

## TRUTH be told Tales From the South can be weird, funny or sad, so long as they're true

ELIZABETH GAMEZ ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

As Paula Morell pulls the vintage microphone close to her lips to introduce Tales From the South and its writers, jitters flutter through her. Her voice is practiced. She's creator and host of the internationally syndicated, 6-year-old radio show. Still, Morell likes to read from a script and thinks she may never be comfortable without one. She's an English professor, not a radio personality.

"I never sat down and said, 'I'm going to be a radio host and executive producer,'" the Little Rock-born Morell says. "It probably doesn't sound natural yet."

Over the years she's rewritten the introduction and closing, but in almost all her scripts she's asked, "All right, are y'all ready for some Southern-style storytelling?"

Those words are familiar to regulars, who take soon-to-be regulars to the Starving Artist Cafe in North Little Rock to hear the live show, which is syndicated internationally to a potential audience of some 130 million.

The show is a platform for Southern writers to read a true, first-person account before a live audience. Interest in the show has skyrocketed; World Radio Network began syndicating the show in September. It's come a long way since it first hit the airwaves on KUAR-FM, 89.1, in 2005. The archived shows can be found on iTunes, **NPR.org** or [kuar.org](http://kuar.org). The show began through the misfortune of another. Morell, an

online professor for St. Leo University in Florida, was contacted by a colleague in San Francisco requesting writing submissions for a similar show. His plan fell through. Morell was left with several pieces of work that she wanted to share.

Morell called KUAR, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's public radio station. She proposed a program where Southern writers could read original stories on the air. KUAR accepted her proposal even though she had no broadcasting experience.

For 18 months, Tales From the South was recorded in the studio, until Morell realized she had the perfect venue for a live broadcast — the Starving Artist Cafe, which she and her husband operate. The live show began on Sundays, but the couple decided to open the cafe Tuesday evenings for the show and dinner.

Recording live has added spontaneity, boosted by the presence of a boisterous audience responding to the stories of two or three writers per session.

After relocating to North Little Rock in January for his job, Paul Bower saw an ad for the weekly show in AY magazine. Since then, the safety engineer has made it a habit to clean off his shoes after work and make his way to the cafe at least twice a month.

"It's an intelligent evening out with a good dinner," Bower says. "It's really everything that was promised. The stories are really entertaining."

An hour before the show, which begins at 6 p.m. every Tuesday, the dimly lit cafe is crowded and buzzing with chatty people. Only one table is available. Frequently the event — there's no admission fee — is packed, which is why Morell encourages people to make reservations. A portion of proceeds from food and beverage sales benefit the show.

On one recent Tuesday, The Old 78's Curly Miller strummed a banjo for diners. The four men of Damn Bullets, who will also play this evening, led the clapping crowd in chants of "hidee-hidee-hidee-hi/hodeehodee-hodee-ho" during a performance of Cab Calloway's "Minnie the Moocher."

Folk and bluegrass bands such as the Salty Dogs and Montgomery Trucking prime the storytelling pump with music. Every week, blues guitarist Mark Simpson nonchalantly plays the prelude and later the finale he wrote for the show.

Tales From the South is performed without a rehearsal. Writers do stumble. Sometimes Morell and the writer communicate through e-mail and don't meet until the night of the event. Morell knows they're nervous stepping onto the stage, which has several screen doors created by artist V.L. Cox as a backdrop.

Writer Megan Riley of Conway read her work over the phone to a friend and recorded herself on the phone before she stood onstage. Even after a week of preparation, her legs began shaking.

"It was like an earthquake in my body," Riley says.

With strong hand gestures, Riley read a piece that took her two years to write. She told about her struggle with poverty, how she scrounged an empty kitchen to feed her brother and herself.

"I wanted to tell the story so people know these stories are lived," she says. "I felt I said what I needed to say in the way I needed to say it. It's a beautiful blessing."

Over a span of weeks, about eight hours are dedicated to editing a writer's story, trimming it to about five minutes of reading time for the half-hour show. A good story doesn't always translate to radio without some help.

Any writer, professional or novice, can submit a story, which must be true. Submission guidelines are on the show's website, [talesfromthesouth.com](http://talesfromthesouth.com) . The stories range from heartwarming to sorrowful to comedic. So far, no narratives have been rejected, but there are restrictions. It must be G or PG-rated and preferably 800 to 1,500 words. The essence of the show requires that the author be from or living in Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi or Alabama.

"Sometimes the people who've never written are those who [knock] it out of the ballpark," Morell says. "Part of the charm is that it's everyday people."

As she likes to say at each performance, "All stories are true and told by the Southerners who lived them."

As a native Southerner, published author (*Broken Water*) and a professor, she believes Southerners have a distinct storytelling style that is rich in voice and language.

"All the stories have substance, depth — a universal element that people all over the world can connect to and feel."

Of all the stories that have been told in the show's six years, one from the first season remains Morell's favorite.

In "The Deacon's Last Shot," James Grissom told about being 9 years old in a pool hall and losing a game of pool to a pool shark. His perception of his father, who was a church deacon, was forever changed when his father beat the pool shark on his son's behalf. Last year, Grissom died in a motorcycle accident. His family asked for a copy of the recording to play during the funeral.

To diversify the show, she's reached out to famous Southerners such as Janis Kearney, diarist for President Bill Clinton, and P. Allen Smith, host of *P. Allen Smith Gardens* on public television.

Their stories form the show's Tin Roof Project, which takes place the first Tuesday of each month. In the cafe's intimate setting, celebrities tell a never-before-heard story and answer questions from audience members. She named the project after the sound of rain falling on the tin roof that she sat under when her father and uncle told stories.

On March 1, Fishin' Hole TV host Jerry McKinnis canceled his reading because of an emergency. Morell called everyone she knew until she found a replacement. That person was Natalie Canerday, who is recognized for her role in *Sling Blade* with Billy Bob Thornton. A native of Russellville, Canerday says she got a call at 2:37 p.m., little less than five hours before the show.

Canerday says she was worried. With nothing written, she got onstage and told a story about her climb to the top in "From God's Country to Hollywood."

"I was a little nervous I wasn't going to be smart enough for a writer, but [the audience] seemed to enjoy it," Canerday said, still beaming from the crowd's roar of approval.

Her references to places unique to Arkansas, her carefree tone and Southern drawl, which she made fun of, connected with people in the room.

Morell's goal is to have people relate to and identify with the narrative. What makes her proud are the people who come up to her and say, "That story reminds me of me when I was a child."

"To me, storytelling is a vital element to the community," Morell says. "I'm tapping into the idea that we're consumed by our own devices and need to reconnect. People are forgetting to do that."

Television might be in her future, but Morell says that she doesn't want to take such a leap yet. There are some venue changes on tap. Future Tales will feature people from "the greatest generation" at a

show in Arkadelphia on April 26, and breast cancer survivors get the stage in the Argenta Community Theatre in North Little Rock on March 29.

She's also working to get the program on more public radio stations. Sponsorship and support from the William F. Laman Library System, the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute, the Argenta Arts District and AY magazine has helped the show turn up its volume dial in the community.

As the show grows, Morell doesn't want to forget the heart of Tales — storytelling. Knowing the power of storytelling is why writer Robin Satterfield decided to tell the audience her story of her hesitation to speak up during a trip to Rwanda.

"Everyone has a story," Satterfield says. "Some people have trouble articulating, but their story deserves to be told because it's humanity and that's precious."

When the last word is read and the audience begins to clap, cheer and whistle, there's a glow, a mix of humbleness and pride that emanates from the writers.

Morell usually tears up for every writer.

"I'm kind of a proud mama," she says.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/CARY JENKINS Guitarist Mark Simpson plays the theme music he wrote for the radio show Tales From the South at a recent performance.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/CARY JENKINS Madeline Young of Hot Springs reads her story to the audience at the Starving Artist Cafe.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/CARY JENKINS **Paula Morell** , creator and producer of Tales From the South, introduces another writer.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/CARY JENKINS **The audience** at Tales From the South, which is broadcast on KUAR-FM, 89.1, applauds writer Madeline Young.