The stories have revolved around a real-life Indiana Jones who works with big cats, an exonerated prisoner who was freed after serving 19 years, and an African American woman who took a hospice job tending to a Klansman.

These stories—told on stage and later heard on the radio—are part of the Moth, a nonprofit organization dedicated to live storytelling. They are among the favorites of Catherine Burns (COM’91) and Sarah Austin Jenness (COM’00), the Moth’s longtime artistic director and producing director, respectively. It is their job to find captivating stories and help bring them to a worldwide audience.

“With storytelling, you’re diving back into the earliest art form—pure, unadulterated, and uncensored,” says Jenness. “The audience buckles in for a real roller-coaster ride and has faith that the storyteller knows exactly the twists and turns and where to bring you. I think everyone is slightly transformed by the end.”

Stories must be true and based on the storyteller’s life, and no notes or memorization are allowed. Each show has a theme, which could run the gamut, from “doped,” to “silver lining,” to “mothers.” Auditions are open to anyone, and the people on stage are as varied as the stories they tell.

Together, Burns and Jenness produce and direct the show, which has expanded significantly since its humble beginnings 15 years ago. It was founded in 1997 by poet and novelist George Dawes Green, 15 years ago. It was founded in 1997 by poet and novelist George Dawes Green, and where to bring you. I think everyone is slightly transformed by the end.”

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The Moth became a household name in 2008 when some of the best performances were released as podcasts. Today, these recordings are consistently ranked in the top 10 most popular podcasts on iTunes and are downloaded more than 15 million times annually.

In 2009 the organization launched the Moth Radio Hour, which broadcasts the best performances from the live shows. Since its initial run of five episodes, Radio Hour is currently produced 10 times a year. Presented by the Public Radio Exchange, the show is carried by more than 250 stations across the country, winning a Peabody Award in 2011 and the MacArthur Award for Creative & Effective Institutions in 2012. A book deal with Hyperion Books is in the works.

Performers, Jenness says, must be committed to a certain level of vulnerability. “You have to tell on yourself; you can’t be a hero,” she says. “A story where you go out in the world and it all just works out is not interesting. Where were you at the crossroads? We’re always looking for something that changes in a person, for personal growth.”

It’s not as easy as it may sound. Burns spent 17 hours working with the exonerated prisoner to develop his story. He got so worked up in the process, he kept forgetting to mention the most important part—being released from prison.

Not every tale is quite so dramatic, but Burns and Jenness say that shouldn’t discourage potential storytellers.

“There are no ordinary lives,” says Burns. “Even the person who thinks they have lived the most standard life—it’s not true. Everyone has a story that is remarkable or special.”

Catherine Burns (right) and Sarah Austin Jenness produce and direct the Moth, a nonprofit dedicated to live storytelling. They also cohost the Moth Radio Hour, which broadcasts the best performances from the live shows.