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Novato storyteller weaves tales inspired by upbringing

Novato storyteller weaves tales inspired by Southern upbringing



Courtesy of Anita Gail Jones

In her career as a professional storyteller, Novato's Anita Gail Jones tells stories inspired by global folklore and her childhood.



By [COLLEEN BIDWILL](#) | cbidwill@marinij.com | Marin Independent Journal
February 27, 2021 at 12:00 p.m.



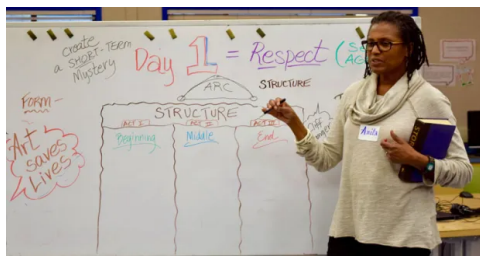
Anita Gail Jones didn't think too much of it when she submitted a form through the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators' newsletter for people interested in giving a presentation to kids at schools. In fact, the Novato resident had forgotten all about it when she got a call two years later, asking if she'd like to come speak to middle school students in San Pablo.

In front of a packed crowd, she gave a talk on where ideas come from and weaved in stories of her childhood in Albany, Georgia. It was in that moment she realized the power of storytelling and started attending and participating in workshops and festivals, working on her craft to become a professional storyteller. In her tales, she often pulls from global folklore as well as from her upbringing.

Education has always played an important part in her life, from teaching workshops to youth to her work with the Gaines-Jones Education Foundation, which gives need-based college scholarships to Black students in southwest Georgia and the San Francisco Bay Area, that she founded in the early 2000s with her husband, Robert Roehrick.

During her time as an affiliate artist at the Headlands Center for the Arts for 2018 to 2019, she worked on her yet-unpublished debut novel, "Peach Seed Monkey," a Southern American tale of two people battling the consequences of history's sweep and personal choice.

Q What inspired you and Robert to start the foundation?



Courtesy of Anita Gail Jones

Anita Gail Jones coaches teens on storytelling for the California Film Institute's My Place | My Story program.

A My mother was a sixth-grade teacher and librarian in rural Georgia for 39 years. When she died in 1992, my sister, my father and I started a small scholarship in her memory, and then five years later, my sister was killed in a plane crash and two years after that, my father died. So, with some of the money from the



Q Why are issues surrounding education important to you?

A Education was always important in our family. With my mom being a teacher and working in education for all those years, it wasn't even a question whether you were going to college. We grew up a street called Hazard Drive, and Albany State College, where my mother went to school, a historically Black college, was at the end of the street. Growing up with the college there shaped us. And my parents opened their wings to students at Albany State. They would eat at our table, our house became their home away from home and when they'd thank my mother, she'd say, "You don't need to thank me, because one day my girls will need help, and I hope someone will be there for them." That's the kind of environment that I grew up in. It's almost a birthright that I am in this business of helping others, because that's what my parents did.

Q What's a memorable story you've told as a storyteller?

A My dad used to tell us when we were growing up that the three things he was afraid of as a kid on a rural farm in Putney, Georgia, was airplanes, trains and billy goats. When I started doing professional storytelling, I asked him if I could share this story with kids in schools and he said, "Sure, that's what stories are for." It has been my most favorite story to tell. In the early 1990s, we were in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, for the Black Storytelling Festival and I told that story on one of the stages. Because my dad was in the audience, I had him stand up at the end of the story. He popped up like a piece of toast. He was so proud and so happy. When my dad died in 1999, that story was my eulogy for him. My father was quite the storyteller. He was a natural. When I realized I had that natural instinct for telling stories, I knew I had gotten it from him.

Q Why is it important for you to share stories of your childhood and Georgia?

A So many stories out of that part of the world are under-told, untold or mistold. In my novel, a lot of my characters are composites of people from my life. Those are really rich opportunities to keep a culture alive, and certain people alive through the stories. It truly is a privilege to do this and to bring those stories to life.



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