



The Pebble Beach Authors and Ideas Festival will be held next weekend in Pebble Beach.
(Herald file)

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The Sun Valley Writers Conference began around a kitchen table in 1994, where four friends gathered to share ideas. A year later, the first conference took place in a tent, featuring four authors, speaking to 108 attendees, and launched with an opening talk by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Halberstam. It grew, exponentially, from there.

Jim McGillen was aware that his wife Cindy wanted to attend the conference but, believing it was something only women did, one of those “girlfriends getaways,” he wasn’t willing to go. A year later, he learned that his pal, Irish-American author Frank McCourt, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1997 for his memoir, “Angela’s Ashes,” was speaking at the festival. McGillen willingly attended the festival with his wife.

“We returned home to Pebble Beach and I said, ‘We really should have a festival like that here. This place would be perfect,’” Jim McGillen said. “Cindy finally said, ‘Why not stop talking about it and just do it.’”



Cynthia and Jim McGillen. (Courtesy photo)

Friday through Sept. 24, the McGillens are hosting their 17th annual “Pebble Beach Authors & Ideas Festival” at Stevenson School.

“Frank McCourt was the first author I called, and he became our first presenter,” McGillen said. “Three years later, he passed away. We’ve brought in some of the best speakers in the country, which is our No. 1 criteria. I don’t care if you’ve sold a million books or just one, we want, not an OK speaker, not a good speaker, but a great speaker.”

Ultimately, the McGillens changed the name of their festival from the Authors Festival to include “& Ideas,” having realized that not all authors can translate their story from the book to the stage.

“It is a great talent to write well and a great talent to speak well,” McGillen said, “and very few people possess both.”

Over the years, the Pebble Beach festival has welcomed Frank Gehry, Elizabeth Gilbert, Jane Goodall, Carl Hiaasen, Khaled Hosseini, Helen Mirren, Sandra Day O’Connor, Condoleezza Rice, and many more gifted orators with startling, inspiring, or encouraging stories to share.

“I spend almost the entire year developing our speakers list,” McGillen said. “There are a lot of lecture series around the country, and I call the executive director of each to ask who their best speaker was, on any topic. Out of maybe 10 suggestions, I’ll probably end up inviting one. When I call to introduce myself, they’ve typically heard about our festival.”

Making the cut

This year, the McGillens are welcoming 22 speakers to the festival, among them, brothers Glen and Les Charles, co-creators, head writers, and executive producers of television’s Emmy Award-winning “Cheers.” They will be joined by Zoe Novic, a graduate of the Yale School of Public Health, with a focus on social and behavioral sciences and “one health,” the connection between human health, animal welfare, and environmental health. Also taking the stage is Vanderbilt University Professor of Composition Michael Alec Rose, whose opera, Lolly Willowses, premiered in 2019, and in 2022, A Million Alien Gospels had five sold-out performances in Texas by Ventana Ballet and Austin Camerata.

PEBBLE BEACH AUTHORS & IDEAS A FESTIVAL OF WORDS AND WISDOM

These speakers will be joined by 18 others, three of whom live and do exceptional work on the Monterey Peninsula.

Based on a long-standing understanding of how adversity affects children and families, and the importance of timely intervention in making a critical difference, since 2020, speaker Dr. Susan Swick, executive director of Ohana, has been designing and leading this Monterey-based center for child and adolescent behavioral health at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula.

In addition to serving as the director of diagnostic and interventional radiology at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula, speaker Eric LoMonaco is dedicated to serving at-risk youth, and often speaks of his own personal path out of challenging circumstances as a youth. He also serves as a mentor in the “Pay in Forward” scholarship and mentoring program through CSU Monterey Bay.

Speaker Alka Joshi, Pacific Grove author of the best-selling Jaipur trilogy, “The Henna Artist,” “The Secret Keeper of Jaipur,” and “The Perfumist of Paris,” was born in India, came with her family to the United States at age 9, and went on to earn her bachelor’s degree from Stanford, and her MFA from California College of the Arts.



(Photo courtesy of Alka Joshi)

Throughout the festival, each speaker presents a 20-minute talk on the main stage, followed by a 35-minute breakout session, during which festival attendees can ask questions and engage in dialogue. Alka Joshi has titled her main-stage presentation, “There is no Such Thing as an Overnight Success.”

“You really need the ‘three P’s—Passion, Perseverance, and Patience,” Joshi said. “Whenever people listen to how long it took me to put the work into the story I wanted people to read, they walk out with inspiration for whatever it is they want to do in their lives, realizing there is never a time limit to creativity, to innovation, to an introduction of new ideas to the world.”

Joshi’s own example is that, during the 10 years it took her to write and edit “The Henna Artist,” she had to make sure to never give up. And, while it was frustrating to wait for the outside world to publish her work, she says, the wait was worth it because it made the product better.

“There is an advantage,” she said, “to having experience and age. After having been in business for many decades, I understood the practical steps I needed to take to produce and then promote my ideas. But what can’t be taught are the actual ideas themselves. Those have to come from within.”

Joshi’s breakout session is titled, “Don’t die before telling your stories to the next generation.” She, who believes in the wisdom in real-life anecdotes, big and small, funny and infuriating, ordinary and extraordinary, encourages writers to share their stories with those who are younger, so they learn to look at what defines their lives and how they will share that with subsequent generations.

“Social media manufactures all these instant-success stories,” she said, “and we can get lost in thinking if we don’t also become an instant success, there is something wrong with us. But that isn’t the true essence of storytelling. Take your time. Live your story. And then share your real-life stories, which always carry more valuable lessons than any how-to book we might pick up.”

Paying it forward

Recognizing there is no age limit on who might be inspired by noble ideas, the Festival is welcoming 1,300 middle- and high-school students from two dozen local schools to the Monterey Conference Center, where they will engage with festival speakers, and learn who they are and the ideas they represent. Select students, who have participated in Migrant Education Region XVI’s annual Speech and Debate tournament, have been chosen to introduce a speaker on the main stage.

“We are very proud of our local students who will introduce our speakers,” Jim McGillen said. “Each student studies a speaker’s bio and then spends time with the speaker they will introduce. Students work hard to practice and prepare, and they never hide behind the

podium. It's one of the best parts of the festival. In some cases, speakers keep in touch with the students over the years."

For many students who come to the Peninsula to participate in the festival, this is the first time they will see the ocean, study the coastline that frames it, and meet authors and visionaries whose ideas just might inspire their own.

Sharing the stage with a television producer, a neuroscientist, a documentary filmmaker, or a symphonic and opera composer can expose students to worlds of opportunity, says McGillen, which they may never have thought possible for themselves.

"One day," he said, "it may be their own inspiring ideas they share as they return to the festival as adults, ready to address their audience."

For more information about the Pebble Beach Authors & Ideas Festival, visit <https://pbaif.com/>

