



Decades of story time for Village wordsmith

Forty-two years as a professional storyteller and Diane Wolkstein still loves the craft.

"Each time I tell a story I love I appreciate it in a different way," she said.

Rain or shine, Wolkstein will be sharing some of her favorite stories at 11 a.m. Saturday, at the Hans Christian Andersen statue in Central Park.

At 2 p.m. she will combine traditional Qigong movements and music to tell "Monkey King: Journey to the West," at the Queens Public Library's International Resource Center, on Main St. in Flushing.

Qigong is a Chinese breath and movement exercise similar to Tai Chi.

Wolkstein promised the day will also include "a story I could not have told five years ago because I did not understand it."

That tale involves a man who prays for a blessing but finds it comes at someone else's expense. In making things right he finds an even deeper happiness.

"It is hard to understand that when you're younger," Wolkstein said. "But to make someone deeply, deeply happy, when you're older, that's a different understanding."

"When you tell a good story, kids get it on one level, middle-aged people on another, and senior citizens have another."

Wolkstein has been telling tales since the mid-1960s when she was teaching Sunday school in Paris, where she was studying pantomime.

"All I did in Sunday school was tell stories, since the Bible is full of stories," she said. "They [church officials] didn't fire me, so I kept telling stories."

She returned to New York in 1966 to get a masters in education from

Bank Street, a teachers college, still dreaming of a storytelling career even as she was told such a thing didn't exist outside of classroom teaching.

In 1967, the city Parks Department hired Wolkstein as a summer recreation director. "I was making \$40 a week, so they liked that," she said.

Wolkstein held her first session at the Hans Christian Andersen statue that same year. The Associated Press did a story about it, which went around the world.

That story prompted the Parks Department to hire Wolkstein as the city's first full-time storyteller.

She was on the payroll for five years, and had a 13-year career on WNYC radio.

These days, Wolkstein works in city schools and for various synagogues, churches and community organizations. She's written 23 books, most of them for children.

She also continues to add to her repertoire.

"I read a lot," Wolkstein said. "I have to read 100 stories to find one I can use. You have to find a story that moves you, because if it doesn't move you it won't move anyone else."

"That's what stories are about, sharing your heart," she added. "You cloak it with words, but what you're really doing is exchanging love."

In what has to be an amazing coincidence, poet e e cummings, writer Sinclair Lewis and writer/revolutionary John Reed all once lived on Wolkstein's West Village block. And Marlon Brando lived in the apartment where Wolkstein now lives.

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For more information about Saturday's appearances and other storytelling sessions, see her Web site, www.dianewolkstein.com.

CITY BEAT
BY CLEM RICHARDSON

Diane Wolkstein, who was hired as the city's first full-time storyteller in the 1960s, will regale kids at Hans Christian Andersen statue in Central Park on Saturday. Photo by Jefferson Siegel