



INTERNATIONAL  
STORYTELLING CENTER

Connecting the World through the Power of Storytelling

## Stories as Medicine: Stories for Community Health and Recovery



The International Storytelling Center (ISC) is building *Stories as Medicine*, a new training program anchored in trauma-informed care and designed to reinforce resilience, empathy, communication, and self-care among essential healthcare workers, public health practitioners, and rural and community development specialists. This program aims to empower participants with the new and relevant skills they need to meet the challenges of the current COVID-19 crisis, and others, head-on. Such work has always been important, but the current pandemic illustrates just how critical this work is now. The *Stories as Medicine* project was originally piloted in a local 21-hospital healthcare system, before being disseminated to over 300 community healthcare workers and humanitarians across the US and Victoria, Australia. The world's first project of its kind, our plans are to ensure *Stories as Medicine* is ready to scale up and be rolled out worldwide—to hospitals, healthcare facilities, and communities in distress. This unique project can be a training vehicle for anyone involved in humanitarian, healthcare, or economic recovery work.

As the global leader in professional storytelling, ISC has spent the last 50 years at the forefront of storytelling practice, theory, and advocacy. We run the largest storytelling festival in the world, and we train teachers, NGOs, and peacebuilders around the globe to use the power of story in community development and peacebuilding. Our work in the field of *applied storytelling* has professionalized an entire industry and serves to highlight storytelling as a powerful tool for use across a wide array of disciplines.

To enact our vision of a better world through storytelling, we are pushing beyond our physical boundaries to build virtual platforms that will empower individuals to tell their own story, connect people within a community to solve local problems, and bond communities together to tackle the global crisis (and crises) we face, now and in the future. Each person has their own unique experience of the world, their own unique perspective—meaning we potentially have billions of ways we can radically shift the global narrative towards health,

empathy, and prosperity. Storytelling is a simple act. It can take place between two people, two communities, or two countries. It scales up and it scales down. Stories are humanity's birthright and each story holds potential to change the world.

As changes and challenges arise, people often feel increasingly isolated, unseen, and excluded. Unrest often stems from this disenfranchisement, and we frequently lack the resources to understand and cope with such exclusion. This is truer now than ever before with social distancing and isolation requirements still in place. Many lack access to physical resources during this pandemic, but we also lack access to emotional and spiritual resources such as family gatherings, religious services, and the social connectivity that helps define us as a species. These deficits all lead to a breakdown of our humanity, stoking fear and distrust, dividing communities, and fueling hatred, discrimination, and violence—as we have seen readily play out across our news screens in recent days and weeks.

However, from nearly 50 years' experience building capacity in communities across sectors and generations, ISC knows that storytelling offers a potent and vital intervention tool in addressing these issues. Stories serve as powerful analytic tools, helping us grapple with complex and difficult experiences in equitable and accessible ways. Storytelling is truly democratic, requiring neither wealth, status, nor formal education to access, making it readily available to those who need it most. Story is inherently good and is born of resilience and survival, turning challenge into opportunity, chaos into order.

Our aim is to scale up the *Stories as Medicine* program and establish a “train the trainer” model in which humanitarians, health workers, community and rural development specialists, and others in similar roles can gain access to best practices in applied storytelling and hone new skills through proven techniques. This, in turn, will allow them to lead such programs in their own communities in collaboration with their local health and recovery sectors, ensuring these communities are empowered to envision a better story—and a better world—for themselves.

Backed by research and experience, the *Stories as Medicine* project will center on the expansion of online multimedia training resources including webinars, self-guided workshops, curriculum materials, and virtual instructional videos and podcasts centered on empowering essential workers during this global pandemic and beyond. These materials will not be exclusive to COVID-19 relief, but will be applicable to a variety of challenges beyond the pandemic, particularly those in the fields of healthcare, economic recovery, and humanitarian aid.

Simply put, storytelling not only enriches lives, it can change the world. By working together for good, we can help craft the greatest story ever told: The story where humanity reclaimed its integrity and shifted the global narrative from destruction to creation, from despair to beauty, from conflict to a world where peace becomes a reality.



*Stories as Medicine* is currently in development and seeking funding. If you are interested in being a potential sponsor, please contact Kiran Singh Sirah, ISC President at [kiran@storytellingcenter.net](mailto:kiran@storytellingcenter.net).