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## **BRIO Winner tells stories with Style**

by Shanell Garcia

“It used to be that dogs and cats were the best of friends!” April Armstrong effused at the start of a storytelling session in 2011.

The statement immediately drew a chorus of exclamations from children in her audience at a Lower East Side day camp. Ms. Armstrong went on to playfully recount how a fight over a ham turned the animals into rivals forever, encouraging audience members to sing, bark and otherwise participate along the way.

“That is why, to this very day, dogs and cats just don’t get along,” Ms. Armstrong knowingly concluded, in a video of the performance available online. Her work on a collection of such tales called “The Cat Came Back: Stories and Songs with a Jazzy Twist,” earned her a Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO) award from the Bronx Council on the Arts earlier this year.



“Why Cats and Dogs Just Don’t Get Along” is one of Ms. Armstrong’s favorite stories to perform. She said she discovered the African-American story in a book and threw in some embellishments for her own version. “They did everything together and then I list all the things they used to do together and that’s how you personalize the story. And then you shock the audience,” she said.

Ms. Armstrong, who is also a singer and actress, aims for a lot of audience interaction during her performances. “I love when I can make people laugh or cry,” the Riverdale resident said. Among lessons learned from years of storytelling? Practice makes perfect. “Sometimes you get scared to do new stories, so you just keep doing the same stories over and over again,” said Ms. Armstrong. “So then they get really, really good because you keep doing them.”

While she performs at schools in all five boroughs, Mr. Armstrong also tells tales at festivals and parties. “People will come up to me and they tell me ‘Oh, my God I didn’t think about this,’ and I’m just like, ‘I didn’t think about that either,’” said Ms. Armstrong. “But then people hear what they can hear and it’ll touch them on a certain level. I think that’s what’s really fascinating about storytelling.”

“It has to be the right audience, you have to really size up the audience and kind of go with your instincts about it,” she continued. “You may have planned to do this but then you see them, you feel them — ‘Oh I’m not telling that, I’m telling this.’”

Ms. Armstrong felt destined to perform from an early age, often staging shows for children in her neighborhood. Shortly after graduating from the Manhattan School of Music, she began storytelling professionally. She also began performing on and off Broadway and at festivals. Ms. Armstrong earned a master’s degree in music education from Columbia University, too.

“I think all stories have a message and most of the time in the stories that we do, there’s something we can all learn from that story, just like when people sing songs,” she said. “That’s what I want to get to next, I want to get to the point where I’m telling really poignant stories where I can feel the audience and I can tell,” she concluded. ■