



STUDENT EXPERIENCES

The Scientist as Storyteller

A biophysics graduate student shares his love of storytelling in venues old and new.

By Kevin Wesley

For Karl Smith, the storytelling bug began with a Montgomery Ward No. 22 typewriter purchased for \$5 at a moving sale.

Typewriter perched on his lap, the doctoral student in biophysics has become a fixture at the Rochester Public Market, Corn Hill Arts Festival, and other Rochester-area arts-oriented venues. For 10 cents, he crafts a half-sheet-long tale about grandchildren, lost loves, pets, or the absurd. The clacking of keys on paper draws a curious crowd.

"I derive a lot of meaning and joy from making things that other people draw joy from," says Smith.

As a graduate student at Rochester, Smith has been finding lots of ways to share his love of storytelling. In addition to his peripatetic typewriting, he's the leader of Rocket Radio Theater, a troupe of radio

performers whose core membership includes fellow like-minded medical science graduate students Clarence Ling, Jon Baker, Carolyn Klocke, Bronwyn Lucas, and Matt Payea.

The project began in 2013 with a recording at Smith's kitchen table. The group, which now records in the studios of campus radio station WRUR, hosts several serial drama podcasts and stand-alone stories created by Smith. Its feature series, *The Bootleggers*, takes place during prohibition-era Rochester, playing up aspects of local history and landscapes.

The serial's theme song, "Boy Gone Bad," was cowritten by Smith and Payea, a PhD candidate in biochemistry, who also helps produce scripts for the show.


"It's become something for us all to do as friends, and I think that's probably one of the reasons we're all still willing to take an hour or two out of the day to yell into a microphone," says Payea. "Karl deserves all the credit for this, unequivocally. He writes the scripts, organizes us, books the studio, and has bought a lot of the equipment we use."

In his research as a biophysicist, Smith explores nanoporous silicon membranes in the lab of James McGrath, professor of biomedical engineering. Smith describes the membranes as "coffee filters made of glass that are 10,000 times thinner than a human hair."

But he hopes to continue to combine storytelling and science after graduation, perhaps as a science journalist or a podcaster.

"There's this weird aspect to this work that people feel very comfortable telling me a lot about their lives," Smith says. "Every once in a while you get a story where you can add something—give them something they can take with them."

He's planning to take his typewriter to the Appalachian Trail for a trek after Rochester, crafting stories as he hikes.

"I want to live in a world," he says, "where people are standing on street corners writing stories." 

RADIO DAYS: Graduate students Clarence Ling (left), Jon Baker, and Karl Smith rehearse a script for *The Bootleggers* at the WRUR studios in Todd Union.

Kevin Wesley is a Rochester-based freelance writer. Carlie Fishgold '12 contributed to this story. For more about Smith's storytelling, visit 10centstories.com.