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An artful impact: article

Lynn Carol Henderson lives in a world of myth and magic -- and saves others by taking them with her.

By [Jeremy G. Burton](#) ([more by author](#))

Lynn Carol Henderson talks with her hands. When she speaks about her art, they weave and circle in front of her. When she tells stories, her fingers spread wide, raising the curtain on a world of myth and magic.

Her favorite tale is that of Inanna, a goddess reborn after journeying into the Sumerian underworld. There, Inanna meets her dark sister and is condemned to die. But friends rescue her, and her identity is restored.

When Henderson tells the story, her cadence pulses. She is in her home art studio, Enigma, a cluttered dome hidden in a scrabble of palmettos and pines on Fourth Street South in Pinellas Point, Fla. She lives for these little moments.

For Henderson, Inanna's story resonates. It is a story about change, about facing the darkness and knowing our journeys will not be made alone.

At 57, Henderson is an artist with a passion for myth, ritual and magic, and she grounds it in daily action. She teaches the subjects at Eckerd College. She leads nature rituals and collaborates in an art therapy program for survivors of sexual abuse. She tells stories professionally to women's groups and at arts festivals.

These are the ways you change hearts and minds, says Henderson. "Through art, story, consciousness and being connected."

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Little Lynn Carol liked to listen. It required no physical exertion, important to a 6-year-old stricken with scarlet fever, measles and mumps.

From her sickbed, she first heard of Pandora and Pygmalion, Beowulf and Robin Hood.

"My grandmother, bless her heart, Teresa, she read me 'Bullfinch's Mythology' from start to end," Henderson said. "I was fascinated by all the different stories, and I was a storyteller from that moment."

Henderson's Jewish upbringing in Baltimore encouraged creativity and curiosity. Her father, a lawyer, took sculpture classes and read Kierkegaard. Often, he came home with open arms and a small treasure, a beautiful stone or an iridescent paper clip, a piece of candy some days.

"He brought me little pieces of magic and wonder every day, and we would talk about them," she said. "It was that he thought of me, and he

listened."

But there was also a time to speak. By 1968, Henderson was marching in protest of the Vietnam War and drawing political cartoons. After her freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania, Henderson traveled by herself to Mississippi. By day, she talked about the civil rights movement with anyone she could find. By night, she stayed in a house of chicken pluckers.

"I wanted to see for myself," she said.

Henderson graduated with a degree in art and studied in Italy for a year before returning to graduate school in St. Louis. It was then that her convictions about pacifism and feminism started to crystallize, and she channeled those themes into her artwork. Leading feminists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, women who worked to change the culture, inspired her.

The belief was that a few dedicated people of integrity could change the world, she said, quoting Margaret Mead. "In fact, it's the only thing that ever has."

It's so difficult, Shirley Reiner says, to articulate how it felt, dancing and singing around the fire pit in Henderson's back yard, celebrating the solstice. It was liberating. It was relaxing. But there was something more.

"You feel like you're able to go with her on this path she's always leading you into," said Reiner, a longtime friend. Leslie Bouwman, another participant in the nature rites, said being in that group of women she found "parts of her creative self that you didn't know existed."

"Some people think they're anti-Christian or of the devil or witchcraft or magic," said Sharon Wadsworth, who started full-moon rituals with Henderson 20 years ago in Pass-a-Grille.

"Those things get mixed up, when it's really about spirituality."

Today, Henderson tells stories at events throughout St. Petersburg, in the tradition of the shaman. She's a regular at the Circus McGurkis festival and last week performed for Girls Inc., a national nonprofit.

An adjunct professor of magic, myth and ritual in art at Eckerd, she has lived in south St. Petersburg with her husband, George, a marine biologist for the state, since 1975. Their son, Carl, is in medical school for osteopathy in New Jersey.

Outside Henderson's home, wind chimes sway next to an herb garden of rosemary and mugwort. Two lean cats patrol around a pond and past a low brick wall anchored down by vines.

In both her house and studio next to it, shelves and walls are filled with artifacts, dolls and curios from travels across India and Nicaragua.

Along the way, Henderson found herself moving away from the Judaism of her family and defining her own spiritual frame. Her brand of sacred activism combines a Quaker faith with the pagan Divine Feminine. It's all about reclaiming voice, she said. Telling goddess myths connects both the speaker and the listeners to an ancient history of sharing narratives and forging community.

"It's a sisterhood thing," said Brandi Hawthorne, a neighbor who visits Henderson often. "It's a closeness."

Henderson doesn't need to be in a classroom to teach. She carries lessons everywhere.

When neighbors and friends drop by for coffee, it's a learning experience. Carolyn Mayberry shakes her head, recalling a visit to Henderson's home across the street.

"I don't know anything about politics or glasswork," Mayberry said. "But I left there feeling like I knew who was in office and how to make a stained-glass window."

"I sure wouldn't want to be without her," said Hawthorne, Mayberry's mother-in-law.

Longtime Eckerd colleague Betsy Lester calls Henderson "the original hippie," always of her own vision.

For the college students she guides and whose work she critiques at Eckerd, Henderson goes out of her way to make a difference, Lester said, once even trekking to Sarasota every week for a student who couldn't bring her project to campus.

Sometimes, though, it takes time for Henderson's style to seep in. Talking with her can be like stepping into her studio, where there is so much to see, you don't know where to start looking.

"She puts the subconscious into words," said Jack Viskil, who graduated from Eckerd last month and had Henderson advise his senior art thesis. "And at the beginning, I was like, 'What planet is she living on?'"

After meeting with Henderson one-on-one and re-reading how she dissected his papers, Viskil said he found clarity and appreciation.

"She forced me to step outside the box," he said. "She really challenged me."

Karlana Morgan stepped onto Henderson's driveway and looked down at the white labyrinth painted on the pavement. Walk the path, Henderson told her.

Together, the two women meandered their way to the labyrinth's center, where the artist guided Morgan to focus and find calm, to call on a

helping spirit. "What are we ready to let go of?" Henderson asked. What unhappiness, what guilt, was no longer part of who they each were?

When Morgan, a rape victim who was also abused as a child, was ready to let go, she was ready to paint. Family Service Centers, a local nonprofit that helps victims of assault and abuse, had teamed her with Henderson for a program called artHEALS 2006, an alternative therapy outlet and fundraiser.

Morgan said the first time she worked with Henderson, she was still in a shell, depressed and experiencing post-traumatic stress. Collaborating with Henderson helped her emerge from the haze. Most important to Morgan, Henderson inspired trust, and the two women worked together a second time this spring for artHEALS 2007.

"The most empowering thing she has given me is the strength and power of womanhood," Morgan said.

They met weekly and traded phone calls, seeking spiritual focus in the middle of the labyrinth, considering images and colors that resonated with Morgan's healing.

"I had the last say, and that did so much for my confidence," Morgan said.

Morgan said she looks at the artwork she composed with Henderson, a triptych and a painting, and she can see a transformation. Today, Morgan works for Family Service Centers, orchestrating events and fundraisers for the organization that connected her with Henderson.

"These women manage to survive with such grace and dignity and abilities," Henderson said, "that you're just uplifted by the possibilities of the human spirit from what they were handed and what they made out of it."

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