

Storytellers spin tales of desert love

By Courtney Vaughn
Hi-Desert Star

JOSHUA TREE — For many, the desert's allure doesn't slap you in the face; rather, it creeps into your soul slowly until one day you can't help but notice an impossible rock formation, a stark sunset or the way the mountains catch the light and elicit bliss.

Those who dare to peer through the tumbleweeds and hard sand often discover hidden treasures, rough journeys and a little bit more of themselves.

"Desert Stories," an annual storytelling series curated by Cheryl Montelle, gives residents the chance to share their stories of finding their way of life in the desert.

Its seventh installment was Saturday night at the Black Box Theatre in Joshua Tree.

Feryat Newman brought her audience to tears with her intimate story of following love to the desert, learning to love the desert and then coping with the loss of her love when her husband died two years ago, not long after Newman returned from "Desert Stories V."

"That moment I looked around and saw nothing but 259 shades of brown," Newman read from her poem, "The Quilt of all Things."

"I don't understand the desert I'm used to hiding, feeling safe in caves and corners," Newman confided, as if reading from a page in her own diary. "My own voice whispers in my ear, 'If you do not like it, leave.' There are some places you can not leave."

"(He wanted) days without the smell of gasoline and the sound of sirens, condoms on the sidewalk, bars on the windows. He wanted horses. I wanted to make a quilt of all things"

Newman spoke of learning to adapt and accept the desert while learning how to be alone in it.

"That night, I was in the desert. He was not. I waited for him to wake up Beyond the pale pink sunrise, the desert tapped my shoulder. 'Wake up!' it said, 'Wake up! It is time to witness how glorified I am, how small you are.'"



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Hector Alvarez gives a comical, historical take on E Clampus Vitus during "Desert Stories VII." The annual storytelling series features local authors and poets.

David Lamfrom shared his vision of the desert's divinity, opening the evening and setting the stage.

"We haven't noticed the fundamental connectivity between each other and those we share this cozy guest house with," Lamfrom said.

"Recurring mathematical relationships between leaves and branches, spirals of shells, the distances between our eyes and ears," Lamfrom read.

"It is here, in this desperate, beautiful, quiet austerity, that I understood better that harmony includes vibration and that vibration in the desert is not soothing, meditative vibration, not the vibration of peace, acceptance or compassion, but rather the



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Catherine Svehla reads, "Re-membering the Mojave," during "Desert Stories VII" at the Black Box Theatre. The series raises money for the Hi-Desert Cultural Center.

timeless buzzing and om of the universe itself. Raw as the rugged desert granite. That vibration creates humility."

Miri Hunter, an expat from the city, illustrated her first impressions with song and syntax.

"There were coyotes and horses and bees and flies, but they only served to punctuate the silence," Hunter read from her piece, "The Tumbleweed Connection."

Others, like Catherine Svehla, shared not only her love of the desert, but her fear of the loss of the desert as she knows it.

"Now is the time for storytelling," Svehla said.