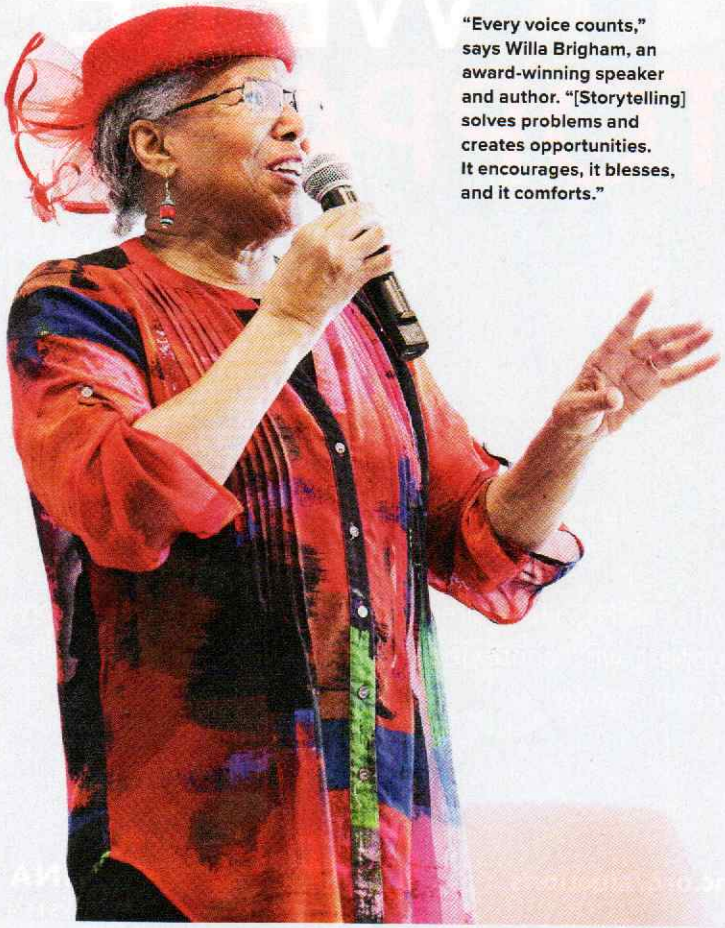
"Every time a story passes from a person's mouth to a person's heart, it gets a little richer."

"Each person — including the storyteller — is sharing in that moment. It's very individualized and personal — and universal."

ALONG WITH CONNECTING PEOPLE, STORIES CAN also connect a community to what it has lost — and what remains. Kiesa Kay is the western region representative for the Guild and programs manager at the Center for Pioneer Life in Burnsville, which highlights the region's tellers at its annual Blue Ridge Storytelling Summit in June.

"This area was really hit hard by [Hurricane Helene]," Kay says. "The people here in Yancey County lost 12 lives, 800 homes, 7,703 structures — we lost all that in one day." Yet, she adds, "we still have our stories to carry with us."



"Every voice counts," says Willa Brigham, an award-winning speaker and author. "[Storytelling] solves problems and creates opportunities. It encourages, it blesses, and it comforts."

And like any inheritance, those stories are meant to be passed along. "Every time a story passes from a person's mouth to a person's heart, it gets a little richer," Kay says. "What we're trying to do is the sharing of what really matters."

THAT EXCHANGE BETWEEN TELLER AND LISTENER IS at the heart of the Guild — and, for Tate, something more mysterious.

"We serious storytellers have discovered that storytelling is a kind of magic," he says. "What we mean by that is that something happens that you can't completely explain. The story is something that has chosen you as the teller for some reason. You have been seduced into valuing it in your mind, in your heart, and in your spirit enough to think about it, reflect on it, and share it."

In its 28 years, the Guild has expanded from 35 storytellers to 115 — a rich tapestry of talent that includes Willa Brigham, Guild board member-at-large and two-time Emmy Award-winning host of the television show *Smart Start Kids*. The air seems to vibrate around Brigham as we sit down to chat in a local library.

"Storytelling is important because the more you tell your story, the more someone who doesn't look like you, dress like you, dance like you, talk like you ... the more you find you have in common than not," she says. "The importance of the Guild is to keep storytelling alive."

Brigham interrupts herself as she's sharing her history — she began by telling stories to her children, then she shared them at libraries, churches, senior centers, and in lessons for her physical education students — and instead starts singing a song about *me*. I'm surprised. And honored.

Next, in that little library nook, she improvises a lesson in self-acceptance: A king has horns, he's embarrassed, and he needs a haircut. In a narrative voice that changes for each character and sometimes slips sweetly into song, Brigham weaves kindness, honesty, and bravery into her fable to illustrate, for me, how her stories evolve.

When she pauses, I don't want the story to end. So I ask, "What happened next?" **OS**

Kathy Norcross Watts writes from her home in Germanton.

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