

**CATHY WURZER:** What are you doing this weekend? The 32nd annual Black Master Storytellers Festival kicks off tonight, Thursday, at the Perpich Center for the Arts in Suburban Golden Valley. It's organized by the Black Storytellers Alliance. This year's festival features legendary storyteller Charlotte Blake Alston, Dr. Amina Blackwood Meeks, Dylan Pritchett, and more. Vusumuzi Zulu is the festival's director, and he joins me now. Welcome to Minnesota Now.

**VUSUMUZI ZULU:** Thank you so very much for the invitation. I appreciate that.

**CATHY WURZER:** Oh, it's great to have you here. So the lineup of people I've just listed are called master storytellers. What makes a storyteller a master?

**VUSUMUZI ZULU:** Well, a master storyteller is a status and certification that is acquired as a result of actual practice and having done the work. Having gone through and performed before larger audiences and our peers. So it takes a few years for most folks to acquire that status. Now master storyteller in the African American sense is one who aspires to the, what the French call the griot, what the West Africans call the jali or the jaliyaa, who were the storytellers in the village.

And those storytellers had great influence because they could do the genealogy of the members of the village and point out the roles of each as well as the history of those in the village from the beginning.

**CATHY WURZER:** So they tell everybody what their role is in a way, is that right?

**VUSUMUZI ZULU:** Well, more so tells everyone what the roles have been of those who preceded them. So not so much saying that this is a role that is assigned to you, but to understand that that role, which was played by someone who may have been your uncle, great uncle, great great grandfather or aunt, that that was the role that they played, and this is how they did it and this is the respect that they gained as a result of it. And this is how it benefited the community.

**CATHY WURZER:** And what is the expectation? OK, so you hear a story. You're taking things from it. The thing is that you're not telling somebody what to know, what to hear, what to tune into. It's a gift where somebody then takes from it what they want.

**VUSUMUZI ZULU:** It is not like watching TV, where in all of the scenes are drawn for one, the music is supplied by one to give the ambiance that may be necessary. But in oral storytelling, one must use one's imagination. And one must also recognize that they are a part of the story. So that the storyteller is not just telling to a wall, but the audience, the people who are before that particular storyteller. And in our cases, we often invite members of the audience, come on up. I want you to be brother rabbit. I need a giraffe. I need someone who is an elder to play this particular role in that short story. So it becomes very interactive.

**CATHY WURZER:** So you're a master storyteller. Is that accurate?

**VUSUMUZI ZULU:** Yes, ma'am.

**CATHY** What does it feel like when you're telling a good story?

**WURZER:**

[CHUCKLES]

**VUSUMUZI** It's a means of transport, if you will. It's a means that says it can elevate. So that when I have finished with  
**ZULU:** having told a good story, that folks feel as if they have been empowered. Hate to use that word sometimes, but that's what I mean. Have been empowered to stand taller, walk taller, and understand that indeed, they can do.

When they leave our storytelling, we want that person-- I particularly want the person to hear my story to say, oh, wait, now you know that story that he told about so-and-so? Let me tell you-- and they then tell that story themselves to someone else. That is the greatness of the oral storytelling. Is that it's not my story alone. When you take it and you tell it, then you put in some of your feelings, thoughts, nuances to that same story. And it lives.

**CATHY** How is this tradition of storytelling, especially in the African American tradition, moved forward through the  
**WURZER:** diaspora of African people across the world?

**VUSUMUZI** And that's one of the things that folks will see in person. Or in this case, we are also going to be livestreaming.  
**ZULU:** Because we are bringing in folks like, for example, Dr. Rita Cox, who is in Toronto, Canada. So you can see that she is one in the African diaspora, but who is residing in Canada. Or another one, Dr. Amina Blackwood Meeks, who comes from Jamaica, man. And she's going to be here. And you will hear her storytelling.

And they've traveled all across the world telling these stories. The fables, as well as folktales. But don't let me start. Because I'll get to telling you some stories.

[LAUGHS]

**CATHY** Well, that's what I wanted. I know we have this very strict time constraint. But I really do want you to tell me a  
**WURZER:** story or the start of a story. Could you do that?

**VUSUMUZI** Oh. Yes, I'm sure that I could. And the fact is that as I think about it, I think about a story that, well, might have  
**ZULU:** been used for our Friday night event of the liar's contest. Wherein one time, there was this gentleman who had come from-- well, he was from Milwaukee. And he had gone down to Louisiana to do some fishing in the gulf. Now he had heard that there were some nice-sized fish out there in the gulf, so he drove on down there and wanted to test out his skills.

Threw out the line. He only had that old fashioned kind. That was with a cane pole. It had a bobble on it. And all of a sudden, that bobble took off. Well, now he got to holding onto that cane. Cane pulled as hard as he could. But that bobble was keeping on taking off. What he did then was he decided to go on back there to that Ford pickup he had, and he tied it to that trailer hitch that he had on the back.

But that bobble kept on going. And then he got in his truck, then he drove forward. And as he drove forward, well, by the time he got to Arkansas, well, the tail of that fish, it swished around up in there and created a dust storm all through Louisiana. Now I'm not saying that that's true, but that's what he told me.

[LAUGHS]

**CATHY** I love it.

**WURZER:**

**VUSUMUZI** So we had--

**ZULU:**

**CATHY** The day the fish caused the dust storm.

**WURZER:**

**VUSUMUZI** Yes, yes. Had a big dust cloud, what I see. On our Thursday night, we have the storytelling, and it's just  
**ZULU:** storytelling and drumming and interactive storytelling. On Friday evening, we have the liar's contest up there at the Capri in North Minneapolis. Now the liar's contest, we invite community folks to come in and tell their best tall tale. They got five minutes. It must be clean, must be family-friendly. Because we have the children who tell their best tall tales, and we have the adults who tell their best tall tales.

And we then give them a trophy. First, second, and third place. Now you might want to come and you might want to get in and you might go home with a trophy. And indeed, then we take your name and we put it on our Aesop Cup. And we say every now and then, we might send it to Washington DC.

**CATHY** Oh.

**WURZER:**

**VUSUMUZI** To that place called the Smithsonian.

**ZULU:**

**CATHY** Oh.

**WURZER:**

**VUSUMUZI** Course, this is a liar's contest. And I'm just letting you know.

**ZULU:**

[LAUGHS]

**CATHY** I might be falling for it.

**WURZER:**

**VUSUMUZI** Then we have on that Saturday evening-- oh, girl, let me tell you. We're going to be downtown in Minneapolis.

**ZULU:** And the stories will come out. You got to hear some of the stories. Now, they will be doing a drum session as well at the beginning. And then brother Ashe, when he tells his story, he's going to be using his gym bag to add to his story.

**CATHY** Well, this sounds terrific. Last question for you. This is the 32nd year of this festival. That is pretty astounding.

**WURZER:** What's the one thing you're still looking forward to after all these years?

**VUSUMUZI** More folks coming back. More folks who said, I heard that you had a storytelling festival and I didn't even know  
**ZULU:** about it. And when are you going to do another one? And we want those folks to be at this one. Because once you are here, we don't have to really worry about you coming back next year. A storyteller is only as good as the ears that are there before. We all need those ears.

**CATHY** Yeah. Well, I hope you have a terrific festival. I think maybe I'll check it out myself.

**WURZER:**

**VUSUMUZI** I sure hope so. And I hope that you come on in and just get on up there and tell your best tall tale. You can't ever tell. And I'm not trying to say that you know anything about telling tall tales.

**CATHY** Yeah, that's right.

**WURZER:**

**VUSUMUZI** But I know you've heard a couple anyhow.

**ZULU:**

**CATHY** For sure, for sure.

**WURZER:**

**VUSUMUZI** So come on in. I want everybody. Anybody is free. Open to the public. Family-friendly.

**ZULU:**

**CATHY** Free, open to the public, family-friendly. Well, Vusumuzi Zulu, thank you so much for joining us today.

**WURZER:**

**VUSUMUZI** I so much appreciate it. Thank you so very much. And I look for you and all the rest of you.

**ZULU:**

**CATHY** Vusumuzi Zulu is the director of the Black Master Storytelling Festival. That festival, he wants me to make sure I tell you, is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board. Thanks to a legislative appropriation from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

**WURZER:**