

History... as it happened

ASU connections strengthen popular “Ballad of Arizona” program

By Oriana Parker



The “Ballad of Arizona” program is the brainchild of Jay Cravath, a two-time alumnus of ASU.

Many ASU alums have lived through a number of significant moments in Arizona history, but far fewer understand their meaning or remember them fully. Two Sun Devils – Jay Cravath ‘90 M.Ed., ‘02 Ph.D. and Dan Shilling ‘87 Ph.D. – have set about rectifying this situation in the past four years, creating the “Ballad of Arizona,” a live multimedia storytelling program that has toured the state.

Similar in format to American Public Media’s radio show “A Prairie Home Companion,” the program employs music, storytelling and live radio-style newscasts to explore stories involving important but often neglected events in the state’s history. Cravath, who is a curriculum manager for the Colorado River Indian Tribes and has served as a music and humanities teacher in Chandler, explains that he and Shilling conceived of the idea for the show during the planning for the 2012 Arizona Centennial celebration.

“Looking over a list of planned events, I noticed there were no programs for the arts and the humanities,” he said. “I contacted Dan and we wrote up a grant proposal that was funded by Arizona Humanities (AH), the Arizona affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.”

Drawing from an inventory of 12 stories, the hour-long “Ballad” program is staged via Arizona Speaks, the AH’s speakers bureau. It shares some of Arizona’s most famous and infamous historical moments, including the state’s association with the Buffalo Soldiers (all-Black U.S. Army regiments who were present at key moments in the settling of the American West), the history of Japanese-American internment camps in the state, and the mafia murder of local reporter Don Bolles, as well as less-



Dan Shilling co-hosts the "Ballad of Arizona," a program that employs music, storytelling and radio-style news reports to relate Arizona's history.

er-known stories such as the history of Arizona dude ranches. The performance has deep roots in ASU scholarship. In addition to featuring live performances by Cravath and Shilling (who is a faculty research associate with the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Institute of Sustainability and is a former director of Arizona Humanities), the program also includes taped contributions from ASU Regents Professor Peter Iverson; current Navajo Nation Poet Laureate and ASU Professor of English Laura Tohe; and alumna Christine Marin '74 B.A., '82 M.A., '05 Ph.D, an archivist/historian and ASU professor emerita.

Here are a few of the "stanzas" from this well-received ballad, which takes its audience from the creation of the world to very close to the present day.

The Pima Song of the World

One of the oldest stories shared in the "Ballad of Arizona" is a creation story from the Pima Indian tribe.

"It's important to realize that in preliterate cultures all knowledge was passed down through musical ceremonies," Cravath noted. "The great hero legends, migrations, and even moral stories were told in song and dance cycles that could last up to 16 days."

According to the Pima, in the beginning there was only darkness ... darkness and water. Until one day there came forth a man. This man wandered in the darkness until he began to think.

Then he knew he was there for some purpose.

The man placed his hand upon his heart and drew forth a large stick. He used the stick to guide him through the darkness and when he was weary he rested upon it. Then he drew forth from his body little ants, as he had drawn the stick from his heart. The stick was of greasewood and he placed the ants on it. These ants made a ball of the greasewood stick's gum.

The man placed the ball under his foot and rolled it to make it round all the while singing "Go forth and make

the world, go forth and make the world." (*Chuh-wuh tuh na-ka-I, chuh-wuh tuh nato*) Then he threw this new earth out into the universe and sang faster: "Now it is done, now it is done." (*Himalo, himalo/Himalo himacho*)

Vandals bring victory to Miami

A 20th century story that is an audience favorite celebrates the 1951 victory of the Miami High School Vandals, a team of mostly Mexican-American boys who were the sons of men who worked in the town's copper mines. Thanks to Ernest Kivisto, a Finnish-American coach who believed in their talent and possibility, the Vandals went on a winning spree throughout Arizona during the 1951 season. The Vandals beat teams in Clifton, Globe, Superior, Duncan, and Nogales. In the playoffs, the team overcame the Phoenix Union High School Coyotes and the Monarchs from Phoenix's all-Black Carver High School for the state championship.

Marin, who tells this story in the program, says that the sports victory helped the boys' families to realize their dreams of equality for their children. Some members of the 1951 team were able to attend college on athletic scholarships, expanding their career options beyond the working-class lives their parents had lived.

"A history professor taught me that there are people who should be remembered for what happened to them. And there are others who are remembered for what they did," she said. "As an archivist/



Professor emerita Christine Marin is an archivist/historian who shares the story of the 1951 Miami High School Vandals basketball team in the "Ballad of Arizona."

historian, I have the duty to write the history of the people so that it won't be ignored or forgotten, and the responsibility to preserve their histories and keep them safe."

Don Bolles and the price of the truth

One of the most gripping stories in the "Ballad of Arizona" presentation is that of Arizona reporter Don Bolles, who was killed by a car bomb in 1976 in retaliation for his award-winning investigative journalism work.

Told in a news-program style, the story discusses Bolles' investigation of the mafia's influence on dog and horse racing in Arizona, as well as a conflict-of-interest scandal involving two state legislators. Bolles and another reporter created a list of almost 200 known mafia members allegedly operating in the state and named them in a story.

It was this kind of fearless writing that earned Bolles being named as Arizona Newsmen of 1974. Those exposed by his reporting were not pleased. On June 2, 1976, Bolles drove to the Hotel Clarendon in central Phoenix to meet an informant who didn't show up for the appointment. Returning to his car, Bolles only drove a few feet before a bomb, placed under his car and detonated by remote control, shattered his lower body. His last words included, "They finally got me ... the mafia."

Brenda Thomson, executive director of Arizona Humanities, reports that, "The Ballad of Arizona" is one of our most popular programs. Jay Cravath, Dan Shilling and the other contributors introduce residents and visitors to the diverse



Brenda Thomson, executive director of Arizona Humanities.

people and places that make up Arizona's unique history in an exciting manner."

As for Cravath, he has his own take on why the program has such great resonance with state residents.

In a 2015 article in the Mohave Daily News, he said the focus on bringing the past into the present helps the audience feel connected to what is being shared.

"Reporting history as if it is a current event allows people to enter the event more intimately," stresses Cravath.

For a schedule of upcoming "Ballad of Arizona" presentation events, visit www.azhumanities.org.

Oriana Parker is a freelance arts writer based in Phoenix.

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