

# “Let’s Put on a Show!”

Megan Hicks

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**F**ive years ago, frustrated about leaving a solid client base when I moved from Virginia to Pennsylvania, where I had no client base and no word-of-mouth to recommend me, I was kvetching to my friend Rivka Willick.

“I’m dyin’,” I whined. “I have no place to perform. I need to gig!”

Rivka asked me to describe the audience of my dreams, my ideal gig. I said, “Actually, I would like to be able to perform my stories for grownups. I hardly ever got to do that in Virginia.” To which Rivka suggested I create my own venue. In my living room. Before I could tell her all the reasons why that was impossible, she said, “I’ll help you.” And didn’t she just!

The first Rose Valley Storytelling House Concert featured Rivka Willick, Robin Bady, and me in a program of haunted tales for Mid-Winter’s Eve. Robin had been hosting her Bady House Concerts with great success for about a year, and she gave me confidence along with great advice and

solid practical help. To my amazement, delight, and relief, about twenty people showed up. With our “suggested donation” of \$15, we covered our expenses and each of us netted a small profit.

The success of this first event gave me courage to think about “the next time.” Every six months or so seemed reasonable. But people kept leaning on me to host another evening of storytelling, sooner; one of those people was my husband. He had functioned as stage manager, lighting, setup, bar tender, greeter, parking attendant, and coat check. He had had a blast. A few randomly spaced concerts later, we settled into a schedule of monthly events, with summers off.

We have taken the name Rose Valley Storytelling House Concerts, and we are now in our fifth year, gearing up for our 55th evening of storytelling. Here is some advice I offer for people teetering on the brink of producing house concerts:

Check out the laws in your state and municipality to determine what your legal liabilities are. Rose Valley Storytelling House Concerts are private parties, by invitation only. Of course, anyone who has attended is welcome (encouraged!) to bring friends. If those friends choose to sign up for MailChimp notifications, they are on the invitation list.

In order to avoid being classified as a business, instead of charging admission, we have a suggested donation. Since I’m not asking for myself, I’m not shy about reminding people to visit the tip jar early and often. One hundred percent of what comes into the tip jar goes home with our guest — because my husband and I are not running a business. We are throwing a party. Which means food and drink is complimentary. Some house concerts also serve as potlucks, with guests bringing food and beverages to share. Some venues take a percentage of the door. Everybody makes their decisions based on what works best for them. If you do decide on the “suggested donation” approach, be sure that you do right by your guest artist(s) and remind the audience often that storytellers have to eat and pay bills, too.

We’ve never maxed out seating in our living room, and there’s ample

parking nearby, so we don't have to take reservations. If space is tight in your neighborhood, you might want to require an RSVP.

**Promotion** — Post your event on social media...over and over and over again. Make flyers and take them to the gym, to yoga, to work, to wherever you can hand them off personally to people with whom you're acquainted. A big contingent of our regular audiences are people who play volleyball with my husband, people who, until a couple of years ago, didn't even know "storytelling" was a thing.

**Concerning set-up:** If you want to flaunt your culinary skill, this is a great place to trot out your favorite finger food recipes. I don't have any culinary skills to flaunt, so almost all our edibles come straight from Costco. My husband enjoys shopping for beer and wine, but if he didn't, I don't think anybody would complain about supermarket beer and boxed wine; adult beverages are totally optional. Spa water is nice, and it's easy to make. Seltzer and soft drinks are cheap. People don't come for the food or to check out your spotless house. If you get one bathroom clean and have comfortable places for everybody to sit where they can see and hear, you've done all the required housekeeping and set-up. Everything else is extra.

Collect contact information for people who want to be notified of your next event. We started with a mailing list of about 25 contacts. Four years later, the list numbers 250+. This is a small enough list that I can use MailChimp for free.

Because we host ten Rose Valley Storytelling House Concerts a year, we have created a structure — policies, if you will — that we observe pretty consistently. If you decide to make house concerts a regular, recurring thing, I suggest you decide as soon as you can what's going to work for you and operate accordingly.

**First:** My first hope for Rose Valley Storytelling House Concerts is that they provide a safe place for tellers to perform absolutely anything they want to try out — edgy, experimental, eclectic. Anything. We invite grownups and older teens. Children have come to two of our concerts,

but only because those guest tellers specifically asked for children to be invited.

**Second:** I only invite tellers whose work I have seen, whom I know to be entertaining, and whom I trust to make our audiences not just glad but DELIGHTED they chose us as their evening's entertainment. First preference goes to those artists I know who, although they may be professionals, are not often afforded a solo set with no time limits and no content restrictions.

**Third:** One of the reasons I jumped on this House Concert train is because I wanted a forum where I could hone my skills as both emcee and performer. To that end, I reserve the close of the evening for myself. I have to come up with something fresh and polished and appropriately harmonious with the first part of the evening. It keeps me on my game.

Robin's Bady House Concerts in Brooklyn, which just celebrated its 49th event, runs on a different set of guidelines. She hosts three or four tellers per event. Three of the tellers are local, from the New York City area, and one is from out of town. Tellers get about 20 minutes to tell and no restrictions on content. Robin actually bakes cookies and cakes for the refreshment table. The tip jar is split among the tellers. Her concerts are also geared to grownups.

There must be dozens of house concerts going on, because they are so easy to produce successfully, and the whole setup is immensely satisfying for all parties concerned. Storytelling is never better than when it happens in an intimate setting, up close and personal. Tellers love the immediacy of a small audience. And when the telling is finished, everybody in the room has something to talk about to anybody else in the house.

For me, the scariest thing about hosting house concerts is the stillness in the house for the first few minutes after 7 PM. I'm thinking, Okay. Tonight's the night nobody's coming. I have this fantastic storyteller ready to open their heart and work like a champion, and nobody's gonna show up, and it's going to be awkward and awful and ... next thing I know someone opens the front door and hollers, "Yoo-hoo!" And the NEXT

thing I know, the house is full of people and conversations and heartbeats and ... well, it's everything I ever hoped church, recess, and birthday parties would be. It's connection. It's community. It's collaborative art.



**Megan Hicks** creates vivid, lasting connections between her characters and audiences of all ages, whether it's a fairy tale, history, parody, literary, or personal story. When asked which audiences she prefers — kids, teens, grownups, seniors — and which story genre — traditional, historical, personal, humorous — she answers, “All of the above.”

“Stories (un)Folding” is what she calls her unique take on the storytelling/origami mashup that some folks call “storygami,” which she has toured throughout the United States and on four continents.

Megan lives near Philadelphia where she tells stories, writes, folds paper, makes trash art, and co-produces the Rose Valley Storytelling House Concerts.

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