

Joel Dresang 0:00

Welcome to Real Stories MKE, brought to you as part of Ex Fabula's work to connect Milwaukee through real stories. I'm Joel Dresang.

Kim Shine 0:07

And I'm Kim Shine. Ex Fabula believes that everyone has personal stories worth sharing. We host storytelling workshops where community members can build their storytelling skills and confidence and StorySlams, where true stories are shared on stage.

Joel Dresang 0:22

To give a better feel for what it's like at a StorySlam, we're bringing you four stories from a single StorySlam. It took place on November 4, 2021, at the Anodyne coffee roasting company on Bruce Street in Milwaukee's Walker's Point neighborhood.

Kim Shine 0:35

Yeah, and each Ex Fabula StorySlam has a theme. You guys know this, right? The slam had the theme Eutopia. Not the utopia spelled U T O P I A, which means an idealized imaginary place. The theme was Eutopia, spelled E U T O P I A, which means good place. We wanted storytellers to focus on good places that can or could actually exist.

Joel Dresang 1:02

The StorySlams attract people looking to connect with other people through real stories. The stories have to be true, personal stories. They can't be longer than five minutes. And they must be told without notes or props. Everyone at the slam is invited to put their name in the hat if they want to tell a story.

Kim Shine 1:19

Yeah, I have a lot of good places that I-that I like. The beach is one. I could say so many things about the beach and my recent trip to San Diego. That was Eutopia to me.

Joel Dresang 1:32

Does that include other beaches like Lake Michigan beaches?

Kim Shine 1:36

It does. In Milwaukee where...I don't know...it's that outlook point where you can walk kind of down into the water. I don't know which one it is, but I know it's there. If you find me on the street, I'll point you to it. How about that?

Joel Dresang 1:51

Walk me down there. Okay.

Kim Shine 1:53

Well, you did something to, right? You had a good place at this StorySlam because you were there.

Joel Dresang 1:59

I actually was the volunteer timekeeper at this StorySlam. Coincidentally, I sat in the front row and held up cards to warn the tellers when they were halfway through their five minutes, when there was a minute left, and when the five minutes was up. And I was a little nervous about it because I didn't want to impose myself and be a distraction and be that guy at the end who's like yanking them off the stage.

Kim Shine 2:28

I mean, if it's too long, it's too—No, just kidding!

Joel Dresang 2:30

No, it is, no.

Kim Shine 2:31

Tell your story!

Joel Dresang 2:32

Rules are rules. Our first story comes from Leah Anderson. Hers was the first name pulled from the hat at that Eutopia StorySlam. Here's Leah.

Leah Anderson 2:42

Is this close enough? All right, great. I went to my first Weight Watchers meeting when I was 11. I learned some things that were helpful. And maybe some things that weren't super helpful. It's maybe not inevitable, but also not surprising, I developed an eating disorder. And um... the one thing I didn't learn at Weight Watchers was that even if I like met my goal weight, I was still me. And I kept trying to like lose more weight to see if I could overcome being me. And it didn't work. I lost 20% of my body weight and I had to go to therapy. And I still like still stuck being this person. And I tried some other things. Alcohol was really helpful for like five minutes, like it really did the trick. But now I've got 21 years clean. Because yeah, it worked super well for a minute and then kind of backfired. So like the process of being clean and being in recovery is not linear. And like the desire to escape being myself is like what I'm learning to recover from, right. And so like, over the years, eating has, like come and gone. It's like been a thing like sizes, like been a thing. And like most of the time, it's not super present. And then, you know, sometimes it can be.

So last winter, when I like started having decreased appetite, I was like, hm, cool! You know? And I started getting slimmer and slimmer. And I was like, I just didn't really want to eat. And when I did, I just wanted to eat Grebe's and Leon's and that's pretty much what I stuck to. So like I didn't I didn't think that there was any problem with the fact that I was like going months and months of like not having appetite. And then in April I found a lump in my breast. And it turns out I had breast cancer and my body like had something important to say, by the fact that I wasn't hungry, but I was like too busy being like, 'hey, I lost ten pounds,' you know? And so breast cancer and weight are like super intertwined. And when you do all the crazy research

that people who find out they have breast cancer do which is a show and like, I wish we didn't have to do that. The fact that you might gain weight is like this big thing, right? From the treatments that you do. But as I did my surgery, and like, as I did radiation, like I kept losing more and more weight, and my day looked like this. I would wake up, I would take a nap, I would go on like a three mile walk, take another nap, watch a show and go to bed. And like something that I love to do is forage and like, especially towards the end of the summer, like I love to pick the choke cherries, and the grapes, and the elderberries and, like make stuff out of them. And what I started noticing is like, I would pick the berries, but then I like couldn't make any, like, I just couldn't get out of the couch to like make the food, right. And so as I'm dealing with radiation, I learned that if you fast and like eat only 800 calories a day, then it can like, not make the radiation be as bad for the rest of your body, right? Because your cells are going to go into whatever dormant! And so during the week, when I'm only eating 800 calories, that was when I was like, why am...? I'm really tired. You know, and it was like I had this dawning realization that like maybe the whole, like the reason I couldn't do stuff during radiation, like wasn't necessarily radiation, but the fact that I wasn't eating.

And so like, I was really happy to find out that I was hungry, and happy to realize like to live my life and do what I need to do in my life, I have to eat. And I made a commitment in that moment, as I'm like watching my grapes rot because I can't get the energy to cook them. Like I am going to eat whatever I need to eat to have energy to do my life. And I wish the story ended here. But I have...it went a little farther. I was talking about it with my kid who's 16. And we're listening to Maintenance Phase- awesome podcast about like, weight bias. And, and I told them my resolution that I was, you know, like, going to eat as much as I need to eat, regardless of how I look. And they're like, 'So are you gonna stop dieting?' And I was like, 'ahhh,' you know, like, what? It's like, I never thought about the impact my behavior was having on her. That like, if you're, if your parent is thinner than you and is dieting, what does that say about you? And what does it say your parent thinks about you. And so like I have this double eutopia, right like the eutopia of always knowing that I'm enough, like regardless of what I look like, and the eutopia of being a parent who shows my child that they're enough to.

Joel Dresang 8:24

We reached out to Leah and asked her to share her thoughts about telling this story. Here's what she said: "To prepare, I followed the strategy the organization suggested to me back when Ex Fabula first started: come up with an opening line, a closing line, and four or five major points to hit and to be sure to include how I changed. This particular event was really special because several storytellers who came up after me said they had been inspired by my honesty. To me, the point of storytelling is allowing others to identify with us, to let them know they are not alone, even in the most unflattering truths about themselves. By sharing that I can have flaws and still be an okay person. My hope is that others believe this is true for them, too."

Kim Shine 9:10

That's not bad. I appreciated her story.

Joel Dresang 9:12

I think the best real stories that come out of these are the ones in which the storyteller exposes...shares of vulnerability, which is hard to do. And I think everybody in the audience appreciates that. And, as Leah experienced, that they relate to that.

Kim Shine 9:28

That's very true. Well, as you know, each StorySlam, Joel, has about nine storytellers. There's usually three rounds of three stories with breaks in between and that's when audience members can freshen their drinks, use the restroom, and if they haven't already, put their name in the hat because that's what we want, if you want to do it. After the first break, we like to dedicate the second round of storytellers to first timers. We wanted to encourage the first timers to share and the middle of the show feels like it has the least amount of pressure. In the first round, newbies get a chance to see how it's done and to feel inspired.

Joel Dresang 10:04

And Kim that night at the Eutopia StorySlam, only a handful of people had their names in the hat when the show began. But during the first break, a slew of newbies came forward.

Kim Shine 10:15

So they're pretty brave. Hm, that's pretty awesome. And one of those people, his name was Murali Badulla. Now, Murali had previously attended an Ex Fabula workshop, but he had not gotten on stage just yet. Then his name got pulled and he went on stage. Here's Murali.

Murali Bedulla 10:38

Check. All right. So, I'm so glad to see so many people out and about. It's been a tough year and a half, as some of you have shared already. I'm in an improv class at Comedy Sports. I attend improv every Tuesday night. And that's what I've been doing for the last two or three weeks. Now, how did I get there? That's a great question. Right? How do you get there? Well, about two years ago, two, two and a half years ago now. I was getting our piano tuned. Our piano had been sitting there, my son used to learn the piano. And the piano had been sitting in the corner. We moved into a new house and we couldn't leave the piano. Somehow, we just had to take the piano along with us. Because even though our son's been gone from home for many years, and so piano was sitting in the corner, and one day I said, well find out the name of a piano tuner, and I'll, and I'll call the piano tuner, and get the piano tuned. And so I called a piano tuner, I got the piano tuned. And then I called a friend and I said, Do you know a piano teacher? So even as I was getting the piano tuned, I said, gosh, maybe I should sign up for piano lessons. And here I am a very left brained person who spent a lot of my career in the left-brain kind of stuff. And, and here I was retired. And one year into retirement, I was getting my piano tuned. And I found a piano teacher. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing. I got into my car. And I was driving to my piano lessons. And I was so excited. Oh, my gosh, I felt like a little kid. I was going for my piano lesson. I am gonna I was gonna get one of those books, you know, those piano books that, you know, lesson one, Book One, Book Two, Book Three that my son had. And I was getting going to get a piano book. Here I was on my way to the piano lesson. And all I could think about was all the excitement about I was going to learn something new. I was going to learn piano. And nothing was going to hold me back. And I didn't know. I didn't know at that

moment what I was getting into. And yet, I went to the piano lesson, the piano teacher and I met up and I never learned how to read music. I didn't know how to do anything with a musical instrument. And to this day, I still think of that moment of excitement. I've been going to piano lessons once a week. During COVID, we had zoom lessons, once a week, and I practice every day for two to three hours. So my Eutopia for you is no matter how old you are, and you have something you want to learn: do it now. Start now.

Kim Shine 14:08

We caught up with Murali recently and he told us that he prepared a rough form of his story at the Ex Fabula workshop that he attended. Now with that as an outline, he said he just flushed out his story on the stage. He was pleased with the feedback that he got. And one of the later storytellers said on stage that Murali's story inspired him to put his name in the hat, too. Murali described the whole experience as quote, 'Liberating. I have done more story sharing since then', he said, adding, 'it becomes easier.' And it really does!

Unknown Speaker 14:41

In addition to the nine storytellers whose names are pulled from the hat, the StorySlams feature UltraShorts, which are very brief, true personal stories related to the theme. Audience members submit the UltraShorts on a slip of paper, and they're read by the emcee, which at this story slam was luscely Flores, who also serves on the Ex Fabula board of directors.

Kim Shine 15:02

And here are some of the Eutopia UltraShorts. This first one is by anonymous. My mom drove by the old house my uncle and his two now grown children lived in decades ago. His son died at age 24. And my mom thought taking snapshots of the old place would bring back some good memories. A woman opened the garage door and asked my mom why she was pointing her phone in the direction of the house. Well, my mom explained why, the woman invited her inside. She showed her the inside of a closet where she had preserved the artwork her nephew had drawn as a child.

Joel Dresang 15:35

Wow, that's cool.

Kim Shine 15:38

Here's one that also has that good place theme. It's from Karen. The first time I crossed Lake Michigan, it took 25 and a half hours. I was in a sailboat race with virtually no wind. I saw both the sunset and the sunrise that made the water look like it was on fire. I would gladly spend another 25 and a half hours doing that any time. As close to heaven as you can get.

Joel Dresang 16:03

Our third Eutopia story comes from Nubian Star. She's another first time teller. Here's her story.

Nubian Star 16:14

So peace and blessings, everybody. So I just want you to know a little bit about me. I grew up in a home full of monsters, and my mom was like, the scariest person ever. So because she was scary, I never wanted to be a mother. But I was blessed to be a mom at 21. And then so we grew up together, we were having a good time, I loved her, she loved me, life was perfect. And then when she turned 12, I had twins. And 14 months later, I had another one. And then two years ago, I became a mom again, and the pandemic hit. So I was like, overwhelmed, to say the least, that I was in a house full of four children. Three very close in age, one brand new starting all over again. And every day was a struggle, because now I have to be afraid of germs. Now I have to entertain children. And then there was virtual learning, which I've equated virtual learning to Common Core if anybody knows what it's like. So if you don't know Common Core is two plus two equals purple. Virtual Learning very much was like that, because now I'm not only the mommy, I am the principal. I am the lunch lady. I am the tech support. I am the recess referee, I'm the nurse. I'm also the person that says you have to get up and go to school even though it's in your bedroom. So life was not fun. And what I did to escape or what I do to escape is at night when it's finally quiet, which is usually around 1130, 12 o'clock at night, I sneak away into my garage, and I pull out paint and I paint. And I write because I've been writing since third grade. Because I learned in third grade that writing is how you keep the monsters away. Creativity is how you keep the monsters away. So as the pandemic has turned into whatever it's turned into, we're still in virtual learning. I am still a domestic goddess with all these many hats. It has literally been 542 days since I've been away from my children. And I'm still saying and this is the very first night that I've been out amongst adults having a conversation. And with that being said, I just want to thank you all for being a part of my Eutopia.

Joel Dresang 18:56

Nubian Star told us that she didn't prepare her story ahead of time. She just got up there and went for it.

Kim Shine 19:02

Wow.

Joel Dresang 19:02

Yeah. She said, 'Honestly, the stories I heard gave me the inspiration and courage to get on stage. I felt full of good adrenaline and creativity.' And she said she definitely wants to do more.

Kim Shine 19:15

What do you think about her story? Because I thought it was hilarious.

Joel Dresang 19:18

I loved it. I was impressed that it's her first time out with adults and she chose to come to an Ex Fabula StorySlam.

Kim Shine 19:25

I love it. I guess when I when I think about kids I'm just always gonna think about her story. Think about parenthood. Just come to an Ex Fabula event, we'll make you happy.

Well, our final Eutopia story comes from Kelly Schaffer, yet another first-time teller. But one caution on this story though, a trigger warning here. This story does mention suicidal ideation. Here's Kelly.

Kelly Schaffer 19:52

Yeah, that's good. Can you hear me? Okay, I'm immediately scanning to like, do I know anyone that I am going to change how much I disclose? So I was sitting and listening to—is it Leah? So I was listening to Leah, I really hope you take this as a compliment, because it's meant as meant meant as one. But when you're like, had an eating disorder, and I'm sober now I was like, she's fucked up like me! Can I swear? Okay, all right. So I was like, Oh, this is awesome. And immediately that got me thinking that this is really the Eutopia. And it's kind of like what Megan was saying that eutopia is really being in a place where we can be seen. And a lot of times, I feel like the things that we want to be able to show to other people are like, the hardest things we've been through. Because it's um...I don't know why that is. I don't know why we want people to know how hard we've worked to get through life. But I think that is a thing. So I was like, yes, she's messed up, and I'm messed up. And maybe I can talk about about why I am. So another thing I was. So I think this is eutopia. Another thing I think is like eutopia is having spaces like this where you can break social convention. Because usually, I wouldn't just go tell a bunch of people my, you know, things like that. But in spaces like this, it's, that's the platform to do it. Right?

So normally, I wouldn't tell all of you, I would never walk up to you on the street and say that I have really battled suicide and been very close to that. But this is a social container where that's okay. And that some other people might be like, Oh, my gosh, she's messed up, too. And so, I thought I'd share a little bit about my journey with that. Because I feel like I've really come out the other side. And now it's one of those things I like to talk about, because I hope other people might find some strength in it. But also because I want people to know how hard I worked not to kill myself. I want people to know how hard I worked and how strong I am! So, um, thanks. I'm just trying to help anyone out there who's struggling, but also be impressed. So I, I have always struggled with anxiety and depression, and it got really bad when there was like the perfect storm. So part of that perfect storm was I decided to go off my antidepressant. Yeah, Leah gets it, right. So that was bad.

I also, um, two of my closest people in my life are my two brothers. And one moved to Seattle, and one moved to Australia, and I was left my parents on my own. Are my parents here? And so that was hard. Then I started having health problems, I had to leave my job, I ended up being gone not working for nine months, going to the doctor every day, because I found out I have fibromyalgia, which is a diagnosis of exclusion. So you do 8000 tests, and they go, I don't know. And we call that fibromyalgia. So then, and if anyone knows me, which my friend Al does, the only things I care about in life are animals. I mean, you are all great, I'm sure. But you're not a dog.

So, and then my dog died. So yeah, that's where, okay, so I was not good. I was also in a pretty terrible relationship, you know, perfect storm. Okay. So I just remember sitting in my apartment, I couldn't sleep, I would stare out the window. And I honestly don't want to get into like the things that I thought about for how I might do it. This isn't an actual way I would do it. I just wanted to be face down in the snow, and just kind of like disappear under the snow. So I just remember that. So I eventually checked myself into a mental hospital, which is what you do. And that was another social container where you could break social convention. One example-there are many-but one example is there was this, I got really freaked out by people talking about meds. It was just like, I didn't want to think about all the side effects people were having. I was trying to get back on meds, but I didn't want to talk about so there's one girl always talked about meds. One day, we're sitting at lunch, and she's talking about all of her terrible side effects. And I'm like, great, that's what I just went on. I went like this in front of her. And it was close with her looking straight at me. I covered my ears. I could never do that in a meeting or something like that. But in this container of...in this container, I could just be like, I can't stop you but I can stop me hearing it. So I love that and then just kind of like closing the, you know, kind of closing things up on the idea of eutopia. I think the biggest difference for how I felt when I was more suicidal to now is that I always was looking outside for eutopia to fix me. And that that was kind of I figured out, you got to find it in yourself. And that's really where the eutopia is, and then it goes with you everywhere.

Kim Shine 25:29

Okay, so we talked to Kelly after this, and she gave us a lot to think about here, Joel, she said that it was kind of a why not moment, you know, she wants to just get out of our comfort zone and try something new. And she was sitting next to a volunteer, aka Joel.

Joel Dresang 25:47

She was on the other side of me, yes.

Kim Shine 25:50

And you told her that sometimes people don't plan to tell a story, but they ended up doing it. And so she did. She also said she did not prepare for this ahead of time. Her friend invited her to go watch it last minute. And so she was just excited. And she kind of figured it out as she went along. And then when intermission came, that's when she kind of did the main thread and respond to the audience as they took her story.

Joel Dresang 26:16

There's this authenticity in these stories when people don't think they're going to tell a story. And they're inspired by a storyteller, and they think I have something to share too. And then they get up there. And they're usually stories that they've told before. So it's not like they have to do a lot of preparation.

Kim Shine 26:33



Yeah. And the the seriousness of her story to she, she added humor to it. But you still knew that she went through this experience. She survived this experience. And she wanted people to know that you can get out of experiences like this, if you just think beyond and realize that it's you who really does have the power to get yourself out of that and be happy and content and find your eutopia.

Joel Dresang 26:59

It was it was very inspiring.

Kim Shine 27:01

I agree.

Joel Dresang 27:02

So at the end of the evening, the storytellers came back on stage to remind the audience of their stories, and then each audience member got to vote for their favorite by secret ballot. The audience favorite gets invited to share a new, longer story at the Ex Fabula All Stars event in May. And...

Kim Shine 27:20

Who won?

Joel Dresang 27:20

The audience favorite was Kelly.

Kim Shine 27:22

Yes.

Joel Dresang 27:22

Yeah, they voted for her. And congratulations to her and for all of the tellers who bravely shared their stories that night.

Unknown Speaker 27:30

Yeah, I agree. Thank you so much as always, and thank you to everyone else who made that Eutopia slam a good place for storytelling, all the staff and volunteers, the audience, event sponsors, Bronze Optical Gallery and Landmark Credit Union, and the season sponsors including Transfer Pizzeria, SHR Marketing, and of course, 89.7 WUWM.

Joel Dresang 27:55

Milwaukee's NPR!

Kim Shine 27:56

Thanks also to the funders of Ex Fabula's work on the radio, Wisconsin Arts Board, Wisconsin Humanities, C-A-M-P-A-C Cam Pac, and an anonymous Family Foundation.

Joel Dresang 28:09

Unfortunately, that's all the time we have today for Real Stories MKE, but don't worry, we've been at this for more than 10 years and there are more audio and video stories available at [exfabula.org](http://exfabula.org).

Kim Shine 28:21

Yeah, you should go to our website because it lists upcoming storytelling workshops and StorySlams And we hope that you'll join us at an event and maybe even share a story we just shared some great ones with you today. You can also connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Joel Dresang 28:36

And thanks to everyone who makes Real Stories MKE possible, including Ex Fabula staff, the storytellers, of course, and audio engineer Sam Woods.

Kim Shine 28:45

We love you, Sam. For Real Stories MKE, I'm Kim Shine.

Joel Dresang 28:49

And I'm Joel Dresang. Thanks for listening.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>