

Sharing stories of culture,

BY LISA DEADERICK ■ PHOTO BY HOWARD LIPIN

Ollis "OJ" Mozon Jr. was already telling stories in his ministry and sermons but didn't get into standalone storytelling performances until a Black History Month program in North Carolina years ago. One of the speakers didn't show up, so Mozon stepped up.

"I told the librarian, who was the wife of one of my chaplain friends, that I could tell a story or two to entertain the anxious room," the retired Navy chaplain says. "I've been a storyteller ever since."

He went on to join the black storytellers association in North Carolina. Since then, he has joined other storyteller organizations, including the Storytellers of San Diego. The San Diego organization hosted its annual San Diego Storytelling Festival at the Encinitas Library on Saturday, where he both performed and led a workshop on the craft. The local festival is part of World Storytelling Day and included more than two dozen storytellers, from national and international professionals to local griots.

Mozon, 65, lives in Oceanside with his wife, Almena, and they have two adult children. He's currently the director of oral learning and of human resources for a missionary organization, and vice president of Black Storytellers of San Diego, Inc. He took some time to talk about his involvement in this weekend's festival and why he enjoys the art of storytelling.

Q. Why was performing as a storyteller something you wanted to do?

A. I like being in front of people. I like giving a meaningful message people can take away with them. Storytelling does that.

Q. What qualities are necessary to be a good, oral storyteller?

A. First, you need to be able to listen to the stories people tell, what kinds of stories they tell, and how they tell them. Second, I find that it is good to read lots of stories. Even if you are primarily an oral teller, I find it helps me to read and re-read words on a page and imagine how they will sound coming out of my mouth. One other thing I do is watch those who are listening. Observe how they respond to the tone, the pace, the volume and the word pictures you are creating before them. The teller is in community with those who listen. Don't leave them behind.

Q. Tell us about the Storytellers of San Diego.

A. The Storytellers of San Diego is the most delightful, wackiest group of professional bards I have ever been a part of. We are so different, but are unified by a common passion to tell our stories. The stories come from our families, our heritage, our diverse cultures, and interests. These stories shaped us and need to be shared to heal, entertain, and give hope. Founded in the early 1990s, it's a nonprofit organization that promotes oral storytelling and the purpose is to demonstrate and sustain interest in the art of storytelling in San Diego, and to show the many uses for this art form in our community. We are also part of the National Storytelling Network.

B Q. What have you learned from them over the years?

A. Many things about cross-cultural storytelling. This year, we put on a six-week storytelling institute. One class was very helpful, about how to integrate folktales with a personal story, and I immediately incorporated those techniques into my performances.

Q. You participated in the annual San Diego Storytelling Festival at the Encinitas Library that took place this weekend. What can you tell us about it?

A. There were a lot of stories to delight almost every ear, no matter the age, told by professionals and first-timers. There were stories from many lands and languages, stories told with music and puppets, stories of several themes. We also had workshops to learn how to tell stories, special presentations designed for children, and a special segment for veterans. Plus, there

was a great view of the Pacific.

Q. What was your role during the festival?

A. I was the emcee and a teller for one of the afternoon concerts, telling a story about the heroic Big John the Conqueror. I also conducted a workshop, "Bible Tales — More than Stories," where I taught helpful ways to present Bible stories that transform lives.

Q. Why did you pick those stories?

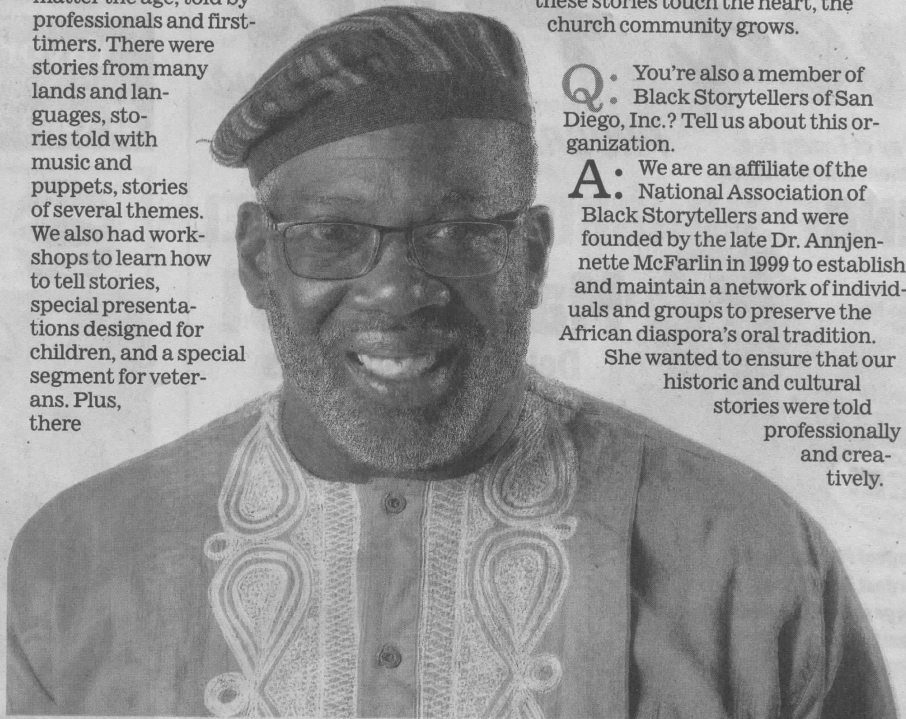
A. The afternoon concert theme was superheroes and before there was Black Panther or Black Lightning, there was Big John the Conqueror. He was a mythical hero for the enslaved descendants of Africa. Big John was revered for his abilities to outwit Ol' Massa or anyone else trying to make life more difficult than it needed to be.

The Bible story workshop was an outgrowth of my current ministry. I serve with a missionary organization that trains people around the world to start a church in their village or community. Many people learn better orally, so with the help of translators, I teach Bible stories and lead group discussions so that even in places where they cannot read the Bible, they can listen and learn the stories and discover meaning. As these stories touch the heart, the church community grows.

Q. You're also a member of Black Storytellers of San Diego, Inc.? Tell us about this organization.

A. We are an affiliate of the National Association of Black Storytellers and were founded by the late Dr. Annjennette McFarlin in 1999 to establish and maintain a network of individuals and groups to preserve the African diaspora's oral tradition.

She wanted to ensure that our historic and cultural stories were told professionally and creatively.



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Q. Aside from a focus on black storytellers and stories, are there other differences between this group and Storytellers of San Diego?

A. Fundamentally, both groups do the same things: tell our stories to those who want to hear and know, and tell stories in schools, libraries, churches, and public or private venues. What is distinctive is that Black Storytellers of San Diego maintains a focus on the needs of the black and underserved communities. We are diligent about uplifting and empowering young minorities through our stories. Plus, we want to enlighten the larger community about the richness of what people of African descent have contributed to America and to the world. Physically, when we tell stories, we wear beautiful, African-style attire, often have an African drum accompaniment, and frequently perform as an ensemble, opening with our theme song and doing a readers' theater piece in addition to the individual stories.

Q. In your opinion, why is having a group specific to black storytellers and stories important?

A. Since our educational system and media too often ignore or misrepresent what is happening in the black community, it is healthy to have a group of storytellers (or griots) committed to telling the rest of the story. ... There is definitely a seasonal appeal for our storytellers, like during Black History Month, Kwanzaa and Juneteenth, but we really want to tell people that we are black and tell stories all year.

Q. What is the best advice you've ever received?

A. From James 1:19 in the Bible: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

Q. What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

A. I like being alone and quiet.

Q. Describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A. Going to an event or activity where I can ride the Coaster (commuter rail service) and one, short trolley or bus ride, round-trip.

lisa.deaderick@sduniontribune.com

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