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The Mothman Cometh!

NYC's spontaneous-storytelling crew mines for voices in slam city.
Monday Oct 26, 2009. By **Gavin Paul**

Arts + Words Feed

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So a lawyer, a DePaul professor and a dance therapist walk into a bar...

The joke would stop there, if not for the endearing comedic weavings of all the lighthearted, though real, characters that highlighted the Chicago kick-off of New York City's immensely popular storytelling series, [The Moth](#), at [Martyrs!](#) on September 29.

Down-and-out poet George Dawes Green created the series in 1997 in an attempt to resurrect the ageless art of a well-told tale (as he and his friends used to do growing up in rural Georgia, with a bottle of Jack Daniels as their only aid). Over the years, it's grown from a simple apartment gathering into an always-sold-out party at a bar, to the second most popular podcast on the web, downloaded millions of times per week. In 2001, the series expanded to include open-mic nights, dubbed StorySLAMs; this year, Chicago and Detroit join Los Angeles as the only cities outside NYC to host such events.

The StorySLAM rules are simple: 10 randomly selected performers (would-be participants put their names in a hat at the beginning of the night) get five minutes each to tell a story that fits within a broad theme, such as "School." The off-the-cuff nature of the event recalls Chicago's poetry slams of the mid-'80s, pioneered by Marc Smith - aka SlamPapi - at the now-closed Get Me High Lounge (Smith still hosts Sunday-night slams at the [Green Mill](#)). The locals taking the stage last month repped the city well, offering entertaining tales about childhood games (the lawyer), the upside of bulimia (the dance therapist) and educational bravado (the prof), among others.

The very different stories had a couple things in common: all were true, and all were told without notes. This enforcement of spontaneity is a key aspect of any StorySLAM, and while it increases the possibility of failure, that's part of the appeal, according to guest host Dan Kennedy (who's also the permanent host of The Moth podcast). Audience members are typically polite, he says - "they say hello and that they love you, but they also hang back to see if they'll need to move to the left should you fall flat on your face."

A few of the attendees get to do more than that; each StorySLAM includes an impromptu three-member judging panel, which determines a winner from among the yarn-spinners. And while The Moth has hosted many talented people (notable performers have included "This American Life" contributor David Dickerson and Jonathan Ames, creator of HBO's "Bored to Death"), you don't have to be a practiced pro to take home the title.



The crowd gets plenty of input at any Moth event.

"I like downtown writer-performers, but it's about authenticity," says Kennedy. "If the choice is between my favorite performer who does gigs all over town to a loyal following, or the guy from the gas station on 8th who just got off work and wants to give this a shot, give me the gas station guy every time. The gas station guy isn't getting off stage to update his Twitter about how he crushed it onstage tonight like the rest of us are doing - that alone is worth its weight in gold these days."

The Moth StorySLAM will be held at Martyrs' on the last Tuesday of every month (\$7 at the door, stories start at 8 p.m.), MC'd by a rotating spotlight of Chicago voices. Upcoming themes include "Firsts" (October 27), "Blunders" (November 24) and "Cars" (December 29).

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