

# Storyteller Laura Pershin Raynor ~ A Gift to the Community

By Karen Foulke Larson

It is 10:45 on a Wednesday morning, and kids and their grown-ups are streaming into the downtown branch of the Ann Arbor District Library. Some children arrive in strollers or in their mothers' arms. Others are walking, and a few are even running toward the cheerful story corner of the youth department. By 11:00 a.m. the crowd of toddlers, infants, parents, grandparents, and daycare providers has grown to over 60 people who are eagerly anticipating Preschool Storytime.

Laura welcomes the crowd with her smile, friendly greetings, and the warmth in her voice. Some of them are visiting for the first time, but most are return visitors, with high expectations for the stories and songs. The enthusiasm is visible in their faces as children and adults greet "Miss Laura." Miss Laura is Laura Pershin Raynor, a nationally known storyteller and a youth librarian at the Ann Arbor District Library.

Storytime begins and a roomful of children and grown-ups become the rain ("pitta-patta, pitta-patta") and the wind (following Laura's arm movements). They sew with words and movements ("snip, snip, snip" and "stitch, stitch, stitch") following Laura's melodic voice.

For this session, Laura leads all the songs and the dances, and gives kids the opportunity to move around in between the stories. Other days, Storytime includes the accompaniment of professional musicians.



Storyteller and librarian Laura Pershin Raynor has a talent for captivating audiences of all ages.

Laura says that, after being in school all day, the kids wanted to play and not sit still. So she had them act out stories, put on finger plays, and even repeat silly back-and-forth rhymes.



Photo by Ken Raynor

## Laura Pershin Raynor

Laura Pershin Raynor performs at storytelling festivals across the country, but her biggest impact may be in Ann Arbor where she has been a positive literary influence on thousands of Ann Arbor youth with her work as a librarian.

Years after Ann Arbor's young people have outgrown Storytime, they still remember Laura...One young man in a Pioneer High School letter jacket saw her and shouted, "Story Lady!" Laura laughs, "For a second, he forgets that he is cool, and the wall comes down. Then he looks around, embarrassed."

### Parental Approval

Betsy Beckerman is one of the musicians who provide music for Storytime. She first met Laura when she started bringing her own kids to the library 15 years ago. Betsy says, "She is still riveting for my kids!"

When she's playing the music, Betsy has a front-row view of the performance and the audience's reactions to Laura's storytelling. She describes how Laura "has a dynamic range and a variety of different voices. She also uses her body with great success." Whether Laura is a bumbling bear or a fairy princess, it is not just her voice, but also her body, that transforms.

The co-artistic director of the Wild Swan Theater, Sandy Ryder, has known Laura for

approximately 20 years. Sandy says, "Laura is an amazing person and an incredible storyteller. She can bring puppets to life in a way that no one else can." Sandy adds that Laura "gets inside the story with her voice, with her smile, with her presence," which keeps the audience hooked.

Rohit Setty and his seven-year-old daughter, Shalini, started attending Laura's Storytimes when Shalini was 18 months old. He says, "Both Shalini and I are still captivated by each and every story that Laura tells and the way she tells them."

### Inspiring Family Tradition

Storytelling has always been part of Laura's family traditions. Starting as a young girl, she attentively listened to her Grandma Dinah tell stories about coming to the United States from Russia at the age of 17. Laura says, "Her stories were my fairy tales."

Another favorite part of Laura's childhood was the weekly trips to the library with her dad. One of Laura's earliest memories of her dad is when he was telling stories at a family gathering, surrounded by his male cousins. "I truly believed that every family was filled with storytelling moments," Laura says. She didn't realize until she was in college that her friends didn't know their families' pasts like she knew her own.

### Library Outreach

As an undergraduate student at Michigan State University, Laura discovered a little public library on Abbot Road in East Lansing, Michigan. She made it a habit to go once a week and was struck by the variety of ages there, which made it like a community. Parents were coming in with tots for story time, while elders were spending hours reading every newspaper in the library.

"I saw the children's librarian taking the kids on a little musical parade around the circulation desk. The children had shakers they had made out of paper plates and beans," Laura remembers. Her visits to that library helped her decide that she wanted to be a children's librarian. She graduated from Michigan State in 1976 with a bachelor of arts and an A.M.L.S. degree (master of arts in library science) and a K-12 teaching certificate.

In 1975, Laura worked part-time doing outreach for the Ann Arbor Public Library. Her job included visiting Peace Neighborhood Center after school. Laura says that, after being in school all day, the kids wanted to play and not sit still. So she had them act out stories, put on finger plays, and even repeat silly back-and-forth rhymes. She recalls that it was such a "joyous" time, incorporating stories and play into learning. Laura also began telling stories for adults as well as children, and searching for places to do it.

### A National Pastime

In 1980, Laura and her husband moved to Boston, where he started a graphic design studio. Boston provided many professional opportunities for Laura. She got a job as an outreach librarian, at the library that her successor in Ann Arbor had left!

It was at that library that Laura found a co-worker and friend who shared her passion for storytelling, Ellen Block. Laura recounts, "I was fortunate that a storytelling revival was occurring in New England and around the country. Ellen and I traveled through Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire together, telling stories at schools, libraries, and festivals." They also began teaching workshops for teachers and at library conferences and elder hostels.

During their years in Boston, Laura's daughters, Molly and Emma, were born. A decade later, Laura and her family moved back to Ann Arbor. Laura returned to working at what is now called the Ann Arbor District Library.



Photo by Lisa Zeldes

**Laura with her daughters**

Storytelling is a family tradition for Laura Pershin Raynor (center) and her daughters Emma (left), a photographer, and Molly (right), a poet.

Laura is part of a team of librarians who, she says, "are amazing. We all have different styles, and we learn from each other." She also appreciates how "Ann Arbor parents understand the importance of imagination and are not afraid to be silly," and adds, "Ann Arbor spoils me rotten!"

**Whether Laura is a bumbling bear or a fairy princess, it is not just her voice, but also her body, that transforms.**

### What's Your Story?

Laura got permission from her family members to fictionalize their tales in order to make them universal, and recorded them on two CDs for young adults and adults. Both "All Dressed Up" and "A Well-

Kept Secret" (which won a Parents' Choice Award from the Parents' Choice Foundation) include Laura's sense of humor.

Laura's storytelling takes her across the country to perform. For 15 years, she has been a storyteller at the Celebration of Light Festival in Midland, Texas. Laura performed at the National Storytelling Festival in 2004; then in 2005, she was part of the Teller-in-Residence Program, both in Jonesborough, Tennessee. She has also performed at festivals in Utah, California, and Virginia.

In 2009, Laura and her husband, Ken, spent a week with professional storyteller Donald Davis on North Carolina's Ocracoke Island. They were part of a group of 14 people from across the country who took a workshop with Davis on finding and telling their unique stories. PBS aired a television series called "What's Your Story?" with footage from that week, and a DVD of the series will be released in 2012.


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# Storyteller Laura Pershin Raynor

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## Award-Winning Talent

Laura's talents have been widely recognized. The Creative Arts Institute of America honored Laura as National Storyteller of the Year in 1997. In 2006, she received the Michigan Library Association's Children's Services Award of Merit, which is granted to a librarian who has made an outstanding contribution to library service to children and young people in Michigan.

In 2011, the Ann Arbor Book Festival honored Laura as a Leader in the Literary Arts. The festival's program director, Jeff Kass, teaches creative writing at Pioneer High School and is the creative arts director at The Neutral Zone, a teen center in Ann Arbor. In Jeff's introduction of Laura at the awards ceremony, he mentioned the thousands of children whom Laura has influenced over the last 20 years and that, for a lot of kids in Ann Arbor, Laura is their introduction to literature.

Jeff uses his own kids as an example of Laura's influence. Even as toddlers, they learned to sit and "pay very close attention" to Laura's stories. "She makes stories really come alive," says Jeff.

Erin Helmrich, teen services librarian at the Ann Arbor District Library, has worked with Laura for eight years. Erin says, "Laura is a completely positive, open, and giving person whose lightness and positivity are contagious, and the parents and kids respond to that. Not to mention that so many of them are genuinely entertained by her amazing storytelling talent."

## Lasting Impact

With over 20 years of working with Ann Arbor's youth, Laura has enjoyed the opportunity to "meet them as beginning readers, moving from red dot [books] to green dot" - and again as teens, when they still trust her to recommend books in the teen room.

Years after Ann Arbor's young people have outgrown Storytime, they still remember Laura. She tells a story about waiting in line behind a bunch of teenagers at a bagel shop on Main Street. Suddenly, one young man in a Pioneer High School letter jacket saw her and shouted, "Story Lady!" Laura laughs, "For a second, he forgets that he is cool, and the wall comes down. Then he looks around, embarrassed."

Laura's favorite part of her job is the sense of community created by parents, grandparents, caregivers, and kids all "meeting in a magical place for a few minutes."

As the hands of the clock in the youth department move toward 11:30 a.m., the crowd is still in a magical place and the young audience is oblivious of time. There are whispers of delight as Laura takes out the limberjack toys (wooden dolls with moveable limbs) that always dance with her last song.

Once Storytime ends, the crowd disperses to various parts of the youth section to browse the shelves, find a couch and read a stack of books, then take their selections to the self-check-out. The 30-minute Storytime has ended for the day, but parents like Betsy Beckerman, Rohit Setty, and Jeff Kass can tell you that the impact is ongoing.

Laura Pershin Raynor's storytelling inspires children and adults to love the art of storytelling, to love books, and to love visiting the library. As Sandy Ryder says, "Ann Arbor is so lucky to have Laura as a storyteller and as a person. She is a real gift to the community."

Visit the Ann Arbor District Library's website at [aadl.org](http://aadl.org) to see the list of Storytimes. To read more about Laura Pershin Raynor, go to her page at the National Storytellers Network website: <http://www.storynet.org/teller/directory.php?ID=148>. Laura may be contacted by email at [lpaynor@gmail.com](mailto:lpaynor@gmail.com).

**Laura Pershin Raynor's award-winning first CD, "A Well-Kept Secret," is out of print. Her second CD, for young adults and adults, "All Dressed Up," is available exclusively at Crazy Wisdom Bookstore.**




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