

Journalist distills 80 years of Thomasville concerts

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Journalist, educator, and mother Nadia R. Watts disclosed that the most difficult part of writing her most recent book, "Thomasville in Concert: The History of the Thomasville Entertainment Foundation Since 1937," was being apart from her two muses—artistically driven sons Sam and Ben.

Both were also the inspiration behind her writing company's moniker Two Muses Communications. They pounded on her study door, yet she remained squirreled away, typing furiously to complete another chapter every two weeks before coming up again for air.



Nadia R. Watts

"They're both incredible writers, too," remarks Watts. "I think the inspiration that they truly give me is that any little thing can be a big story in my

family. Those are the stories I like to collect and tell. Even if it's a one liner it can be funny, or sad, and it can inspire me to come up with other ideas."

Small stories can build an impressive legacy, a phenomenon Watts experienced as she puzzled together the history of the Thomasville Entertainment Foundation, a membership-driven concert organization that began in 1937. She was commissioned to write a book in celebration of TEF's 80th Anniversary by long-time archivist Linda Hester and artistic director Janice Faircloth.

Watts looks forward to signing the finished product for readers on National Independent Bookstore Day at The Bookshelf in Thomasville, Georgia, on Saturday, April 28.

Watts' career as a journalist has been a full one, though the TEF project was her first foray into writing a non-fiction book. The first newspaper she ever wrote for was a self-published periodical called "The Funny Page," that she co-created with her sister on a mimeograph machine and distributed to their elementary school classes.

In high school, Watts had the opportunity to work with a newspaper journalist whose warmth and support spurred her to pursue writing at the College of William & Mary in Virginia where she was editor of a news feature magazine. After graduation she dove into a career as a journalist, and wrote for numerous publications before earning her master's in Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

"What I learned, which has been important to teach in any journalism classroom, is that regardless of any story you're assigned, you have to find the human element in whatever you're writing," says Watts. "That's where your reader is going to connect with the piece. That's what makes a story so interesting."

Watts has honed her style to be "efficient, clean, and concise," while giving an attention-grabbing and fun spin so



Nadia R. Watts will sign copies of her "Thomasville in Concert" book Saturday at the Bookshelf. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

If you go

What: Nadia R. Watts Book Signing with Thomasville Entertainment Foundation

When: 2 p.m. Saturday, April 28

Where: The Bookshelf, 126 Broad Street, Thomasville, Georgia

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 229-228-7767 or visit <http://www.tef-concerts.com/>.

readers can connect with her work. She loves getting to know the people behind a story, and is unafraid to ask hard questions but is accessible enough that she can create an open conversation. Ultimately, this journalistic approach served her well as she delved into TEF's history.

The process began with carloads upon carloads of boxes. Watts drove back and forth to Hester's study where the archivist kept stacks of scrapbooks, notebooks, and photographs from the past 80 years. Interviews were another important aspect of the process for Watts. After poring over all her research and physical resources, she began to divide TEF's history into clear chapters.

Some stories jumped off the page for Watts, such as folk singer Burl Ives' and

his premiere at the Thomasville Concert Series. Emily Searcy, the organization's president at the time drove to pick up Ives from the train station, as was customary, only to learn that he had purchased an airplane and told the pilot to land in Tallahassee and wanted to be picked up there.

"Emily was a very kind woman, but she also set her limits and nicely suggested that [Ives] purchase his own car and drive himself up to Thomasville," chuckled Watts. "TEF volunteers always were very attentive to their artists and showed them such gracious hospitality though. That's why artists always wanted to come back to Thomasville."

Watts found an advertisement in one scrapbook that reveals how the organization began alongside World War II when membership was just one dollar. Even during time of great duress, the town continued to value the arts.

She didn't work chronologically however, instead starting in the middle with the section on education. Watts felt a special connection with the subject, as she was an educator for the past 20 years at the collegiate and high school level. Fostering relationships with her students was a gift that continues to replenish her passion for storytelling, and she feels lucky to be a part of the Thomasville community and their commitment to this community organization.

"Thomasville is an incredible gem of a place to live," says Watts. "This organization has only had one paid employee ever. Everyone else who has put this amazing concert series together has been a volunteer. What that shows about the people of Thomasville is that we care and we have a passion for what we do and a passion for educating."

Watts' ultimate message behind sharing TEF's story is one of optimism. It's about keeping the performing arts alive for the next generation. She has seen the arts empower children to identify their talents in school, and sees its effect on her sons—one performing theater, the other playing the drums. Watts is excited to support another local organization, The Bookshelf, and meet readers on Saturday to sign books and talk about TEF and the town's rich history.

"What I hoped to do with "Thomasville In Concert" was evoke that human element," says Watts. "I want the readers to get the facts that they need to learn about the organization as well as sink their teeth in and enjoy the storytelling."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).