STORIES FOR ALL
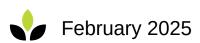
A Digital Storytelling Project for the Twenty-First Century

Understanding the Community Impact of Digital Storytelling

February 2025

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Mellon Foundation

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FOR THE HUMANITIES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The *Stories for All* Model

Stories are fundamental to the expression and preservation of humanity.

Through stories, we document history, create culture, and cultivate a common understanding of who we are, what we do, and what futures we envision.

Stories trace our differences. What we do with stories matters. It can be a divisive force when we discredit stories from marginalized groups and see them as a threat to what has been constructed as social unity. Or, we can listen to people who have different identities and life experiences than us and aspire to compassion, care, and equity.

~*~

Stories for All aims to leverage the affordances of digital technology to elevate the power of community-based, social justice-oriented storytelling.

From 2021 to 2024, the Stories for All initiative collaborated with an array of community partners representing diverse cultures and traditions in Kansas and beyond. These partners created 54 digital storytelling projects and received financial, technological, and programming support from the initiative. In April 2024, a three-day festival in downtown Lawrence culminated Stories for All programs and invited community members to see their stories told in discussion panels, film screenings, and art exhibitions.

54 digital storytelling projects

from
artists
academics
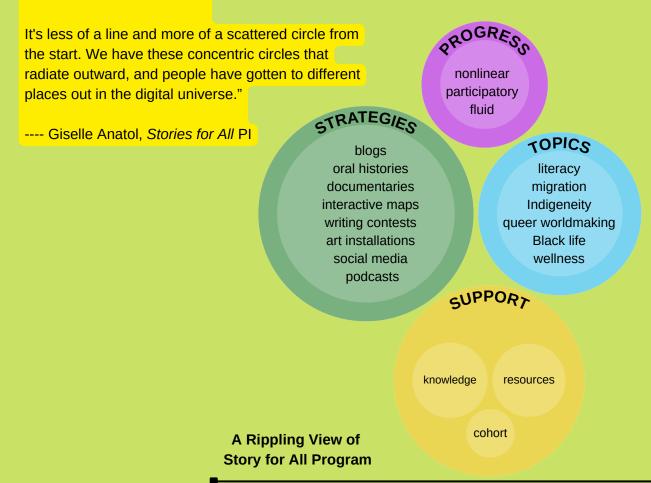activists
librarians
filmmakers
& anyone who has a story to tell

The *Stories for All* Model

The Stories for All model provides partners with three pillars of support:

- **Cohort building.** The initiative holds workshops, symposiums, office hours, and social events where partners can network with other storytellers.
- **Resources coordination.** Partners receive funds, facilities, and technical skills from the initiative and share resources among themselves.
- **Knowledge creation.** Stories of different histories, traditions, and politics are in conversation, shaping collective knowledge on past and present human conditions that directs the future.

"We had a lot of diversity of projects in terms of different communities that wanted to pursue this idea of digital storytelling. Not everyone is crossing the finish line at the same time.

It's less of a line and more of a scattered circle from the start. We have these concentric circles that radiate outward, and people have gotten to different places out in the digital universe."

---- Giselle Anatol, *Stories for All* PI

PROGRESS

nonlinear
participatory
fluid

STRATEGIES

blogs
oral histories
documentaries
interactive maps
writing contests
art installations
social media
podcasts

TOPICS

literacy
migration
Indigeneity
queer worldmaking
Black life
wellness

SUPPORT

knowledge

resources

cohort

**A Rippling View of
Story for All Program**

IMPACT METRICS

For Community-Based Digital Storytelling

Stories for All creates **an interdisciplinary, multimodal, trans-media, and cross-organizational network of digital storytelling**. This innovative approach, however, sees no readily available metrics to assess its community impact. Conventional metrics that prioritize quantifiable audience reach can be too narrow, as many of our partners are locally based and deal with specific, but complicated issues.

At Stories for All, we take **an accumulative, qualitative approach** to understand community impact and develop **a metrics system of six dimensions**—deliverables, relationship building, ethics, social justice, digitization, and sustainability.* These dimensions of the metrics are interconnected. They do not depict a linear progression.

The impact of digital storytelling lies in **the collective, communal effort** to change the power dynamic dictating whose stories are told, to challenge established narratives on marginalized identities and histories, and to explore the potential for healing and reparation.

Deliverables

Show tangible results to people who have shared their stories. People feel validated seeing their stories in curated oral histories, documentaries, podcasts, songs, and art exhibitions. The sheer number matters, as these stories were never told publicly. Experimental formats of storytelling also help to build empathy and debunk stereotypes.

- What is the nature of the stories? How may people relate to them?
- How many stories are collected and shared, and in what formats?
- What cultures, traditions, or histories do project deliverables embody?

Relationships

Storytelling connects people. It activates the communal energy to preserve history and mobilizes one's cultural heritage for social change. Relationship building is gradual and requires mutual trust. The relational aspect of storytelling determines if a project is ethical and sustainable.

- Who are the community stakeholders? How are their perspectives centered through storytelling?
- How do we gather and incorporate feedback from the community? How do we build reciprocal relationships?
- How may people use the stories to organize actions, educate themselves, or improve their life in any sense?

Ethics

Protect the interest of vulnerable groups. We need an acute awareness of whose perspectives are included and whose are not and an equitable framework to allocate ownership of and access to project deliverables. We prevent people who contribute their stories from being exploited or fetishized.

- What ethical concerns do we have? How do we work through them?
- What measures are taken to protect vulnerable groups? What support is provided for them?
- What are the ethical protocols for data management, consent, ownership, access, and privacy?

Social Justice

Storytelling links people's lived experiences to politics of structural change. We advocate social justice by documenting what injustice looks like in everyday life and grounding claims of grievances in histories of migration, segregation, and gentrification. Stories map out concrete trajectories of oppression and hence specifies reparation methods.

- How does our storytelling subvert harmful narratives and structures? How do we dismantle racism, xenophobia, settler colonialism, heteronormativity, misogyny, agism and ableism?
- How do we address reparation to and reinvestment in disenfranchised communities?

Digitization

Digitization is a technological condition for achieving relationship building, ethical storytelling, social justice and sustainability. It is not an end result. We make conscious decisions on what digital tools best speak to the stories. We aim to insert more community-based storytelling content into the broader digital information ecosystem.

- What digital tools are used to gather and share stories and engage the audience?
- What resources are used for digitization, and what are the expected benefits?
- What spaces, connections, networks, perspectives, and values does digitization enable?

Sustainability

A project is sustainable when it generates relationships beyond the grant funding cycle and when its digital visibility inspires continued community engagement. Gain fundraising capacity and cultivate lasting partnerships. We work with partners to preserve the digitized stories and build capacity for further project management.

- What resources are available for extending our work over time?
- How will the digital and non-digital sites of stories preserved and managed?
- How will we sustain collaboration and partnerships? How are we generating a network of storytelling content in the focus area?

*The impact metrics system builds on sources including:
- Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Congregational Accompaniment Project for Asylum-Seekers Ethical Storytelling Workshop.
- Potts, E., Lowell, D., & Manne, L. (2022). Spotlight on Impact Storytelling. Liz Manne Strategy.
- Taylor, C. & Wei, Q. (2020). Storytelling and Arts to Facilitate Community Capacity Building for Urban Planning and Social Work. *Societies*, *10*(3), 64.

This report showcases 7 Stories for All partners. The impact metrics are applied to capturing how their storytelling projects elevate community voices. Methods used for impact evaluation include:

CASE SPOTLIGHT

In-Depth Interviews

with partners and community members

Participant Observation

at project sites and events

Documentary Tracing

of news coverage and participant testimonials

Each case spotlight features an impact statement, a brief narrative about the project, a metrics-informed impact table, and a prospect statement envisioning a transformed world.

FORMER ENSLAVED AMERICANS SEEKING FREEDOM

We recover the true history of slavery and empower African American descendants with stories of perseverance, strength, and self-determination.

Untold Stories: Former Enslaved Americans Who Sought Freedom in Lawrence, KS revolves around the story of Maria Rogers Martin, a formerly enslaved African American woman taken to Lawrence by Union soldiers against her will during the American Civil War. Despite the mistreatment of her and her family, Maria continued her craft of quilting and actively participated in local civic life.

The project gathers an array of historical evidence about Maria's life that challenges the conventional understanding of Kansas as the anti-slavery free state and demonstrates the complexity of anti-Black violence and racial segregation.

Speaking of what happens when the project is complete, project lead and renowned quilter Marla Jackson says, "We're going to talk about the ancestors, and we're going to have a funeral celebration. We're going to have soul food and singing. It's a celebration of life."

FORMER ENSLAVED AMERICANS SEEKING FREEDOM

Impact Metrics

Deliverables	Relationships	Ethics
Art installation of tiles, textiles, & artifacts Panel discussion at the National African American Quilt Convention Archival collections	Youth research program in collaboration with local schools Conversations with historians that lead to the correction of historical records	Consulting people whose family histories attest to the complexity of racial segregation Preserving donated artifacts of historical significance
Social Justice	**Digitization**	**Sustainability**
Dismantling the elite gatekeeping of Black history and storytelling Demanding reparation to descendants of enslaved African Americans	Documentary film on the story of tracing the life of Maria Rogers Martin Live stream of panel discussion	Collaboration with the Watkins Museum, a local history museum Compiling research materials for donation to the University of Kansas archive collections

Worldmaking Prospect

We aspire to Black histories that are not erased, Black voices that are not gatekept, Black cultures that are not Whitewashed, and Black futures that our elders and children create together, one quilt a time.

POLICE BRUTALITY SONG

We track the impacts of police brutality and invite affected families to share stories of their loved ones. This song is about their grief and joy.

Police Brutality Song tells the stories of lives cut short in the epidemic of police brutality. Alex Kimball Williams, project lead and musician, interviewed 15 Kansan families who had lost loved ones.

"The mainstream narrative about police brutality is very dichotomous," Alex says. "There's a victim, and there's a person who's enacting the violence. There's not enough room for how their family mourns them, or how their family celebrates their life."

The project focuses on the disproportionate harm racist policing inflicts on communities of color. It amplifies the voices of people who have little influence in societal decision making on policing. "People who are not artists are now becoming artists in a way, or getting to share their story without all of the labor and the visibility and risks that come with that," Alex says.

POLICE BRUTALITY SONG

Impact Metrics

Deliverables	Relationships	Ethics
Oral history entries from families affected by police brutality Song on police brutality Performances & presentations at community spaces	Spending time with families and validating their experiences Fostering connections via personal activism	Providing counseling service for interviewees Excluding people whose loss is too recent & raw Prepping interviewees & giving them control
Social Justice	**Digitization**	**Sustainability**
Debunking the misrepresentation of police violence victims Engaging people of different stances on policing in a conversation	Digital copies of interview recordings for participants Online distribution of the song Music video on YouTube	Joining the Kansas Touring Artist Roster to boost performance across the state Applying for community organizing grants

Worldmaking Prospect

Protest art supports a better tomorrow where state violence is subtly yet powerfully questioned, and its impacts on communities are acknowledged without deficit framing or media condemnation.

RECLAIMING HOME

We bring back memories of home to Latino and Black communities whose residences have been erased from the city map under unethical urban development.

Reclaiming Home: Remembering the Topeka Bottoms revives the hurtful history of an once flourishing racial minority and immigrant neighborhood, the Bottoms, in Topeka in the 1960s. The city demolished residential homes and businesses of more than 3000 people without fair compensation.

The project reconstructs the neighborhood and restores lost memories and relationships. It collects oral histories, films a documentary, and creates art installations honoring the material reality of the past. Most importantly, it brings together families and friends of former Bottoms residents.

"It's a loss of legacy," says María Velasco, project lead and visual artist. "We're looking at groups already denied access because of the color of their skin. On top of that, you're making disappear their accomplishments and their attempts at having a better life for themselves and giving something to their families."

RECLAIMING HOME

Impact Metrics

Deliverables	Relationships	Ethics
Documentary on the Bottoms' destruction 40+ oral history entries Multimedia art exhibition including interactive 3D wooden puzzles of neighborhood maps	Developing horizontal partnerships with local artists & historians, instead of vertical control Investing in younger generations as liaisons to their older family members	Addressing an urgent community need to have a voice in making urban development plans Understanding how different racial groups' experiences of dislocation vary
Social Justice	**Digitization**	**Sustainability**
Revealing the mistreatment of racial minorities in the history of urban development Reconnecting Bottoms descendants with their elders and history	Historical site entry "The Bottoms" on Clio Project Facebook page Website & social media circulation of documentary and interview clips	Participating in the gatherings of former Bottoms residents Influencing the policy making process Obtaining grants on racial justice

Worldmaking Prospect

No one should ever have their homes and businesses demolished for not being wealthy enough, important enough, or White enough. City planners and local residents together make decisions for an equitable urban future.

REPRO FILM

We dedicate a platform to women filmmakers exploring issues women care about and use films as a method of care, healing, and community building.

RePRO Film offers programs that feature independent films about women, by women, and for women. The project has screened, spotlighted, or funded tens of film projects and continuously published a multimedia monthly newsletter since 2022.

"We are a community that's connecting storytellers and advocates who are passionate about bodily autonomy in all of its forms," says Lela Meadow-Conner, project lead and film curator.

This work sees challenges as reproductive rights and health are increasingly politicized. The project aims to foster conversations in local communities in Kansas and to overcome binary views on issues like abortion. "We curate films that give us the opportunity to think freely and make up our own mind," Lela says. "The people we bring to the conversation should come from groups that are most affected by the issues."

REPRO FILM

Impact Metrics

Deliverables	Relationships	Ethics
RePRO Periodicals multimedia newsletters *The Screening Womb* community screenings & panel discussions Online film catalogue	Easing audiences into reproductive right issues with less politicized everyday contexts Facilitating conversation among women with diverse experiences	Making space for filmmakers' perspective as contextualized in community expertise Reducing barriers for storytellers who are sidelined or censored in mainstream spaces
Social Justice	**Digitization**	**Sustainability**
Amplifying women's voices in social conversations on reproductive rights Connecting women's issues with anti-racism, environmentalism, etc.	Multimedia newsletter with podcasts, essays, film spotlights, & mixtape playlists Streamed & recorded video interviews with filmmakers	Fellowship programs for independent filmmakers Expanding a one-off virtual film festival into continuous hybrid publications and events

Worldmaking Prospect

All women have autonomy over their bodies and access to the care they need. Stories of femininity, motherhood, and being a woman, still complex as ever, can be told without the burden of violence, stigma, and repression.

UNSETTLED LAWRENCE

We find inspiration from the rich history of unsettlement and showcase the creativity, strength, and sophistication of unhoused people besides their endurance.

Unsettled Lawrence: Challenging Collective Memory of Settlement Through the Oral and Public Histories of Unhoused Populations in Lawrence invites people to rethink the mainstream beliefs about being unhoused, living in a camp, and the triumph of settlement over unsettlement in history and the present.

The project curates historical records on unsettlement in Lawrence, Kansas, and shows a continued legacy through oral history. Project lead and historian Rachel Schwaller made the effort to build relationship and trust with unhoused people, who would ask, "You do history? Awesome. Why are you with us? Oh, because we're making history."

Unhoused people often see their history erased besides stigma and discrimination. "People are frustrated because they are not able to interact with society for living in a tent," Rachel says. "They are assumed to be a criminal or a medicalized individual."

UNSETTLED LAWRENCE

Impact Metrics

Deliverables	Relationships	Ethics
10+ participatory oral history entries of unhoused people Art exhibition co-curated with unhoused people showcasing their artistic & literary works	Adjusting the pace & location of research for the regular movement of unhoused people Respecting people's diverse experiences of encampment	Creating non-institutional infrastructure for access given the hostile stance of institutions against unhoused people Weighing the benefit of publicity versus privacy
Social Justice	**Digitization**	**Sustainability**
Revising how forms of unsettlement, including encampment, is theorized & historicized Reducing stigma & discrimination of unhoused people	Planned website featuring life stories & practical knowledge of unsettlement Digitizing oral history records with data management tools	Compiling research materials for archiving at the Spencer Library Obtaining grants to expand collaboration with ethnographers & public historians

Worldmaking Prospect

People form communities that help them thrive. Even when those communities are in nontraditional and traumatic spaces, the humanity of individuals should not be devaluated or rendered a public nuisance.

UNTOLD STORIES OF AGING

We build intergenerational ties between older and younger generations to demystify aging and inspire open conversations on later life care.

Untold Stories curates in-person and digital exhibitions of arts and stories from older people through participatory community actions. The project also connects stories of aging with stories of later life care professionals.

"When you see images of older adults in the media, they are often shown as being frail and vulnerable. That's only one version of what aging might look like," says Sarah Jen, project lead and gerontologist. "We wanted to illuminate diverse, nuanced, and complex stories of aging and use art as a medium to communicate that."

A project participant exhibiting her coloring books before her entire extended family. This participant, never been an artist, found talent and joy in making art in her 80s. She passed away shortly after the exhibition, and her family asked for the interview video of her as a remembrance.
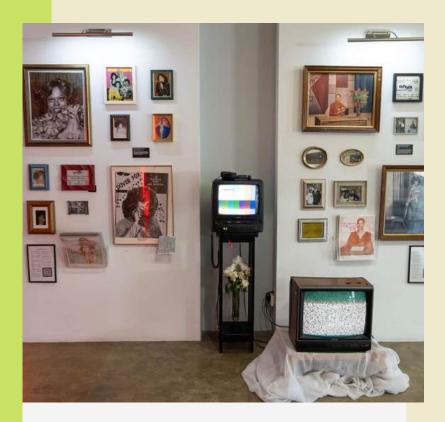
UNTOLD STORIES OF AGING

Impact Metrics

Deliverables	Relationships	Ethics
Aging-themed art competitions & exhibitions Video series of interviews with later life care professionals	Cultivating intergenerational understanding & conversations on aging Coordinating research & programming through a scholarship program	Reducing technological barriers for older people to participate Offering awards & recognition for participants
Social Justice	**Digitization**	**Sustainability**
Promoting leadership & belonging among later life care professionals Preparing public health systems for a growing older generation with diverse needs	Website showcasing project programs, images, & videos Curating live digital art exhibitions with ongoing contributions	Sharing project deliverables with social workers across Kansas at virtual workshops Publicizing & exporting the model of aging storytelling programs

Worldmaking Prospect

The fear of aging may never go away, but people do not need to bear that fear alone. Stories of walking the later part of one's life journey while encountering passions and heartbreaks can be shared over joy and tears.

{B/QKC}

We liberate Black queer history from racist, queerphobic erasure and innovate accessible, multimedia, and reparative archiving of stories.

{B/qKC}: Black/queer Kansas City curates a dynamic community archive that challenges the erasure of Black queer people in urban history and the institutional control over what stories and spaces are preserved.

The project showcases Kansas City's Black queer social scene from the 20th century to present day. A digital archive and moving exhibitions of collected materials created a decentered presence and proliferation of this history.

A story features Soakie's, a sandwich shop turned Black gay bar. Two Black gay men befriended the shop owner and helped to save the business from closure. "It was interesting and unfathomable that this shop, owned by the Italian mob, was so welcoming and warm-hearted to Black queer people," says project lead and journalist Nasir Anthony Montalvo. "They just crowdfunded for a DJ booth, doing the dance floor, and renovating the bar to make it look like a club."

{B/QKC}

Impact Metrics

Deliverables	Relationships	Ethics
2 volumes of feature stories & research articles published in *The Kansas City Defender* Moving interdisciplinary art exhibitions at local businesses & venues in Kansas City	Passing down Black queer artifacts & knowledge via intergenerational ties Gathering oral stories from community members	Compensating people who have contributed to the archive & Black queer spaces Licensing process that features co-ownership & reciprocal involvement
Social Justice	**Digitization**	**Sustainability**
Documenting how urban gentrification eliminates safe social spaces for marginalized groups Reversing the erasure of Black queer people's contribution & presence	Digitizing & preserving analog materials Archive & database of historical Black drag scene & night life Multimedia digital art	Funding & sponsorship from organizations including the Diaspora Solidarity's Lab Collaboration with local zine & VHS tape archives

Worldmaking Prospect

Queer youths of color gather at cafes, print shops, and bars to hear stories from their elders and see themselves grow into the full potential of life. The music is on, and the disco ball lights the dance floor.