stories: Story Crafting for Storytellers, Writers, Teachers and Other Imaginative Thinkers* and *You Don't Know Jack: A Storyteller Goes to School*, and co-author (with Judy Sima) of *Raising Voices: Creating Youth Storytelling Groups and Troupes*. His books celebrate the power of story in learning and life. Much of his work focuses on youth, helping young people discover their voices and the courage to tell their own tales. Wherever there's a curious mind and a circle forming, Kevin is likely nearby—asking the next great story question.



JUDY SIMA - TALKING LEAVES

Judy Sima has spent more than 50 years bringing stories to life with passion, creativity, and heart. She began her career as a public school teacher, where she discovered the power of storytelling as a tool to inspire learning, spark imagination, and connect with students. She has also mentored others, teaching people how to effectively share stories of their own.

Over the decades, Judy has shared stories in many forms, including folk, traditional, and contemporary tales, each delivered with her signature colorful style and vibrant presence. She has told deeply personal stories as well, including her mother's journey to the United States. Her performances captivate audiences of all ages, blending wisdom, humor, and humanity. She previously received ORACLE Awards in 2005 and 2013, further recognizing her lasting impact. Through her work, she has not only entertained but also preserved traditions and inspired others to find their voices through storytelling.



JOSEPH SOBOL - TALKING LEAVES

Joseph Sobol's doctoral dissertation on the American storytelling revival was published in 1999 by the University of Illinois Press as the award-winning book *The Storytellers' Journey: An American Revival*. He is a co-founder of the Storytelling in Higher Education Special Interest Group of the National Storytelling Network, and a co-founder and co-editor

from 2004-2022 of the interdisciplinary journal *Storytelling, Self, Society*. His 2005 book *The House Between Earth and Sky: Harvesting New American Folktales*, from Libraries Unlimited/Teacher Ideas Press, is a step-by-step guide to doing Folklore and Storytelling residencies for secondary school ESL classes, along with a selection of international folktales collected in the Chicago City Schools. From 2000-2017 Sobol coordinated the Storytelling Graduate Program at East Tennessee State University. From 2017-2022 he directed the George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling at the University of South Wales. In 2020 he published *Liars, Damn Liars, and Storytellers: Essays on Traditional and Contemporary Storytelling*. He is now happily retired from academia, and lives in Amenia, NY with his wife, Mitzi.



JACK ZIPES - TALKING LEAVES

Jack Zipes is professor emeritus of German and comparative literature at the University of Minnesota. He has edited more than one hundred collections of fairy tales and written many books about fairy tales and children's stories. He has also translated major classical tales by the Brothers Grimm, E. T. Hoffmann, Charles Perrault, and Guiseppe Pitré. In 1995 he

founded Neighborhood Bridges, a storytelling program for students in public schools with the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis, which ended in 2015.



JEFF GERE - INTERNATIONAL STORYBRIDGE

JEFF GERE blends talents as painter, puppeteer, and mime into performances which have electrified audiences in Hawaii for 30 years. Jeff's physical energy, morphing elastic face and voice characterizations make his shows events. Jeff becomes his stories!

Born on Halloween, Jeff performs constantly. He produced/hosted/ told in the Talk Story Festival, Hawaii's biggest storytelling celebration (26 years), Story TV (23 years monthly), Talk Story Radio (2 years weekly, Hawaii Public Radio.) He produced statewide tours, story camps & conferences. He's performed at the National Storytelling Festival (2010, Residency 2013.) He told in Spain, Hong Kong, Turkey, Vancouver & the Yukon before retiring from Oahu's Parks Department (end '14.) Then international tours began (Thailand, China, India, Japan, Australia, Taiwan, Java, Romania & Kenya.) During covid and after, he created local, national & international virtual events as performer and producer. He produced Story Retreats on Kauai, (2023, '24.) He's on YouTube. He does shadow puppets too. www.jeffgere.com jeffgere1031@gmail.com



MARGARET READ MACDONALD - INTERNATIONAL STORYBRIDGE

Margaret Read MacDonald has shared tales and offered her "Playing with Story" workshops in over 55 countries. She was a Fulbright Scholar in Mahasarakham, Thailand, 1995-1996. Margaret solicited storyteller authors and edited collections from Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand.

As a festival producer, Margaret was able to feature tellers from Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, Quebec, the UK, and Thailand.

Her many folktale collections bring folktales from around the globe to English speaking audiences.