



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Adwoa Badoe, Ann Estill, Elizabeth Matson, James Gordon

The Telling Details

Guelph Guild of Storytellers presents rich stories with an ideal backdrop – gardens and a river

BY JOANNE SHUTTLEWORTH

A bucolic setting is a great place to be entertained and enlightened by a good story. For the past 10 years, the Guelph Guild of Storytellers has shown how it's done with Tea 'n' Tales events at the Guelph Enabling Garden at Riverside Park. To mark the 10th anniversary, there will be 10 storytelling sessions this summer at 10 a.m. on Fridays from June 30 to Sept. 1. The lineup includes storytellers from Toronto, Kitchener, Waterloo, Burlington,

Elora and Wisconsin, along with local favourites such as Jan Sherman, Adwoa Badoe, Sya Van Geest and Brian Holstein. There are also a couple of musical storytellers on the schedule. Audience numbers were small in the early days, says Holstein, president of the guild and chief organizer of Tea 'n' Tales. At first, there might have been only three people listening with five or six guild members doing the telling. But the community is catching on and crowds can reach 100 with seniors from local retirement homes often

converging on the event, he says. "Four or five years ago, it started turning around. People would ask me, 'Are you doing that thing again?'" Holstein says with a laugh. Hopes are high for this summer's series. For one thing, the Guelph Enabling Garden was recently recognized as one of 150 public gardens worth visiting during Canada's 150th anniversary year. In a world addicted to screen time, it's refreshing to know there's still demand for real, authentic, face-to-face storytelling, says



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Holstein, a retired special education teacher.

“A good story will put a picture in your mind, but it doesn’t dictate the picture like movies do. There are stories that are meant to be read, but these are meant to be told. It’s quite a skill,” he says. “And the Enabling Garden is the perfect place to tell stories.”

Trevor Barton is a co-founder of the Guelph Enabling Garden, a millennium project he took on with Betty Richard. At the time, Barton was a manager with the city’s waste department and Richard was the city’s administrator of disability services.

While the Homewood Health Care and St. Joseph’s Hospital and Home both had therapeutic gardening programs for their own clientele, there were no public therapeutic gardens in the city at the time, Barton says. Gardening has physical, environmental, social and nutritional benefits for everyone who enjoys it. Barton and Richard envisioned public gardens that could accommodate wheelchairs, walkers and other disabilities.

In partnership with the City of Guelph, and thanks to some Trillium and United Way funding along with a fundraising campaign, the Guelph Enabling Garden opened in 2005.

The garden features accessible paths, raised garden beds, ergonomic tools and signs in Braille, opening gardening to a population that can’t do the work on their hands and knees. Horticultural therapists offer gardening seminars at the site, and for 10 years the enabling garden has hosted the weekly storytelling sessions offering free tea, hot or iced, depending on the weather.

“The garden needs to be a destination point and these storytelling sessions help us,” Barton says. “With the river, the garden and the stories – it’s so rewarding.”

There are standard elements that make a good story, but these storytellers have their own cadence, rhythm, tempo and timbre that rise above the nearby Speed River and yet blend with it.

It’s an enriching experience to tell at the river, says Sya Van Geest, a retired school teacher and longtime guild member.

“The sun, the river, the ambient sound –


the setting is perfect,” she says.

Van Geest became interested in African folk tales through another volunteer project – the GoGo Grandmothers – and she finds these stories reverberate more when told by the river versus an indoor setting.

Van Geest and Holstein say it’s better to know a story than memorize it. That allows the teller to adapt to the mood and reception of the audience.

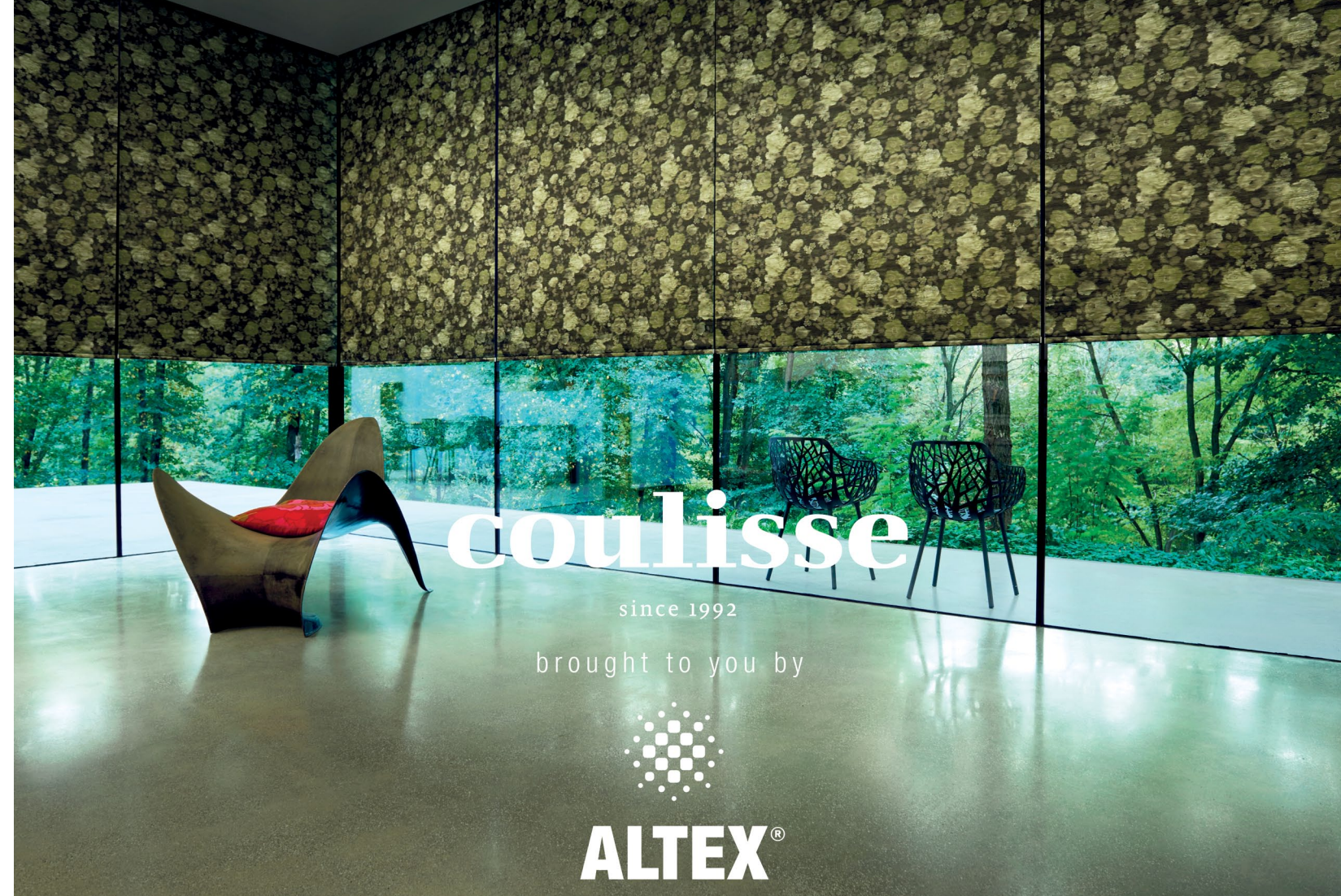
But Jay Wilson says he prefers to recite material from memory. He’s an actor and puppeteer so that probably has something to do with it, he says. He often recites poetry and sometimes tests new material at Tea ‘n’ Tales. And don’t be surprised if a puppet takes over the telling when Wilson is on stage.

“It’s very exciting,” he says. “As an actor, I’m always searching for the immediacy of being in front of an audience. But anyone can do it. You just take a big breath and do it.

“I tip my hat to Brian that we’re still going at this after 10 years. He’s the one making it happen.” 

IF YOU GO

- Tea ‘n’ Tales runs 10 to 11 a.m. on Fridays, June 30 to Sept. 1, at the Guelph Enabling Garden, located in Riverside Park behind the Evergreen Seniors Centre and not far from the Speedvale Avenue bridge.
- The event is free but donations are accepted.
- Bring your own lawn chair and mug for hot or cold tea. The event runs rain or shine, so bring an umbrella or head to the nearby picnic shelter.
- The Rotary Club of Guelph and the Downtown Guelph Business Association support the event by covering advertising costs and giving free vouchers to downtown shops.
- Here’s the lineup: June 30, Sarah Abusarar and Brian Holstein; July 7, James Gordon and Jenny Higgins; July 14, Doug Larson; July 21, Brenda Lewis and Gayle Ackroyd and Donna McCaw; July 28, Pauline Grondin; Aug. 4, Ann Estil and Michael Dougherty; Aug. 11, Jay Wilson and Carolyn Wilker; Aug. 18, Jan Sherman; Aug. 25, Elizabeth Matson and Beve Matson; Sept. 1, Adwoa Badoe and Sya Van Geest.
- Children and adults are equally welcome.



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