

The cover of Ulster Magazine features a large photograph of an elderly woman with curly grey hair, wearing a dark red, long-sleeved dress with blue floral embroidery. She is smiling broadly and has her right hand raised, touching a wooden frame. To her left is a painting of a woman in a yellow patterned top and orange skirt, standing in front of a building with green foliage. The magazine title 'ULSTER' is in a red box at the top right, with 'MAGAZINE' and the date 'Jan./Feb. 2016' below it. The main title 'Humor lightens the dark' is in large white letters on the left side, with a subtitle and author information below it. The page number '9' is in the bottom right corner.

ULSTER

MAGAZINE

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Humor lightens the dark

For Verna Gillis, laughter is a survival skill

By Deborah Medenbach
Photos by Erik Gledman

Everyone thought they knew her.

Verna Gills used her experience running a hip performance venue in New York City to reimagine the old Accord Train Station in the 1990s as a gallery and performance space. She was an ethnomusicologist with a PhD who recorded obscure music from the Middle East, Africa and South America.

As a producer and promoter, she brought musicians Youssou N'dour, Yome Toro, Salif Keita and Carlinhos Brown to American audiences and was later nominated for a Grammy award for a jazz album. As a businesswoman, she economized everywhere possible and usually juggled a half-dozen new projects at a time.

A short, fashionable, middle-aged woman with Medusa hair and enormous eyes that widen impossibly to take in even more, Verna Gills had her life fully under control.

Until she didn't.

Her husband, sculptor Bradford Graves, died right before her eyes on a surreal spring day in 1998, his heart simply stopping.

"I think of relationships in general as concentric circles. You touch and untouch and you only know that part that you touch. Even the person you live with," Gills said of the man who'd caught her eye and affection when she was 20. "When my husband died, we'd been together for 34 years. What I learned about him at his memorial was startling because all I knew of him was the dynamic we had, but with everyone else, he had a different dynamic."

She retreated to the home she'd built with Graves on family property in Karhkonen and began to write.

"I wrote a lot therapeutically after Brad died. It was a way of dealing with it and suddenly I had time," Gills said. Talking



A portrait of Verna Gills with her now-deceased husband, Bradford Graves, in 1988.

(AT BOTTOM) Gills has decorated her home with all sorts of items found in local antique shops, as well as during her travels.



about her loss at the time with trombonist Roswell Rudd, whose wife, Moselle, had just suffered an incapacitating stroke, the two found strength in one another, both romantically and professionally.

The next 12 years were rich with projects and recordings as Rudd collaborated with new artists and the couple moved to Ketchikan full time.

It was a random girls' night out in 2010 that yanked Gillis out of her groove and tossed her unceremoniously onto the whoopee cushion laurels of standup comedy. Her new skills would break future catastrophes down into manageable one liners and dissolve old cruelties into a universally understood shtick.

"My friend Amy Summers called me up — I'll always be grateful to her — and said, 'There's a thing at Market Market in Rosendale and it's three-to-five minutes and this is the topic. Do you want to go?' It's interesting how life is because Roswell was on tour in Europe. I've often asked myself, if he had been here, would I have gone?" Gillis remembered.

"It was sponsored by TMI (Too Much Information) and I met the great Eva Tambo and Julie Novak. It was the first time I'd ever laid eyes on them." The topic for the evening's story slam was "Coming of Age," which she changed to "Coming of Aging," telling true tales of what it's like to be a woman in her 70s. To her surprise, she not only won, but was asked to appear in several additional TMI performances.

Dozens of people participate in TMI workshops and story slams around the region each year. TMI leaders make a point of teasing out what may begin as embarrassing personal stories and honoring them with the storytellers until truth outweighs awkwardness and participants are ready to tell their tale in front of a live



Gillis and renowned trombone player Roswell Rudd play music - and dance - together.



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because Roswell was on tour in Europe. I've often asked myself, if he had been here, would I have gone?



A jukebox, stacked with old 45's, fascinates young visitors who love to listen and dance to the music. "Our house has become kid central," says Gillis, which has made that purchase even more worthwhile.

Gillis, looking at a shelf of collectibles, says that she switched one addiction - an eating disorder - into "collecting with a pathological determination."



audience of 100 or more neighbors. The workshops are not always a transformative experience, but the effect on Gillis was seismic.

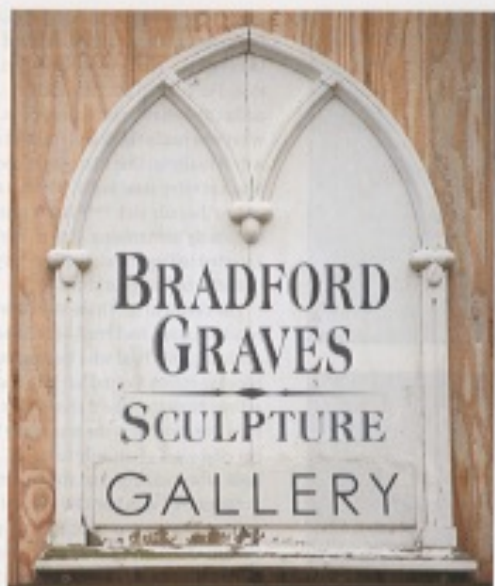
Between growing up in a Latvian Jewish family where humor was a required survival skill and having spent years in the truth-telling rooms of 12-step programs, Gillis had just pinpointed the intersection where both worlds merged in acerbic irony cloaked in a baby doll voice. She was hooked.

"It's not as if whatever happened in my family didn't happen in other families. It happens everywhere, because that's the nature of the family. A lot of good things happened in my family too, but you don't have to recover from that. You have to recover from the damage done, like in the Neil Young song," Gillis said.

Family stories included a grandmother buried alive by Nazis, doctors of world-class training labeled on their passports as Jews during dangerous times, false loyalties to homelands that turned on them. Gillis sighs. "I've had it with the Holocaust. Each

Gillis saved some of the sculptures created by her late husband, Bradford Graves, after a fire burned a barn to the ground a year ago.





Notable in Gillis' and Radd's home are these masks, created by papier-mache artist Didier Chiffon for Halloween parties.



generation has their own traumas. Look at Paris, Syria, all the unrest. A lot of addictive behavior is ... and I'm an expert on addiction. I'm your all purpose addict! ... A lot of addictive behavior is about shame. About what you really think and feel and about the way it really is. One of my lines about going into a 12-step meeting is, "What a relief to not be the only sick ***** in the room. It's extremely humanizing. It was there that I started telling the story. Recovery is in honestly telling your story."

The desire to tell these stories with a light touch on stage harkened back to her years as an ungainly teen who lost ingénue roles because others slotted her into character acting. Now that she'd shaped her own persona over 70 years, she was ready to share her character at comedy festivals, theaters, book store readings and story slams.

"Because I won the TMI slam, it led to more performances which got more material out there and I saw the response was positive, not only from older people but from younger people too. It's the kind of identification with my material that I've had all these years listening to people who tell their stories in *The Rooms*," Gillis said, returning to the value of 12-step bald truths. "It's the truth about what you did, who you became and what happened that sets you free ... or relatively free, for the moment."

The crucible of humor helped Gillis reframe the misfortunes of the ensuing years like a Delphic oracle, whispering giggled mysteries around nuts of hard truth. Her current goal is to publish the manuscript of her standup routine *Tales from Geriatric Park: On the Verge of Extinction* and film it. A cancer diagnosis in 80-year-old Radd consumed a year in treatment and recovery. The barn where Gillis kept family correspondence and her late husband's drawings and sculptures burned to the ground a year ago, thanks to a wire-hungry rodent.

"The letters. Would I have gone back and read them? I don't know. But they were there. Now they are not there. Who needs another reminder of the fragility of life? Thank you, I've had enough!" Gillis said, praising the firefighters who saved adjoining buildings in tinder-dry conditions. "There's something ghostly, otherworldly, about a fire. I saved some of Brad's pieces. A lot of limestone pieces just blew apart in the fire. They are under a tree now. I kept some pieces that were transformed." ■