



INTERNATIONAL STORYTELLING CENTER

Connecting the World through the Power of Storytelling

National Storytelling Festival and *Storytelling Live!* Outreach and Digital Learning Program Proposal 2021-2022

Introduction

The International Storytelling Center (ISC) is an educational and cultural institution dedicated to building a better world through the power of storytelling. Our mission is to inspire and empower people to tell their stories, listen to and honor the stories of others, and use storytelling to produce positive change. All of ISC's programming reflect the highest standards, ensuring that a diverse selection of storytellers from existing and emergent traditions are represented.

For nearly fifty years, ISC has been at the forefront of America's storytelling renaissance, a revival ignited in 1973 by the first National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee's oldest town. The Festival became our flagship event—the world's first, largest, and most acclaimed public event devoted exclusively to the art of storytelling.

ISC turned a grassroots movement into an international storytelling revival, spawning hundreds of storytelling programs, festivals, organizations and activities across the country and around the world. After the first Festival, the vocation of "professional storyteller" was born. ISC helped professionalize storytelling as an industry, as an artistic movement, and as an academic discipline. Today, the National Storytelling Festival remains the world's premiere storytelling event. Its sister series, *Storytelling Live!*—the only program of its kind in the United States—annually offers artistic storytelling residencies in Jonesborough for six months of each year, with additional shows in other months as well. Both of these ISC mainstay programs were presented virtually in 2020.

Our education programs vary from year to year, but are consistent in their quality and inclusivity. Each program offers an arts pathway for youth. For example, in working to reach communities in counties in and around our region that might have little or no access to the arts, we are able to provide storytelling-based arts programming for children and youth who would otherwise have none. Our children's concerts showcase master storytellers, and we specifically work with regional education partners such as Coalition for Kids, Boys and Girls Club, local libraries, and schools, as well as offering concerts in direct collaboration with the children's hospital and other public health partners.

We also offer programs specifically designed for youth-at-risk. These educational programs have been informed by trauma-care specialists as well as education, workforce development, and communication experts. Our [*Shero's Journey*](#) program serves girls ages 10-13 from across Northeast Tennessee, many of whom have survived traumatic experiences, and our Stories for Change is an empowerment program for teenagers, offering them a safe space to unpack their personal stories and re-author these narratives of struggle as stories of hope and resilience.

The Young Appalachian Story Summit is designed for young professionals, ages 18-25. This civic leadership program aims to address a critical issue: How can these young leaders use storytelling as a tool to help create Appalachia's future? By leveraging the power of story in a variety of disciplines, this one-day deep-dive series of workshops and plenaries helps young professionals explore how to use their stories to create positive social change right here in our region. We make a special effort to ensure young people from low-income or disadvantaged populations can attend, working to attract young people from the immediate region and neighboring states, particularly Virginia, Kentucky, and North Carolina.

Other education programs include our Kids Institute. In November of 2019, over 700 5th graders from around the region attended the first Kids Institute, which for many, was their first exposure to storytelling arts. During the pandemic, while in-person events were on hold, we created Story Guides, using live footage made possible from previous Niswonger Foundation support, filmed at the National Storytelling Festival. These curriculum additions include links to each video, questions which help explore different facets of each story, activity suggestions based on the performances, and event introductions for how participants can craft their own story. These Guides are free to teachers, educators, home school learners, and the general public to help engage young learners in grades 3-8 although we have found they are often enjoyed by learners of all ages).

Impact

With support from the Niswonger Foundation in 2020, ISC was able to successfully hold the National Storytelling Festival virtually, September 29th through October 3rd. This event contained over forty-two hours of programming, employed forty professional artists, and had nearly 10,000 attendees. Of these attendees, a total of 18% had never attended the Festival in person. The first ever, virtual National Storytelling Festival provided multiple streams of instruction including footage from our archives, discussion panels, curated programming, story-based workshops, and interactive engagement for our attendees. Friday's program included a track specifically geared toward children and families.

Feedback was solicited from artists, teachers, and participants, with positive comments on all. A few of the reviews are provided below.

"Hello! The virtual festival this year is so good! Thank you so much for all of the hard work that you all are doing to put this together for us! It is absolutely wonderful to get to relish the performances from afar! It is evident the work that you all have been employing to produce high quality virtual performances! I'm a teacher with too much time spent on Zoom and Google Meets. What you are giving us is a beautiful respite. Thank you again. :)"

"Miracles. The Festival is FABULOUS!!! So clean, warm, easy to navigate, full of heart and truth and courage. Everyone is texting how wonderful it is!! Hold your head high. It's beautiful. Thank you."

"I want to express how nourished, moved and inspired I feel. I'm "churching" this morning with David and Josh. Just ... Sigh. My heart is so full and fed. And lonely too. Missing the tents and hugs, and the quiet breathing of an audience entrained. Thank you for doing the festival this year so the line could be unbroken."

"This live stream made my day! So happy you all provided it- a gift- the gift of story- many thanks."

“So glad to be able to share this with my kids. I grew up going to the storytelling festival, and I’m grateful to be able to pass on the experience. THANK YOU!”

During the digital 2020 National Storytelling Festival, ISC hosted a live workshop for teachers led by Storyteller Lyn Ford; the session was also recorded. Lyn led the workshop in a way that would also be appropriate for teachers to view at a later date. The workshop, *Focused on Feelings: Storytelling to Support Emotional Intelligence in Children*, is geared toward second and third graders and emphasizes ways to support children's social and emotional development. We granted two hundred and seventy-seven regional teachers access to this recording for the first two weeks of December 2020. This offer was also extended to NPAC's teachers via Vicky Hudson.

ISC's story guides are designed to support teachers and parents adapting to new ways of teaching. These guides are created using the recordings of live footage filmed at previous National Storytelling Festivals, and are geared towards grades 3-8. In 2020, ISC created 22 story guides featuring 14 tellers. Access to these were recently offered to the aforementioned teachers via an online toolkit.

On November 21st, ISC presented a virtual children's concert. This subsidized event had an admission price of only \$5/household. It included folktales from award winning children's author Carmen Deedy, along with tales from professional storytellers Adam Booth, Simon Brooks, Ed Stivender, and Clare Murphy. Complimentary admission was also offered to regional organizations that serve at-risk and underserved populations, including Coalition for Kids, Boys/Girls Club, Girl's Inc., and the Niswonger Children's Hospital. The subsidized concert had a total attendance of 770.

In addition, the concert was made available pro bono to regional classrooms. A total of 450 regional children were able to watch the concert for free.

Following the 2020 National Storytelling Festival, we began a 2020 fall series called “Storytelling Online” which featured eight weeks of storytelling events. The series showcased nationally known storyteller and Jonesborough resident, Barbara McBride-Smith, in a concert of family stories. We offered complimentary access to Barbara’s concert to twenty-three senior/assisted living centers in the area, which was available for viewing over a week-long period.

This fall we will return to an in-person National Storytelling Festival in addition to hosting a virtual Festival as well.

Goal

Our goal is simple: to bring professional storytelling into the lives of as many people, both young and old, as possible. The ability to view these performances online has changed the footprint of the organization. Our theaters and tents are no longer at capacity, our reach can expand even further. With funding from the Niswonger Foundation, ISC can reach those who might not otherwise have the ability to ever visit the International Storytelling Center or attend the National Storytelling Festival.

Live streaming the National Storytelling Festival is one excellent avenue for accomplishing this goal. Strengthening support for the online expansion of our *Storytelling Live!* program is another. Reaching elementary school teachers is a third way. All utilize professional storytelling by the foremost artists in the field.

Project Activities

National Storytelling Festival Livestream:

While visitors travel from around the country and the globe to attend the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, each year, many locals including youth, and especially those who are economically disadvantaged, never witness these professional storytellers in live performances. Continued live streaming of the festival, with specialized marketing and communications development, including improved quality and viewing standards, will ensure that local residents as well as students and young people in surrounding communities have access to the event regardless of their location.

***Storytelling Live!* Outreach to Individuals, Youth, and Teachers:**

ISC is committed to helping our region's rural and underserved community access our program of live storytelling. We work annually with area schools and organizations such as Coalition for Kids, Washington County Library, and Girls, Inc. to provide complimentary programming. Continuing this pro bono programming for youth gives area children access to professional tellers in a live performance setting. In 2021, we will continue to offer a complimentary workshop, an in-service opportunity to benefit East Tennessee elementary school teachers.

With the Niswonger Foundation's support:

- ISC will livestream parts of the National Storytelling Festival as part of the virtual offering of the Festival. ISC will improve the quality and viewing standards of the livestream feed by making the following modifications:
 - Dedicated high speed internet access
 - Additional stage lighting focused on the storyteller
 - Additional camera placement for multiple viewpoints
 - Additional microphones dedicated to audience reaction, i.e. clapping and laughing
- ISC's *Storytelling Live!* youth outreach, which is a pro bono program, will be partially underwritten. The 2020 program reached over 1200 school-aged children and included outreach to Johnson City's Coalition for Kids, Boys/Girls Club, Girl's Inc., and the Niswonger Children's Hospital.
- ISC will provide a two-hour workshop to area elementary school teachers in order to teach storytelling skills for use in the classroom. The workshop will be free of charge to teachers. The participating teachers are provided a Professional Development Certificate of Completion and receive required in-service credit.
- Utilizing our video live stream archive, ISC will continue to create Story Guides. These curriculum accompaniments include links to each video, questions which help explore different facets of each story, activity suggestions based on the performances, and event introductions for how participants can craft their own story. These Guides will be provided free to teachers, educators, home school learners, and the general public to help engage young learners in grades 3-8.

Participating tellers for the livestreaming, outreach, and training will be specially selected to ensure that they possess the skills and expertise to both mesmerize their young audiences and provide quality professional development learning experiences for students and their educators. Storytelling activities and experiences help children develop language and literacy skills. Many studies have examined the effects of storytelling and its ability to address literacy. As far back as 1988, Cliatt and Shaw (Cliatt, M, and J. Shaw. "The Storytime Exchange: Ways to Enhance It." *Childhood Education* 64(5), pp 293-298, 1988) concluded that "The relationship of storytelling and successful children's literacy development is well established." Their study showed that "Children learn and internalize story structure from a diet of told and read stories" and that this process enhanced children's development of language skills.

Research tells us that a teacher's role is critical to a child's learning and that teachers can inspire children to read, write, and learn through thoughtful planning and developmentally appropriate literacy instruction. In ten studies of elementary students in 2001, each study documented that "storytelling enhanced literacy." (Mello, R. Proceedings, Storytelling in the Americas Conference, St Catherine, Ontario: Brooks University Press, 2001.) Mello's study concluded that "Storytelling was an effective learning tool that linked literature to content and experience." Programming will be diversified to include as great a breadth and depth of expertise across content areas as possible, while placing Storytelling as a cross disciplinary STEM learning tool.

Evaluation of Program Impact

Through the festival and its livestream outreach, an estimated 5,000 school-aged children per year will be reached. In addition, through Storytelling Live's outreach program, approximately 1,500 students per year will be reached. And finally, up to 100 elementary school classroom teachers will be impacted each year. Quantitative outcome measures will be based on the number of tellers participating and the number of children reached. Qualitative outcomes will be gauged through audience feedback, quality of engagement feedback from ISC partners and participants, a media impact report and by interviewing teachers regarding the impact that the tellers and such programs have on the children as well as feedback from the educator's workshop.

Funding Request

Funds are requested for the 2021-22 year (July to June) in the amount of \$10,000. This equates to \$5,000 yearly to support live streaming of the festival, which includes expanded marketing, archiving, and technical upgrades; \$1,000 yearly for the free teacher workshop; \$3,000 yearly to support ISC's youth outreach programming that is implemented through our *Storytelling Live!* series; and \$1,000 yearly to curate educational video content.