

KIRAN SINGH SIRAH

Speaker / Consultant / Peacebuilder/Storyteller/ Folklorist

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PERSONAL PROFILE

Kiran Singh Sirah is a Speaker, Folklorist, Storyteller, Consultant, Peacebuilder and Past President of the International Storytelling Center (ISC,) producer of the world-renowned National Storytelling Festival. Prior to his appointment at ISC, Sirah helped establish a number of award-winning arts, cultural, and human rights programs throughout the United Kingdom. These included community building programs at National Museums Scotland in response to the 9/11 attacks, and a number of peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives exploring issues of religious, ethnic, and sectarian conflicts in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In 2011, he embarked on a Rotary Peace Fellowship in the United States focusing on the folklore of “home” and studying at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Upon graduating in 2013, he began his tenure at ISC and has helped the institution grow in ways previously unimaginable. Sirah is regularly asked to provide keynote lectures, workshops, and trainings for such entities as the Smithsonian Institution; the US State Department and Department of Defense; the Library of Congress; the Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation, the Alliance for Peacebuilding, the Pentagon, the White House, Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library and the United Nations; and has worked in and in collaboration with projects in Colombia, Brazil, Palestine, Israel, South Sudan and Uganda. In addition to storytelling for peace and justice, his passion includes mentoring youth and young adults, particularly youth-at-risk, budding artists, peace activists, and poets (including mentoring national Poetry Out Loud champions,) to help them be positive change agents in their communities.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

President, International Storytelling Center, Jonesborough, TN; 2013- June 2023

Sirah dedicated the past decade to advancing ISC as the global flagship for storytelling through expanding the definition of storytelling, highlighting marginalized and underrepresented narratives, celebrating unsung heroes, increasing accessibility to storytelling for all, and

promoting storytelling as a tool for peace. In his time at ISC he has developed a variety of new programs including Freedom Stories, Stories as Medicine, and the More than One Story Initiative, while also steering the National Storytelling Festival through its 50th anniversary. Through his work, ISC has received recognition from the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, Purdue, the Mellon Foundation, South Arts, the New Pluralists, and the East Tennessee Foundation, and has been promoted to among the top rank of Major Cultural Institution (MCI) for the state of Tennessee. Sirah has represented ISC at numerous world peace assemblies and developed partnerships with major cultural institutions including the Smithsonian, the United Nations, the Library of Congress, Google Arts & Culture, Dollywood, and Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. During his time at ISC, he has been honored as a "Champion of Peace" at Rotary International Day at the United Nations, invited to develop a storytelling and healing program with the City of Charleston following the 2015 massacre at "Mother" Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, collaborated with Yo-Yo Ma on amplifying Appalachian traditions, and advocated for a bipartisan peace initiative at the US Senate, which became known as the Ellie Wiesel Genocide and Mass Atrocities Prevention Act

Fellow, Rotary Peace Fellowship Chapel Hill, NC; Duke University Certificate in peace and conflict resolution/conflict prevention. 2011-2013

Fellowship at the University of North Carolina's Department of American Studies Folklore Program focusing on "Aesthetics of Home through Narratives, Memory, and Arts" emphasizing the power of human creativity; worked in homeless shelters to collect stories of people experiencing homelessness.

Arts Manager, Sense Scotland Glasgow, Scotland; 2009-2011

Managed the Helen Keller International Award exhibition including 120 artists and 26 supporting countries; led and developed national and international arts and communications programs supporting people with complex and diverse dual disabilities. Kiran was pivotal in establishing recognition for Sense Scotland's Arts & Disability center, Touchbase, as part of UNESCO Creative Cities.

Learning Curator, Glasgow Museums Glasgow, Scotland; 2002-2009

Established high profile, adult and young people's social justice education program on issues of human rights, slavery, world faiths and crimes against humanity; developed "Societies Emerging from Conflict" peace and reconciliation program for leaders from Northern Ireland's divided communities. Worked across 13 museums developing city wide social justice projects, and as learning curator at St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, developed one of the largest anti sectarian programs in the UK.

Developed a 'Societies Emerging from Conflict' partnership with Ulster museum, receiving official recognition from The Scottish Government and The Northern Ireland Assembly, Represented the City of Glasgow in a twinning with City of Marseilles, France, as part of the European year of International Dialogue.

Led the City of Glasgow Museum's 2007 bi-centenary commemorations of the abolition of the British slave trade, "Towards Understanding Slavery: Past and Present". The African 'Voices' exhibition sought to reinterpret these objects through first- person narratives of artists from Scotland's 'new

communities', by encouraging the relinquishing of institutional control and empowering diverse interpretations of the aesthetics of cultural property.

Education Manager, National Museums Scotland Glasgow, Scotland; 2001-2009

Established "Side by Side: A Celebration of World Faiths in Scotland," a national post-9/11 educational and interfaith public dialogue program

LECTURES

- Presented the closing plenary for the Main Street America annual conference, Main Street Now, focused on storytelling as a community building and preservation tool; Richmond, VA; 2022
- Delivered a keynote speech and a one-hour workshop for approximately 600 Rotary leaders including Rotary International President Shekhar Mehta at the Big West Zone Institute; Tucson, AZ: 2021
- Presented a keynote for World Artists Experience's "Culture Is People: Storytelling into the Future" conference; virtual: 2021
- "Storytelling: A Radical Gift of Hope/Storytelling: Un regalo radical de esperanza," a talk for the Bank of the Republic of Columbia's "Peace Speaks Up" initiative; virtual: 2021
- Presented a closing keynote for the Maker City Summit; Knoxville, TN: 2021
- Presented a plenary talk and Q&A for artists with the RiffRaff Arts Collective's "We Need to Talk!" initiative, funded by an Our Town grant from the National Endowment for the Arts; Princeton, WV: 2021
- "Rethinking the Narrative," a plenary talk for the League of American Orchestras annual conference; virtual: 2021
- Participated in "How Do We Talk to Each Other? Storytelling for Racial Justice," a panel discussion for the final Freedom Stories presentation; virtual: 2021
- "The Transformative Power of Storytelling," an open keynote for the National Museum of African American Music's Rivers of Rhythm Institute for Social Education conference; Nashville, TN: 2021
- Presented a keynote for the Greely Rotary District Conference; virtual: 2021
- "Your Story, Your Values, Your Impact," a keynote for the Future Assistant conference held across western Europe; virtual: 2021
- Delivered a plenary talk for the annual Rural Assembly Everywhere conference presented by the Center for Rural Strategies; virtual: 2021
- "The Power of Storytelling," a keynote for Rotary E-club of World Peace; virtual: 2021
- Opening remarks and welcome for the ISC's Freedom Stories initiative; virtual: 2020
- "Storytelling and Peace," +Peace Coalition Launch and United Nation's International Day of Peace plenary lecture; New York, NY: 2019
- "Home," Dolly Parton's Imagination Library *Homecomin'* keynote address at the invitation of Dolly Parton; Pigeon Forge, TN: 2019
- Storytelling and peace lecture series for the annual Rotary International Conference and Peace Symposium; Hamburg, Germany: 2019
- Presented at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 50th Anniversary; Washington DC: 2017

- “Storytelling: The Power of Peace,” US Department of Defense opening keynote and workshop for Collaborative and Adaptive Security Initiative (CASI;) Arlington, VA: 2017
- “Storytelling: A Peaceful Power,” TEDx talk; Nashville, TN: 2016
- “The Transformative Power of Storytelling: A Social Force for Social Change,” Botkin Lecture Series, 40th Anniversary of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress; Washington, DC: 2016
- “Narratives of Hope,” paper at the Society for Anthropology North American conference; Durham, NC: 2013
- “Beyond the Comfort Zone: Challenging Conventional Narratives of Peace,” a speech for the Rotary Spring Conference: 2013
- “Poetry for Social Change,” lecture at the Peace to Peace Conference; Greenwood, SC: 2012
- “Social Justice Folklore,” an address at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage; Washington DC: 2013
- Keynote address to international delegation at United Nations; New York, NY: 2012
- “Ethnography at Street Level,” paper delivered at the American Folklore Society conference; New Orleans, LA: 2012
- “The Engaged Museum,” speech at UNESCO British Council Managing World Heritage Sites conference; Edinburgh, Scotland: 2008
- “Challenging Sectarianism,” lecture at the Gallery of Modern Art Lecture Series; Glasgow, Scotland: 2007
- Keynote speaker at Conference on World Religions: 2007
- “Engaging with Communities and New Arrivals,” keynote at Northern Ireland Museums Conference; Belfast, Northern Ireland: 2005

WORKSHOPS/PRESENTATIONS/CONSULTATIONS

- Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Creative Encounters; Living Religions, ten daily “kitchen table” storytelling circle conversations, presentations and facilitation of main stage narrative session panels, as part of a *Storytelling as a Sacred Gift*- theme. The National Mall, July 29 and July 9, 2023.
- Led Storytelling training in Evanston, Illinois that took place at Rotary International Headquarters’ One Rotary Center. This was part of Rotary leadership Global Support Seminar to train and introduce regional leaders from 19 different countries on storytelling as a community building practice. February 2023.
- Hosted a “Changing the Narrative” roundtable discussion at International Storytelling Center with The Emancipator’s Co-Editors. The Emancipators project is part of The *Boston Globe* and Boston University Center for Antiracist Research led by anti-racist activist scholar Dr. Ibram X. Kendi.
- Participated in a special convening of storytelling and music with world-class cellist Yo-Yo Ma. Kiran led a thinking exercise and workshop focusing on the interplay between culture and the environment, music and stories, and how they can foster peace and understanding, building out connections between and among one another and the land upon which we live and work. Kiran participated as a thinking partner in partnership with The Office performing arts and film, the

National Park Service, the Cherokee Museum, Tremont, Black in Appalachia, and other participants.; Great Smoky Mountains National Park; 2022

- New Pluralists Collaborative Conflict Transformation and Healing Focus Group. Kiran was invited to participate in this focus group, aimed at developing a focal area strategy for future New Pluralists grant-making. Other change leaders included those associated with projects such as, On Being Project, One America Movement, Braver Angels, Common Ground USA, Mediators beyond Borders International, Faith Matters Network. New Pluralists plan to distribute \$100 million dollars over 10 years. 2022.
- Presented a workshop entitled “Strengthening Voices” as a follow-up to the keynote at the Big West Institute; Zoom; 2022
- Delivered a keynote speech and a one-hour workshop for approximately 600 Rotary leaders including Rotary International President Shekhar Mehta at the Big West Zone Institute; Tucson, AZ: 2021
- Delivered an applied storytelling presentation for the “fine arts and PE” section of Niswonger Regional Learning Day, a professional development summit for regional K-12 teachers across disciplines sponsored by the Niswonger Foundation; Greeneville, TN: 2021
- “Finding Your Story,” a workshop for young adults presented as part of the Young Appalachian Story Summit; Jonesborough, TN: 2021
- Bureau of Land Management, New Mexico—Zoom. A two-part training for colleagues at the Bureau of Land Management and their invitees from other state and federal agencies working in New Mexico. The focus was on how to more ethically and holistically gather and tell the stories of “The Land of Enchantment” including BIPOC stories of the land. This follows a training we did in the fall of 2020 with practitioners from the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the Forestry Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service on how to understand storytelling as a community building tool to support telling the story of nationally designated “wilderness” locations, participants attended from all four US times zones.
- July 15: RiffRaff Arts Collective—Princeton, West Virginia. An informal, community conversation/consultation, with Q&A/talkback for artists to kick off the “We Need to Talk!” initiative, a project funded by an NEA Our Town grant looking to use the arts for community diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- “commUNITY,” a community-building talk/workshop joint event presented in partnership with Stuart Rotary of Stuart, Virginia: 2021
- Presentation to the National Council of Tradition Arts on the impact of the Freedom Stories initiative; virtual, 2021
- Presentation to Biden-Harris Arts and Humanities Transition Team on the importance of the arts and humanities in rural regions such as Central Appalachia; virtual: 2020
- “Telling Stories that Matter” workshop; a training for members of the interpretive staff at the Bureau of Land Management, the National Parks Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Forestry Service; virtual: 2020
- Artists at Work advocacy training; a workshop for members of the AAW team, a WPA-inspired pandemic-response project funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation; virtual: 2020
- “Stories as Medicine” pilots; a series of resiliency-trainings designed for healthcare workers, developed in direct response to the Covid-19 pandemic; Johnson City, TN and Ballarat, Australia: 2020
- Training and consulting for the Uganda Storytelling Initiative; Tororo, Uganda: ongoing

- Story Circle Leader, House Foreign Relations Committee; eventually helping lead to the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2019; Washington, DC: 2016
- “Telling Stories that Matter,” a collaborative series of workshops for community building and healing following the shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church; Charleston, SC: Feb. 2016
- Community Partners Action Summit participant at the invitation of the White House; Washington, DC: 2015
- Participated in various talks and projects across Colombia focused on social responsibilities, human rights education, and peace promotion with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs); Bogotá, Ibagué, and Cartagena, Colombia: 2009
- Human rights-centered program and workshop for World Refugee Day; Glasgow, Scotland: 2008
- Panel speaker on “museums of the future” at the “Moving on Up” development session; UK Museums Association: 2008
- Glasgow representative in sister-city project “Societies in Crisis” sponsored by the European Commission aimed at better structuring and enriching educational approaches to youth initiatives across Europe and the Mediterranean; Marseilles, France: 2007
- “Faith to Faith: F2F,” adult social justice learning program aimed at allowing visitors to discuss and debate issues relating to religion in Scotland and the world; Glasgow, Scotland: 2007
- Invited to chair session at the UK Museums Association conference: 2004
- “Sense over Sectarianism,” a 16 panel exhibition produced by working with two schools and using artworks produced by students; Glasgow, Scotland: 2004

PUBLICATIONS & CONTRIBUTIONS

- Contributed Forward for *Speak Peace: Words of Wisdom, Work, and Wonder* by Lyn Ford and Sherry Norfolk in response to the killing of Alton Sterling; 2019
- “Storytelling and Community in Jonesborough, Tennessee,” Main Street America article for The National Trust for Historic Preservation; 2016
- “Telling Stories that Matter,” a toolkit for exploring one’s potential as a storyteller, used in communities and schools across the US and 18 countries; 2013 (rev. 2016)
- “Challenging Stigmas, Celebrating Disability,” Deaf Blind International; 2010
- “Towards Understanding Slavery,” an article for Glasgow Museums exhibitions commemorating the bicentennial of Scotland’s abolition of the slave trade; 2007
- “St Mungo Museum: Thick-skinned but Full of Faith!” an article for *SHCG News*, the Social History. Curators Group biannual newsletter; 2003

AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

- Nominated for the National NEA Martin Luther King Jr. Human and Civil Rights award. 2023.
- United Way unsung heroes’ award. 2022.
- Purdue Peacebuilding Big Idea Challenge winner; Purdue University, 2019
- “Champion for Peace” Rotary International and the United Nations, 2016
- Received “exceptional ability” Greencard by US Government, for specialist and unique contributions to benefit the citizens of the United States.
- Paul Harris Fellow Award; Rotary International, 2011
- Invited to serve as an advisory member to UK National Commission for UNESCO Scotland and invited to meet with UNESCO Director General, 2011
- Her Majesty’s Inspectorate for Scotland recommendation for “Bigot Busters,” 2007

- Invited to present exemplar project at the First Minister's Summit on Sectarianism, 2006
- Enterprise for Scotland award for "Sense over Sectarianism," 2005
- Invited to chair session on "Diversify" at the UK Museums Association Conference, 2004

EDUCATION

- **University of North Carolina/Duke University; Chapel Hill, NC:** M.A. in Folklore/American Studies & Graduate certificate in International Peace & Conflict Resolution; 2013
- **Newcastle University; Newcastle Upon Tyne, England:** M.A., in Museum, Gallery, and Heritage Studies; 2003
- **University of Leicester:** Post Graduate in Art Education. 1999.
- **University of Wolverhampton; Wolverhampton, England:** B.A., Honors in Art & Design, 1998