

Stories That Work

Folk tales offer chance to talk about troubles

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CHAPEL HILL — Lenora Ucko knows that very often, a story is more than just an entertaining way to pass the time.

Folk tales, for example, can serve as a kind of cultural guidebook that tell men how to be men and women how to be women, and dictate how the sexes shall interact.

Ucko, a Durham resident who holds a doctorate in cultural anthropology, founded the StoriesWork nonprofit. It uses folk tales to help abused women think about their plights and let them know there are alternatives to victimization.

For a battered woman, a folk tale in which a man beats his girlfriend can open the door to discussing abuse, but in a fictional and therefore safe forum.

In a late March training, Ucko pointed out that many folk tales are based on conflict between male and female, husband and wife. Folk tales often present archetypes of men and women, and in most of the roles, there's very good likelihood that the woman character will end up hurt.

"The most prevalent one is the shrew; she nags, is confrontational and is disobedient. She's a shrew because her husband doesn't approve of what she's doing. At the end of the story, she's beaten up," often by her henpecked spouse, Ucko said.

"The wise woman is the power behind the throne; she knows how to get what she wants. She manipulates her husband," who's like a puppet.

"The good woman has given up; she doesn't fight anymore. Her husband can treat her any which way. She does everything right, but her husband misinterprets her and treats her badly, like the story of Othello and Desdemona. Then there's the egalitarian marriage, with the assertive wife and assertive husband. They are adults, and they deal with each other in a respectful way."

But, Ucko added: "There are very few folk stories that I've been able to find that portray egalitarian marriage. We don't have many models of egalitarian marriage in our culture — in poems, song lyrics, advertising, TV. You can find in some other cultures evidence of egalitarian marriages, but they are few and

far between. Some of them come from West Africa," Ucko said.

The prevalence of folk tales that portray unhealthy relationships and rigid gender roles is an unfortunate but accurate reflection of the world.

In a 1998 study on women's health issues, The Commonwealth Fund found that 31 percent of American women report physical or sexual abuse by a husband or boyfriend during their lives. Estimates about U.S. domestic-abuse incidents vary, but the numbers — according to the U.S. Department of Justice — are staggering, anywhere from 950,000 to 4 million annually. And these are just the numbers from the United States.

Help for teenagers

At this StoriesWork training, Ucko and volunteers taught their "therapeutic storytelling" approach to social-service providers who work with young people.

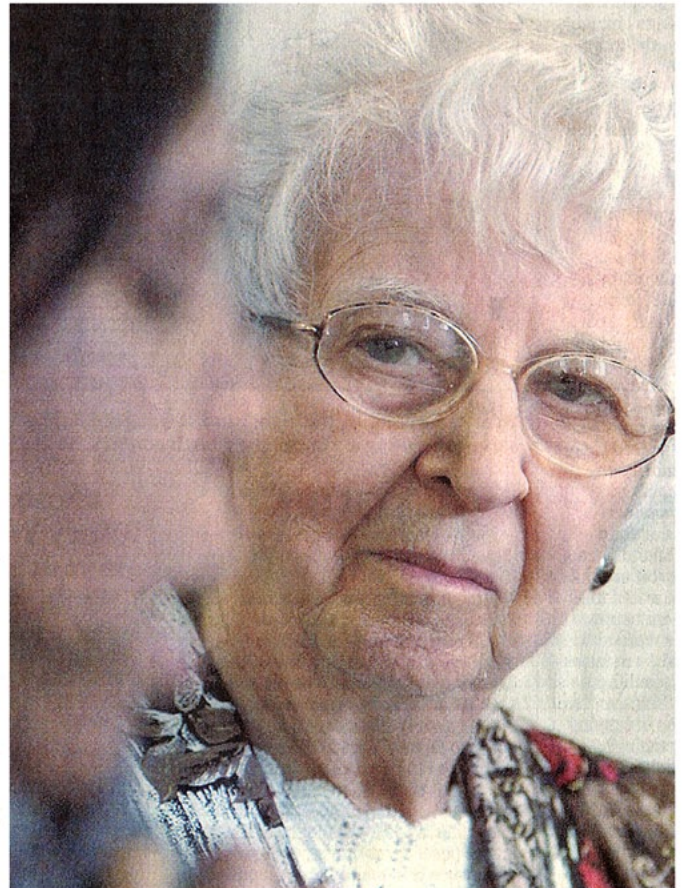
She used the technique in the 1970s at New York's Adelphi University to help social-work graduate students connect with their diverse clients, and applied it again at a Fort Bragg school that prepared military officers for overseas deployment.

Ucko said folk tales also can get teenagers thinking about the transition to adulthood.

"Young people are faced with an incredible burden to try to make sense of a very confusing world. It's not easy to grow up in this culture. The bags get heavier and heavier. When they get to be teenagers, you're lost at sea" — at precisely the time when hormones are flowing wildly and dating starts.

And then she segued into a storytelling demonstration: "Let me tell you a story. This

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Lenora Ucko (above, right), executive director of StoriesWork, listens to Shanita Kemp talk about a folk tale during a recent workshop.

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is about the difference between marriage and courtship.”

In a quiet, conversational tone, she recounted an Arabic folk tale called “The Silent Couple.”

A young couple, each from influential families, has just gotten married. The wedding guests have left, and the elated pair enters their small but lavish home. Excited by the day’s events, they forget to close the door.

When the new husband tells his wife to close it, she demurs. Holding a hand to her chest, Ucko mimicked the young woman, “Me? I don’t close doors. I come from a wealthy family. I’m like a princess.”

Unconvinced by this argument, the husband replies, “Me? I’m the man of the family.”

They make a wager, Ucko said. “Whoever talks first loses the wager and has to close the door.”

Neither will budge — even when thieves ransack their house. When police spy the damage, they run in and threaten to beat the husband, who refuses to talk. His young wife begs, “Oh, no, please don’t!”

The husband, fixated on winning, tells her to shut the door.

The small conference room filled with groans and knowing laughs. One woman said, “She probably wanted to hit him then!”

When Ucko asked simple questions about what the story means, another woman talked about how things change when a relationship becomes a marriage — and what happens when the honeymoon ends.

‘New ways to empower’

By the workshop’s end, all the participants have become storytellers. They use general scripts, but tell the stories in their own ways, embellishing here or leaving out a detail there.

There’s the Asian story of a young man, Dhun, who marries his cousin to protect her from a terrible, prophesied death. In his fear, Dhun follows his young wife everywhere, prompting the neighbors to call him a baby sitter and not a husband. His constant monitoring



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Kristal Jones (left) and Diane Lennox participate in a discussion of a folk tale as they learn how to use the stories to help people heal.

eventually fails to save the young woman, who is never named in the story.

Every story ends with questions. Did he love his wife? Was this protection or control? Is the marriage incest, culturally sanctioned tradition or both?

The folk tales may not steer people toward healthier relationships, but they are a medium that young ears can hear, said participant Sylvia Ratliffe, special programs director at the Council on Adolescents of Catawba County. Her nonprofit operates school programs that teach teens about making responsible decisions and the risks of sex and drug use.

“I do a lot of dramatic performance to teach the kids. Throwing out stories will allow them to think for themselves,” Ratliffe said.

Participant Donna Allred, supervisor of sexual-assault programs at My Sister’s House in Rocky Mount, said folk tales will be another tool in her work with battered women. She’s preparing a mini-workshop to share what she learned with her colleagues.

“We have seven support groups, and we’re always looking for new ways to empower the women, to help them answer questions, to see how gender roles impact them and really impact all of us.”

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Before the workshop, Allred said, she’d never thought about the gender violence in folk tales.

“But I know there are a lot of fairy tales that emphasize male saviors and women in distress.”

Drawing from her experience, Allred has put her own spin on the folk tales’ violence and purpose.

“When the abuse is demonstrated in the form of folk tales, it almost seemed to me that this was a secret way of communication between [abused] women so they know they are not alone. It’s a kind of an Underground Railroad.”