

Storytellers Shine for Holiday Fundraiser



ON THE TOWN
David Laurell

Over the past few weeks you've had experiences that have already been stored in your vault of memories.

Through alchemical means, they will now be transformed into stories to be retrieved from time to time throughout the remainder of your life.

As your memories-turned-stories from the 2025 holiday season become seasoned with age, they will, undoubtedly, take on a patina of embellishment to heighten their humor, happiness or sadness, and, possibly, some rust as the gift of recall recedes.

No matter what sort of a holiday season this year brought you, there is one thing for certain: it left you with some sort of a story.

In what has become an annual Burbank holiday tradition instituted by Suzanne Weerts, the founder and producing creative director of the Burbank-based JAM Creative, this season saw eight storytellers share their tales and two musicians share their tunes in the 2025 production of "Jingle Tales & Tunes."

Staged as a fundraiser for Home Again Los Angeles and their subsidiary, the Burbank Temporary Aid Center, the evening featured the holiday memories of Andrew Boyle, Ron Hart, Julio Martinez, Rochelle Newman-Carrasco, Rick Sanchez, Liz Murdoch, Laura Strobl and Weerts on the stage of the Colony Theatre.

Presented to a full house, the evening began with the musical stylings of the father/daughter duo, Bishop, composed of John and Fi Bishop, and a welcome by Weerts.

"It's pure joy to bring stories to the stage while shining a spotlight on the important work done by Home Again Los Angeles," said Weerts. "The need in our community is greater than ever this year, and I'm grateful that we have this opportunity to come together to share an evening of entertainment and connection while helping those in need so they may have a hopeful start to 2026."

Telling the assemblage that while the memories and stories associated with the holidays can and should be shiny and bright, Weerts laid the predi-



Photos by David Laurell / Burbank Leader

This year's jingle tale-tellers were Andrew Boyle, Laura Strobl, Julio Martinez, Liz Murdoch, Suzanne Weerts, Rochelle Newman-Carrasco, Ron Hart and Rick Sanchez.

cate that some of the tales they would be hearing would entail navigating the healing of heartbreak, and the need to find forgiveness.

It has come to be expected that this annual production will bring about laughter as well as the wiping of tears, and that was the case with this year's tales, which ranged from a mother who lands in the hospital during the holidays, a father who forgot about Christmas, a Jewish woman who found inspiration at a Roman Catholic mass, and how holiday memories and magic can be found in simple things such as a candy bar, a J. Crew catalogue, and tamales.

Strobl, a Burbank native who graduated from John Burroughs High School and worked at Central Casting for many years, is currently serving as the president of the Burbank Human Relations Council. She shared a touching tale about the love of her culture and the beauty to be found in keeping family traditions alive.

She spoke of her family making tamales for the holidays, something they have been doing since her grandmother arrived in Burbank during the early 1920s.

Strobl said that to write something personal, much less to share it publicly, would not have been anything she would have considered doing until this year, crediting her membership in The

Circle, a private enrichment community for women, for having given her the courage to do it.

"Along with taking a writing class at The Circle, I have greatly benefited from the other women members who have been so encouraging," said Strobl. "It was though my involvement with them that I gained the courage to write about my life and then get up on a stage in front of people to share it. My son (Josh Strobl) is an actor who is currently appearing on Broadway in 'The Outsiders.' He's totally at home on the stage, but that's not the case with his mama," she added with a laugh.

Recalling that her father, a construction worker with limited formal education, rarely had the money for lavish gifts, Strobl said the presents she received as a child were not wrapped in shiny red paper with green satin bows, but rather the comics of the Burbank Leader's predecessor, the Burbank Daily Review.

She spoke of how her mother would give people tamales as holiday gifts because that was all they could afford to do. This caused young Laura embarrassment until, as time went by, she learned that tamales are not just food, they are a gift of tradition and love.

She recalled her mother once handing her a tamale and asking her what she saw when she looked at it.

Strobl said as she looked at that tamale she looked beyond the golden corn husk and saw years of tradition — memories of the family's tamale-making parties and mixing the masa with her grandmother's wrinkled hands guiding hers in kneading the thick goey cornmeal.

She remembered the laughter and stories that were told every year as the tamales were being made — tales of the old days in Sonora, Mexico, how her family came to California where they worked in the fields, about her Grandma Margarita who operated a restaurant in Burbank near the Lockheed aerospace manufacturing complex.

"Soon my kids and grandkids will gather for our Christmas tamale-making tradition," said Strobl. "I will tell them the same stories my grandmother and mom told. We will play music, travel through our past, and appreciate all those that came before us as we make new memories, and, of course, extra tamales to give as gifts to those we love."

This year's Jingle Tales & Tunes raised over \$4,500 for Home Again Los Angeles, bringing the total raised by JAM Creative shows for local nonprofits to almost \$60,000.

David Laurell may be reached by email at dlaurell@aol.com or (818) 563-1007.



Providing the jingling tunes were John and Fi Bishop of the family band Bishop.



Albert Hernandez of Home Again Los Angeles and the Burbank Temporary Aid Center shares a moment with Suzanne Weerts, who led an evening of tale-telling.



Ron Hart says he loves to do storytelling events because his wife is sick of hearing his stories.



Julio Martinez is a Renaissance man who has worked as a journalist, musician, and radio personality.



Lifelong Burbanker Laura Strobl shared the love and memories that are a part of her family's tamale-making tradition.