

## THE SAGE OF WOBEGON



Meghan McCarthy/Daily News

Garrison Keillor, creator of Lake Wobegon and "A Prairie Home Companion," made an appearance Tuesday in the Society of the Four Arts speaker series.

# Keillor: Choose cheerfulness

**By JAN SJOSTROM**  
*Daily News Arts Editor*

Garrison Keillor sang, recited poetry, told jokes and delivered a homily on cheerfulness cloaked in homespun humor Tuesday at The Society of the Four Arts.

The storyteller and writer whom

Four Arts President Ervin Dugan introduced as "America's pre-eminent performance artist" is best known as the creator of the long-running radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*, which is heard by more than 3 million listeners on more than 450 public radio stations weekly.

Last week's cold snap brought on by the "polar vortex" wouldn't have fazed Minnesotans when he was a child, said the 71-year-old Keillor, who was born and raised in Anoka, Minn.

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## KEILLOR 'Every day is a gift,' writer says

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When the Minnesota governor closed schools, "people my age all over Minnesota thought to ourselves, 'Why didn't someone do that in 1951?'" The winter of 1951 was so cold that if you'd lived through it, "you never needed to move to a warmer climate because every succeeding winter was better," he said.

Keillor's talk moved on to touch on his wisdom tooth extraction, an MRI of his brain and the unexpected turns his life has taken.

Reflecting on the euphoria brought on by sedatives when he had his

wisdom tooth extracted, Keillor said his ancestors would have been suspicious of such a state of mind. "My ancestors didn't believe in ecstasy. They didn't believe in happiness, exactly."

What they believed in was "cheerfulness, and it is a choice," he said. "You make it in the morning. It's always possible. You simply decide this is how it will be. As you become older, this becomes your obligation."

The generation that raised him grew up during the Depression. They didn't complain or discuss their fears for the future, because everyone was in the same boat.

"You recognized your obligation to amuse each other and put the best face possible on everything."

They recognized the

value of small talk, "those little sounds we make every day to cheer each other up," he said. "We all are marching toward a precipice and we do not know where it is in the darkness. In the meantime, we make the best of it and are cheerful."

That principle served him well when he was looking at an MRI scan and saw blood clots in a nonessential area of his brain. A few millimeters away, and his speech and motion centers would have been devastated.

"What is this supposed to do to you?" he asked. "Terrify you? It's supposed to make you cheerful. We live on a small margin and every day is a gift."

He didn't plan to become a famous radio host, magazine contributor and author of several

books. The fictional world of Lake Wobegon evolved gradually.

"Without realizing it at the time, you create something that fascinates you and keeps you busy to the end of your born days, without ever meaning to," he said.

Keillor's talk entertained Jessie Araskog, a fellow native Minnesotan and Palm Beach resident.

"Everybody ate it up," she said. "He kept the audience captive for the whole time."

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