New event helps people share diverse stories

By
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On Saturday, June 30, approximately 100 people attended the Moab Valley Multicultural Center's new event, Dialogues of Diversity: Multicultural Stories of Strength. Pictured, left to right: Joanna Onorato, Haley Austin, Steffani Raff, Rhiana Medina, Quincy Masur and Zaida Agreda Winn. [Photo courtesy of Rhiana Medina]

On Saturday, June 30, about 100 people at the Moab Arts and Recreation Center (MARC) attended the Moab Valley Multicultural Center (MVMC)’s
newest event: Dialogues of Diversity: Multicultural Stories of Strength.

Each of the stories, told from the perspective of “being new” to the Moab area, was unique and the sense of community pride was palpable in the room, said Rhiana Medina, executive director of MVMC.

One of the storytellers described her transformation from being a “city girl” in Istanbul, Turkey, to becoming an unabashed Moab desert child. She told the audience how her “feet got dirtier, but her soul got brighter.”

Another storyteller recalled his experience of learning English after he moved to Moab from the Navajo Nation. When he spoke in his native tongue, the room fell silent and everyone leaned in a bit closer to hear those sounds coming from his mouth.

The audience experienced what Medina and the advocates at the MVMC get to experience all the time — the opportunity to listen to stories.

Before that moment, Medina said, she had never thought about the things she has come to know about her clients as “stories.”

“But in that moment I saw my job as just that — a colorful tapestry of stories made up of people’s everyday lives,” Medina said. “I’ve heard tragic stories, hilarious stories, shocking stories, scary stories. You name it, I’ve heard it. Last week, I had a conversation with a male Chinese fashion model living in town for a few months and working at a fast food restaurant to practice speaking English. That same day, I helped a homeless woman who lives in her van apply for food stamps as she told me all about the ‘old days’ when she was a traveling salesperson. Seriously, I doubt many of you could say the same thing about your job.”

Medina said she learned a lot about the art of storytelling over the last few months from Steffani Raff, MVMC storytelling coach and mentor.
“Steffani, in my opinion, is a good reader of people,” Medina said. “Even though we were never in the same room with her (we did all of our coaching via Skype), she used her adept skills to pull the details out from each of the storytellers in a way that spoke best to their unique personalities. Working with Steffani, it never felt like she was telling any of the storytellers what to do. She framed everything as a question which would then challenge that person to think about the details of their story in a different way.”

Medina said Raff helped to instill confidence in everyone, saying things such as, “What you’ve done in interesting, but who you are is even more interesting. You are worth knowing.”

“I’m definitely taking a few pages out of her (story)book and applying it to my work,” Medina said.

Raff opened the Dialogues of Diversity event by telling the listeners a story about her experiences rock hunting as a child.

Her grandfather was a geologist and taught her a lot about rocks and their scientific properties.

Her favorite rock, she recalled, was a plain, grayish-brown colored stone on the outside, but on the inside, had swirls of purple and blue: a geode. She spent her days as a child looking for the most boring, ordinary rocks so she could bring them home and smash them with her grandfather’s rock hammer. Although she never found one, she later realized that the joy was in the moment between lifting the hammer and smashing the rock. In the brief moment before the hammer fell, she thought, “Maybe this time!” Or, “This is the one!”

“What Steffani was describing was hope,” Medina said. “She never lost hope then, and she is still an optimist today. In these uncertain times, no matter how scary the stories, we should all try to live in the hopeful moment before the hammer falls and remember that sometimes, the most ordinary things contain unimaginable beauty.”
Storytellers mentored at MVMC

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