In 2007 the University Libraries at UNC Greensboro began a collaboration that created a special weekend for those in the Triad who love children’s books and storytelling. During that year, the University Libraries and the UNCG School of Education partnered to bring children’s book author and illustrator Jerry Pinkney, and his wife, author Gloria Pinkney, for a series of appearances at the BOOKMARKS Festival and UNCG. This tradition has continued with authors and storytellers Carmen Deedy in 2008, Willy Claflin in 2009, and Tim Tingle in 2010.

Most years, the children’s book author and storyteller appears at the BOOKMARKS Festival held in Winston-Salem the second Saturday in September. Overall, the Festival draws more than 6000 readers and booklovers to the day-long event each year. BOOKMARKS’ mission is to engage and inspire readers and writers of all ages, champion literacy, promote cultural diversity through reading, and offer enrichment and education through literary experiences celebrating books and authors. As this mission dovetails nicely with the role of libraries, the UNCG Libraries have been involved with the festival for a number of years, serving as Board members and volunteers.

After appearing at BOOKMARKS under UNCG sponsorship, the author appears at UNCG the following Monday for three programs. In the morning, fourth graders from area schools who host student teachers from UNCG are invited to campus for a field trip to hear the author speak and tell stories. They are hosted and chaperoned by their teachers and NC Teaching Fellows while at the University. To date, more than 2500 area students have made this field trip since the series began. Here are some of their comments:

“Thank-you for giving our students this wonderful opportunity! Most of our students have very limited experiences outside of home and school. We know that vocabulary is developed through exposure to the world around us. Without these experiences children have limited vocabulary which in turn diminishes their reading skills. By bringing our students to a university campus and exposing them to the rich language of a storyteller and author like Willy Claflin, you have positively impacted their personal and academic growth.”

—A fourth grade teacher

“We loved the storyteller and the story. It made us laugh so much that we were almost out of breath….Thank-you for inviting us.”

—A fourth grader

“Thank you for inviting us to UNCG yesterday to listen to Carmen Agra Deedy tell her story. It was really funny. She knows how to make the audience laugh. When she told the story I wondered if it was really true. I hope we get to come back. It was awesome.”

—Another fourth grader

“Thanks so much for another wonderful literature experience for our students. They loved Willy Claflin and were talking about the stories on the way back to school. We have many puppets in our library so I’m anxious to see some of the students try their hand at storytelling.”

—A school librarian
In the afternoon, UNCG students training to be elementary school teachers are invited to see the author tell stories to more 4th graders, followed by an hour-long Q&A session with the author, who helps them learn how to better incorporate storytelling and author visits into their teaching. Feedback from UNCG students has been very positive. They cite a number of areas in which they benefit, including the use of storytelling in the classroom, techniques for author studies and reading aloud, and promoting creativity and cultural awareness of diverse populations.

Here are comments from four different students:

“I have benefited from the two storytellers that have visited UNCG over the past two years. In fact, next week I am using Willy Claflin’s book and CD, The Uglified Ducky, to talk about fairytales and fractured fairytales while incorporating the concept of prediction. This year, I purchased several of Tim Tingle’s books and I am excited to share my new discoveries about American Indians and their roles in society both now and in the past.”

—A UNCG student doing her student teaching

“I went last year to hear Willy Claflin and his storytelling event. I really enjoyed meeting him because he opened the ‘doors’ to integrating storytelling into my classrooms.”

—A UNCG student

“Thank you so much for having Tim Tingle come to campus to tell us stories. Listening to him speak allowed me to think of ways I can incorporate storytelling in the classroom. I think it would be great to have the students hear one of Tim Tingle’s stories, and then do an author study on him. For a final project I think it would be great to have them research their own family background and create their own stories. I think storytelling is a great way to keep students thinking creatively. Thank you again for giving us the opportunity to listen to him.”

—A UNCG student

In the evening, the UNCG Libraries offer a free public program by the author and storyteller to the Friends of the UNCG Libraries, students, faculty, and staff of UNCG, and the general public, especially teachers and media specialists in the area who are UNCG alumni. More than 1200 persons have enjoyed these events over the past four years. One of the most affected was a little girl about six years old. After hearing Willy Claflin use his puppet to perform as Maynard Moose, the little girl tapped the project director on the shoulder after the performance and asked to meet the Moose. The project director started to take her over to meet Claflin, but she shook her head emphatically. “Not him,” she said, “I want to meet the Moose,” pointing to the puppet still sitting onstage. The project director took her over and let her gently touch the moose, upon which time she uttered a sigh of utter satisfaction and contentment. Through the performance, UNCG had connected with this little girl in a meaningful and positive way.

In 2009, budgetary pressures threatened cancellation of the series, but Friends of the UNCG Libraries Board member Pam Sprinkle and her husband David stepped forward to make sure that the series continues for the next five years. As a former media specialist herself, Pam recognized the value of the series and its impact on children. With this commitment and support, the University Libraries is able to invite speakers well in advance.