



# A stage for their STORIES

Tracey Segarra hosts 'Now You're Talking' for those on Long Island with tales to tell

Tracey Segarra hosts "Now You're Talking," which nearly sold out a recent performance at the Merrick Theatre and Arts Center. ■ Video: newsday.com/act2

BY JIM MERRITT  
Special to Newsday

Spend enough time with her, and Tracey Segarra will tell you about that time she sent a holiday card to her Bronx-born, Sicilian, Jehovah's Witness mother-in-law, triggering a thaw in their dicey relationship, or that time she and a college friend — mostly the friend — used cunning, moxie and five choice words to outwit a pair of uninvited visitors on an empty, late-night subway train.

The stories will cost you the price of admission, but attend one of Segarra's "Now You're Talking" shows, and the live storytellers will regale you

with tales of dental disasters, bar mitzvah misadventures, a near-death experience and more.

On a recent Sunday night, Segarra, 55, of Hewlett, and five others took the stage at the Merrick Theatre and Center for the Arts. She recounted lessons learned after one of her twin daughters underwent open-heart surgery as an infant 17 years ago, drawing laughs and even a few sniffles from the audience of 150 in the nearly packed house.

"I look for the stories that have somehow changed me or changed my perspective on myself, other people or the world; those are the stories that define us, that make me, me," Segarra said.

She works as director of marketing for Margolin, Winer & Evens, an accounting and business advisory firm in Garden City, and moonlights as a storyteller. Segarra said the secret of her success is revealing her innermost thoughts while telling a good yarn.

## STORYTELLING OPEN MIC

Storytelling is not just for children nowadays, but has become an international phenomenon, with thousands of adult storytelling groups springing up in the United States and around the world, said Catherine Burns, artistic director of The Moth. The New York City-based nonprofit is dedicated to the art and craft of storytelling, and

hosts open-mic events at which 10 people chosen by lottery compete to tell the best story on a theme.

The Moth was founded in 1997 by novelist George Dawes Green and produces nearly 600 shows, or storySLAMS, annually in 27 cities. Its podcast is downloaded more than 44 million times a year.

Segarra is hoping to create a Long Island audience for the genre, luring out-of-town raconteurs from as far as Brooklyn with a \$100 fee. They tell a well-crafted story at shows held six times a year at either the Merrick Theatre or at Turn of the Corkscrew Books & Wine in Rockville Centre. Her first show in May sold out the 180-seat Merrick Theatre, and

shows at the bookstore attract about 50 to 60 people. Her efforts have been successful enough that Segarra plans to do a show every month in 2018.

Mark Pagán, 38, of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, who participates in The Moth events in that borough and in Manhattan, met Segarra at a storytelling event a year and a half ago, and they have become friends.

"She offers a little bit more freedom than The Moth, so I can be a little improvisatory," Pagán said of Segarra's storytelling events.

Segarra is "a crowd favorite at the slams" in New York City,

See STORIES on E24

# Adding insights to a good yarn

## STORIES from E23

Burns said, referring to the open-mic storytelling competitions based on a theme. The Moth has recorded more than a half dozen of Segarra's stories. The one about her relationship with her mother-in-law will be featured in the annual Moth Radio Hour holiday special, which airs nationwide on more than 450 public radio stations.

Segarra said she and her husband's mother had "circled each other warily for a long time. I'm a middle-class Jew from Long Island. Rita was a Bronx-born Sicilian, a waitress and a secretary, and a Jehovah's Witness, this strange religion I knew nothing about."

On Long Island, the holiday show can be heard on WNYC-93.9FM starting Dec. 19.

"It's priceless," Burns said of Segarra's story. "The way she depicts her growing relationship with her mother-in-law is charming."

### A STORY OF SURVIVAL

Segarra's own two-hour shows feature six storytellers, all masters in the art — or at least possessing a natural storytelling ability.

Among those at the Merrick show was John Aldridge, 49, a Montauk lobster fisherman, who told the short version of "A Speck in the Sea: A Story of Survival and Rescue," the book he co-authored with Anthony Sosinski, which was published in May by Hachette Book Group.

Aldridge told the audience a survival story that began when he fell off his lobster boat in 400 feet of water, 40 miles from Montauk, while his two crew members were asleep in their bunks. Aldridge recounted how he resolved to survive because "there are too many people who love me," and was rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard after almost 12



Mark Pagán tells his story during the "Now You're Talking" show at the Merrick Theatre and Center for the Arts.

### Talk, listen

#### WHEN | WHERE

7:30 p.m. Dec. 2, Turn of the Corkscrew Books & Wine, 110 N. Park Ave., Rockville Centre

**INFO** Free, \$15-\$20 suggested donation; 917-653-8250, traceysegarra.com

hours in the water.

Aldridge said he has told his survival story to live audiences before, including to a crowd of 3,000 in Puebla, Mexico, in November 2014. But Segarra felt Aldridge was including too much detail in his oral presentations. In a series of phone calls, she coached Aldridge to simplify his tale and eliminate details that got in the way of his true story about surviving in shark-infested waters while he clung to a buoy.

said she realized that "being an actress with a big, black, dead front tooth, that's not the niche I want to be in."

### HER STORYTELLING GIFT

Segarra's storytelling gift may be inherited. Both her parents had a background in the performing arts. Her mother, Lois Miller, was a former actress who taught high school English and drama in the New York City public schools. Her father, Bob, was a successful advertising man who had spent time as part of a Borscht Belt comic trio, The Three Professors. Segarra grew up in Freeport and Great Neck, with three sisters and a brother, in what she called "a crazy, nutty, warm Jewish family."

Segarra's first stage experience came in a production of Lillian Hellman's "Watch on the Rhine" at Great Neck North High School. After graduating in 1980, she earned a bachelor's degree in English literature and rhetoric from SUNY Binghamton. During her college years she admits that she "mainly majored in off-campus parties." (Segarra said she has been sober for 30 years.) For a time she contemplated an acting career but gave up, fearing rejection at auditions.

After working as a secretary, Segarra found a reporting job covering the crime beat for a weekly newspaper in Brooklyn. Her articles impressed an editor at United Press International wire service, who hired her as a reporter. For five years in the 1990s, she covered City Hall and the courts, writing about the administrations of former New York City mayors David N. Dinkins and Rudy Giuliani, as well as covering the Woody Allen and Mia Farrow custody case, and conducting a jailhouse interview with Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, the blind cleric convicted of masterminding the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. "I loved it so much," she

recalled of her reporting days. "Every day it was something different. Sometimes my stories need to marinate for a while before I'm ready to tell them."

She left UPI in 1996 and went into trade publishing, and the next year married her husband, Fred, now 57. Their twins, Lily and Jessica, 17, are seniors at George W. Hewlett High School in Hewlett.

### DISCOVERING HER TALENT

Segarra discovered her talent for telling true stories to a live audience three years ago, after her husband told her about "The Moth Radio Hour," a live storytelling series on National Public Radio.

"My first thought was, 'This is incredible. I can't believe that this [live storytelling] is an art form,'" Segarra said. "My second thought was, 'I have to do this.'"

Moth organizers choose three judges randomly from the audience. The judges rate each entry with Olympic-style number cards (8.5, 9.0, etc.) on story





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structure — does it have a beginning, middle and end? — and adherence to the night's theme and five-minute time limit.

Segarra found her narrative niche several months after her husband's revelation, at one of The Moth's open-mic story slams at Housing Works Bookstore Cafe in Manhattan. "It was even more incredible than it was on the radio," said Segarra, who was selected to go onstage as the second storyteller.

"I was so nervous I was shaking," she recalled. "I had to hold on to the microphone, but I told my story, of a late-term miscarriage when I was already 16 weeks pregnant. The audience was raptly listening to me. I could feel that from the stage. It gave me the confidence to go on.

"Afterwards, at least two or three women grabbed me, hugged me and told me how much they loved my story and that I made them cry. They had suffered miscarriages, too."

Segarra not only won that night's slam, but since then

**Mary Theresa Archbold tells her story about being what she calls a "one-armed woman." At right, program host Tracey Segarra works with storytellers before the show begins.**

she's become a master and a rising star of the genre. She went on to win two more slams and bested other regional champions in a Moth GrandSLAM, which pits 10 storySLAM winners against each other.

Segarra also gives storytelling workshops to adults, and travels around the Island to libraries and schools spreading the word about the live storytelling movement.

She said discovering her inner storyteller has been a liberating experience.

"Once I turned 50, it was wonderfully freeing," she said. "I don't really care what other people think. I do what feels right, and storytelling feels so right. How else do you get up on stage and tell people the most vulnerable, emotional parts of your life?"



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