



INTERNATIONAL STORYTELLING CENTER

Changing lives, through the arts of storytelling



Highlight Reel

**A forward-focused look at the work
of the International Storytelling Center**

Throughout the world, in every culture, people have told stories — at home and at work, when the harvest was taken in, the wood was cut and carted, and the wool was woven. And while the folk were telling their stories, so too were the bards and the minstrels, the griots and troubadours, who were the poets, singers and guardians of a people's history.

Today, we still enjoy stories — listening to them, telling them — as deeply as did our ancestors, for our lives are bound together with stories; the tales, perhaps ever so ordinary, that seem to catch us up and in some obscure, almost magical way, help us make sense of our world. And since our lives are still intertwined with stories, it would seem that the art of storytelling should have a forever unchanging place of honor in our history and culture. Yet this is not so. Despite its ageless power and importance, this ancient folk art has, until recently, been forgotten — lost in a sea of print, film and videotape that is testimony to the media’s skill at filling us up with images and ideas that were once the province of the oral tradition.

But during the late 1960s and early 1970s, there emerged throughout America a realization that we were losing our connection to the genuine one-on-one communication. In 1973, in a tiny Tennessee town, something happened that rekindled our national appreciation of the told story and became the spark plug for a major cultural movement — the rebirth of the art of storytelling.



National Storytelling Festival, Fresh Air Photo

Every October since 1973, thousands of travelers visit Tennessee’s oldest town. They come for one purpose — to hear stories and to tell them at the National Storytelling Festival; the oldest and most respected gathering anywhere in the world devoted to storytelling, has in turn spawned a national revival of this venerable art. Since then we have only grown as we embrace new genres and create amazing partnerships around nation and the world as ISC continues to serve as a benchmark for the storytelling community, both nationally and internationally.

Storytelling is the art form that helps to paint a picture of a world in harmony, helping to democratize our voices and as the art of storytelling continues to go viral, ISC remains at the forefront and at the heart of a changing world.

Storytelling for Peace and Empathy

We believe that we all have the capacity to tap into our stories, our narrative assets, and communicate more effectively. In addition to our flagship programs, National Storytelling Festival, and 26 week Storyteller in Residence series, we endorse a partnership approach in order to harness the power of storytelling as we work together to build a better and fairer world.

We were established in 1973 as an educational and cultural institution dedicated to building a better world through the power of storytelling. In over 40 years, ISC has transformed a grassroots movement into a national and global storytelling revival, professionalized the storytelling industry, and built a storytelling campus in Tennessee's oldest town.

In this growth process, we formed key partnerships and collaborations with influential institutions like the Smithsonian Institute, Library of Congress, the National Endowment for the Arts, NASA, United Way, Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation, Alliance for Peacebuilding, Partners for Democratic Change, The United Nations, The White House, Dollywood, Google, and many more.



ISC's National Storytelling Festival not only ignited a renaissance of storytelling throughout America and the world, but is also recognized as the world's first, largest and most acclaimed public event and institution devoted exclusively to the arts of storytelling. Through our public programs we host more than 26,000 visitors each year, offer over 300 hours of live storytelling, and reach thousands of lives throughout the year in unique diverse storytelling partnerships with our friends.

In addition, ISC is active on the national and global stage, fulfilling its mission to enrich the lives of people around the world through the arts of storytelling. The Center partners with international and national institutions, grassroots movements and projects, to reinforce the importance of sharing stories to build peace and understanding among peoples, divided groups, and nations. ISC is active in numerous projects to promote storytelling and peacebuilding across the United States and around the world.

Projects and Partnerships from Around the World:

Fresh Air Photo



HARVARD
GRADUATE
SCHOOL OF
EDUCATION

Research to Applied Storytelling Practice

In 1998, ISC hosted the first in a series of forums on applied storytelling practice. This pioneering work ignited the explosion of public interest in applied storytelling practice. In 2004, ISC commissioned a comprehensive study on storytelling in education, health, organizational development, and peace and conflict resolution. This groundbreaking study — Project Zero — became an ISC-led partnership with Harvard Graduate School of Education. The resulting outcomes established ISC’s outreach peace initiatives and national empathy building programs to strengthen our vision to build a better world, through storytelling.



Smithsonian Partnership

In 2014, ISC and the Smithsonian brought together cultural heritage and development specialists, educators, media journalists, filmmakers, public arts and festival planners, museum curators, and others to explore best practices in cross-cultural interdisciplinary empathy building exchange. The project was geared toward using storytelling to confront contention in society, and also to use the arts and culture more effectively in building the story of a nation.



Smithsonian Affiliations

In 2017, ISC was a participating partner in the 50th Smithsonian Folklife Festival on Washington, D.C.’s National Mall. The project focused on immigrant stories and drew hundreds of thousands of visitors.

Storytelling and Diplomacy

Vice President Al Gore attended the National Storytelling Festival in 1995, and helped launch the organization’s downtown campus naming ISC “the epicenter of American storytelling.” He talked about his experience using personal stories as a peace-building tool in international relations. ISC and the Vice President created a delegation of storytellers to Washington, D.C. to recreate a mini storytelling festival for a diplomatic event.

Fresh Air Photo



Projects and Partnerships, continued

Courtesy of the Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation



Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation

In 2013, ISC partnered with the Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation for an UBUNTU Storytelling project. The online site featured National Storytelling Festival storytellers and invited people everywhere working for peace to tell their stories. In 2014, ISC supported a South African Delegation — inviting them to visit the National Storytelling Festival and providing them with consultation to help develop their first National Storytelling Festival in Mandela’s legacy.



Turning Peace Data into Peace Stories

In 2014, ISC worked with the Institute for Economics and Peace — producer of the Global Peace Index (GPI) — considered the world’s largest statistical study that ranks the world’s nations according to peacefulness. ISC invited GPI’s founder to help tell the story of peace and this project so they can tell more nations and governments how to understand this important economic data through story. GPI has been endorsed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President Jimmy Carter, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.



Changing Policy through Storytelling

In November 2016, ISC president Kiran Singh Sirah established and led a “Storytelling Circle” round table at the U.S. Senate with delegates from U.S. foreign relations and peacebuilding representatives. The initiative helped frame the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2017. This bill promotes, as policy, regard for the prevention of genocide and other atrocity crimes as core moral responsibility, and strengthens State Department efforts and other agency efforts at atrocity prevention and response.

Projects and Partnerships, continued



The U.S. State Department

In 2016, ISC helped the U.S. State Department develop a storytelling for cultural diplomacy toolkit to enable U.S. embassy staff and Foreign Service personal to use personal storytelling for building connections with others. ISC advised and helped on U.S. Native American and Ecuador indigenous people's exchange, and trained visiting young leaders from Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq.



Preventing War through Storytelling

In 2017, ISC collaborated with the Center for Civil-Military Relations, an organization within the Department of Defense at the Pentagon. Building on a dialogue between ISC and the Pentagon that began more than a year before, we thought hard about the challenges we face as a global community and how we can use storytelling not just to enrich lives, but also to save them. The project was aimed at looking at storytelling as a means to prevent war and save lives, build better international relations, and serve in a role to help develop a U.S. national peace strategy.



United Nations—Storytelling for Peace

In 2014, ISC partnered with the United Nations (NYC) to launch a global storytelling for peace initiative. The project gave youth around the world a platform to share stories that inspire peace. As a result, 24-year-old Velma Mukuro, finalist from Kenya, was mentored by ISC president Kiran Singh Sirah to tell her story live at International Peace Day at the United Nations. The event was hosted by Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, Peace Ambassadors Dr. Jane Goodall and Yo Yo Ma and live streamed worldwide. Around 500 million worldwide participate in International Day of Peace events. ISC continues to support national and global efforts in Storytelling for Peace.

Projects and partnerships, continued



Geneva Peace Week

In November 2017, ISC's president, Kiran Singh Sirah, traveled to the United Nations in Switzerland, for the Geneva Peace Week, where he was recognized as a Champion of Peace for his lifelong work as a peacebuilder, and for advancing storytelling for the cause of peace.



Rotary International

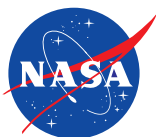
In 2015 and 2017, ISC participated in the Rotary International World Assembly. The audience included representatives from all world nations and leaders representing Rotary's 1.2 million members, the world's 2nd largest NGO. ISC president Kiran Singh Sirah led a Stories, Sustain, Peace program extended to the World Peace symposium at a 10,000+ global convention in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and in Atlanta, Georgia. ISC continues to offer support for Rotary intercultural initiatives across America.



NASA

Storytelling and Space

For more than a decade, ISC has worked with NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab (JPL) on high-profile space exploration projects. Focusing on education, ISC helped develop special programming for the general public (through storytelling performance), for schoolteachers (through regional workshops), and for JPL itself (by working with its scientists). In 2004, NASA invited Syd Lieberman into the control room to witness the first Mars rover landing. Jointly commissioned by ISC and NASA, Lieberman later shared the story of that historic event with audiences in Jonesborough and beyond — the first in what would become a series of groundbreaking collaborations between prominent storytellers and NASA.



Projects and Partnerships, continued



Telling Stories That Matter

In 2015, ISC launched [Telling Stories That Matter](#) a free toolkit for educators, peace builders, students, volunteers, social change makers, and other individuals. The toolkit is being used in 18 countries worldwide. It is designed to help people and organizations explore storytelling to build meaningful conversations in an ethical and thoughtful way. The toolkit supports numerous grassroots community building programs across the nation, such as the Ferguson Commission, healing projects in Charleston, South Carolina, and other initiatives addressing community and police relations and healing from violence.



Above, Charleston, South Carolina's Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Right, Kiran Singh Sirah meets with young people at Burke High School in Charleston.



In 2016, ISC was invited to design and facilitate a series of storytelling programs to engage the public in Charleston, South Carolina, following the June 2015 shooting at the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. This tragic, racist event, took the lives of nine community members. ISC president Kiran Singh Sirah worked in partnership with Charleston Public libraries, church and city leaders, artists, students, educators and community-building activists. The Telling Stories That Matter project used storytelling to support healing and educational inter-community dialogue for people touched by violence over the years. The project included a formal Proclamation of Storytelling Friendship between the city of Jonesborough and Charleston.



INTERNATIONAL STORYTELLING CENTER

Storytelling: *a radical gift of hope*



National Storytelling Festival, photo by Fresh Air Photo

For almost half a century, the International Storytelling Center (ISC) has been at the forefront of sustaining storytelling as a traditional folk art, promoting innovation and the integration of storytelling across disciplines. ISC serves as a national Learning Resource Center that facilitates efforts to incorporate the art of storytelling in promoting understanding, equity, and justice. We create educational and professional tools, storyteller residencies, world class festivals, disseminate research, evaluative results and curate and share best practices in using the art of storytelling for peace and community-building.

The first era of our history as an organization was about making a place for storytelling in the world. We believe that the frontier we now face is to make a place for the world (diversity, a global village) in storytelling.

We seek to develop our educational outreach initiatives to establish world class storytelling within the arenas of community development, education, arts, culture, science, and public health — as well as global and national cultural arts and justice collaboration.

Through story we will seek to empower more communities to contribute, through powerful and creative means, to help end world poverty and hunger. In addition, our work promotes equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities for all — in particular equality for women and girls, indigenous people, LGBTQIA, and economically disadvantaged communities.



Our work promotes equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Through our continuing development of a comprehensive storytelling training portfolio, solutions-driven grassroots movements and organizations will gain access to training and opportunities during special workshops, digital courses and onsite programs at our National Storytelling Festival . . . and through our growing youth and community summits, symposiums and community conversation round tables.

These innovative **Stories in Progress** projects will further enhance our ability to actively respond to the needs of organizations around the nation who are engaged in poverty eradication, improving health and education, and promoting equity and understanding. ISC is poised as a leader to help other partners and organizations learn, as we have done, to integrate storytelling into our thinking, planning, and as a viable tool for peace that fosters solidarity, dialogue, and civic engagement.

A few of the Stories in Progress programs are highlighted in the following pages: **Stories for Change**, civic youth leadership; **Stories for the Soul**, health partnerships; **Stories in Motion**, responding to natural and human disaster relief; and **Stories for All**, digitalization of a truly democratic art form.

Stories in Progress Initiatives

Stories for Change

Civic Youth Leadership

As a result of social and political divisions felt by young people in the U.S., ISC established Stories for Change; a project to expand programming to empower youth, communities of color, LGBTQIA and economically disadvantaged populations through storyteller training programs designed to foster social justice and inspire civic engagement and leadership. The project builds on our existing youth engagement for underserved youth, adding leadership Youth Summits and workshops designed for at-risk youth and those vulnerable to violence.

ISC is developing this model of applied practice to help inform teaching for its own national digital storytelling broadcast and footage which now reaches more than 45,000 people in hospitals, school classrooms, juvenile detention units, and eldercare facilities.

ISC is working with teachers, schools, and community youth projects across the nation through initiatives geared toward empowering the next generation of civic leaders through storytelling. Our efforts will equip the next generation to be the story of change they wish to see in the world. In 2017, more than 600 teachers, 26,000 program attendees, 45,000 digital participants, and 1,700 at risk youth participated in these emerging projects.



Stories in Progress Initiatives

Stories for the Soul

Health Partnerships

Built on research that showed a strong link between stories and healing, in 2002, ISC brought storytelling to special new audiences: hospital patients. In partnership with a network of 14 hospitals, we produced a series of performances by master storytellers that were broadcast on a dedicated channel to hospitals. The initial program, Stories for the Soul, was later expanded to include recorded concerts for pediatric patients and storytelling workshops in palliative care. Now, a live broadcast goes directly on-screen into hospital wards. In 2018, we plan to designate our first community hospital as one of ISC's Sites of Excellence. We hope to grow Stories for the Soul to help other hospitals and health initiatives.

This latest project focuses on storytelling and public health needs. ISC is now establishing work with community members across the nation that fosters systemic change, provides spaces for dialogue, and develops community-driven solutions to the opioid crisis and other public health challenges — including violence, meth addiction, and obesity.



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Stories in Progress initiatives

Stories in Motion

Responding to Human and Natural Disasters

In the wake of recent hurricanes (Irma & Florence), and crisis events such as massacres, shootings, terrorist attacks, and the rise of gun violence, ISC has been piloting a story-collecting support and consultation to grassroots projects across the nation. In this initiative, we are developing a rapid response through storytelling whereby local communities affected by wildfires, hurricanes, or violence can gain access to opportunities to tell their own stories. Using real time multimedia, Stories in Motion empowers communities to share and tell their stories via a regular online feature which examines these efforts, enabling national audiences to understand the power of storytelling at work in our world.

We see Stories in Motion as a longer term archival platform supporting ISC's commitment to public and community documentation of these memories. Gathered content may be added to story-maps as public record for generations, and disseminated in programs such as the National Storytelling Festival or as part of our national archive at the Library of Congress.



Stories in Progress Initiatives

Storytelling for All

Digitization of a Truly Democratic Art

ISC is working on digitization of its collection to both preserve and share this storytelling heritage with the nation. This presentation project will lay the foundation for greater national programming and will help America celebrate the diversity of all its stories and unique cultural heritage. At a moment in history in this nation when it is more important than ever to tap the power of story to bridge understanding, this project will enhance the reach and advance storytelling as a truly democratic art form — one which belongs to the whole of us as a diverse multicultural nation. In sharing stories, we find those common threads that help us to build civility and to treat others as we ourselves hope to be treated. Storytelling — and story listening — not only fosters a sense of pride, but also connects our diversity, our history, and enables us to understand our national narrative from different perspectives, bringing a shared understanding that can help us foster a better society for all.

Storytelling for All will work to proactively involve groups and audiences from African American, Native American, Tribal communities, Asian American, and European American populations. All will be invited to partner with ISC on identifying aspects of the collection that are particularly meaningful to their communities and have potential to foster dialogue and promote community development collaborations. We will actively invite these groups to partner in ways that will enable them to recognize that the heritage in this collection belongs to them and can be used to frame a story for today that speaks to a more equitable society for tomorrow.



National Storytelling Festival photos by Jay Huron

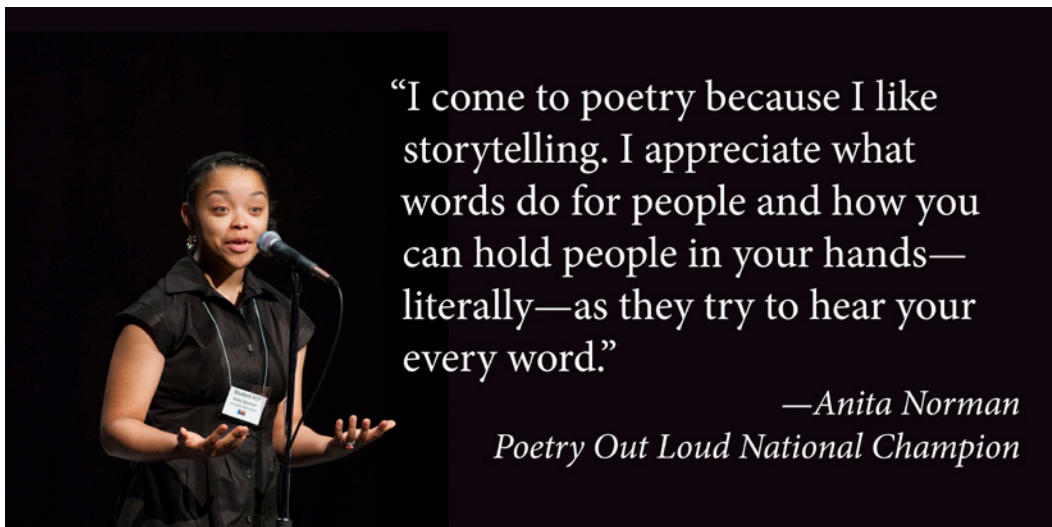


The Future of Storytelling

As we move further into an era of conflict and social division, we need to find new ways to tap into stories that build empathy and understanding that can compete with or overpower the stories of war and division. We need to shift the narrative so the storytellers of tomorrow feel empowered to win more hearts and minds and offer the radical gift of hope. We will reinforce the reality that stories build civility and trust.

As we think about long-term transformational growth, we're seeking out bigger and ever more impactful projects that harness the power storytelling has to shift the narrative towards peace.

The International Storytelling Center is in a unique position to be, not just at the heart, but also at the forefront of a changing world. We hope you will join us in this important work, our revolution in storytelling. Stories are more than just a human right. They are a gift we can give the world.





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INTERNATIONAL
STORYTELLING CENTER

Connecting the World through the Power of Storytelling

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In association with the Smithsonian Institution