

New All Saints parishioner shares art of storytelling

The art of storytelling goes back to the beginning of human history. And though just about anyone can tell a story, few can bring them to life like Janice Curtis Greene.

Known as Janice the Griot (an African word for storyteller), Mrs. Greene spins yarns, layered with meaning and based on Bible stories, about saints' lives, her own family history or ancient African folktales. The cadence of her words, the inflexion in her voice and the drama of her narratives appeal to people of all ages, races and religions.

Mrs. Greene's faith and the experience of coming from "a long line of strong black Catholic women," as she says in one of her most popular stories, are central themes in her work.

She and her husband, Paris, are members of New All Saints Church, Liberty Heights. She performs for many Christian denominations, as well as other organizations and venues like the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, the National Aquarium and Artscape.

She is also a contributor to The Catholic Review, writing about Catholicism from an African American perspective.

Her career as a professional storyteller began quite by accident more than 20 years ago when, because of her dynamic manner of speaking, a friend asked her to tell a story at a Kwanzaa event. She searched through a folktale anthology and retold one of its tales in her animated style.

"When I looked up, there were people crying and saying it was so beautiful," Mrs. Greene said. "I had no idea I could have that kind of effect on people."

From then on she was hooked.

She met other storytellers, expanded her repertoire with new stories culled from

many sources and added songs, dances and costumes, ranging from a slave's calico dress to subtle touches, like a scarf worn differently to suit the character.

Mrs. Greene's power as a storyteller comes from not only her innate ability to engage listeners with her dramatic language, but by giving careful consideration to her audience and drawing themes from her own life, which has been marked with as much sorrow as many of the protagonists in her tales.

Mrs. Greene, 60, has buried two of her three sons. Her oldest, Calvin, had struggled with drug addiction, though he lived drug-free for five years before succumbing to complications from diabetes at age 36 in 2002. She said that Barry, her second son, died in 2005 as a result of illnesses he contracted as a U.S. Marine during the First Gulf War.

Many of the stories she told before her sons' deaths have taken on new meaning for her and her audiences.

The anti-war theme of a story she calls "The Smoke That Thunders" - the translation of the African name for Victoria Falls - makes her think of Barry. After travelling to Victoria Falls, she has added even more descriptive details to the story about a warlike tribe that finally made peace when all but the king's youngest son had been killed.

A friend who had seen her perform the story before and after Barry's death noted the change. "She said, 'That is nothing like the way you used to tell it. It was always entertaining, but now it is so much more powerful,'" Mrs. Greene recounts.

In another story that she wrote, Mrs. Greene recounts conversations of her deceased ancestors at pivotal moments in their lives, including one with her mother's ghost on the morning of Calvin's funeral. The message, she explains, is "trust in God, and you can live with that hurt, though it won't go away."

"God gave me this story. I had a dream where I saw myself performing this on stage," Mrs. Greene said, noting that even the details of what to wear came to her in that dream.

Many in her audiences who have lost loved ones find comfort in the story.

“The healing gift that God has given me has helped me so much,” Mrs. Greene said. “It has helped me heal myself by being a blessing to others. It’s turned into a ministry. It’s not just entertainment anymore.”