

Performance Nightmares

By Linda Gorham, Storyteller, with help from the Fox Valley Storytelling Guild
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My father used to say “Proper prior planning prevents poor performance.” He was right. When we go out to do a show we need to plan and prepare. Of course we need to know our stories, but there is so much more. We need to give the hiring venue advance information about our professional needs. We need to ask the right questions. We need to be clear about what we can and will do. We need to do whatever it takes to help us shine during our shows. But, “*No matter how carefully we plan, things will go wrong!*” I know it. You know it. I would bet that all storytellers have tales of performance anguish.

Recently I gathered a group of tellers from the Fox Valley Storytelling Guild to talk about our storytelling experiences. I asked them to finish the following sentences:

- I wish I had asked . . .
- I should have realized . . .
- I wish I had stipulated that . . .
- I wish the audience had listened when I told them repeatedly . . .
- I will never ever again . . .
- I wish I had told them . . .
- I wish I had had the courage to say . . .

Once we sat down and the tape recorder was turned on, the stories erupted. We heard frightening scenarios of woe, hopeless tales of things that went wrong, and fearless feats of performance bravery. Together we laughed, we cried, and we reminisced as we recreated some of our most memorable nightmare performance experiences. Joining me were: Sue Black, Jim Decker, Karen Decker, Donna Dettman, Leanne Johnson, Diane Ladley, Lainie Levin, Becky Potter, Mike Speller, Carolyn Thomas-Davidoff, and Ican Seenow. We hope by sharing our true stories we can save you from the horrors of performance **Nightmares.**

I wish I had asked . . .

- Are you sure a storyteller is right for this event?
- Will the seniors expecting Bingo?
- Will you be collapsing the tables during the first or the last story?
- Will the sound system be a battery powered megaphone?
- Is this a Blue and Gold scout dinner?
- Will the show be in the same room as the smoking lounge?
- Will half of the audience be leaving for band practice in the middle of my show?
- Will a helicopter be landing next to me during my show?
- Will there be lights so at least someone can see me in the dark?
- Will there be a sound system so at least someone can hear me in the dark?
- Can I have a sunlamp so at least I can get a tan in the dark?
- Will you be advertising the show?
- Will you put up signs so people know where to find me?

- Will you bother to tell anyone?
- Does the audience speak English?
- Do the children have special needs?
- Are there any major road closings in your area?
- Is the highway exit still there?
- Is this the first time you are producing an event?
- Will Elvis be performing before me?
- Will a nationally known comedian, who has been on David Letterman five times, be going on just before me?
- Which school door will be unlocked? Where is the doorbell?
- Where should I park?
- Where is the bathroom?
- Is it okay if I use words like “butt?” How about “demonic?”
- Will there be a petting zoo next to my stage? How about an inflatable moonwalk?
- Will anyone be making announcements over the PA system during the show?
- Will anyone be walking behind the stage during the show?

I should have realized . . .

- That when they told me they would pay me nothing, they would treat me like nothing.
- That they would turn on the smoke machine during my show.
- That the kids were too wound up at the end of my show. I should have calmed them down before they went back to their classrooms.
- That if there were several contact people, things would go wrong.
- That teenagers who are not used to sitting on the floor, wouldn't like any of my stories if I took away their chairs.
- That if I put my CD on display, someone would take it.
- That if I took off my watch and put it down, someone would take it.
- That walking around the campfire while I told my stories was a dumb thing to do.
- That the audience wasn't bored; they simply did not understand English.
- That the venue would be hard to find if I left the directions home.
- That when the teachers sat in the back and faced away from me, no one was going to supervise the kids.
- That when they put me in a trailer to do the show, I would be in trouble.
- That even if they didn't return the contract or my repeated phone calls, the gig would still be on.
- That when they asked me if I was flexible, that would mean upon arrival I would learn that three shows would become six.
- That it would take a lot longer than I thought to get to the venue.
- That a story requiring five volunteers would need at least five willing people in the audience.
- That I should have worn a slip under my dress.
- That smoke from a campfire would find my throat no matter where I stood.
- That the audience only came around the campfire to get warm, not to hear stories.
- That I was in trouble when they told me that the parking lot was only for the PAID entertainers (i.e., not me).
- That the color of the background curtain would clash with my outfit.

- That preschool students would be attending the eight grade show.
- That the HUGE campfire would cause a few problems – make that many problems.
- That I should always bring my own bottle of water.
- That my \$#*&!! shawl would fall off.
- That the fire would not provide enough light at night for anyone to see me.
- That they wouldn't know how I wanted the seats set up unless I told them in advance.
- That a scout leader sitting up front and center would talk on her cell phone during my show
- That I should have brought bug spray for my outdoor show.
- That right in the middle of the most critical part of my story, someone's cell phone would go off.
- That my cell phone would go off.
- That while a teacher can control twenty-five kids, a parent cannot control one.
- That everyone would want to sit at the absolute top of the large grandstand seats, leaving them all at least twenty-five feet above and away from me.
- That my butt would look big in those newspaper pictures.
- That all parents would think their children are inherent angels and deserve the freedom to run wild and yell out during inappropriate times during my shows.
- That if it's a Blue and Gold scout banquet dinner, performing after the awards would mean waiting around for a long time. And parents would be ready to go home by the time I was asked to start the show.
- That the school office would be closed at night and no one would hear me calling from the road.
- That I should never trust MapQuest.
- That rush hour would start early.
- That the bleachers would be noisy . . . and kids would stamp their feet on them.
- That kids feel would be attached to sound equipment – and would touch all of it.
- That when they said the check would be late, they meant really late.
- That when they said the check would be late, they meant it will never come.
- That when the school secretary said, "The gym is down that way," I would not be getting any help at all.
- That when they said the area near the storytelling space might be a tiny bit "busy," they meant really loud.

I wish I had stipulated . . .

- That I would not perform in front of a large picture window.
- That I would not perform in front of a door.
- That a parking space would be reserved for me in advance.
- That the principal would not admonish the children to, "Be quiet! Sit still! And don't move!" before I was introduced.
- That sending me an aerial view of the library would not be very helpful.
- That I would go on before the sugary treats.
- That I would not perform near a cappuccino machine.
- That they would provide me with a bottle of room temperature water.
- That the noisy parents in the back of the room would be reminded not to talk and should at least pretend to model good behavior and listen.

- That at least one person would be assigned to monitor the room.
- That they would send me written directions.
- That the shades would be closed to keep the sun out of everyone's eyes.
- That Santa, Captain Underpants, Dora the Explorer and a host of other characters would not be allowed to enter the room until after my show.
- That they would not introduce me by saying (on a very hot day), "Ice cream will be served as soon as the storyteller is finished."
- That the teachers would leave their homework in their classrooms.
- That marshmallows would not be roasted during my ghost story show.
- That for Blue and Gold scout dinners, families would sit together during my show.
- That the dinner dishes would be removed after, and the tables removed before, my show – not during.
- That they would give me emergency contact and cell phone numbers.
- That they would give me a number in case of a snow emergency.
- That the kids would give their . . . balloons, toys, books, candy, juice boxes etc. to their parents before the show.

I wish the audience had listened when I told them repeatedly:

- The ghost stories will get more intense. The children should leave now.

I will never ever again:

- Tell at a Blue and Gold scout dinner.
- Tell ghost stories in a school environment.
- Tell at a birthday party.
- Tell at a slumber party for 200 kids.

I wish I would have:

- Charged more.

I wish I would have had the courage to say:

- It sounds as if you have enough activity planned. You don't need a storyteller.
- Sorry, I'm already booked that day.
- I'm not the best storyteller for your needs. Let me give you the names and numbers of other tellers you should call.
- **No!**

Linda Gorham tours nationally. In 2003 she co-chaired the National Storytelling Conference in Chicago. In 2004 she co-led a group of sixty-two American storytellers who traveled to South Africa as part of a professional exchange. Linda is a founding member of ASE: The Chicago Association of Black Storytellers and an award-winning recording artist. www.LindaGorham.com