

# Missouri Folk Arts Program

**Lisa Overholser**  
Guest Author

Folklorist Lisa Overholser celebrates one year as the director of the St. Louis Storytelling Festival, a program of University of Missouri Extension, in January 2016. Missouri Folk Arts Program staff sought Overholser as one partner in our new project, **Then and Now: Apprentice Journeys**. With **Then and Now**, staff will coordinate two oral histories with public performances annually featuring former Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP) apprentices who ultimately achieved master artist status and lead their own apprenticeships. In this article, Overholser introduces us to **Then and Now** artist Loretta Washington. [Lisa L. Higgins, director, Missouri Folk Arts Program]



Loretta Washington

Loretta Washington never intended to be a storyteller. Like most traditional tellers, she absorbed the stories and tales she heard from her family and community as she was growing up. Born in what

was then St. Mary's Infirmary, an African American teaching hospital in St. Louis, Loretta nevertheless spent her formative childhood years in Wardell, Mo., after her mother moved her to the small town in the Missouri "Bootheel." There, she passed the time when not in school listening to

stories from her great-grandmother Ellen ("Mama" as Loretta lovingly calls her), grandmother, and mother. Loretta was riveted by the tales of how her family escaped sharecropping life in Mississippi in the 1930s and 40s; the struggles they went through upon moving to Missouri; the humorous animal tales Mama would tell; and an occasional story with a moral lesson for good measure.

Loretta returned to St. Louis and transplanted as a young girl back to a major urban center. As an adult, she worked in corporate administration while raising her family. Her family's tales drifted deep into her subconscious. When Loretta started to volunteer at the St. Louis Storytelling Festival and attend workshops, her interest was piqued. She admired what she heard, though she recalls: "I never thought I was a storyteller, or even good at public speaking." She did, however, apply what she learned about public speaking for career advancement.

Then, Loretta met Gladys Caines Coggsell, a well-known regional storyteller who also documents the stories of Missouri's African-American communities. During informal conversations with Loretta, Gladys found out that Loretta remembered wonderful stories from her childhood in the Bootheel. Gladys encouraged Loretta to share these stories, and that relationship led to Loretta's 2003 apprenticeship with Gladys in the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP), which provides opportunities for master practitioners of traditional arts to work in deeply focused ways with apprentices to pass on traditional knowledge.

For Loretta, the apprenticeship program was transformative. She drove from St. Louis to Gladys' home in Frankford, Mo., often over the next few months to learn from Gladys. Loretta had been telling stories for four to five years at that point, though with little personal connection to her repertoire. Suddenly,



Washington performs at the Ste. Genevieve, Mo., Welcome Center in 2014.

she remembered the stories from her female elders, and she excavated that rich repository from her subconscious. Gladys taught valuable techniques, like story structure and story development, and she also emphasized that Loretta must make the stories her own. Loretta says: "Gladys taught me to branch out. She taught me that there is value in sharing the stories of your own experiences, and she opened my eyes to

the gift that was inside me." In the fall of 2009, Loretta's involvement with TAAP came full circle when she and apprentice Breia Jefferson were selected by panelists for participation. And, Loretta participated in TAAP again in 2014 with apprentice Mary Thomas. Loretta thinks very highly of the apprenticeship program, noting that she also learns in the teaching role of the partnership: "The apprenticeship

is a process; it emphasizes the process, which can take time. But that's valuable." She sees the program as a way of giving back to her community, a community that helped foster a deeper connection with her past and, ultimately, a deeper sense of community. Please join us for the St. Louis Storytelling Festival, when we partner with the Missouri Folk Arts Program, to present Loretta Washington at The Stage at KDHX. ■

<p><b>then and now</b> Apprentice Journeys</p>	<p><b>John P. Williams, Jr., fiddler</b> 5:30 p.m., Friday, April 22, 2016 Museum of Art &amp; Archaeology 115 Business Loop 70 West, Columbia, Mo.</p>
	<p><b>Loretta Washington, storyteller</b> 5:30 p.m., Friday, May 6, 2016 The Stage at KDHX 3524 Washington Avenue, Saint Louis, Mo.</p>



Washington and her apprentice Breia Jefferson, who met through their church, practice storytelling at Washington's dining table in Ferguson, Mo., in 2010.



Washington (left) and master artist Gladys Caines Coggsell perfect stories at Coggsell's kitchen table in Frankford, Mo., in 2003.

Photos: Courtesy of St. Louis Storytelling Festival, Deborah A. Bailey

Photos: Robert Mueller, Deborah A. Bailey