

EX Fabula

Story. Stage. You.

Audio Transcript: Kerri's Story

3, 2, 1, welcome to Ex Fabula! True, Personal Stories. Ex Fabula! Story, Stage, You. Ex Fabula is a Milwaukee non-profit committed to strengthening community bonds through the art of storytelling.

Ex Fabula Fellows are community members who use personal stories to inspire community led dialogue around some of the most pressing issues in the greater Milwaukee area like segregation, and economic and racial inequality.

Ex Fabula Fellow Kerri Grote shared a story at the Zeidler Center in January of 2016.

One of my favorite memories from childhood is having a ton of people around the dinner table. In fact, sometimes there were so many people that we had card tables set up in the living room to make sure that everybody had a seat. This is how my parents taught me how to welcome people. It was about food, and family, and friends neighbors and gathering everyone; everyone together. And food was a big thing in my family, particularly meat. I grew up on a cattle ranch so beef was the king of the dinner plate. My dad would grill these thick T-bone steaks on the grill, sizzling hot. My mom made corn fritters. It was kind of like a pancake batter but with fresh sweet corn in it. You're nodding your head. You'd drop it into hot oil and it would come out hot and crispy on the outside and you'd break it open and steam would roll out of the center and you'd get this amazing sweet corn taste. It was fantastic. And that is how I've always thought of about welcoming people into my home, into my life. That's the feel and the sense and the flavor of what it is like for me.

More recently I've started to peel back the layers of what welcoming is really all about. It's about all those things for me, but there's more to it, too. Particularly as I've gotten more involved in this Fellowship, the Ex Fabula Fellowship. And as I've started to get really committed personally to really understanding racism and the part that I play and the structure and this system that we live in in which I benefit. I'm starting to see and realize the subtle ways that I react and respond that are in fact not particularly welcoming. There are many examples from my past and my present. One that sticks with me is my brother in law is black. My sister and he had been married for over a decade. I think about, how did we welcome him into our family? And I don't think we did. I think at that time my thought process and that of my family, I'm certain, was, "well we don't see color". And I'm going to treat him just like everybody else in my family. He loves my sister, my sister loves him, and he's part of the family. And I think about that now, you know, and it was a defense mechanism because there was a false belief for me that acknowledging his color was somehow racist. In fact, we were denying a really important part of who he is. And I can't imagine that that felt welcoming for him at all.

Another memory I have is the first time I dated someone of color. This was just a few years ago. And um, we'd gone out a few times and I was inviting him to my house to make dinner. This was a big deal for me. This was how I was welcoming him, right? So I had dinner all planned and I wanted some music. I remember him talking about a

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couple of bands and songs that he liked and they were in the R&B and soul genre. So I spent hours making this amazing R&B soul playlist imagining how he's really going to like this and how it's going to be really welcoming for him. And you know, he gets there and we're eating and probably thirty minutes of R&B and soul has been playing. He looks at me across the dinner table and he says, "do you really like this music?" And I said, "well, yeah, it's good but I know you really like it". He said, "Well, how do you know?" And I realize it more now but at the time what he said to me was, "I don't want to hear the music that you think I like. I want to hear what you like". I look back at that now and you know, it was a way, it was a subtle way of not being particularly sincere, frankly. And in letting him get to know me and also making assumptions, you know, about what I thought he would like. So it's an interesting thing about how we can, I can do something that I think is welcoming but in fact, it might not be.

Another more recent example is uh, a new friend of mine. I invited her recently out to dinner. She's a woman of color, and I was excited about this dinner. As the date got closer, though, I started thinking about some questions that I had. They were related to things that I had been learning and things that I've been experiencing in this Ex Fabula Fellowship and just in my own, you know, my own desire to understand more about race. I actually started making a list on my phone of questions that I wanted to ask her about. How could I be a better white ally? What are some things that I could do and what are some experiences that she had. And she was incredibly kind and gracious and answered my questions and gave me some suggestions and really lovely and we had this great dinner conversation. Then later I had this realization: I had never made a list of questions like that and asked them of one my white friends. I had this assumption that the only way that I could learn those things was to ask someone of color. Also, this assumption that she'd be willing to talk about. So, I'm realizing more and more that these subtle ways, however well intentioned they are, are not as welcoming as I always think they are.

A political activist Jonah Olsen wrote, white people have to think about racism in their daily consciousness as often as people of color do. For me that is about awareness because I know that with awareness, change can come. I'm seeing that my way of welcoming that I learned from my family and the ways of welcoming that I'm peeling back and discovering now, it's not about either or, it can be both and. I can take the ways of welcoming that I love and that I grew up with and I can take the things that I'm learning now about how to be conscious of how I interact and welcome others and I can serve those both up around my dining room table, the same dining room table that I grew up about. And with that steak, and those corn fritters and family and friends and neighbors and gratitude. Thank you.

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