



INTERNATIONAL STORYTELLING CENTER

Connecting the World through the Power of Storytelling

ISC Outreach and Digital Learning Proposal 2023-2024

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 reflects the highest standards, ensuring that a diverse selection of storytellers from existing and emergent traditions are represented.

For more than 50 years, ISC has been at the forefront of America's storytelling renaissance, 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. Through the Festival, ISC helped professionalize storytelling as an industry, artistic movement, and academic discipline.

Today, the National Storytelling Festival remains the world's premier storytelling event. Its sister series, [Storytelling Live](#)—the only program of its kind in the United States—offers artistic storytelling residencies in Jonesborough for six months each year, with special holiday shows offered in December.

Outreach

Our performing arts outreach programs vary from year to year but remain consistent in their quality and diversity of offerings. All of ISC's programs are designed to offer an arts pathway for youth. For example, we are able to offer Storytelling Live programming through a network of community partners to reach kids that might have little or no access to the arts. We plan our residency weeks in conjunction with organizations such as [Coalition for Kids](#), [Boys and Girls Clubs](#) of Greeneville and Johnson City, [Carver Rec Center](#), [Langston Centre](#), local libraries, and surrounding school districts to provide low-to-no-cost storytelling concerts and other educational opportunities each season.

We also offer programs targeted specifically to local and regional youth. Our ongoing “Stories for Change” program partners with the Langston Centre to provide a multicultural storytelling curriculum to at-risk children in Johnson City. Langston’s Afterschool Institute is an on-site program that serves students in grades 3-8 throughout the school year. The Institute is offered at no cost to students and includes free transportation from participating schools. This year’s Stories for Change program is a proposed “Intro to Storytelling” course which will culminate in a public performance at the end of the fall semester. A variety of resident storytellers will offer different course sections with a local instructor supplementing and supporting the students along the way.

Other youth programs in 2023 include our [Kids Storytelling Institute](#), which is planned for November 6-10, 2023. Reverend Robert B. Jones, Sr. will offer an interactive storytelling session introducing the Civil Rights Movement to area fifth graders. The Kids Institute is designed to meet Tennessee Department of Education Academic Standards for English and Social Studies and provides participating classrooms with a teacher toolkit with a link to the recorded session, supplemental teaching guides, and additional content sources.

ISC has also created [Story Guides](#) using live footage filmed at the National Storytelling Festival, and made possible by previous Niswonger Foundation support. Part of our [Learning Library](#), these curriculum additions include links to each video, questions that 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 Story Guides are free to teachers, educators, home school learners, and the general public to help engage young learners in grades 3-8, although anecdotal feedback suggests they are often enjoyed by learners of all ages.

Impact

With support from the Niswonger Foundation in 2022, ISC was able to successfully record stories live at the 50th annual National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough which was released post-event on October 28 and was available for viewing through Thanksgiving weekend. The 2022 festival showcased a diverse line-up of 28 storytelling artists, including a cowboy poet, a deaf artist, and cultural perspectives from African, Latino, Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern, Indian, and Northern European traditions. Over 500 households tuned in to the virtual festival broadcast, with an estimated attendance of 1250 viewers representing 41 states and 3 countries (New Zealand, Canada, and England).

Niswonger funds also supported ISC’s youth outreach programming in 2022 through our Storytelling Live performance series. The series featured 26 weeks of professional storytellers who appeared both in-person and online. Each week, resident tellers presented five hour-long matinee concerts in ISC’s 95-seat theater, one of which was recorded and broadcast for online viewers at home. ISC hosted six (6) pro bono performances for child-centered community organizations and school groups. In total, the hybrid storytelling program resulted in nearly 200 performances, hosted over 9,300 audience members, featured 27 artists, and engaged with more than 800 students and/or youth in subsidized performances and learning opportunities. In November of 2022, some 450 fifth graders attended the Kids Storytelling Institute, which for many, was their first exposure to a live storytelling performance.

Funding Request

ISC is requesting \$10,000 for the fiscal year 2023-2024 (July to June). This equates to \$7,000 to support virtual access to the festival, which includes expanded production, marketing, archiving, and technical upgrades; \$1,500 for a story-based teacher workshop available free of charge to East Tennessee educators; \$1,500 to support ISC's youth outreach programming that will be implemented through our Storytelling Live series.

Goal

ISC's goal as an organization is to share the power of storytelling as a performing art with as many people as possible. The ability to view performances online has significantly expanded the footprint of the organization. While we are excited to have our theater and tents packed with in-person audience members this year, the opportunity to reach new storytelling audiences across the world remains a priority. The effects are two-fold: it allows us to offer the cultural and artistic benefits of storytelling at low or no cost to underserved communities and it also helps to ensure the sustainability of the art form.

Distributing the National Storytelling Festival virtually is an excellent avenue for accomplishing this goal. Strengthening support for the online expansion of our Storytelling Live program is another. Reaching and supporting teachers (and subsequently our young people) is a third way. All utilize professional storytelling by the foremost artists in the field. With funding from the Niswonger Foundation, ISC can reach those who might not otherwise have the ability to visit the International Storytelling Center or attend the National Storytelling Festival.

Proposed Project Activities

Expanded Access to the National Storytelling Festival and Storytelling Live

The Tennessee Arts Commission (TAC) defines "underserved" populations according to the following criteria: children under 18, senior citizens, people of color, people with disabilities, and people living in rural or isolated settings. While thousands of visitors from around the country (and sometimes the world) travel to Jonesborough to attend ISC events each year, there are East Tennessee residents who fall into the above categories and are not able to attend. ISC is committed to keeping performing arts accessible to our region's distressed and "at risk" communities which include the following target counties as determined by TAC: Cocke, Hancock, Carter, Greene, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington.

Quality recordings of storytelling performances, including improved quality and viewing standards, will ensure expanded access to ISC's live performance events.

- ISC will record and distribute parts of the National Storytelling Festival as part of the virtual offering of the Festival.
- ISC will record and make available one virtual concert each week for the duration of the Storytelling Live performance season beginning in July 2023 and running through June 2024.

Continued Outreach and Training for Individuals, Youth, and Teachers

ISC works in conjunction with area schools and community partners to provide complimentary programming each year. Storytelling activities and experiences help children develop language and literacy skills.

Numerous 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 also 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 10 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 showcasing storytelling as a cross-disciplinary STEM learning tool.

- In 2023-2024, we will again offer a complimentary virtual workshop for teachers, an in-service opportunity to benefit East Tennessee educators and students. ISC will provide a story-based workshop to area elementary school teachers in order to teach storytelling skills for use in the classroom. The workshop will be recorded and ISC will provide Niswonger Foundation partners access to the recorded material on a limited-use, non-commercial basis for educational purposes. ISC will also provide classroom materials in conjunction with the workshop for use as a teacher education resource.
- ISC's Storytelling Live youth outreach, which is a pro bono program, will be partially underwritten.

Note: Outreach efforts in 2022-2023 included two children's concerts offered at a reduced rate in May and June, and an additional nine (9) subsidized performances for kids featuring former children's librarian Carol Birch, musician and children's theater director Sam Payne, bi-lingual teaching artist Carolina Quiroga, Kenya-born folk teller Mara Menzies, Appalachian ballad singer Sheila Kay Adam, and children's author and storyteller Bill Harley. Students from Greene, Washington, and Sullivan counties attended the Kids Storytelling Institute and Stories for Change.

- Age-appropriate content from the National Storytelling Festival will be made available to the Niswonger Foundation for distribution to its partner network for classroom use.

Participating tellers for the virtual festival, 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 learning experiences for students and their educators.

Measuring Program Impact

Through the festival and its livestream outreach, an estimated 3,000 school-aged children per year will be reached. In addition, through Storytelling Live's outreach program, approximately 2,000 students per year will be reached. And finally, up to 300 elementary teachers will be impacted each year. Quantitative outcome measures will be based on the number of tellers participating and the number of children viewing. 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 teacher workshop.