



Fellow Dianne Pratt at the Ex Fabula Spectacular at Turner Hall last December

## Stories Worth Sharing

EX FABULA SEEKS TO SPUR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE

BY JOSHUA M. MILLER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ART MONTES

**Last year when Rochelle Fritsch applied to be an Ex Fabula Fellow** — that is, to partner with the nonprofit to spur conversations through personal stories about race — she thought she had a good idea of what privilege, oppression and racial inequality meant. She's a black woman married to a white man, living in Milwaukee with their biracial daughter. But she had only seen the tip of the iceberg.

"(There are) so many shades of people walking different paths and experiencing life differently that I hadn't even considered," Fritsch says. "So I walked away and was like, 'Wow, I thought I knew stuff, but I don't really know stuff.' I hadn't considered the entire spectrum."

"I feel that if we're going to do storytelling in Milwaukee, we have to talk about racial inequality. You can't just ignore it," says Megan McGee, the executive director of Ex Fabula, which has been hosting local storytelling events since 2009. She says it's crucial for more of the city to talk about race through events like theirs.

"As a city, we still aren't talking about race," McGee says. "It's still an uncomfortable topic. It's clear that we haven't addressed what the role that race plays is in our society."

Fritsch says that even if there are no concrete solutions, hearing others' stories can help dispel stereotypes. "It's a bad pun, but it's not as black and white as people might think," she continues. "(There are) so many nuances and hues to what's going on. I think the only way for people to get smarter and more informed is having conversations, and the fellowship really allows for people to have respectful conversations. It allows people to learn from both sides."

It's also why the fellowship program is returning for a second year with an increase in the number of workshops: from four last year to six. Participants hone their stories through working with teaching staff and other participants.

McGee says many fellows held their own story circles, where they would "get together outside the workshops and practice and continue to support each other throughout the year." That was so popular that they're including it from the beginning this year.

McGee feels storytelling is the best way for people to connect. "The way that stories are processed in the brain by people is that, by listening, it's kind of like they're seeing the world through someone else's eyes," she explains. "Because of that, they're uniquely good at helping us develop empathy and learn."

The workshops end in November, which is when 25 participants are then picked to perform their stories at performance events throughout the city in December.

Fritsch is thankful for the opportunity to share her story. "I would hope that, by sharing my story, it wasn't just a way to shine a light on the fact that sometimes it's a little hard to be brown or 'other,' but to shine a light on the fact that we're all walking different paths here," she says. "We all do things and experience life, and I hope that's what came out of the story I told."

While other events boast professional speakers, a point of pride is that Ex Fabula is open to everyone.

"Part of our work is to find how we can create environments where really everyone in the city feels they can get up there and share," McGee says. "We believe everyone in the city has stories worth sharing. We want to challenge people, whether they share the story onstage at an Ex Fabula event, or in your personal life — we want to challenge everyone to tell your story and take time to listen to each other. That can be powerful." **M**