

Real Stories MKE Season 1 Ep. 1 | Transcript

Joel Dresang 0:00

Welcome to Real Stories MKE, brought to you as part of Ex Fabula's work to connect Milwaukee through real stories. I'm Joel Dresang

Kim Shine 0:07

And I am Kim Shine. Ex Fabula believes that everyone has personal stories worth sharing. So we host storytelling workshops where the community members can build their storytelling skills and confidence, and StorySlams where true stories are shared on stage. Today, we are bringing you two of those powerful stories.

Joel Dresang 0:27

Since this is the first episode of this season of Real Stories MKE, and Ex Fabula's mission is to connect Milwaukee through real stories, we chose the theme 'Connection'. And speaking of connection, Kim, how did you first get connected to Ex Fabula?

Kim Shine 0:43

Well, it's kind of fun. I am actually from Chicago. And I found out about Milwaukee just in general from a job. And so I came here for a job a few years back and really wanted to get into the community because I always have loved writing, have always loved storytelling. And I did more so kind of a spoken word poetry thing. But when I found Ex Fabula, went to one of the events, I was in awe of just how real everything was, and just how people were so open with their stories and so honest, and we could laugh about it. It was just a great experience. You know, what about you?

Joel Dresang 1:23

Well, a number of years ago, some friends of mine and I wanted to connect with audiences through comedy. So we're forming a comedy group, and I connected with Megan McGee, who has been part of a long standing comedy group in Milwaukee. And while talking with her, she also works with Ex Fabula, and mentioned that Ex Fabula could use some volunteers. And like you, I just got hooked I, I took a workshop, I put my name in the hat at a StorySlam, I got on the board, well, not on the board, on a committee and became a member and got trained to be a coach like you. Yes. And so our comedy group got together and had a successful run, died of natural causes. But I'm still here with Ex Fabula

Kim Shine 2:12

I think that's so awesome. And thanks for mentioning that you are a coach because I actually totally forgot that part of my story. I moved away from here, returned about two years ago, got reconnected with Ex Fabula and became a coach. And now here we are doing this amazing show.

Joel Dresang 2:30

And we've got that connection now too.

Kim Shine 2:32

Love it.

Joel Dresang 2:33

Our first connection story comes from Matthew Lewis. He shared this story in May 2019. As part of an Ex Fabula collaboration with the Jewish Museum Milwaukee, the culminating StorySlam was titled 'Untold Stories of Resistance'. And that theme explored the many ways that we can speak truth to power and stand up for our beliefs. Here is Matthew Lewis and his story.

Matthew Lewis 3:17

Hello. Sunday school began at nine o'clock with prayer in the classes every Sunday, and I remember my mom would get me and my brother up, make breakfast, send us off to church, and we will be there on time. Every Sunday on Sunday. On Saturdays, we had choir practice, and I'd be there with my scripture and my dues ready to go into the choir stand because that was your entry fee. Not fee, but that's how they taught us to read the Bible. And then on Wednesdays, there was Bible study. So I knew that I was going to be in church, basically four times a week. And it was good. It was cool. You know, that was the study group of people that I was going to be around all the time. They had known me since I was born since my family had been at that church. Basically, from my grandparents. My mother grew up there. My mother got married there. I was christened there. So basically, major events had always taken place at this church. And so it was great for me. I was in the choir, I was an usher. I was on drill team, I did devotion. When my mom had meetings, I sat in the back and tried not to fall asleep. You know, it was just it was like a second home for me. I had my friends there, we'd go over each other's houses and watch wrestling. We'd be the Hardy Boys versus Stone Cold and The Rock. And it was just cool. You know, like I had this other world of people that just accepted me, that I was just born into it. I didn't have to work hard for it. And that was great. And it stayed great up until about age seven. And it became apparent that I was different. And by different, I mean, I wasn't like the other boys. And people started to become a little irritated that I wasn't growing into being like other boys. And so this world that had been so lovey-dovey, and every Sunday excited to see me started to be accompanied by more comments trying to modify my behavior; my relationships with the other kids started to change. And, you know, the boys that I had played wrestling with suddenly didn't want to play wrestling anymore. And just, it didn't feel so good to go to church every Sunday, and every other day of the week. I remember there's an instance where a drill team practice, we were practicing a step, and I demonstrated it, and one of my friend's moms pulled him aside. And I'm not sure if she meant for me to hear. But she quickly told him that he was not to do this step as I did it. Because I did not do the step how boys were supposed to do it and he was not to follow anything that I did. And it was the first time that I had seen someone reprimanded for being around me. And from that day forward, I was just more vigilant of how people were interacting with me. And I noticed that the boys are more cruel, and how I will hold my hands, and the toys I would bring the church. And finally there came one Sunday where my pastor, who had a habit of interjecting his political beliefs

into sermons, gave a sermon that was against homosexuality. And I don't know if it was for me, but there's nothing like sitting in a pew and a crowd of people saying amen to something that feels like everybody is looking at you. And so at that point, I didn't like church anymore. And I was working as the Sunday School clerk, which the office happened to be in a closet. And I remember sitting down there and being like, I am playing solitaire on the computer instead of being in the sanctuary for service. And I still love God, I just don't love church. So I'm very fortunate to come from a family of people who may not always understand me, but have done nothing but defend me and love me pretty fiercely. So I went to my mom and just told her that I did not want to go back to church anymore. I didn't tell her why. I think at the time, I was really afraid of what that might mean for her. But I didn't want to go back anymore. And it didn't mean that I didn't believe anymore, but I was done going to a place where I didn't feel comfortable. And my mom got really kind of panicked and my brother had left the church earlier. But she said, "Okay, we're gonna go look and find other places." So for the next few Sundays, for about two months, I just went and visited churches every Sunday. And for the first time, I got to choose what I wanted to join. So it was different having to say, Oh, I don't like the way this feels, or being able to say I don't like the way this person preaches. And so finally, I found a church that I liked, it was one of the oldest black populations in Milwaukee. So I sent my request for my letter. It's kind of like a two week notice to church. And I was like, "Hey, I'd like my letter because I'd like to leave this church." And I remember, for the first time I'd seen the people who I grew up with, their faces sort of come back when they realized I was leaving. And they were like, well, aren't you going to come back? Why are you leaving? And I just remember saying, it's time for me to go somewhere where I feel good. And I remember after that, more people started to leave, my mom left. And when I've gone back to visit, it's never felt quite the same. And it's hard because my new church, while I love it, there's nothing like being born into a place where that feeling is just given to you instead of having to learn it and work for it. So this journey of faith has been hard but I don't regret—ever regret knowing that God loves me enough that I should be somewhere where I can thrive spiritually. Thank you.

Joel Dresang 9:50

That was Matthew Lewis with his 'Untold Stories of Resistance' tale. Thanks to our project partner with the Jewish Museum Milwaukee, and the Wisconsin Arts Board, which accorded that collaboration as well as several other Ex Fabula projects. So we recently reached out to Matthew, and he told us that he's doing well these days, focusing heavily on creative pursuits, spending time with family and friends, and enjoying his work at Public Allies Milwaukee. He no longer belongs to a brick-and-mortar church, he says, but he still celebrates his relationship with God, through art and community.

Kim Shine 10:27

I think anytime you can focus on your creative pursuits and find what works for you, and what makes you feel connected, what wherever, wherever that may be. It's always something that helps you move forward, you know, amen. Well, next up on Real Stories MKE is another story about connection, this one from Richard Kerhin. It was told at the Turner Hall Ballroom in May of 2018, for All Stars, our end of season event that features audience favorite storytellers from previous slams. Here's Richard.

Richard Kerhin 11:17

Good evening. I'm very happy to be here today. My name is Richard and I'm a drug addict. Now, people who know know that that means I've been to a few meetings. And the question of how that relates to connection is a long one, but less than 10 minutes hopefully. Now I—I'm also a father and a husband, and a son and a brother, a business owner. And it's been a while since I've been using regularly. And mostly because of a combination of luck and white privilege. Luck being that I met my beautiful wife, and she put her foot down and said that "I'm sorry, but if you're either cheating on me or you're using", and I said, "Well, I'm definitely not cheating." And she said, "Well, we need to go to counseling." I see white privilege because there were a number of times where I think if I were a person of color, there's no way I would have gotten out of the situation, the way I did with a get out of here or whatever. So while we were in counseling, the majority of the time was being spent talking about me. So the counselor said, "Maybe we need to just do one on one with Richard." And if that doesn't fix it, then we can come back to the marriage. So the first question that she asked me was "Why are you using?" and it should be noted that my drug of choice was cocaine. As a young man, I had been very open with experimentation. But I think that, you know, after a while, it became clear that this was my problem child. And I said, Well, it's everywhere. I worked in bars, and everybody I knew was using. And she said, "Well, chocolate cake is everywhere. Why don't you just kill yourself by eating chocolate cake every day till your heart explodes?" Fair enough. So I thought about it for a while. And as I was driving home that day, the answer came, because I hate who I am. And I started crying in my car. I think at the root of many people's addictions is a sort of basic hatred of themselves. Whether or not they understand that, they're, they're not happy with who they are, they wouldn't be doing this self-destructive behavior. So if I came back the next week and told her what happened, and she said, "Oh, that was fast." I think she could see that. She wasn't gonna make as much money off of me as perhaps some of her—some of her other clients.

Richard Kehrinn 14:28

And so she said, Well, what do you think the next question is? And I said, it's obviously why. Why do you hate who you are? So that one bounced around in my head for a while. And the answer came back because I feel worthless. I feel like I have no value to society. Oh, it should be noted that I—I had a rather, by most accounts, an idyllic childhood. Two parents that loved me very much, a stable home, a loving home, an encouraging home. Maybe too encouraging, you know? You might think to yourself, look at this guy's, he's handsome, he's charismatic. He's got it all. How could he...How can you possibly hate who he is? And one of the things that that happened when I reached an age of maturity, or at least not really maturity, but an age where I started thinking for myself, was that I started to question my faith, I was raised in a Pentecostal home. And I really started to question everything. And that that questioning led me down a path of eventually rejecting that faith. I can't say, with any certainty, that there is no God. But I also can't say that there isn't. And it left me kind of wandering, searching for some kind of meaning, because you're told specifically that, as a child of God, you are preserving the earth, you're the salt of the earth, you're there to, you know, make it better until...I don't know...

the you could take it up, and then everything falls apart. So if none of that stuff was true, at least if I can't really prove or disprove that any of it is true, then what's the point? And then you sink into maybe a bit of nihilism, you know, what's the difference? Who cares if I'm, you know, stealing 500 bucks a week from my employer to pay for all this coke. I'm sorry about that, by the way, if any of my former employers are here. I really do feel bad about that. But so I went back and I told the therapist this, you know, that it was because I had lost my faith that I didn't really feel like I had any kind of value. So she said to me, "Well, if you don't believe that there's a God, then what do you believe in?" And this became sort of the thing for the next two months bouncing around my head, I didn't have any clue. So, about two months later, I was at the gym. And I'm working out on a bike and I'm listening to a song. And it's by Jose James. It's a song titled Love. And part of the chorus is singers in the background, singing, "love, love" over and over again. And as I'm listening to this, and the question is, what do I believe in? I believe in love. And I started crying again. On my...while I'm working out and somebody came over and was like, Sir, are you okay? I said, Yes, I am. I think I'm okay for the first time in a really long time. You know, I think that at the core of it, you know, part of the reason that I felt this nihilism is, have you seen Voyagers little blue dot, where they turn Voyager around to take a picture of Earth, as it's leaving our solar system. It's a tiny little blue in this stream of sunlight, this ray of sunlight, and this insignificance that you feel looking at that. But I realized that day that I had, I had it all backwards, that if there is nothing else out there in this giant universe, and if there isn't a deity that will take care of us afterwards, that really all we have is each other. That all we have is this connection to one another as human beings and that we really need to focus on the time we have here to be as kind and loving as we possibly can be. Until we're gone. Now, I'm not the Dalai Lama or anything like that, because soon as I get on the freeway, some asshole was gonna cut me off. And you son of a— But this event, this Ex Fabula, has really...every time that I come here and listen, other people tell stories and and do this, which I highly encourage because it's exhilarating. My hands are ahhh, but you know, this has been so cathartic for me. And this experience of finally feeling connected again to the community is something that has been—been vital in my staying away from that feeling of nihilism and worthlessness. So thank you all for being there for me, even if you didn't know you were. And I'm there for you as well. But don't call me or anything like that. But thank you.

Kim Shine 20:50

That was Richard Kehrin. And it all starts with his connection story and what has happened since he told his story? These days, Richard and his wife and business partner, Patricia, they operate two restaurants: Richard's Cafe, which was already open when he told this story and Aperitivo, which opened in 2019. Both restaurants have made it through the pandemic, thankfully. Now reflecting on his story, he says that "I have not struggled with my addiction, as much as I used to. Speaking honestly and frankly about it has been a big help. I would encourage anyone struggling with addiction to look for counseling and therapy, especially during the holidays."

Joel Dresang 21:27

I like that he makes that connection of the therapeutic aspect of telling—of sharing his story.

Kim Shine 21:35

Yeah. And especially during this time as we as we go into the holidays, or you know, what, what, whichever holiday we go into, because they come every year, right?

Joel Dresang 21:43

Several times in the year yes.

Kim Shine 21:45

It can be a time where you do feel alone. So yeah, get connected, get therapy, do what you need to do.

Joel Dresang 21:50

Yes. So Kim, one of the things that I like about the story slams is that they only have nine people share a story in an evening. But they have these UltraShorts, where people in the audience can write down a slip of paper, a story that's related to the theme of the StorySlam. And that way, you get so many more voices on stage, and you've got the emcees reading these in between.

Kim Shine 22:13

And that's the good part. Because a lot of people especially if it's their first one, they might be a little bit timid to share their story in person. This is a great way to get your feet wet just a little bit.

Joel Dresang 22:22

That's right, it adds a nice change of pace to the whole thing. So we've got some UltraShorts that we've collected. Yeah, that relate to the topic of connections. So um, let me read one, um, this is from somebody named Tony. "I have a son with autism. For the first six years of his life, he communicated using phrases from books we had read. I'll never forget the first time he departed from those phrases and told me he loved me. It transcended all the degrees of separation."

Kim Shine 22:50

Oh, that is so sweet. Oh my gosh, that-that's really beautiful. This one here is from Diana she says, "Every time I visit Turner Hall, I feel a connection with the wistful young spirit of my grandmother who came here to dance 85 years ago." Wow.

Joel Dresang 23:09

This one's from Julie. "I was diagnosed with my first autoimmune disease at 14 and my second at 17. I had never been so sick or felt so alone. Many years and a handful of surgeries later, I ran a half marathon to raise money for Crohn's and Colitis. Two months ago, I ran my first full marathon. Now I am connected to a community of people with autoimmune diseases just like mine. Now I am a runner. My diseases have been the absolute worst, and the absolute best things to ever happen to me. I belong." That's nice here.

Kim Shine 23:49

This one here is from anonymous, says "In college, I was friends with a small group from karate. Josh and Chris were a couple. They broke up and Chris started dating Mike. After I moved home from LA, I met up with Chris to go swing dancing. At this point Chris was now not dating Mike anymore. At swing dancing. Mike walks in with Elliot who turned out to be my future husband, Chris and Josh married in the end." Wow. A lot of flopping around.

Joel Dresang 24:17

I'm gonna have to chart that out.

Kim Shine 24:21

Right? You gotta find the perfect match though.

Joel Dresang 24:23

Here's another UltraShort from somebody named Tim. "I met someone briefly and was interested in her but met her that once. And a year later, I was thinking about getting serious about relationships. And I thought about her. I'd like to meet her again. I thought to myself. I went through my next day acting as if I had the love I wanted. That evening. I went to an event and she turns around. Hey, how do I know you? She's now my wife."

Kim Shine 24:57

Hold on. So you mean to tell me is that easy like that? Like that

Joel Dresang 25:01

Just wish for it and it happens. Yes.

Kim Shine 25:03

What I need to do is say, Okay, I want this and then I'm just gonna look down. It's gonna be right there in my hands.

Joel Dresang 25:10

You have to know what it is first though.

Kim Shin 25:13

Okay, I'll come up with some ideas next year. This one is from anonymous in Havenwoods. "I bought my house because I saw a neighbor mowing his lawn. I walked over and introduced myself. He found out I was looking at the duplex for sale, three houses down. He pleaded that I buy the house. He also went up and down each side of the street saying who owned the home their names, kids names, what they did for a living. I was sold. I've been living in the upper 17 years."

Joel Dresang 25:40

Wow. That's nice. Yeah, knowing your neighbors.

Kim Shine 25:45

It matters because who's going to help you shovel? Who's who's going to make sure that you take your garbage can out there on the right day?

Joel Dresang 25:52

Connections count? Yes. This one is from Diane. "It took me until age 56 to move to my favorite place since first visiting in 1989. New Mexico. I pursued new activities regularly hoping to make some new acquaintances. At a Zumba class in Albuquerque on Sunday morning, I connected with a woman named Kathy over Cold Stone Creamery ice cream, after we discovered her hometown was Sheboygan, Wisconsin. She had lived in Albuquerque for 30 years. We are now friends."

Kim Shine 26:25

Oh, I liked that one too. And you know why? I think I connect with this one a lot. Because I'm not from Milwaukee, right? So whenever I find somebody that is from Chicago, or even not just the city, but any part of Illinois or I see a license plate that's from Illinois, I automatically feel like we're connected. So that's that. This UltraShort is from anonymous. "It wasn't until I connected with the right therapist at the right time that I truly connected with myself. I just knew."

Joel Dresang 26:59

nice. This one is from Zach. "When I moved to Milwaukee from the East Coast late last summer, I knew no one knew very little about the city, had no connections. Friends, family back home thought I was nuts. Ex Fabula's show at the Black Historical Society in collaboration with Doors Open was the very first public show of any kind I attended in my new city. I instantly knew I had made the right choice with the move. Milwaukee was clearly going to be home." How nice.

Kim Shine 27:32

That is very nice.

Joel Dresang 27:35

That's all the time we have today for Real Stories MKE. But don't worry! We've been at this for more than 10 years. And there are more audio and video stories available at exfabula.org.

Kim Shine 27:47

That is so right. And our website also lists upcoming storytelling workshops and StorySlams. And we hope that you will join us at an event and maybe even share a story or an UltraShort because you can do that too. You can also connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Joel Dresang 28:04

Thanks to everyone who makes this program possible including Ex Fabula staff, the storytellers and audio engineer, Sam Woods.

Kim Shine 28:11

We love you, Sam. And make sure you join us next Sunday on 89.7 WUWM

Joel Dresang 28:16
Milwaukee's NPR.

Kim Shine 28:19
For Real Stories MKE, I am Kim shine.

Joel Dresang 28:20
And I'm Joel Dresang. Thanks for listening.