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NATIONAL LOUIS UNIVERSITY

CONNECTIONS THROUGH STORIES IN A SMALL TOWN IN RURAL VIRGINIA

A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY DOCTORAL PROGRAM
IN THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

BY

Andrea Plamondon 2023

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Chicago, Illinois

October 2023

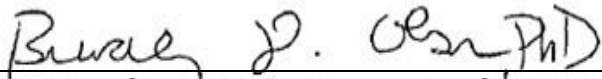
Community Psychology Doctoral Program

Dissertation Notification of Completion

Doctoral Candidate: Andrea Plamondon

Title of Dissertation: Connections through stories in a small town in rural Virginia

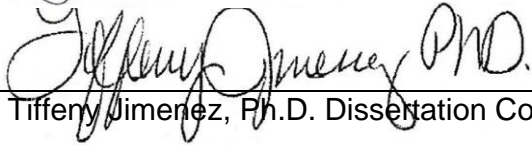
Certification: In accordance with the departmental and University policies, the above named candidate has satisfactorily completed a Dissertation as required for attaining the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Community Psychology Doctoral Program (College of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences) at National Louis University.



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CONNECTIONS THROUGH STORIES IN A SMALL TOWN IN RURAL VIRGINIA

Abstract

Stories are powerful tools used for centuries to entertain, teach, empower, and build community. Neuroscience research shows that stories impact the brain in ways that allow us to increase empathy and connect with people (*What Happens in the Brain When We Hear Stories?*, n.d.; Yang, 2014; Zak, 2015). Community Psychologists have used stories to collect qualitative data and life experiences to create or change a community narrative and address community trauma (Hyman, 2002; Rappaport, 2000). While existing research describes the power of stories and provides storytelling techniques, this research study identified a new method – The Community Story Engine - for Community Psychologists and community partners to use to build connections in the community, spark challenging conversations, and collect the community's voice sharing their strengths and challenges as an input into strategic action planning (Campbell, 1949; Denborough, 2008; P. G. Foster-Fishman et al., 2009; Law, 2017, 2014; White, 2007). A guided storytelling workshop was designed and tested which delivered 80 stories. The stories were coded to identify themes, common interests, and community strengths and challenges. The stories were compiled into a collection to be shared with the community to create connections and provoke conversations. The place-based research was conducted in Virginia's small, rural community with a history of family and tradition, patriotism and loyalty, segregation, and polarity, all with the beautiful backdrop of the town's mountains. The research led to five findings: the Storytelling Workshop created connections, even safe stories can be a lightning rod to spark conversations, stories can be a doorway for the Community Psychologist, the storytelling research approach was not extractive but a gift and the praxis of the Community Story Engine and tools. This process and tools can be used by Community Psychologists to build

and strengthen community relationships, make meaningful connections in the community and spark challenging conversations, and use the outputs as input into strategic action planning.

Acknowledgments

I extend my deepest gratitude to my committee, Dr. Bradley Olson, Dr. Judah Viola, and Dr. Tiffeny Jimenez. They introduced me to the basics of Community Psychology and then explored it with me as we learned together. Dr. Olson always encouraged me to think big. Dr. Viola provided the structure and rigor behind qualitative methodologies and made it make sense. I extend my heart and hands to Dr. Jimenez who helped me along this journey from the beginning as I flailed around with both good and bad intentions and ideas. She patiently shared her knowledge and experiences to help me find understanding and purpose and use my positionality to contribute positively.

My work could not have been possible without the partnership and support of Julie S. and Community Partner board members. Together we explored how to make connections across a community stricken by polarity on many fronts including racism. A community member commented “I do not know how you convince people to agree to do it and then actually sign on and show up. It takes a certain chutzpah to approach people and ask them to do something unusual.” Julie gave me the chutzpah every step of the way. And to my other Virginia connection, Mom, and Dad, who courageously opened their hometown to explore together.

I could not have completed this research without the constant support of my life partner, Mike Plamondon. He listened to the stories, challenged me to dig deep to address all the feedback (the good, the bad, and the ugly), and celebrated the big and little successes with me along the way. He is my biggest fan and insists I can truly do anything.

Introduction

Prologue – My Smalltown Story

For as long as I can remember, summer vacation and Christmas time meant piling into the family car and making the long trek from West Chester, Ohio to Smalltown, Virginia - Grandma's house. It was all about the family, the food, and the fun times. Big family gatherings were with aunts and uncles and cousins, great-aunts and great-uncles, grandparents, and great-grandparents. There was country ham sliced by the men, biscuits made by Grandma's hands every day, and dishes piled high and cleaned by the women. There were Scrabble games, climbing trees, and hiking the Peaks of Otter. And there was plenty of singing and laughing to Granddaddy's crazy songs.

Fast forward 30+ years and I return to Smalltown regularly to visit my parents and a few remaining aunts and cousins. My brothers join me for the Christmas parade right down Main Street and the Christmas Tree lighting in the center of town. And you guessed it more food, games, singing, and laughing. But today, we sing different songs. Songs without the hint of a white privileged lifestyle built on the backs of Black people in rural Virginia.

I am a white, middle-aged woman living and working in the Chicagoland area in Illinois privileged by what comes as a white, educated, experienced business woman. I am on a learning journey to understand the impact of my privilege and the ways I need to change to be inclusive and truly treat others with equity. I have learned (and am still learning) the impact of my everyday actions and how my upbringing has caused hurt and perpetuated the cycle of racism.

This brings me to a deep interest in Community Psychology and research focused on a place – “Smalltown” Virginia – and a desire to foster community building for all the town's residents. This research collected the stories of residents; those young and old, those new to the town, returning and those who never left, those from the town and the county, and those whose

skin is black and white. The research considered a way to help community members connect through their stories and foster community together. My Smalltown Story is still being written but my dream is for it to be a story of authentic connection and healing.

Historical perspective

The town was founded in 1782 as Liberty Village and became a town in 1839. It was a strong, small town built on textile and furniture manufacturing and the production of electricity. The town prided itself as the World's Best Small Town. The town has a deep connection with World War II where many soldiers from the town fought and died in the battle of Normandy on D-Day. Today the city is a small cultural mecca with many artists and musicians working and living as residents.

Demographics

At the time of this research, according to the U.S. Census, the population of the town was 6,562. The outlying county included a population of 78,376. The focus of this research included the town and county. The gender split was 47.1% male and 52.9% female. The median age of residents in the town was 34.5 years but the county was older with a median age of 46.3 years. The number of people 65 years and older in the town was about 20%. The ethnicity mix of the town was 76.3% white, 20.3% Black and 3.4% Hispanic or other.

The median household income in the town was \$36,364 as compared to \$74,222 in Virginia. Approximately 23.8% of county residents and 45.7% of town residents lived at or below the poverty level as compared to 24.8% in Virginia. 40% of the school-aged children were eligible for free lunch and 97% of the students in Thomas Jefferson Elementary and Smalltown Alternative Education Center were eligible for free and reduced lunches. School attainment for people over 25 was 19.1% less than high school equivalent, 30% high school

equivalent or higher, 30% some college, and 29% bachelor's degree or higher (Centra Health, 2021).

Community Partner

Community Partner, a community organization in Smalltown working hard to make change and build community, partnered with the researcher. The mission of this organization is to eliminate prejudice, discrimination, and polarity by educating the public on topics of general interest to the community as a whole -- and provide a means by which residents can get to know each other, get a sense of the real fabric of the community, celebrate shared values, and create a shared stake in the future of Smalltown's next generation. Community Partner was a critical partner in this research making community connections and collecting stories. The findings of this research were intended to help identify future actions for Community Partner to achieve its mission.

Literature Review

Community Psychology is built on the idea of collaborating with community members to ensure diverse views and populations are represented and building on the strengths of the community to empower them and create a sense of community (Kloos et al., 2021). The existing research of Paolo Freire and Mary Watkins describes the roles of the researcher and the oppressed. In his work on the Liberation Psychology Theory, "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed" Freire outlines the importance of the oppressor working *with* the oppressed not *for* the oppressed. He also notes the importance of the researcher recognizing the dehumanization of the oppressed to build relationships. Similarly, in her work on Psychosocial Accompaniment, Watkins reports the importance of walking with those being served and identifies the steps of reflection, decolonizing roles, commitment to dialogical relationships, solidarity, and knowing one's role to

build relationships (Freire, 1972; Watkins, Mary, 2014). Finding ways to work with the community as equal partners is critical to Community Psychology.

The current literature review considers how Community Psychologists use storytelling and community narratives to walk with communities to identify strengths and actions. The review starts with the neuroscience of storytelling, how Community Psychologists have used storytelling and community narratives and explores several storytelling methods.

Research conducted in the field of neuroscience explains what happens in the brain of the storyteller and the listener. When stories are told it increases the storyteller and the listeners' empathy and ability to relate to each other (Yang, 2014; Zak, 2015). The connections between the storyteller and the listener are seen in the synchronization of brain waves (*What Happens in the Brain When We Hear Stories?*, n.d.). The neuroscience research supports the Community Psychology research of using stories to create a sense of community and healing. Community Psychology research explains the importance of engaging community members in the community-building process (Foster-Fishman et al., 2009; Hyman, 2002) and how using personal stories help the individual identify and articulate their values and beliefs while the community narratives help the community come together around a shared set of values and beliefs (Kelly, 1955; Olson et al., 2016; Rappaport, 2000). There are many ways stories and narratives have been used in Community Psychology. Narrative coaching can be used to help a community in crisis (Law, 2017). Shifting the community narrative can disrupt the dominant cultural narrative and the way the community identifies and believes (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Scott, 2019). Community narratives can also be used to assess the change and the effects of actions taken (Olson & Jason, 2011).

Many methods are used to collect stories and community narratives. The Story Arc defined by Joseph Campbell (Campbell, 1949) is referenced in many approaches with the

importance of a simple structure with a beginning, middle, and end. Story writing methods reviewed in this research include the Life Story Interview, a collective narrative approach leveraging cross-story exchange and definitional ceremonies, narrative coaching using definitional ceremonies, Photovoice Participatory Action Research, and the Flashbulb Memory.

Neuroscience of storytelling

A good story triggers various chemicals and various parts of your brain which leads to building trust, creating empathy, helping others, creating connections, improving communication, and increasing learning. Compelling stories cause oxytocin to release which affects our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, according to the research of Zak (2015). He explains the importance of oxytocin as the chemical that enhances the sense of empathy which allows us to understand another person's experience and choose to work with them. He also found that the more oxytocin released the more people were willing to help others. Oxytocin is released when the individual feels trust and Zak attributes it to be the chemical for the "Golden Rule: If you treat me well, in most cases my brain will synthesize oxytocin and this will motivate me to treat you well in return" (Zak, 2015, p. 3). A similar finding in the research of Yang (2014), explains how stories help the storyteller and the listener relate more to each other also improving empathy. He found that while listening to a story, the listener's brain searches for a similar experience which fires the insula in the brain and helps the listener relate to that same experience (Yang, 2014).

Brain science also explains how storytelling creates connections and improves communication. The research of Hasson shows listeners of a story have the same brain waves as the storyteller and as other listeners. This is called "neural entrainment" which allows for connection and improved communication of meaning. This same effect happens even when

relaying someone else's story. The connection creates a common ground and lays the foundation for communication and working together (Hasson, n.d.).

Storytelling increases learning and comprehension. A story can activate different parts of the brain including the cortex, motor cortex, and even our olfactory cortex. When these parts of the brain fire, it helps one to understand complex material and remember them better (Yang, 2014).

Based on the findings of the research discussed above, neuroscience supports the idea that stories can be used to create empathy and thus connections between the storyteller and the listener, improve communications, and enhance learning.

Storytelling and Community Psychology

Much research was found on storytelling and Community Psychology. Research shows stories can help build community and connections through collecting individual stories and creating a community narrative. Community Psychology often starts with stories to create a shared experience and engage the community and change the community narrative.

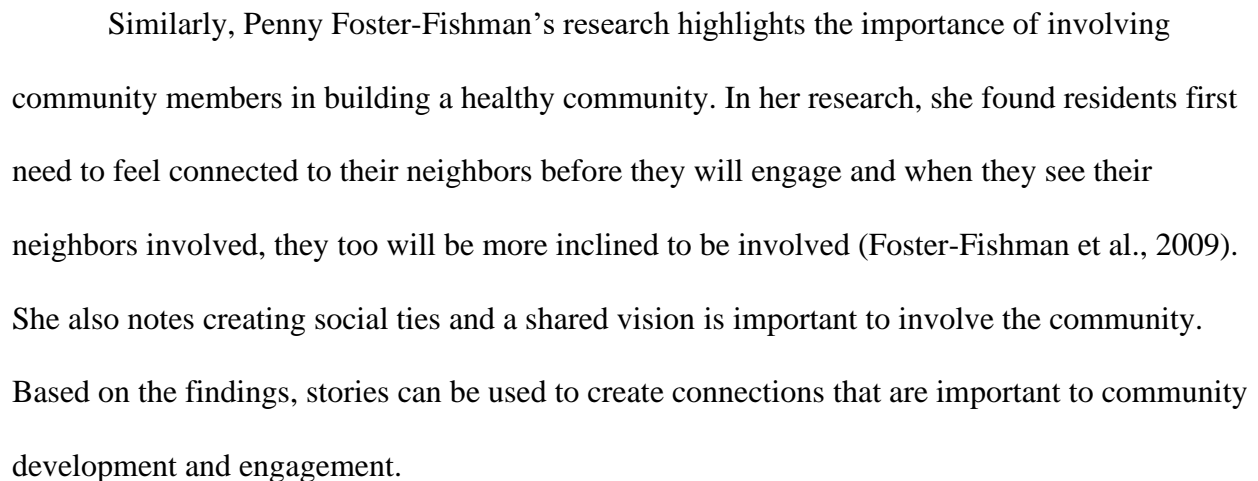
Stories and narratives

Collecting stories from individuals, combining them into a community narrative, and engaging in community conversations are frequently used techniques in Community Psychology. Personal stories are defined as those told by an individual about their own experiences, while a narrative is a storyline that relates across people. When the inputs of many personal stories and narratives are combined and represent the thinking and beliefs of a community, it is referred to as a community narrative. When a community narrative is repeated, it can become stereotypical and impact the community's behaviors and beliefs. This is known as the dominant cultural narrative (Rappaport, 2000).

Community building and stories

Empowerment and citizen participation, sense of community, and collaboration are several of the core values of community psychology (Kloos et al., 2021). How to involve the community is found in the work of Hyman with the Annie E. Casey Foundation as the Community-Building Process Framework (see Figure 1: A Community-Building Process Framework). The first cluster of the framework focuses on building resident engagement which is of primary importance to get the individuals involved and the community working together. In the framework, Hyman explains increasing the amount of social interaction among community members is important and can be accomplished through “bonding” and/or “bridging.” Bonding is when individuals strengthen their connections and relationships. Bridging is bringing together community members who may not know each other. Simply making connections is noted as important because even just expanding one’s network results in improving their well-being, even if those relationships are never organized to serve the larger community’s needs (Hyman, 2002). One strategy recommended to engage community members is the Story Circle where 8 – 10 community members come together and share their stories. Another important step is creating opportunities for social interaction across the community.

A Community-Building Process Framework (Kloos et al., 2021)



In his Community Psychology research, Kelly explains when stories are shared experiences with a shared construct, known as a “commonality corollary” there is a psychological connection between the storyteller and listener (Kelly, 1955). This was consistent with Hasson’s research on “neural entrainment” noted earlier which explains how brain wave

trends are shared between the storyteller and listener (*What Happens in the Brain When We Hear Stories?*, n.d.). Both Community Psychology and neuroscience research explain starting with stories is effective at connecting the storyteller and the listener and as neuroscience explains building relation and empathy.

Liu and Hilton (2005) found collective narratives also create a sense of purpose and group identity. By starting with the stories, the shared group history members inside and outside of the dominant group understand each other (Liu & Hilton, 2005). Collecting personal stories and involving the community narrative requires an iterative approach and allows for the mutual support of community members. The personal story helps the storyteller define their own identity and purpose and sharing the story began to refine the community narrative. The personal and community narratives reinforce each other and act as a system of exchange (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000; Mankowski & Thomas, 2000). All of these researchers agree on the power of starting with personal stories and involving the community narrative to build connections.

If the collective narrative can be changed by inviting the dominant and the outside group, connections can begin to be made. Evidence of this change is seen in the work of Scott who used oral histories of Black families to begin to disrupt the geographic work to include Black geographies into the worldview and the community narrative (Scott, 2019). Again, personal stories are being used to create a community narrative to create change and connections.

Storytelling methods and approaches

Several techniques were reviewed including the Story Arc, Life Story Interview approach, definitional ceremonies, and Photovoice Participatory Action Research. The concept of the Flashbulb Memory was also found to be important in recalling and retelling a scene from a storyteller's life.

Story Arc

The use of the Story Arc is used in many storytelling methods and began with the work of Joseph Campbell who defined an effective dramatic storytelling approach. The Story Arc includes a beginning with a struggle, a middle where the hero/heroine goes on a journey to overcome adversity, and an end with eventual triumph or learning (Campbell, 1949). The neuroscience research of Zak showed the brain is attracted to this style of story (Zak, 2015).

Life Story Interview

In the work of Dan McAdams, he uses the life story to help people make sense of their lives – narrative identity. To do this, he uses the Life Story Interview approach (see Table 1: Life Story Interview) which asks participants to think of their lives as chapters and then identify key scenes from each chapter which would include the high, low, and turning points, positive and negative childhood scenes, and vivid scenes from their adolescent and adult years. Next, they are asked to identify key life challenges. The next question is to describe the future chapters in their life story. From this historical and futuristic view, the participant is asked to consider their beliefs and values around religion, politics, and other important values. The interview concludes by allowing the participant to reflect on the story and details they just shared and to define a life theme (McAdams, 1985, 2013; McAdams & Guo, 2014). This approach involves extensive, lengthy one-on-one interviews. The output of the interview is more of a research case than a story that can be returned to the storyteller or shared with the community without significant editing to write a succinct, meaningful story.

Table 1*Life Story Interview*

Topic	Approach
Life Chapters	Break down life into chapters with a title, a plot, and a start and end for each chapter.
Key scenes	For each scene, describe what happened and why think it is important to your life story.
Life challenge	Identify the single biggest challenge in your life and how you have tried to overcome it.
Future scripts	What's next for you and how do you plan to achieve it?
Ideological setting	Think about your values around religion, politics, and other important values. Describe the values and why you think they are important to your life story.
Life theme	Reflect and determine what you think the theme of your life is.

Definitional Ceremonies

Another approach and use of storytelling is to use stories to support two communities who have experienced similar traumas. In his community narrative practice work, David Denborough collected the stories of a group who had experienced a trauma including the effects of the trauma and the skills they used to adapt to the loss. The stories did not focus on the problem but instead focused on how the skills and strengths were used to respond to the problem. These stories were then shared with a community experiencing a similar trauma. They found the stories and approaches to responding to the trauma helpful and wanted to share their experiences and learnings. For both communities, they were happy they were able to help each other (Denborough, 2008; Denborough et al., 2006).

To further the effectiveness of sharing the stories, the definitional ceremony approach is used to trade stories. Definitional ceremony is a term originally coined by anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff, as a technique where the storyteller shares the story or the story is read aloud and outside observers listen to the story, respond with what they heard and then the process is

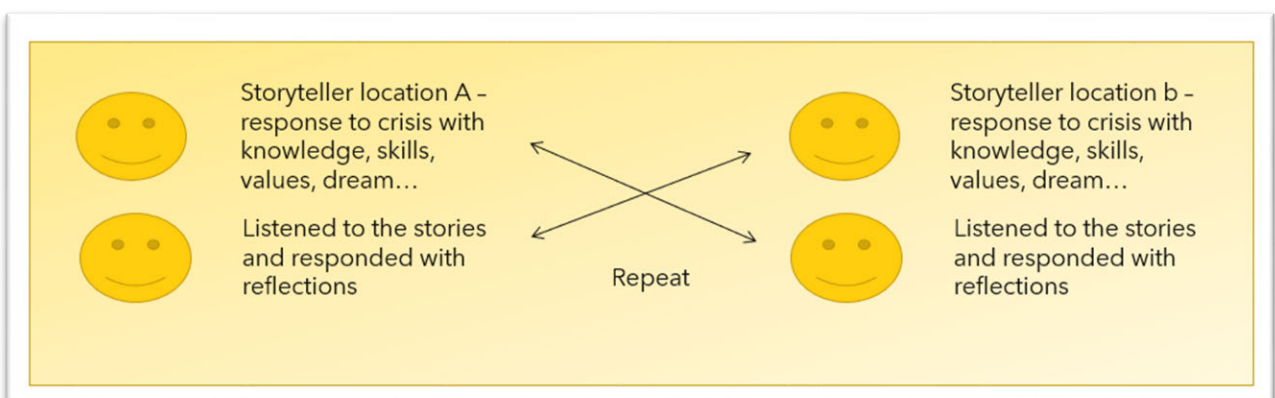
repeated (see Figure 2: Definitional Ceremonies). The use of definitional ceremonies impacts the storyteller and the listener. The storyteller feels a sense of belonging and purpose whereby their skills are included and valued. The listener is also impacted whereby the listener validates the story and has a connection to the storyteller (Myerhoff, 1986).

In Denborough's work, the written stories were read aloud to the other community who served as an outside witness. The ongoing correspondence between the groups sharing stories and witnessing the other community's story was an effective way to approach the response to trauma.

The approach of definitional ceremonies was applied to therapeutic actions by Michael White. In his research, White interviewed families about how they were dealing with a trauma and then the families shared the stories with an outside listener who then responded to the story sharing what they heard, and then the family responded to the response. White found using this approach was powerful because all involved felt a sense of contribution (White, 2007).

Figure 2

Definitional Ceremonies (Denborough, 2008)



Narrative Coaching through Definitional Ceremonies

In his work using narrative to address personal and community traumas, Ho Law explains narrative coaching performed by a professional counselor can use storytelling to help an individual heal and improve general well-being (Law, 2013, 2017, 2014). He found narrative approaches can also be applied to community healing after a crisis leveraging a community's strengths. He also applied the definitional ceremonies in his process of telling and retelling (see Figure 3: Definitional Ceremony Retelling Approach). Storytellers told the story from their vantage point and the listener retold what they heard. The retelling went on for several iterations. In this practice, the telling and retelling happened immediately in a single session with the participants all included. His findings are consistent with Denborough's finding that the telling and retelling strengthened the community and promoted healing (Denborough et al., 2006).

Telling and retelling stories is a good way to create connections.

Figure 3

Definitional Ceremony Retelling Approach (Law, 2013)



Photovoice Participatory Action Research

Photovoice Participatory Action Research is another qualitative method for collecting input from community members used by Community Psychologist. Photovoice Participatory Action Research is an artistic, storytelling method to ensure marginalized voices can be heard. This technique was revised from the original method created by Wang and Burris in the healthcare industry (Wang & Burris, 1997). The idea is to give participants a camera and ask them to take pictures of the community's strengths and areas of concern. Photovoice Participatory Action Research was used in a Community Psychology setting giving the camera to marginalized community members and asking them to return to a session to identify community needs in a participatory action research session. The Photovoice Participatory Action Research method was tested to determine if it works in the Community Psychology context and why. After using the method with a community and asking what was the impact it was found participants felt empowered as experts, it allowed them to reflect deeply and provided a safe space for them to share diverse perspectives (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005)

A variation to the Photovoice Participatory Action Research approach is place-based Photovoice Participatory Action Research where participants are given a camera and asked to take pictures of physical places in their neighborhoods that are meaningful to them. They were asked specifically to take pictures of "What is your life like?" "What is good about your life?" and "What needs to change?" It is important to note, that the methodology did not prescribe the themes the researchers hypothesized might be the concern. The place-based photos reminded them of where they came from and what was important to them (Nowell et al., 2006). These findings were consistent with what Wang & Burris found in that using the Photovoice methodology allowed them to sidestep the limitations that preconceived notions of resident needs and assets might impose (Wang & Burris, 1997). The Photovoice Participatory Action Research

approach is an open way to engage the community to identify community strengths and challenges without persuading or influencing their thinking or input.

Flashbulb Memory

A Flashbulb Memory was first defined by Brown and Kulik as when one experiences a surprising or exceptionally emotional event such that a very vivid memory is created. In these instances, one can recall specific details and can elaborate on the narrative very clearly even after a long period (Brown & Kulik, 1977). These types of Flashbulb Memories could be used as good input for story writing and telling.

Storytelling use cases

Stories were found to be widely used in many ways publicly. The Humans of New York and Dear World were two use cases reviewed in the research. In both use cases, stories were used to collect personal stories and then share them publicly to create awareness and connection.

Humans of New York

The Humans of New York (HONY) project started as a photography project but turned into a storytelling project to share the everyday stories of strangers living in New York. The process expanded to more cities beyond New York and to broader groups linked together by a challenge such as nurses during COVID-19. The process involved taking a portrait and then collecting a story in an interview. The idea of using stories to help people connect was demonstrated in this project and made beautiful with photographs and stories (*Humans of New York*, n.d.).

Dear World

Dear World, a storytelling approach practiced in the corporate environment was reviewed in the research. The objective of the Dear World storytelling experience put into practice at a large, global consulting company is to create a connection between the company's core values

and the new joiner's personal values. The approach is called the Brain Tattoo Storytelling process and was split into three acts.

- Act 1 – opening experience
- Act 2 – portrait and video shoot
- Act 3 – story reveal.

In Act 1, the participant reflects on the core values of the company and how these values appear in their own lives, identifies three memories, and picks one memory to expand on in a story. Identifying the memory relies on the Flashbulb Memories described earlier. Dear World calls this memorable moment a “brain tattoo” or a memory so etched in your brain that you can remember every detail. In Act 2, the participant identifies one line from their story – their Dear World Message – and writes it on their body such as on their arm, hand, or leg. Then a professional portrait is taken of the person with their message. In Act 3, the participant shares their story in small groups and if desired in a large group setting. (*Dear World / Storytelling Skill Building and Interactive Keynotes*, n.d.; Dear World, 2022).

Researcher note: As a Dear World certified storyteller, the researcher personally observed this process successfully allowing participants to reflect, write, and share their story as a way to connect with their new company core values. Allowing participants to practice and share their story allows them to make connections with each other as described from a neuroscience perspective by Zak, Yang, Hasson et al and the Community Psychology research of Rappaport.

Summary

Research on stories and narratives was found to be extensive in the field of neuroscience and Community Psychology. However, research was limited when looking at how storytelling might be simplified and used as an entry point to work deeply with a community in an inviting and non-threatening way, particularly in segregated locations where the sense of community remained divided. This place-based research aimed to explore how storytelling might be used in such a community – Smalltown, VA.

Characteristics and Theories

Purpose of the Study

Storytelling research and the application of storytelling in Community Psychology is found to be vast and comprehensive. A clear process to open dialogue in a simple, quick, and non-threatening way was identified as a gap. This research developed and experimented with a storytelling workshop process to engage more people in community-building efforts, create connections, and spark challenging conversations in a divided community. The research was place-based in a small, rural town in Virginia which is called “Smalltown” in this research.

The study attempted to fill the gap by developing a story-writing approach based on the Story Arc, Life Theory Interview, definitional ceremonies (retelling), and Flashbulb Memories. Workshops were conducted in Smalltown, Virginia where there was a divide in socio-economic, demographic, and many other characteristics. The stories were 2 to 5-minute scenes from the lives of residents. The research explored how these stories could be used as input to identify community needs and actions, create connections, and spark challenging conversations.

The researcher collected stories from people from diverse backgrounds through a 2-hour Storytelling Workshop. Participants were invited to share personal scenes from their history in the community and/or their hopes for the future of their community. The stories were shared in the workshop to show similarities and differences thus creating a connection immediately and to create a shared vision of the future. The personal stories defined the meta-story or community narrative including Smalltown's strengths and challenges which could be used by Community Partner to identify ways to increase connections and take action.

Positionality Statement

As a non-resident of Smalltown, the researcher played the role of a pure facilitator. The researcher trained Community Partner board members to conduct workshops. In all workshops, the researcher or a Community Partner board member partnered with a Community Host from the group hosting the workshop. This was done to build trust and create a safe environment for participants to share stories. The groups hosting workshops were mostly an affinity group with similar demographics and were familiar with each other.

The participants selected for the research were members of existing community groups such as faith-based groups, book clubs, knitting circles, service organizations, and members of community outreach programs. The decision to use existing groups was made to build on existing trust within a group. The community groups were identified by Community Partner board members' contacts. The researcher knew less than five of the 80 participants before the workshops.

Research Questions

This research examined how we might use storytelling to open dialogue in a simple, quick, and non-threatening way via group storytelling workshops to create connections across the community and engage more people in community-building efforts. The research was place-based in a small, Smalltown, Virginia. The study addressed three primary questions: 1) does the workshop and the stories collected create connections, 2) does storytelling feel “safer” than answering direct questions in a focus group, and 3) does the workshop approach allowing for reflection create stories that can be used to identify community strengths and weaknesses? The research leveraged a strengths-based approach to find ways to build on community connections and strengths across affinity groups.

Method

Design of the Study

The researcher selected a Case Study qualitative research approach and leveraged components of Grounded Theory to create a new methodology for Community Psychologists. Each story was reviewed as a case to understand how stories and key themes from those stories could be used to engage more community members in making community connections and determine if themes from the stories provided insight into community needs.

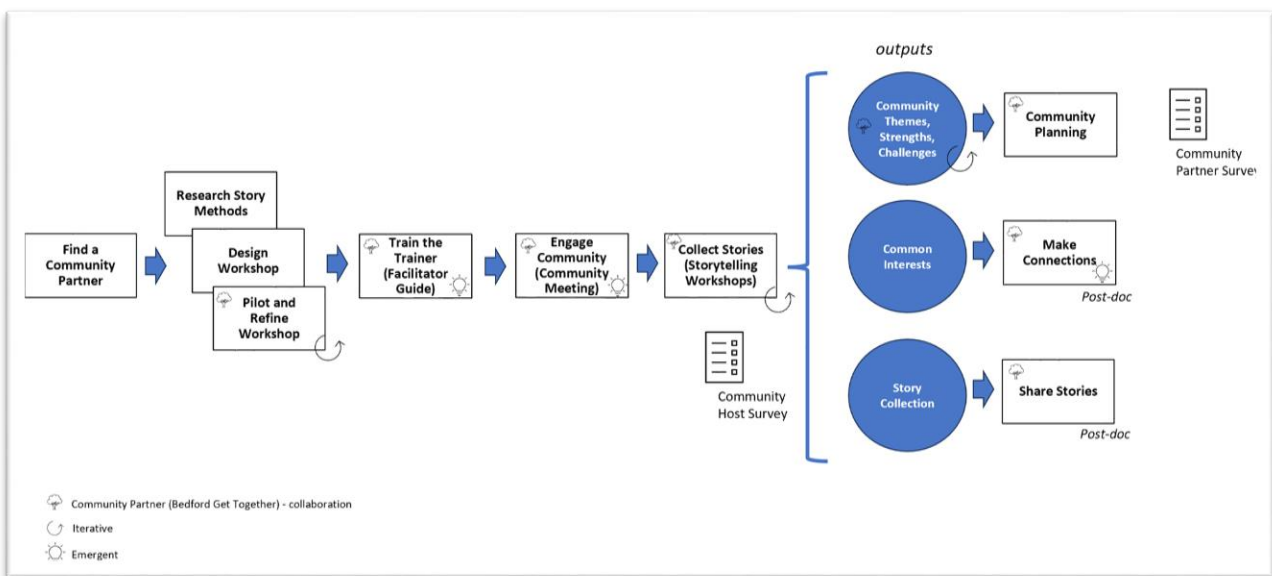
First, the researcher developed and experimented with a new storytelling workshop approach based on the secondary research findings of McAdams and Denborough, and others. Working with the community partner, Community Partner, a community meeting was hosted to garner community support and collect input on the approach. Next Community Hosts from existing community groups were invited to host workshops with their group. The stories were shared during the workshops and afterward via a repository on the Community Partner interactive website and plans were made to share stories in the local newspaper and on Facebook. The stories were coded to determine community themes – strengths and challenges. Afterward, post-program assessment surveys were conducted with Community Hosts and the Community Partner board to assess if connections were made, the overall effectiveness of the process, and for Community Partner to use in planning future actions.

Key design components of the research approach were to take a collaborative approach and allow the process to be iterative and emergent. A core value of Community Psychology is collaboration (Kloos et al., 2021). The researcher developed a partnership with Community Partner based on a shared vision and desire to collect Our Smalltown Story. The skeleton of the research approach was shared with Community Partner and refined as the research progressed. Components that iterated were the workshop design based on secondary research and piloted and

evolved with the workshops. Emergent ideas were the need for a train-the-trainer and facilitator guide to build the capacity of Community Partner to facilitate workshops. The identification of common themes and leveraging those themes to make more connections were identified as the workshops progressed (see Figure 4: Emergent Research Approach).

Figure 4

Emergent Research Approach



After the establishment of the partnership with Community Partner, the workshop approach was designed, and facilitators were trained. This led to the Community Meeting.

Community Meeting approach

To build buy-in with community groups, a community meeting was held to get input on the storytelling workshop approach and how to share the stories after collection. Participants from 30 – 40 community organizations were invited to the 90-minute meeting (see Table 2: Community Meeting Agenda). Notes were collected regarding their input on the process. At the

end of the meetings, Community Hosts were invited to sign up to host a future Storytelling Workshop.

Table 2

Community Meeting Agenda

Topic	Minutes (90 minutes)	Approach
Intentions	10	Share power and science of storytelling and research question.
Workshop proposal	20	Share a draft of the workshop approach. Ask for feedback – strengths, weaknesses, adds, changes, deletions
Key questions	45	What 3 words come to mind when you think of your "Smalltown Story"? What could you use the stories for in your group? How should we record stories? Written, verbal, video? Where should the stories be stored? How should the stories be shared?
Enlist volunteers	15	Ask: Would you/your group be interested in a storytelling workshop?

Storytelling Workshop approach

The 2-hour workshops allowed participants to reflect on their history in Smalltown as well as dream about their hopes for the future of Smalltown (see Table 3: Storytelling Workshop Agenda). They were asked to write down six words that came to mind during their reflection. Then they were asked to define the six words and write as many phrases and words as they could think of in the definition process as fodder for their story. A couple of participants were asked to share one of the words they chose and the definition they wrote. After some sharing to get participants thinking more, they were asked to select one word that they would like to write about as a theme for their story. With this word in mind, they were asked to think about 3 scenes or dreams they have about how this word came to life for them or how it was demonstrated in

their life. This scene was based on the Flashbulb Memory concept. For each idea, participants wrote one sentence. Again, participants were asked to share one of their memories/scenes. After each participant had a focus word and a memory/scene to use to write their story, the facilitator explained, in simple terms, Campbell's Story Arc and how to use this to structure a simple story. The beginning was used to set the scene. The middle included what happened and the end was meant to explain why the participant told the story relating it to the focus word.

Table 3

Storytelling Workshop Agenda

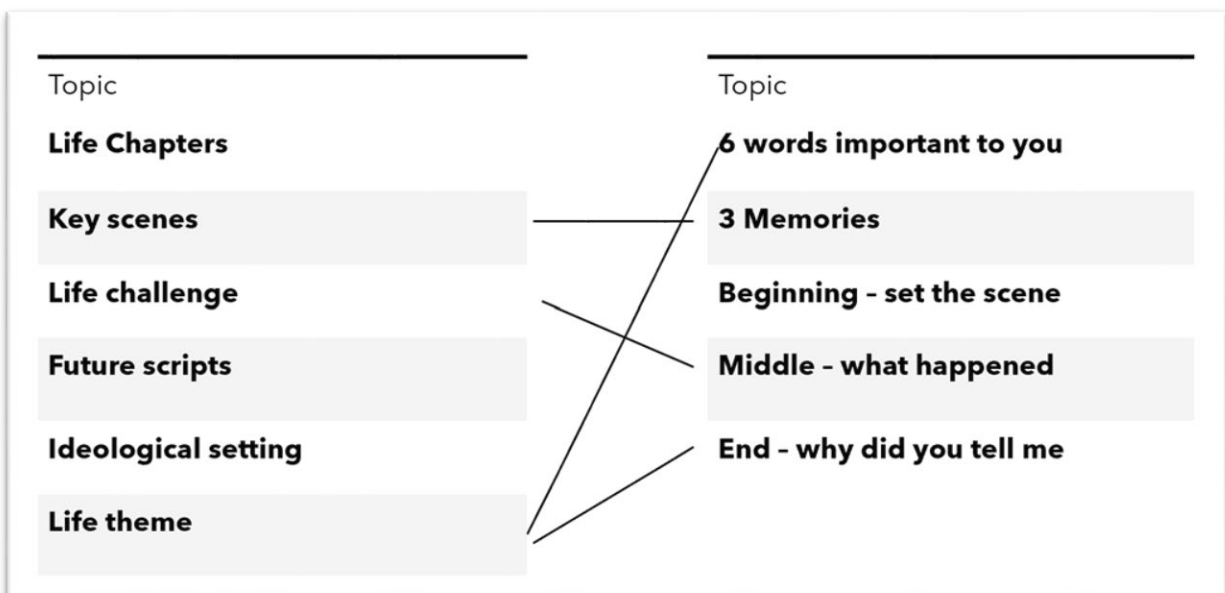
Topic	Minutes (120 minutes)	Approach
Welcome	5	Welcome and introductions
	5	Why stories?
	5	Workshop overview
	10	Housekeeping – logistics and consent forms
Reflect	5	6 life themes
	5	Define themes
	10	3 life scenes
Write	5	Writing instructions – beginning, middle, end
	20	Write
Share	45	Storytelling
	10	Wrap up

The Life Story Interview was reversed starting with the life themes – “What 6 words are important to you?” A single scene from one's life was the story output, not an entire life story, In

Figure 5: Life Story Interview compared to Storytelling Workshop approach, the Life Story Interview is on the left compared to the Storytelling Workshop on the right to demonstrate the reverse order of starting with Life Themes in the new design. The end of the story allowed for reflection to confirm “why you told this particular story.”

Figure 5

Life Story Interview compared to Storytelling Workshop approach.



Community Themes – coding

The stories were collected and analyzed to determine common themes of a meta-story of Smalltown's strengths and challenges. The stories were reviewed to assess if the individuals talked about connections and where the content of their stories could be used to create more connections. The stories were also analyzed to determine how race was included in the stories and if this could be used to take additional actions. The analysis was shared with Community Partner and used to determine their action plans.

Post-program Assessment

To determine the effectiveness of the storytelling approach, a quantitative survey was sent to the Community Hosts (see Appendix F: Community Host Survey). Community Hosts were asked to provide feedback on the storytelling process – what they liked, what could be better, and what they suggested should be included next time. They were also asked if the workshop created connections, helped them learn about each other, gave time to reflect, if they were able to write a short scene from their Smalltown lives, and if the workshop felt fun and safe. They were asked to provide examples of the types of connections made and how the stories could be used beyond their group.

Another survey was distributed to the Community Partner board (see Appendix G: Community Partner Survey). This survey focused on how the stories helped create connections and what they learned about the community, Smalltown's strengths and challenges, and the actions they would take as a result of the story collection process.

Participants

Individuals from the community and community group leaders were selected by the Community Partner board members and invited to the Community Meeting. When a community group requested a Storytelling Workshop, they were given the workshop objectives and outline and notified that workshop participants would need to sign an informed consent form. During Storytelling Workshops, participants were provided with an informed consent form to sign (see Appendix C: Storytelling Workshop Recruitment Letter and Appendix D: Joint Informed Consent Form).

Participant demographic data, such as education, age, and race were important variables of this study to ensure stories were collected across a diverse population. Demographic data was used in the community themes and community action research process but was only shared with

the participant's story if they included it in their story. The study included 13 workshops with 3 to 10 participants in each workshop. Workshops were conducted in groups where the participants already knew each other and had trust. Post-assessment surveys were collected from 10 Community Hosts and 5 of 6 board members from Community Partner.

Instruments

Instruments were designed for each step in the research process – the Community Meeting, the Storytelling Workshop, and Post-assessments.

Input from discussion questions from community members at the Community Meeting was collected via notes of the researcher and index cards from meeting participants answering the following questions:

- What 3 words come to mind when you think of your "Smalltown Story"?
- What could you use the stories for in your group?
- How should we record stories? Written, verbal, video?
- Where should the stories be stored?
- How should the stories be shared?

The Storytelling Workshop instruments included the agenda (as described above), the Facilitator guide with step-by-step instructions to facilitate the workshop (see Appendix A: Storytelling Workshop Facilitator Guide), and a participant worksheet including the informed consent (see Appendix B: Storytelling Worksheet). The participant stories were collected via audio recording and stored in mp3 files. The stories were transcribed using OtterAI and stored on a secure site. The transcribed stories were input into QDA Miner for coding.

Two post-program assessments were conducted: the Community Host survey and the Community Partner board survey. The Community Host survey focused on the storytelling workshop process – what they liked, what could be better, and what they suggested should be

included next time (see Appendix F: Community Host Survey). They were also asked how they used the stories in their organizations and if they believed the stories created connections. The Community Partner board survey was used to collect feedback on how the stories helped them identify Smalltown's strengths and challenges and future actions (see Appendix G: Community Partner Survey).

Procedures

Community Meeting Procedures

Community Meeting participants were identified for a 90-minute information session by the Community Partner board members. The board members followed these steps to ensure participants were aware and supportive:

- An informal personal, 1:1 conversation with a person/group they wanted to invite.
- Explained (if needed) the Community Partner vision.
- Described the “Our Smalltown Story” idea as a priority for Community Partner this year and potentially into the future.
- Explained the research project and the Community Meeting date, time, and location.
- Explained the project approach, collecting feedback from meeting attendees about both their interest in the project and suggestions to refine the approach.
- Informed the person they were being invited to the Community Meeting as a representative of their group/s in the Smalltown area because the project relies on a group process to capture stories. As a result of the meeting, they were asked if they were interested in hosting a Storytelling Workshop for their particular group/s.

Storytelling Workshop Procedures

When a community organization requested a Storytelling Workshop, they were sent the recruitment email (see Appendix C: Storytelling Workshop Recruitment Letter) which outlined

the workshop and notified them that workshop participants needed to sign an informed consent letter. After a date, time, and location were confirmed the Community Host notified participants of the Storytelling Workshop and what to expect and shared the need for the need for an informed consent to participate in the workshop and to share their story (see Appendix D: Joint Informed Consent Form).

During the Storytelling Workshops, the facilitator welcomed participants and distributed the Storytelling Worksheet (see Appendix B: Storytelling Worksheet). The facilitator followed the Facilitator Guide (see Appendix A: Storytelling Workshop Facilitator Guide) which described the step-by-step instructions including collecting the signed informed consent documents from each participant.

Post-program Assessment Procedures

To assess the Storytelling Workshop's effectiveness, the Community Hosts were asked to complete the Community Host survey. The researcher targeted 5 survey responses and received 10 of 11 Community Hosts.

After the stories were coded and the Community Host survey results were analyzed, a planning session was conducted with the Community Partner board. The Community Partner board reviewed the Town Word themes, strengths and challenges, how connections were made and future ideas for creating connections and a discussion on implications of race and the stories. After this planning session, the Community Partner board survey was sent to the board members. The researcher targeted 4 of 6 board members to ensure views across the board are considered. 5 board member survey responses were collected.

Ethical considerations were accounted for during this research project. The first was to ensure the Community Meeting participants, Storytelling Workshop participants, the Community Hosts, and Community Partner board members understood participation was voluntary. During

recruitment, the researcher was clear that participation was voluntary and made participants aware of their right to withdraw at any time. The participants were made to feel comfortable and not coerced to participate in the research that volunteering to participate was of their own free will.

Confidentiality was another ethical consideration. The researcher intentionally ensured that participants' identifying information was excluded from reports and documents. Addressing these ethical considerations through proper communication regarding the researcher's role and responsibilities minimized harm that could be caused to participants of this study. If a Storytelling Workshop participant wanted to share their story publicly on the Community Partner website, newspaper, radio, or podcast series, they signed a release with Community Partner indicating if their name, photograph and or story could be shared.

Results

Participant Demographics

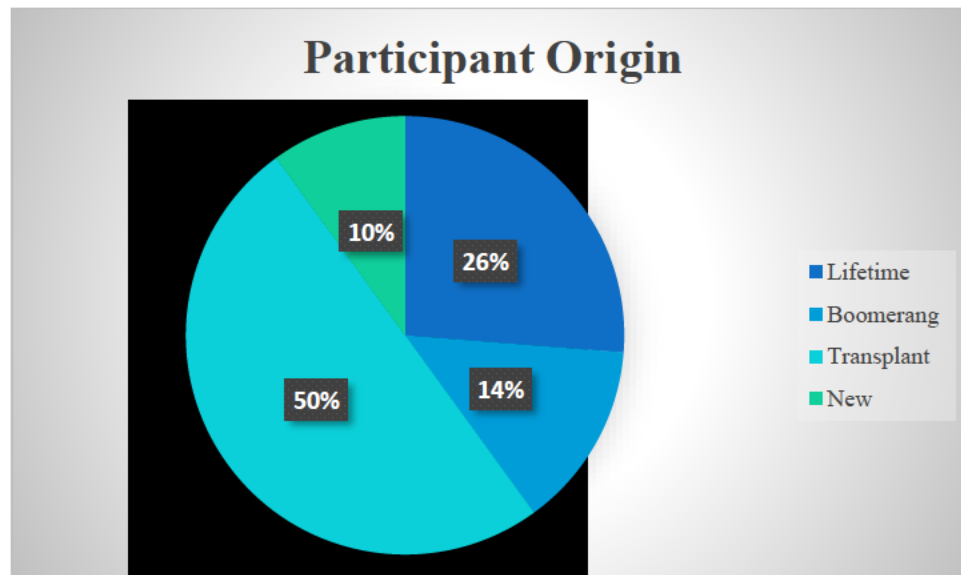
Participants were identified by the Community Partner board. They identified community organizations to attend the community meeting to learn more about the Our Smalltown Story project, the neuroscience of stories, and the Storytelling Workshop approach. During and after the community meeting, representatives from each group agreed to host a session with their community organization. 35 people attended the meeting (N=35) of the 45 people invited to the Community Meeting. Based on an informal view of participants it was estimated of those who attended 40% were male and 60% were female and 12% were Black and 88% were white.

During and after the Community Meeting, 13 workshops were scheduled. Snowball sampling was used and 6 individual participants were identified who requested to share their stories individually. A total of 80 stories were collected (74 through stories collected at workshops and 6 individual stories collected in one-to-one conversations). There were 47 female and 23 male participants. Ages ranged from 18 to over 90 with 20 between the age of 18 to 40, 8 from 41 to 60, and the majority 52 in the age range of 61 and over. There were 72 White, 6 Black, 1 Korean, and 1 German participants (see Table 4: Summary of the Participant Demographics).

Another important demographic collected was how long the participant had been living in Smalltown noted as Origin; 21 Lifetime participants (those who were born and raised in Smalltown and did not leave), 11 Boomerang participants (those who were born in Smalltown, left and came back to Smalltown), 40 participants who Transplanted to Smalltown and lived there for more than 5 years, 8 participants identified as being New to Smalltown living less than 5 years in the area (see Table 5: Summary of the Participant Origins).

Table 4*Summary of the Participant Demographics*

Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Total
Female	18 to 40	Black	2
		White	14
		Total	16
	41 to 60	White	4
		Total	4
	61 and over	Black	1
		German	1
		Korean	1
		White	34
Total		37	
Female Total			57
Male	18 to 40	Black	1
		White	3
		Total	4
	41 to 60	White	4
		61 and over	Black
	White		13
	Total		15
Male Total			23
Grand Total			80

Table 5*Summary of the Participant Origins*

Data Collection

The Storytelling workshop was facilitated by the researcher or a trained facilitator from the Community Partner board. The Storytelling Workshop Facilitator Guide was followed to take participants through reflection, writing their Smalltown Story, and sharing their story with the participants in the group (see Appendix A: Storytelling Workshop Facilitator Guide).

Participant demographic information, reflections, and stories were collected on the Our Smalltown Story Worksheet and an audio recording (see Appendix B: Storytelling Worksheet). Demographic data included name, how long they had been in Smalltown, and their background including their origin (Lifetime, Boomerang, Transplant, or New) and race. The Reflect section provided space for participants to include six themes or words that came to mind when they thought of their history in Smalltown. Reflection questions included “How does Smalltown make you feel? How has Smalltown impacted who you are today? What are the strengths/challenges of Smalltown that impacted you most?” Space was provided for the participants to define their Town Words, which allowed for deeper reflection on what the words really meant to them. The next section was a space to collect three Flashbulb Memories or moments when one experienced deep emotion or surprise and could describe the story in detail (Brown & Kulik, 1977). The second page of the worksheet was provided for the participant to write bullet points of their story including a beginning, middle, and end. Some participants preferred to write their story on a blank sheet of paper and some preferred to share their story orally without pre-writing. Flexibility was provided and participants could decide on the level of writing they wanted to do before sharing. Storytelling Worksheets were collected, imaged, and stored in a secure drive. Audio files were transcribed using OtterAI. The transcription files were checked and cleaned to remove the facilitator’s words, fix errors from the auto-transcription tool, and remove language

distractions. The data files were backed up and stored safely then entered as a case in the QDA Miner analysis tool to be coded and analyzed.

After completing all workshops and collecting all stories, the Community Host survey was sent to the Community Hosts via Mentimeter (see Appendix F: Community Host Survey). After the Community Partner planning session, the Community Partner board survey was distributed via Mentimeter (see Appendix G: Community Partner Survey). Data was exported and stored in a secure drive.

All procedures were approved before the administration of the study by the Institutional Research Review Board (IRRB) at National Louis University, Chicago, IL. Informed consent forms were obtained before the study was administered.

Data Analysis

The analysis included three sources of data: 1) qualitative coding and analysis of the individual Smalltown Stories, 2) quantitative analysis of the Community Host survey data, and 3) quantitative analysis of the Community Partner board survey data.

Story coding and analysis

The researcher used a Case Study and Grounded Theory data analysis approach to review each story following five steps as outlined by Creswell and Poth:

- (1) Create and organize the data files.
- (2) Read through text, make margin notes, and form initial codes.
- (3) Describe the case and its context.
- (4) Use categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns.
- (5) Use direct interpretation and develop naturalistic generalizations of what was “learned.”

(Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After the stories were coded and analyzed, the Community Story Engine was developed as a Grounded Theory output (see Finding 5).

The words participants wrote on their worksheet in the Reflect portion of the workshop were consolidated into the Top 20 Town Words (see Table 6: Summary of the Top 20 Town Words). The Top 20 Town Words were used as input for the codes, this helped to define the meta-story. Of the Top 20 Town Words, all were strengths except for three: Frustration/struggle/no action, Polarity/difference, and Outsider/not from here.

Table 6

Summary of the Top 20 Town Words

Rank	Town Words	Number of Occurrences In Reflection
1	Family	31
2	Mountains/beauty/scenic	30
3	Connections/Community	21
4	Church/spiritual/religious	14
5	Friends	12
6	Rural/small town	11
7	Friendly	11
8	Home/chosen home	10
9	Creative/art	9
10	Peaceful/relaxing/rest	9
11	Supported/banded together	9
12	Change/growth/opportunity	8
13	School days/high school	8
14	Frustration/struggle/no action (<i>challenge</i>)	7
15	Polarity/difference (<i>challenge</i>)	6
16	History/D-Day	6
17	Safe/security	6
18	Outsider/not from here (<i>challenge</i>)	6
19	Volunteering	5
20	Deer	5

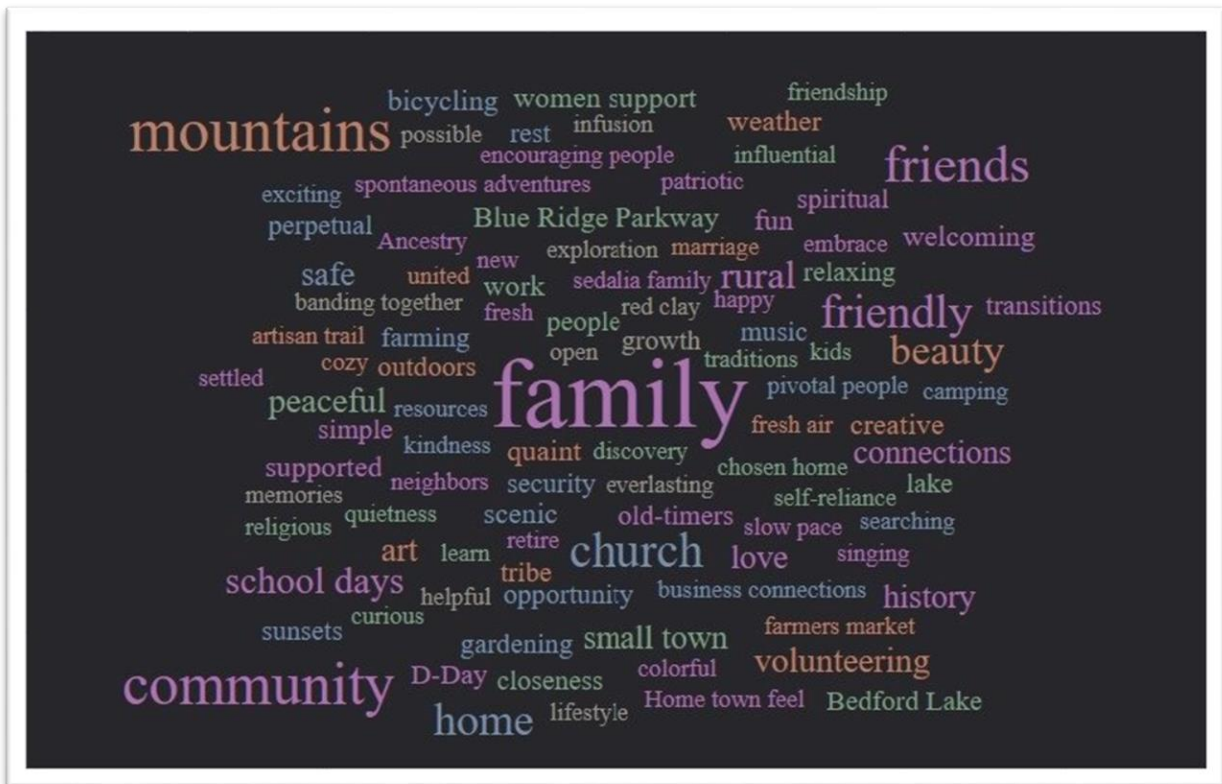
To make the coding more accessible to the Community Partner and to share with the community broadly, the words were collected in Word cloud format. Three Word Clouds were created to be

used by Community Partner depending on the audience need to see all, or just the strengths or challenges (see Figure 6: Our Town Story Word Clouds – All, Strengths, Challenges). The size of the word means it was listed by more participants. The colors in the charts do not have meaning.

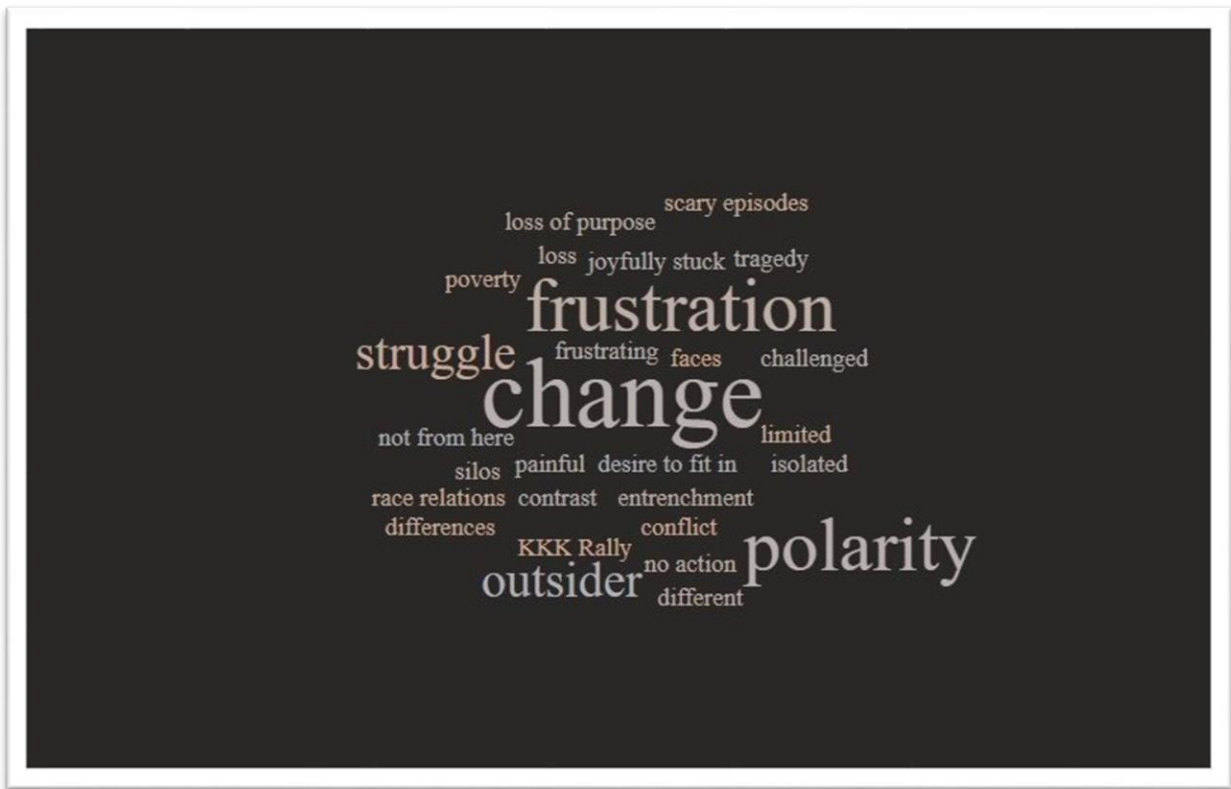
Our Town Story Word Clouds – All



Strengths



Challenges



Each story was treated as a case and read in totality and coded using the Codebook (see Appendix E: Codebook) and following these steps:

1. Scanned for Town Words/Themes and highlighted code using the codes in the Town Word Strength or Challenge categories.
2. Noted the number of Town Words/Themes were identified in the Variable “Town Word count” (BWORDCOUNT).
3. Scanned for the individual’s Town Words and highlighted code adding and using codes in the Other Strengths or Other Challenges categories.
4. Marked Yes/No if the individual’s Town Words were used in the Variable “Individual Town Word” (IBWORD)

5. Scanned for possible content to make future connections. Put a single word in the Variable “CONNECTCON.” Include topics where there might be connections (for example, activities such as gardening or biking or interest areas such as cars).
6. Scanned if the story refers to Race positively or negatively. Marked Yes/No in the Variable “RACE” and highlighted and added codes in the Race Impact categories.

The Town Words were split into two categories – Strengths and Challenges. Each story was coded using the Town Words. The frequency of the use of the Town Words indicated how strong the themes are not only in the people’s reflections but then reinforced by the stories. 9 of the Top 20 Town Words were in 10% of the stories or more (see Table 7: Frequency Analysis and Sample Quotes of Codes by Category). These top strengths and challenges could be used to write the new community narrative and as input into strategic action planning.

Table 7

Frequency Analysis and Sample Quotes of Codes by Category

Category	Town Word Rank	Story Frequency	Town Words	Sample Quotes
Strengths	1	53.8%	Family	“I’ve got 5 or 6 generations and both my parents’ side of the family go back to our town.” Case DF
	2	21.3%	Mountains / beauty / scenic	“We marvel at the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains.” Case HT
	3	32.5%	Connections / Community	“I want to thank the town for coming together giving advice and help you know and own up to the day with somebody’s house catches on fire everybody comes out. Oh that’s what makes our town.” Case BS
	4	11.3%	Church / spiritual / religious	“We saw two of our pastors there and then other apostles were down the middle. We were surprised to see them but it’s a big festival and

				everybody likes a festival. It was nice to see them.” Case KS
	5	25%	Friends	“After a few weeks, we developed a wonderful friendship.” Case EJ
	6	8.8%	Rural / small town	“The way of life we had of course it was slower being in a small town.” Case MB
	7	7.5%	Friendly	“Everyone was very warm and caring.” Case AB
	8	18.8%	Home / chosen home	“This town feels like home.” Case KR
	9	10%	Creative / art	“Artisan trail because I think it's so quintessential about what our town is and what it could be.” Case PE
	10	6.3%	Peaceful / relaxing / rest	“I had forgotten the pleasure of space, and also how much I crave the freedom of wide open places and beauty.” Case TT
	11	21.3%	Supported / banded together	“My brother and I, dad and my three uncles, my grandpa, two grandparents, and the neighbors came over because they had tobacco too. So we helped each other out.” Case BW
	12	1.25%	Change / growth / opportunity	“I made some mistakes on every front and have been lifted up in many ways.” Case DM
	13	3.8%	School days / high school	“I was in high school and youth group at Main Street Methodist.” Case MB
	16	3.8%	History / D-Day	“During the war years, there was a closeness here that maybe a lot of people didn't feel. I think we all are aware that patriotism during those years has never been equal to sense. But the effort here was strong. We did everything to be patriotic, we saved tin cans, we saved chewing gum wrappers.” Case MB
	17	5.0%	Safe / security	“I do love the closeness of our town I do love the secure feeling it gives me for my children and my family.” Case KG
	19	6.3%	Volunteering	“Having finally had enough volunteers, six volunteer parents,

				including myself, we decided to form an entirely new nonprofit soccer club, the Peaks Area Soccer Association.” Case BM
	20	2.5%	Deer	“The lilies are inside an electric fence, yet somehow the deer, the many deer that roam our backyard, know that their fawns are safe inside the fence.” Case LD
Challenge	14	3.8%	Frustration / no action	“Because there's still millions of artists still producing and producing great stuff. But that level of collaboration just didn't materialize. It's part of the Town Story. Our town wants to be different, but it just can't find how to do that. Whether it is in tourism, whether it is in economic development, whether it is in the arts, just doesn't seem joyfully stuck where it is.” Case PM
	15	3.8%	Polarity / differences	“Post inauguration, I was incredibly depressed about the polarity that was going on after the election, and didn't know what to do about it.” Case JS
	18	10%	Outsider / not from here	“I wanted to fit in after moving to our town, but I didn’t” Case AC

Most of the stories included more than one of the Town Words in the strength category. An example of a strength story is “\$1 Pocketknife. Priceless.” which was told by a Lifetime resident about his childhood on the tobacco farm. It was a story about family, connections, and supporting each other as well as work ethic, love, and pride (see Story 1: A Strength Story about Family, Connections, and Supporting Each Other).

Story 1

A Strength Story about Family, Connections, and Supporting Each Other

\$1 Pocketknife. Priceless.

By B. Witt (*shared with permission*)

It was October 1966. And I remember that the Vietnam War was raging in parallel with our life. We had this simple but complicated life trying to keep the farm going and get the taxes paid by December. Our cash crop was tobacco. We had a pretty good year with it but we had these mounds of tobacco that were in the barn that were being cured. We got right up against market day. And we all had to pitch in and tie it up, stack it up, and get it ready for market, which is quite a process. I was 10 years old. My job was to climb up in the tobacco barn, which was probably 25 feet up on the poles. Because I liked to climb, they would always send me up and I would bring down the tobacco.

There were mounds of tobacco leaves all around us. It was nighttime. I can remember the smells of tobacco and kerosene from the lamps as there was no electricity in the barn. And I remember my brother and me, dad and my three uncles, my grandpa, two grandparents, and the neighbors came over because they had tobacco too and we helped each other out. There were probably a dozen of us in this tiny little room with mounds of tobacco. The old people were stringing yarns and we were in there working. It's cold and dirty. I was wearing rags because we didn't have fancy clothes or that type of thing. We had work clothes and school clothes and none the two shall meet. Of course, one day the school clothes would graduate to work clothes, but anyway, it was dirty. We worked late into the night, and it was even a school night – we worked until three in the morning. Whew. Then we finally got it all done. There was a lot of pressure to get it done. But nobody lost ourselves over it. We just stayed and kept going and kept going and kept going.

My feeling was as a young boy - I felt needed. I learned the value of work. We always worked. But at some point, you just kind of cross over this little border, and you say, "I'm needed and I'm 10 years old, and I'm capable." It gave me a very, very good feeling. My grandfather was so proud of me. After we sold the tobacco, he brought me back a \$1 pocketknife, which I still have to this day.

Fewer stories pointed out the challenges of living in the town. The most frequent challenge theme was "Outsider/not from here" which was noted in 10% of the stories. Of the Outsider stories, most included implied challenges and included different ways of thinking. An example of the implied theme that the storyteller was an outsider and didn't fit in was depicted in the story about bringing something new to the farmer's market in the 1970s (Story 2: A Challenge Story about Being an Outsider). A more direct story about being an outsider and not being accepted was shared by a storyteller who transplanted to the town but had been there for more than 5 years. She shared the story of trying to help her children integrate into a closed community (Story 3: A More Direct Challenge Story about Being an Outsider).

Story 2

A challenge story about being an outsider

Purple, Green Beans

By Patsy Arnold Martin

I moved to this town in the week of Christmas in 1984. We moved here from Salina, Kansas. We drove a truck full of stuff from Kansas to this town, emptied it into a house, got back in the car, and drove to New Jersey to have Christmas with my husband Tony's parents. I was not unpacking and trying to have Christmas with a three-year-old.

We had been in Kansas where Tony was taking a yearlong internship at a place called the Land Institute, where he studied alternative agriculture. He'd been offered a job as an organic gardener at a school in western North Carolina which is where we were going to go next. But just before our time finished in Kansas, the person who currently occupied the job in North Carolina, decided they weren't going to leave. So, Tony didn't have a job. And we were left asking "What are we going to do now?" Right at that time, my parents who were living in Israel at the time, called to tell us a tree had fallen on their house in this town and needed somebody to go live in it. They asked, "Would you go there?" We thought, "Oh, we'll go there for a few months." This was December 1984.

There we were in our early 30s, with a three-year-old. We decided that we would try to be part of the farmer's market. And Tony really studied about it. He'd learned that the best way to be successful in a farmer's market is to either grow things really early before all the other farmers or to grow unusual items. So, he tried both. He grew an early spring mix and every color of lettuce that you can imagine and even purple, green beans. They were beautiful purple, green beans. This was the Spring of 1985...in this town.

My job was to take this harvest to the market while Tony stayed home with our daughter. I made a beautiful display of all the different colors of lettuce and the highlight was these purple, green beans. As an elementary school teacher, I made really nice posters about everything. I went early and set up my display and I waited for customers. And waited. And I waited. And I started hearing little conversations. "What do you think that is? I don't know. I'm not going over there." Finally, one brave soul came up and asked, "What are those things?" I said, "They are like green beans, but they're purple." He asked if he could take one home to his wife. I said they're only 30 cents a pound. And he said, "I don't think so." He turned and laughed. And later someone said something about "Why did I put organic on the poster?" and I explained because all of these were grown organically, and this guy said, "You should have moved to Floyd County."

So, the point of my story is it is surprising we stayed here that long after that welcome, but we are still in this town 40 years later. I bet I could sell purple, green beans today. They would sell right away. Maybe this town is catching up.

Story 3

A More Direct Challenge Story about Being an Outsider

Birthday Parties

By Transplant – more than 5 years (*shared without name permission by the storyteller*)

If there was a theme for some of my most painful memories, it would be “birthday parties.” I didn’t realize how much it hurt. I wanted to fit in after moving to this town, but I didn’t. My family had just purchased a home, which seemed like an active community for families of different backgrounds in education. My children were attending what I thought at the time were the best schools. I thought I had all the boxes checked when my daughter’s eighth birthday rolled around in March 2016. Birthdays for my children are always a sad occasion for me anyway, because when they were younger, it was another year closer to them not being little anymore, but I always managed to smile and hold special celebrations in their honor. I planned a small birthday party at home and had my daughter give me the names of some children she would like to invite. There were three. My daughter was particularly excited about one girl named Elena. She lived in our neighborhood just down the street. In fact, I had visions of them having playdates and possibly even walking to each other’s houses when they got older, lifelong friends. My daughter delivered the invitation directly to Elena’s mailbox. Days went by and we never received an RSVP. The birthday party grew closer and closer. I finally pushed my daughter to ask Elena at school if she had received the invitation. Elena said that she had but that she couldn’t come. And my daughter asked her why. And Elena replied, “Because my mom said she doesn’t know your family.” I was shocked because I felt like I made all of the right moves and connections to set myself and my kids up for success in our integration into the community, house, neighborhood, and schools. I wasn’t sure what other likenesses or similarities or connections we would have to have for one child to attend another child’s birthday party. It’s been seven years. I guess I still don’t know.

Looking at the most frequently noted challenge, Outsider/not from here, the Origin of the 8 storytellers including that code was analyzed. 7 of the 8 storytellers’ Origin was “Transplant – more than 5 years” and 1 storyteller was “New – less than 5 years.” This information could be used when considering action planning. Anecdotally, people from the Creative/art community have expressed feeling like outsiders but only 2 storytellers were coded with both Outsider and Creative/art. The storytellers coded with Creative/art were a mix of Lifetime (1), Boomerang (1), Transplant (4), and New (1) (see Table 8: Outsider and Create/Art codes by Origin). The challenge of fearing outsiders and change was discussed with the Community Partner board. They were curious to learn that this challenge came up in the stories but were not surprised as they explained “It’s a southern thing. Change threatens their way of life” and “Southerners don’t

want an outsider coming if they are not from here.” This strengthened the Community Partner board members’ conviction that these stories must be shared.

Table 8

Outsider and Creative/Arts codes by Origin

Origin	Outsider	Creative/Art	Both
Lifetime		1	
Boomerang		1	
Transplant	7	4	1
New	1	1	1

Another way to look at the strength of the Town Words in the story was to count the number of Town Words included in each story. For example, the count would be 3 if a story was coded with Family, Home, and Deer. 95% of the stories had at least 1 Town Word and over 70% had more than one Town Word (see Table 9: Town Word Count Frequency Analysis).

Table 9

Town Word Count Frequency Analysis

	Town Word								
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
# Stories	4	18	20	15	12	6	4	1	80
% of Stories	5%	23%	25%	19%	15%	8%	5%	1%	

The stories were also analyzed considering race; race of the storyteller and race included in the content of the story. Reference to race was made in 5 stories as follows:

1. Bluegrass music is referred to as white music
2. Mention of the KKK Rally in the 70's and the local response
3. The efforts of a storyteller to make a "slave cemetery" as historic site
4. Noting the race of the Tai Chi instructor as a Black man
5. Frustration over historic inequities of funding for churches based on race.

All the storytellers were white and included Origin of Boomerang (4) and Transplant (1). The story about the KKK Rally shows the deep history of racial challenges in the Town (Story 4: A Story about Historic Racism). The first round of workshops did not surface challenging stories specific to racism.

Story 4

A Story about Historic Racism

One teacher makes a difference

By M. Bond (*shared with permission*)

One Flashbulb Memory that stands out is a time when I was in high school and youth group at Main Street Methodist Church. There was supposed to be a KKK rally or parade downtown. To which most people just rolled their eyes and didn't respond. My church teacher got a group of kids from the church to make signs to hang. We ended up hanging them at the back of the church because the parade was supposed to come by that route. We had written "red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in God's sight" and hung it on the side of the bus in the parking lot. It ended up that the parade was small and didn't create much of a stir, but it impacted me because we were doing something.

I shared this story because the church teacher had a big influence. She had a big influence on me and my whole group of peers at that time. She made an important difference.

The stories were assessed to find stories that could be shared with the community on the Community Partner interactive website and in the local newspaper. Stories were selected that included a strong structure with a beginning, middle, and end with an emphasis on the ending to ensure the reader would find meaning. Before publishing, the storyteller was given the

opportunity to refine the story and give final approval. 12 stories were selected to be published in the first year (see Appendix H: Shared Story Collection).

The stories were analyzed to identify content areas where storytellers might be able to make connections – common interests. 5 codes were identified where more than 2 storytellers included a topic (see Table 10: Common Interest Frequency Analysis). At the time of the research, Community Partner was considering hosting additional workshops around the common interest. This would further connections across community groups.

Table 10

Common Interest Code Frequency Analysis

Content Code	# Stories	% of Stories
Outdoor activities	12	15%
Horses/pets	6	7.5%
Aging/retiring	6	7.5%
Music	4	5%
Gardening	4	5%

Community Host survey analysis

The researcher distributed an online survey to the Community Hosts to collect their feedback on the workshop experience, how the workshops helped to create connections, and what to do with the stories collected. Surveys were distributed via Mentimeter to 11 Community Hosts and returned by 10 respondents. The responses were anonymous.

The workshop experience was rated on a 1 – 5 point scale as to whether the experience created connections with the group if participants learned something about others if the

workshop flow gave them time to reflect, and if they were able to write a short scene from their lives and finally if the experience was fun and a safe place to share. (See Appendix F: Community Host survey.) The mean of all questions was above 4 points as shown in Table 11: Community Host Survey Results. Within the group at the workshop, they were making connections and learning about others in a fun and safe environment. The workshop provided a process that allowed all but 1 participant to write a story. The workshop format could be refined to allow for more time for reflection.

Table 11

Community Host Survey Results

	Distribution					
	Mean	1	2	3	4	5
How would you rate the workshop experience for your group?						
Created connections	4.6			1	2	7
Learned something about others	4.8			1		9
Gave us time to reflect	4.2			3	2	5
Able to write a short scene from our lives	4.8			1		9
Enjoyed the time – it was fun	4.6		1		1	8
Felt like a safe place to share	4.8				2	8

Comments from the Community Hosts regarding what they liked about the workshop included:

“The stories were so heartfelt for both the storyteller and the listeners. This shared experience gave me a new connection with each one in our group. We really were transported into each story!”

“We shared a creative process face-to-face in real-time, and we each found our story.

They were each a revelation. We don’t ordinarily reveal ourselves, and it was fun.”

Comments on how to improve the experience were around coordination asking for more time for the workshop in total and more time to reflect. One comment was made about the workshop being a part of a research project which points to the very importance of having the Community Psychologist embedded in the community so the participants don’t feel used. The comment was quite pointed:

“I saw no real positive outcome from this exercise. One student at a far-off college we had never heard of is getting credit toward her Ph.D. I feel used.”

After reviewing this feedback with the Community Partner board members, the board members believed it was an outlier but caution should be taken to ensure context is provided in how the stories will be used. This comment also demonstrates the challenge of not accepting outsiders generally.

While the Community Hosts felt connections were made during the workshop, they were not as convinced the stories would make connections outside of the workshop group or afterward the workshop. This emphasized the importance of creating a strategy to share stories in an interactive way to engage the community. The workshop experience did allow for deeper connections within the participants attending individual workshops with a mean score of 4.4 during the workshop and 3.7 after the workshop. Examples of the connections made included:

“You now know something personal and immediate about someone else whom you may not have known before at all. You now have a connection to that person that you didn’t have before. It’s permanent.”

“I feel that we have this precious experience in common, and I feel more confident and comfortable with these folks – no longer strangers.”

“We had 2 new members in the workshop. One was new to this town, and she remarked that she now felt she had found her tribe.”

The survey also revealed some new ideas for Community Partner to use to share the stories to create connections beyond the workshop participants. Ideas included:

“Post in random places during a gallery showing or performances at the Bower Center, as an exhibit within a larger event that draws people in.”

“Share the stories with their families.”

“Use the stories to educate the community about the evolution of diversity and that makes us stronger.”

“Waiting rooms – people have nothing else to do. Residents of nursing homes. Eateries around town.”

“Signs, digital, radio, newspaper, farmers markets and with other community groups.”

Community Partner Survey Analysis

The coding and analysis were shared with the Community Partner board after which a survey was sent to collect their feedback on the overall program of using storytelling workshops to gather stories to create connections and to identify Smalltown's strengths and challenges to be used in strategic planning. Surveys were distributed to 6 board members and 5 responses were received. The responses were anonymous.

The first question considered if the workshop experience helped create connections within each group, across the groups, and in Smalltown. Regarding connection within each group, the board all responded with 4 or 5 and the average was 4.6; however, the question regarding making connections across groups and in Smalltown was rated lower. The mean score for creating connections across groups was 2.8 and 3.2 for creating connections generally in Smalltown. This is likely because, at the time of this research, stories had not been shared

beyond the groups or in Smalltown broadly. Community Partner does plan to have a monthly news release of a story in the local newspaper, Facebook, and through the Community Partner interactive website. The distribution of scores ranged from 1 to 5 for the question on making connections across groups and in Smalltown, which is likely the board members' speculation on the impacts of sharing stories as planned. (See Table 12: Community Partner Survey Results).

Table 12

Community Partner Survey Results

	Distribution					
	Mean	1	2	3	4	5
Did the stories create connections?						
Within each group	4.6				2	4
Across groups	2.8	1	1	1	2	
In Smalltown	3.2	1	2		2	1

The Community Partner survey also provided insights into how effective the process was at identifying Smalltown's strengths and challenges. The mean score reported for identifying strengths was 4.2 while the mean score for identifying challenges was lower at 3.8. This is likely because more stories included strengths than challenges. In the comments, the board reiterated the importance of sharing the stories and using the findings to plan future actions.

“Collect more stories and share share share!”

“Make the study results a major focus on Community Partner strategic planning.”

Some of the ideas suggested by the board as things to take action on in the future included building on the strengths of tradition, family, and the outdoors and addressing the challenges of helping people fit in and addressing “cliquishness” with “acceptance activities.”

Trustworthiness

Member checking was used to confirm the trustworthiness of the coding. After the workshop pilots, Word Clouds were created and reviewed by the Community Partner board. They suggested combining some of the terms that were similar in order to make the themes stronger. They also suggested creating three Word Clouds; one for strengths, one for challenges and one for all. After all stories were transcribed, the documents were reviewed by Community Partner to assess accuracy. Key findings and the code book were shared with Community Partner board members to determine if codes were missing or misinterpreted. They suggested minor changes such as combining “home” and “chosen home.” Input and confirmation were incorporated into the coding, results, and discussion.

Discussion

As found in the research discussed above, stories are used as a tool by Community Psychologists to empower community members and create a community narrative and trade stories to allow for community healing. Based on the research of storytelling methods above, the researcher developed and experimented with collecting stories to use as input into community planning, creating connections with the community and sparking challenging conversations. The Storytelling Workshops and analysis led to five findings.

Finding 1: The Storytelling Workshop created connections

Experimenting with the Storytelling Workshop approach in Smalltown demonstrated that connections were made with the participants in the workshop. By allowing the participant to reflect and share a story that was meaningful to them, new topics to share arose for the individual which allowed for further connections within the group. These connections were made immediately during the workshop and were reported to continue over time.

After the workshops, the stories were consolidated into a Story Collection and given to the Community Partner. The Community Partner board planned to share these stories in a regular newspaper column – Our Smalltown Story. An initial meeting with the Smalltown Bulletin was held and the monthly column was agreed to start in December 2023.

Through coding and analysis, common interest themes evolved. Community Partner board members believed that these themes could be used to host future workshops based on the theme and invite community members broadly not just from one affinity group. These common interest-themed workshops would create cross-community connections. At the time of the research, one of the first topics considered was aging/retirement.

Finding 2: Even safe stories can be a lightning rod to spark conversations

The research showed that most of the stories were safe stories and did not directly address the more challenging topics such as racism. However, several of the stories were believed to be provocative enough to stimulate deeper and more challenging conversations. For example, one participant talked about her memories from high school at Smalltown County Lake (Story 5: Smalltown County Lake was the Place to Be). She shared her happy experiences and expressed that Smalltown County Lake was the place to be in the day. However, in discussions with Community Partner board members, it was discovered that the lake was sold by the county around the time of eliminating segregation to avoid opening the lake to all races. During the conversation with the Community Partner board, memories were spontaneously told about another lake in Smalltown which was frequented by Black community members. At the time of this research, the Community Partner board was discussing how to use these stories as a way to spark community conversations. They asked, “What would Smalltown be today if we kept the lake?”

Story 5

Smalltown County Lake was the Place to Be

Smalltown County Lake the place to be

By M Bane *(shared with permission)*

I have been in Smalltown since 1934. My thoughts are not so much of an incident, or a single story but just how growing up in Smalltown shaped the rest of my life.

The way of life we had was slower being in a small town. But it was peaceful, and it was safe. And we knew that. We had no problem running all over town day and night and feeling safe. I never knew not to feel that way. And that's a good way to be because it helped me feel that way in other situations as well.

We didn't have a great many commercial activities to do. We had a couple of movies. One closed during the war. We had to make our own entertainment and we did that and that gave us lasting friendships that I don't think we would have got anywhere else.

The normal entertainment in the school year in high school was to go to the ballgame or whatever season it was. Then we'd end up at somebody's house, usually in their basement. And there would be a record player and some refreshments and that was the weekend. You don't lose those friendships, they stay.

In summer, the main thing and place was Smalltown County Lake. That was where everything happened - family picnics, church picnics, dating, everything. The thing was to get to the lake anyway you could get there - every day. And we tried and we went and that was our entertainment for the summer. It was really good entertainment.

During the war years, there was a closeness here that maybe a lot of people didn't feel in other places. But the effort then here in Smalltown was strong. We did everything to be patriotic; we saved tin cans, we even saved chewing gum wrappers. Some girls cut off their hair that was used to make parachutes. I never did go quite that far. But there was a strong effort to support the war. It was important to us to have that togetherness.

We learned to accept everybody because, in the school, that's where everybody was. And regardless of where they lived, or what their position in life was, they were just schoolmates. And we were accepting of them, and they were our friends. My roots go deep in Smalltown County. The first court forming the county was held in a grandfather's home, down in the New London area so I'm pretty well tied to the area.

I was gone for a short time and then came back and worked here until I retired. But it was good growing up here. I think of Halloweens and how we did trick or treating. It wasn't so much that we'd go from house to house, but our teachers were the ones who set up parties. We'd go into the teachers' homes, and they would have wonderful tables spread for us. And it just I think showed the closeness that there was within our schools and our community. Don't think you get these sorts of memories in a bigger city. I may have missed some things from a big city. But I don't think I missed much.

Finding 3: Stories can be a doorway for the Community Psychologist

This research allowed for the development of relationships built between the researcher and the community partner and the community members. Also, the experience allowed the researcher to understand the community as a whole which can lead to strategic action planning. The experience also gave insight into the community narrative and how it might be refined to create connections and address community challenges such as polarity.

Through this research and storytelling experiment, the researcher established an open relationship with the community partner based on a shared vision. This process involved openly sharing the research intentions and the community partner's vision and finding overlapping goals. With repeated visits and conversations, iterating on every step in the research, the relationships strengthened.

Similarly, the process created a connection with community members and engaged them in community change. The researcher and the Community Partner trained facilitators all reported building new and deeper relationships with community members. Details of a shared story were remembered and talked about well after the workshop. Engaging the storytellers in determining how stories could be shared with the community also gave them continued involvement in making connections. In the case of the Smalltown County Lake story, the storyteller was actively involved in deciding what could be done with her story to make a connection, have an impact, and allow for community healing.

The stories also provided the Community Psychologist and more importantly, Community Partner board members insight into the community's strengths and challenges. Yes, many strengths were described in the stories, and several challenges the community faces were shared. These themes were successfully used by the Community Partner to consider in future strategic plans. One of the research questions was to determine if the storytelling approach felt

“safer” than answering direct questions in a survey or focus group to provide insights into the community's needs. Community Hosts in the survey reported the environment felt safe and fun and workshop participants shared anecdotally that their reflections made them recall meaningful and insightful scenes and themes.

The community themes, strengths, and challenges create a new integrated, collective identity that the Community Psychologist and community partner can use to share the narrative or over time refine and change it. In the case of Smalltown, the often-told community narrative describes the sacrifices made on D-Day with the loss of 19 men on the beaches of Normandy (*Bedford Boys*, 2014; *The Bedford Boys Remembered on the 75th Anniversary of D-Day*, 2019). However, the 80 stories collected as part of this research did not tell the story of the soldiers but instead a different community narrative about family and friends, connections and supporting each other, the beauty of the natural environment as well as challenges such as feeling like an outsider. This community narrative can be used to enhance the current story and identify actions to help strengthen and heal the community.

By partnering with a community partner from the very beginning, the shared vision and research approach can be agreed. Then working together repeatedly in an open and iterative way allows for the research approach and outcomes to be emergent. This ties back to Freire, Watkins and Foster-Fishman’s research about engaging the community. See Figure 4: Emergent Research Approach that lists steps in the process for Community Partner involvement and iteration and emergence to take place.

Finding 4: The storytelling research approach was not extractive but a gift

Most research is extractive and often leaves the community feeling used. This research approach was the opposite by giving the community, the community partner, and the individual participant immediate outputs. The community was left with a repository of stories to share and

use as fodder for more challenging conversations. The community partner was left with a sustainable tool and methodology for continuing to collect and share stories. The individual participant was left with the opportunity to reflect on something they might not have recently considered and created connections initially within their group. Building capacity in the community, making the tools simple and easy to understand and use, and making the findings accessible was important component of the research approach. As described by the president of the APA, George Miller in 1969 who said we should be giving psychology away this approach gave the experience and the reflections to the community and the individuals. Miller believed we should put the psychological tools in the hands of the nonexpert to use and address social problems (Miller, 1969). This research approach gave the process and tools to the community and the gift of stories to the community members to build connections.

One of the critical components of this research approach was a keen focus on creating usable stories instead of mass amounts of data and stories that would need to be turned into something usable by the community. At the end of the workshop, the participants already had their story which was collected and immediately shared with Community Partner. The Town Words were collected in a way that we could see the themes emerging as we completed more workshops. The results were available throughout the project and did not have to be waited for which made it immediately meaningful.

However, you will recall the feedback provided by one Community Host who did not experience the research as giving and left feeling used. This was discussed with the Community Partner board members who believed it was an outlier but could be addressed by sharing the stories, themes, and findings with the Community Hosts. At the time of this research, the board planned to share the stories and involve Community Hosts in the action planning going forward. The story collection will be shared directly with the Community Hosts and they will be invited to

help determine how to use the stories to create more connections and spark challenging conversations.

Finding 5: The Community Story Engine

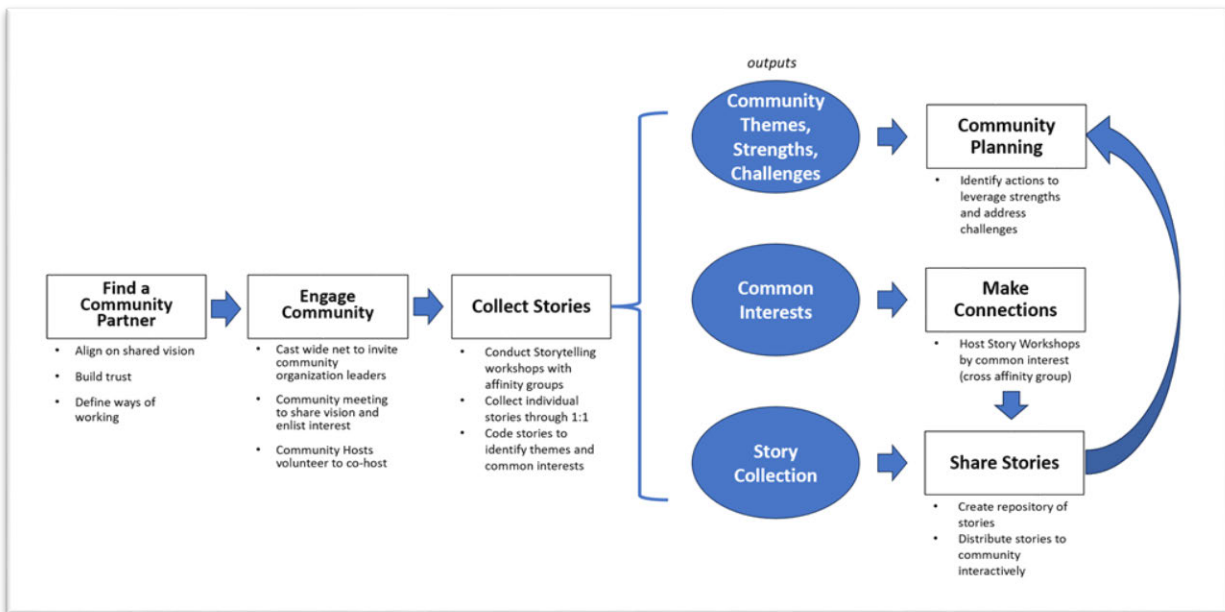
Out of the research findings, a new methodology and toolset was developed – The Community Story Engine. The new praxis allows for partnering with a community to identify community actions and make connections across the community by engaging community members in social change (Figure 7: Community Story Engine). The Storytelling Workshop Facilitator Guide was provided for the Community Psychologist to customize and prepare for workshops in communities.

Community Story Engine

It was found to be important to first find a community partner with a shared objective and then establish trust and determine ways of working. The next step identified in the engine is to engage the community, which can be done by inviting existing community organizations and clubs to participate. To solicit their interest and create buy-in, host a community meeting where they can learn more about the process and enroll in co-hosting a workshop. Stories are collected through workshops following the facilitator's guide. Additional stories can be added to the collection from 1:1 interviews and individuals submitting their stories electronically. The stories are then refined and edited and coded thematically. The output of the workshops includes 1) the community themes, strengths, and challenges, 2) common interests of the community members including events, topics, and landmarks, and 3) the story collection.

Figure 7

Community Story Engine



The Community Story Engine encompasses many pieces of the community involvement processes and the storytelling outlined in the literature above. Starting with the Community Partner allows for connections to be made with community members based on the Community Partner's network. In Hyman's Community-Building Process Framework in Figure 1, he starts with resident engagement (Hyman, 2002). By starting with the Community Partner, it provides access to the residents who might already have familiarity and trust with the Community Partner. The Storytelling Workshop agenda uses some of the same questions as McAdams' Life Story Interview but is conducted in a much shorter time and in groups (McAdams, 1985). The output is a story that is already refined and ready to share.

Storytelling Workshop Facilitators Guide

The Storytelling Workshop Facilitators Guide (see Appendix B: Storytelling Workshop Facilitator Guide) can be leveraged with community partners to build capacity and allow for more workshops to be conducted in a short period. The guide included the objectives, the

agenda, and step-by-step instructions and script for how to conduct a Storytelling Workshop. This capacity-building step also builds buy-in and support for the overall program and the community partner builds more and deeper relationships with community members.

Recommendations – Implications for Praxis

Building relationships with communities such that they feel safe to share strengths and challenges requires researchers to work “with” not “for” communities and walk side-by-side as outlined by Freire and Watkins. Wide open storytelling allows the community members to reflect on their life experiences in a community and then write a scene from their experience without prompting on specific topics and issues, allowing the researcher to listen to what is important to the community members. This research study identified a new methodology – the Community Story Engine and tools to build research relationships and collect community input. The research also immediately started creating more connections with community members and engaged them in the community-building process. These tools can be used as a guide for Community Psychologists beginning new relationships with a community and collecting input for community planning.

Delimiters of the Study

A delimiter of this research is that it did not collect stories from a sufficiently diverse population. Further research should be conducted to consider how to get more diversity from more groups to participate in workshops and/or share their stories. These findings and recommendations should be validated by the diverse community members.

Community Hosts and Community Partner board members self-assessed whether they believed connections were made during and after the workshops. A deeper community engagement assessment could be completed after the Our Smalltown Story scales and reaches more people and the stories are shared. Validating that positive connections were made would be

interesting to assess the impact of these new connections. This was minimized somewhat because the Community Host feedback was relatively consistent across all workshops.

Implications for Future Research

After the stories are shared with the community in the newspaper and on the Community Partner website, the storytellers and general community should be surveyed to see if meaningful connections were made as a result of sharing their story. The involvement of the community on the Community Partner website should also be monitored to determine if the stories provide challenging conversations. Attendance at future workshops and contribution of more stories could also be monitored to determine interest and connection. Maintaining contact with the Community Hosts would be another way to continue to emerge the research. Their ideas on ways to collect and share more stories should be considered and they should be surveyed regularly to ensure their voice is heard and they do not feel used.

The long-term findings of this research study should be validated with the Smalltown community. Ideally, community members would be asked if they were aware of the stories if they created new connections, and the impact of these new connections. A quantitative study could be done to assess the impact of the connections on overall community engagement and then additional qualitative research to collect the impact of connections.

Conclusion

Collecting stories helps Community Psychologists engage with community members and start the community-building process building on community strengths and addressing community challenges. But it does not stop there. Sharing the stories across the community created connections within the workshop experience and beyond and has the potential to spark more challenging conversations about topics such as racism. The Community Psychologist must continue to engage and listen to the community and the Community Storytelling Engine can be

used and shared with community partners to build capacity and allow them to help themselves. This simple technique of giving community members the time to reflect and share their stories might just open more doors for more change in our communities.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Storytelling Workshop Facilitator Guide

Appendix B: Storytelling Worksheet

Appendix C: Storytelling Workshop Recruitment Letter

Appendix D: Joint Informed Consent

Appendix E: Codebook

Appendix F: Community Host Survey

Appendix G: Community Partner Survey

Appendix H: Shared Story Collection

Facilitator Guide

Our Smalltown Story Storytelling Workshop

This document serves as the Storytelling Workshop Facilitator Guide. It provides guidance to assist the facilitator and should not be given to workshop participants. It gives the approximate timing of delivery for each activity, talking points, and supplemental questions to raise during the activities.

INTRODUCTION

Facilitators walk participants through the 3-step story writing process: Reflect, Write, and Share. Facilitators are responsible for ensuring that participants focus on story writing and making sure all participants are successful in writing their 2-minute Smalltown story.

A key Facilitator role is to build and maintain an environment where all the participants feel comfortable speaking honestly and where differences of opinion are respected. Facilitators should ensure that everyone feels included and has an opportunity to participate as they would like. **Facilitators should not drive the discussion but rather keep participants focused on the process of writing their story.** Additionally, Facilitators may want to use an issues list or “parking lot” to document valid points that are raised by participants during the exercise but that risks taking the focus away from story writing; these items can be assigned for later discussion to the appropriate persons.

AN EFFECTIVE FACILITATOR

- ▶ Creates a safe space for sharing stories.
- ▶ Keeps participants focused on writing their story.
- ▶ Allows participants to bow out or postpone writing their story as desired.
- ▶ Controls group dynamics and manages strong personalities by using the parking lot to collect discussion points for later.

Considerations to create a focused environment

Facilitators should discourage side conversations, ensure cellular phones are turned off or made silent, and control group dynamics. Table arrangements for the exercise should try to maximize the interaction between the Facilitator and participants. During the exercise, Facilitators need to constantly be aware of time constraints, notifying participants about progress and moving the discussion toward completion of exercise objectives when time is running short.

OBJECTIVES

The Storytelling Workshop objectives are as follows:

STORY WRITING WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Give participants the opportunity to **reflect** and find meaning in their Bedford history and the impact it has had on their lives.
- ▶ Provide participants the opportunity to **document and share** a scene from their life that has meaning to them.
- ▶ Create 2-4 minute stories that can be shared with others to **create connection**.
- ▶ Identify themes including **strengths and needs** of the Bedford community so actions can be determined.

Stories help the teller organize their experience and find meaning in their life events according to Mankowski and Rappaport. Creating connections is important to engaging the community members in community-building activities as demonstrated in Hyman's Community-building process framework. (Hyman, 2002; Kelly, 1955; Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000)

Agenda

25 minutes	Welcome and Workshop Overview
20 minutes	Reflect: life themes and scenes
25 minutes	Write: beginning, middle, end
50 minutes	Share: Group

Roles

Facilitator – your role is to facilitate the process and ensure participants are successful in writing their story and have a positive experience sharing their story with the group. You are also responsible for handling workshop scheduling, room setup, and collecting materials and stories.

Community Host – community members who requested a storytelling workshop for their group will identify a host from their group. The Community Host will partner with you to conduct a successful workshop. Before the workshop, they should explain to their group the objective of the workshop and why they thought it would be beneficial for the group to participate. They will be responsible for communicating the workshop coordination with the group participants, identifying the site and date, and working with Community Partner on the details. You may want to give them a copy of this page.

Participants – come to the workshop with an open mind and curiosity to write a 2-4-minute story from a scene in their life in Smalltown. They will reflect, write, and share their story. An informed consent will be required with two parts: Part 1 – agreement to participate in the workshop and Part 2 – agreement for Community Partner to share their story.

Community Partner – Community Partner, Inc. is a private, nonprofit organization in Smalltown, Virginia whose vision is a community united through understanding, trust, kindness, and respect. Our Smalltown Story is a key priority to help create connections through stories and identify the needs of the community for future initiatives. Community Partner is sponsoring this initiative and will manage how the stories are collected and used.

Room Setup

Before the workshop, you will want to ensure you have adequate seating arrangements, materials, and technical setup. You will want to arrive early to the session to prepare the room and be ready to greet participants before the workshop.

Seating - participants will need space to sit comfortably and a writing surface. A round or square table seating 5 – 10 participants such that participants can interact with each other would be ideal. You should position yourself at the table as part of the group. If you need multiple tables to accommodate the number of participants, make sure everyone can see and hear you.

Materials - participants will need a copy of the Our Smalltown Story worksheet and the Informed Consent Form. At the center of the table, provide a writing instrument for each participant and a stack of notebook paper for them to use to write the details of their story. At the end of the workshop staple the papers from each participant together including their worksheet, consent form, and notebook papers.

Technical setup – as participants are sharing their stories, you will ask if you can collect a voice recording. To do this, you will need to record the audio file on your phone or you can use a recorder from Community Partner. You will also need to take a digital photo of each participant (if they are agreeable). You can do this on your phone. After the workshop, post the audio files and photographs on the [Community Partner Gmail Drive](#). For each workshop you facilitate, create a folder with the name of the group and the date in the folder name.

What to bring

- Facilitator Guide (printed copy for your use)
- Our Smalltown Story worksheet (one per participant)
- Informed Consent Form (one per participant)
- Pens or pencils (one per participant)
- Stapler
- Digital recorder or recorder on the phone
- phone to take photos of participants

WELCOME AND WORKSHOP OVERVIEW [25 MINUTES]

Time	Topic/Issue	Facilitator Notes/Questions
5 minutes	Welcome and introductions	<p>When participants are ready:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome to the Our Smalltown Storytelling Workshop. In the next 2 hours you will have the opportunity to reflect on your history in Smalltown and write a 2-4-minute story from a scene in your life that has meaning to you. Introduce yourself. Share your Smalltown story to break the ice and to give participants an idea of the kind of story they will be sharing. Ask the Community Host to introduce themselves and why they decided to host the workshop. Ask participants to introduce themselves – name and number of years in Smalltown.
5 minutes	Why stories?	<p>Why are we asking you to write your Smalltown story today and what makes stories so important?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Telling and listening to stories makes you feel good (Zak, n.d., 2015). Brain science experiments have proven storytelling makes your brain release chemicals that make you feel good - both the teller and the listener (Hasson, n.d.). Reflecting on your story helps <u>you</u> find meaning (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000). Stories help us relate to each other and connect (Kelly, 1955) and that is what Community Partner is hoping to do with Our Smalltown Story – help people connect.
5 minutes	Workshop overview	<p>We are going to go through a 3 Step Process</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Reflect – I am going to walk you through the process of thinking about words that describe your Smalltown history or your dreams for Smalltown's future. Then you will jot down the scenes that bring those words to life. For example, _____ [list a word you considered in your Smalltown Story and a memory that brought it to life]. Write – then I'm going to give you time to write your story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. As easy as that. The beginning will set the scene. The middle may tell about a struggle and how you overcame it, a funny anecdote, or a moment of triumph. The end will explain why you told the story and why it is important to you. Share – we will spend a big bulk of time sharing stories. You'll share your story with the group. You can read your story or use bullet points to guide your verbal storytelling. If you are willing, we'd like to capture an audio recording of your story and collect your notes.
10 minutes	Housekeeping	<p>Distribute Our Smalltown Story Worksheet, note the informed consent page and a pen. Have them put their name, when they came to Smalltown, and a couple sentences about their experience in Smalltown (i.e. native, grew up here or relocated as an adult or returning native...).</p> <p>Read through the informed consent and ask participants to sign Part 1 before we get started. Part 2 will be reviewed after stories are shared to allow Community Partner to be included in the story repository and share with other Smalltown residents.</p>

REFLECT: LIFE THEMES AND SCENES [20 MINUTES]

Time	Topic/Issue	Facilitator Notes/Questions
5 minutes	6 themes	<p>Let's get started with step 1 of the 3-step story writing process. There are some sub-steps but this first step is giving you time to reflect on your history in Smalltown.</p> <p>Think about words that come to mind when you think of your history in Smalltown.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does Smalltown make you feel? • How has Smalltown impacted who you are today? • What helped you be successful? • What got in the way of you being successful that you had to overcome? <p><small>Questions modeled after place-based approaches as described by Nowell. (Nowell et al., 2006)</small></p> <p>I'll give you 3 minutes to reflect and write down 5 or 6 words on your Our Smalltown Story worksheet. These are just ideas that you will use as you write your story.</p> <p><i>Debrief – ask participants to share a couple of the words they wrote on their worksheet exactly as written. It's not time (yet) to share stories or why. Just ask for single words.</i></p>
5 minutes	Define themes	<p>Now let's define those words.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For each word, write down what it means to you. It can be single words or phrases. • There are no right answers. Just what these words mean to you. • This is meant to be free-flow brainstorming with yourself. Getting your ideas on paper so you'll have a starting point for your story. <p><i>Debrief – ask participants to share one of their definitions exactly as written on the worksheet. Again, it's not time (yet) to share stories or why.</i></p> <p>Now we are going to narrow down your story. Look at the words and select the one that you feel like you want to write about today. Don't worry about selecting the perfect one as this theme might evolve as you do more reflection and writing. This is your starting point.</p>
10 minutes	3 scenes	<p>Now you are going to think about specific memories or scenes from your life when that theme came to life. I want you to come up with 3 memories or scenes from your life and write them down. For example _____ <i>[share a scene from your life such as a picnic at the Peaks when a cousin broke his arm].</i></p> <p>These memories are the ones that are etched in your brain forever and are sometimes referred to as "Flashbulb Memories." You can remember the details like it was yesterday typically because of a surprise or an emotional experience.</p> <p><small>Flashbulb Memories defined by Brown and Kulik (Brown & Kulik, 1977)</small></p> <p>Ideas to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High, low, and turning points • Positive or negative childhood scene • Vivid scene from your adolescent or adult years • Life challenge – struggle or conflict you faced <p><small>Adapted from McAdams' Life Story Interview (McAdams, 1985, 2013; McAdams & Guo, 2014)</small></p> <p>I'll give you 3 minutes to reflect and write down 3 scenes.</p> <p><i>Debrief – ask participants to share one of their scenes exactly as written on the worksheet. Again, it's not time (yet) to share stories or why.</i></p> <p>You guessed it. Now I'd like you to pick one of the scenes that is calling you to write about it today.</p>

WRITE: BEGINNING, MIDDLE, END [25 MINUTES]

Time	Topic/Issue	Facilitator Notes/Questions
5 minutes	Writing instructions	<p>Okay, so we are on step 2. This step is going to take about 20 minutes and will be when you write your story. Now, you are probably thinking “How can I write a story in 20 minutes?” Good question but here’s how:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You’ve already been doing a lot of thinking in step 1 about what you want your story to be about. You’ve got a theme and a specific scene. 2. We are going to use the Story Arc which is super simple and we’ve all heard these stories – the hero’s story. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning is where you set the scene and tell your frame of reference. You describe who was there, period, season, smells, feelings... Teleport the listener right back to the scene. • Middle is where you write what happened. Was there a struggle and how did you overcome it? Was there a funny anecdote or a moment of triumph? What happened? • And the end. This is where you tell the listener <u>why</u> you wrote the story. Here’s a hint. It probably relates back to your theme word you listed at the beginning of the session. By now, you might have refined your original theme word. Use the ending to explain the life theme and why this story is so important and meaningful to you. <p><small>Adapted from McAdams’ Life Themes approach. (McAdams & Guo, 2014)</small></p>
20 minutes	Writing	<p>The goal is to write a 2-4 minute story about a scene in your life and then share it with the group verbally. To help you format your story, you can jot down and outline with bullet points or you might prefer to write your story in full sentences in writing that you can read verbatim. Using the second page of your worksheet and extra paper as needed, write your story with a beginning, middle and end.</p> <p>I’ll give you about 10 minutes to write and see how it is going.</p> <p><i>Check-in after 10 minutes and give them 3 minutes to wrap up. They can add details when they are sharing in the next step.</i></p>

SHARE: GROUP [50 MINUTES]

Time	Topic/Issue	Facilitator Notes/Questions
45 minutes	Storytelling	<p>Now for the fun part. We get to hear the stories. A couple of logistics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you don't want to tell your story out loud, no problem. We would love to read your written story after the workshop. Or, if you'd like us to read it aloud to the group, we'd be happy to share. • If you are okay sharing your story, we'd love to record the audio. I'll simply hit record on the recorder. If you record your story it will help us transcribe the story and we might even be able to use the audio to share it with others but we will work with you before we do anything. <p>Who would like to go first? I'll be sure to keep time. We have time to give you each 5 minutes.</p> <p><i>Facilitators note: For each participant (if they are willing to be recorded) start the audio recording on the digital recorder. If you are using an iPhone to record search for the Voice Memo app. For each participant hit the red button to record and at the end press stop. The files will be saved on your phone, and you can post them on the Community Partner Gmail drive after the workshop.</i></p> <p><i>After each participant tells their story ask if you can take their photo. If they are willing, take a photo with your phone and post it to Community Partner Gmail drive after the workshop. The photos will be used when stories are shared. Participants will be notified and conferred with to decide if and when and where to share their story.</i></p>
10 minutes	Wrap up	<p>Thank you for participating in the workshop. I hope you found it meaningful. We'd like to collect the Story Writing Worksheets and will be working to determine how to share stories with Smalltown residents.</p> <p>We need to collect your consent to share your story. We will be in touch with you about how we'd like to share stories with more people in Smalltown. Read through Part 2 of the Consent Form. You can write down specifics you'd like to have changed or omitted from your story then sign it.</p> <p>Thank you again for participating in the workshop and let us know if you'd like to host a workshop with another group. The more stories we collect, the better!</p> <p><i>Facilitators note: Collect worksheets, notebook papers, and informed consents. Staple together for each participant. Give your materials to Julie Stanley. You can post the audio file and photos on the Drive.</i></p>

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Appendix B – Storytelling Worksheet

OUR SMALLTOWN STORY WORKSHEET

NAME: _____ SMALLTOWN SINCE: _____

BACKGROUND (ORIGIN/RACE): _____

REFLECT – 6 THEMES

6 words that come to mind when you think of your history in Smalltown. How does Smalltown make you feel? How has Smalltown impacted who you are today? What are the strengths/challenges of Smalltown that impacted you most?

WORDS	DEFINITIONS

REFLECT – 3 SCENES

WRITE - YOUR SMALLTOWN STORY

Beginning – set the scene. Describe who was there, time, season, smells, feelings.....

Middle – what happened?

End – why is this story meaningful to you? Explain why you told this story. It might link back to your life theme or maybe you've revised your theme.

The goal is to write a 2-minute story about a scene in your life and then share it with the group verbally. To help you format your story, you can jot down and outline with bullet points or you might prefer to write your story in full sentences in writing that you can read verbatim.

BEGINNING

Beginning is where you set the scene and tell your frame of reference. You describe who was there, time, season, smells, feelings... Teleport the listener right back to the scene.

MIDDLE

Middle is where you write what happened. Was there a struggle and how did you overcome it? Was there a funny anecdote or a moment of triumph? What happened?

END

The End is where you tell the listener why you wrote the story. Here's a hint. It probably relates back to your theme word you listed at the beginning of the session. By now, you might have refined your original theme word. Use the ending to explain the life theme and **why this story is so important and meaningful to you.**

SHARE

Storytelling – share your story. Trick – start with “Once upon a time” to get transport your listener right into your story.

Listener – listen intently and hold your questions until the end then share the impact the story had on you and what you learned.

Appendix C – Storytelling Workshop Recruitment Letter

My name is Andrea Plamondon, and I am a doctoral student at National Louis University in Chicago. I am inviting you to participate in the Our Smalltown Story: Storytelling Workshop, which is also my dissertation research project. The workshop begins April 1, 2023, and will wrap up by September 30, 2023.

The purpose of the research project is to design and implement a Storytelling Workshop with the Smalltown community and explore whether/how the stories help create connection and community involvement. The research will also help identify future actions we can take in the community to create a sense of belonging and connection.

The dissertation research is called Connections through Stories in a small town in rural Virginia. This form outlines the purpose of the study and describes your involvement and rights as a participant in the dissertation research project.

By signing below, you are providing consent to participate in a research project conducted by Andrea Plamondon, a doctoral candidate at National Louis University, Chicago.

Participation in this study will include:

Participating in a 2-hour Storytelling Workshop to reflect and write your story.

You will share your story in writing and will have an option to record your story on audio.

This additional item will be included for Community Hosts:

Participating in a Post-program Assessment Survey.

Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. The learnings from this study may be shared in community discussions and other knowledge exchange activities. You may receive a copy of the dissertation product and any publications that come from this work.

Your identity will in no way be revealed unless you decide to use your name on your story (otherwise data will be reported anonymously and without identifiers that could connect data to individual participants). If/when you decide you would like to be involved in the telling of the story with your name, I will develop any necessary permission forms for using direct quotes. All research data will be destroyed seven years after the study has been completed.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits, no greater than that encountered in daily life. Further, the information gained from this study could be useful to build community connections.

If you have questions or would like any more information, please contact the researcher, Andrea Plamondon via [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED].

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that have not been addressed by Andrea, you may contact:

Bradley Olson, a faculty member of Andrea's dissertation committee (bradley.olson@nl.edu or 312.261.3464)

Shaunti Knauth, co-chair of NLU's Institutional Research Board (Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu or 312.261.3526) or Dr. Carla Sparks, Co-Chair for IRB (Institutional Research Board) (csparks3@nl.edu or 813.928.6889)

Consent: I understand that by signing below, I am agreeing to participate in Connections through Stories in a small town in rural Virginia. My participation may consist of the activities below between April 2023 and September 2023:

Participating in a 2-hour Storytelling Workshop to reflect and write your story.

You will share your story in writing and will have an option to record your story on audio.

This additional item will be included for Community Hosts:

Participating in a Post-program Assessment Survey.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Appendix D – Joint Informed Consent

OUR SMALLTOWN STORY STORYTELLER CONSENT FORMS

INTRODUCTION: Andrea Plamondon is a doctoral student at National Louis University in Chicago. Her dissertation research is called “Connections through Stories in a small town in rural Virginia” and will be known locally as “Our Smalltown Story.” Community Partner, Inc. is a private, nonprofit organization in Smalltown, Virginia whose vision is a community united through understanding, trust, kindness, and respect.

The purpose of Andrea’s research project is to design and implement a series of Storytelling Workshops with Smalltown community members and explore whether/how the stories help create connection and community involvement. The research will also help identify future actions we can take in Smalltown to create a sense of belonging and connection.

Thank you for your interest in participating in Our Smalltown Story. Part 1 of the form below asks for your consent to participate in a storytelling workshop and allow Andrea to use your story in her research. **(Once the workshop is over, Community Partner must have your further consent to permit the sharing of your story with others-Part 2 below).**

If you have questions about the Research Project at any time, please contact Andrea Plamondon via [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED] If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that have not been addressed by Andrea, you may contact:

- Bradley Olson, a faculty member of Andrea’s dissertation committee (bradley.olson@nl.edu or 312.261.3464)
- Shaunti Knauth, co-chair of NLU’s Institutional Research Board (Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu or 312.261.3526)

If you have any questions about Community Partner’s role in the research project, contact Community Partner.

**PART 1: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STORYTELLING
WORKSHOP AND ALLOW YOUR STORY TO BE USED BY ANDREA
PLAMONDON IN HER RESEARCH**

I understand that by signing below, I am agreeing to participate in a Storytelling Workshop in Connections through Stories in a small town in rural Virginia, also called “Our Smalltown Story,” and allowing Andrea to use my story for her research.

1. I understand that my participation in the Workshop is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any time without any negative consequences.
2. I may ask for and receive a copy of the dissertation product and any publications that come from this work.
3. My participation will consist of these activities between March 13, 2023 and June 30, 2023:
 - Participating in a 2-hour Storytelling Workshop to reflect on and write my own Smalltown story;
 - Reading (or having someone else read) my story to the Workshop participants and having an option to record my story on audio; and
 - Having my photograph taken at the Workshop.
4. I understand that I have these rights:
 - I can ask questions if I do not understand something that is said in the Workshop.
 - I can ask for assistance in writing any materials that are requested in the Workshop.
 - I can choose to stop participating at any time for any reason. If I choose to stop, any writing or audio recording made of my story will be either given to me or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the story.
5. I understand that the risk of participating in the workshop is no greater than that encountered in daily life, and the benefits may include that the information gained from this study could be useful in building community connections.

I have read, or have had read to me, the Introduction and Part 1 of this form, and I fully understand the Workshop and my rights during the Workshop. By signing below, I voluntarily consent to participate in this Workshop. I also agree that Andrea may use my story for her dissertation research project and that when the research is finished the story will be sent to Community Partner.

Storyteller Printed Name

Storyteller Signature _____

Address _____

Phone Number _____

Email _____

Date _____ Time _____

Community Host Printed Name _____

Community Host Signature _____

**PLEASE STOP! DO NOT GO TO PART 2 UNTIL THE WORKSHOP IS
COMPLETE.**

PART 2: CONSENT FOR UNLIMITED PUBLIC USE OF MY STORY
BY COMMUNITY PARTNER

Thank you for telling your Smalltown story for this project. This part of the form gives your consent to allow Community Partner to use your story.

1. My Workshop and my story have now been completed. In no way will any of the words I have used in the workshop be changed, but I understand that the story may be edited for clarity, and it also may be shortened.
2. I give Community Partner unlimited access to and use of my story. My story and my words may be quoted and/or my photograph shown on Community Partner and other websites, over the internet, in newspapers and public places, and/or in scholarly and popular publications.
3. Community Partner will organize, process, conserve, and provide access to the story in accordance with accepted professional standards and best practices.
4. I reserve the right, and Community Partner grants me the right, to copy and publish my story, to create new works based on my story and the content of my story, and to use my story for my own purposes until my death. Community Partner requests that I notify them if I create additional works based on my story.
5. I have a right to place restrictions on the content, storage, and/or use of my story. If I have chosen to place any such restrictions, they appear in detail below.
Please write in here any restrictions you wish to place. Please specific:

I have read, or have had read to me, Part 2 of this form, and I fully understand the content. By signing below, I voluntarily give Community

Partner permission for unlimited use in its sole discretion, subject to any restrictions or provisions I have noted above.

Storyteller Printed Name

Storyteller Signature _____

Address _____

Phone Number _____

Email _____

Date _____ Time _____

Community Host Printed Name

Community Host Signature

Date:

_____ Time: _____

Appendix E – Codebook

Town Word Strength

- mountains - Peaks of Otter, Sharp Top, Blue Ridge Parkway, and local mountains
- Family - The connections and love within families immediate, extended, and generational
- church/spiritual/religious - church, spiritual and religious institutes
- friends - Strong connections between people and neighbors.
- rural/small town - Rural and small-town living.
- Friendly - People are kind and helpful to each other. Make each other happy. Smile.
- home/chosen home - Feeling of security and where I belong. Chosen home.
- creative/art - Using artistic skills and love of art. Artisan trail.
- peaceful/relaxing/rest - Peaceful, relaxing, rest
- supported/band together - Helping each other. Have your back.
- history/D-Day - Smalltown history and patriotic references.
- change/growth/opportunity - Changes and growth. Opportunity.
- school days/high school - Memories of school days and high school.
- safe/security - Feeling of being safe and secure.
- Connections - Small-town living allows for deep connections.
- Volunteering - Taking opportunities to volunteer and give to the community.

Town Word Challenge

- Frustration/no action - Frustration with lack of change. Joyfully stuck. Struggle. Painful.
- polarity/difference - Views on opposite ends of the spectrum political, religious, race, socioeconomic
- outsider - Not feeling like they fit in because they are not from here or boomerang. Referring to myself as new even after years of living in Smalltown.

Content

- Aging/retiring – Stories about aging or caring for aging people or retiring.
- Garding – stories about gardening or farming.
- outdoor activities - Stories about hiking, kayaking, and other outdoor activities
- cars - Stories about cars as a hobby.
- horses/pets – stories about horses and pets
- music – stories about music, festivals, choirs, and singing
- Elks Home – stories about the Elk’s Home and interaction with Elk residents

Appendix F – Community Host Survey

Sent to Community Hosts via email including a link to the Mentimeter online survey.

1. How would you rate the workshop experience for your group (scale 1 - 5)
 - created connections
 - learned something about others
 - gave us time to reflect
 - able to write a short scene from our lives
 - enjoyed the time - it was fun
 - felt like a safe place to share
2. What did you like most about the workshop?
3. What would make the workshop better?
4. If you were to host another workshop for another group, how would you change the workshop?
5. To what extent did the stories help make connections (scale 1 - 5)
 - during the workshop
 - after the workshop
6. Please explain the types of connections made and provide an example
7. How could you use the stories collected?
8. Who could we share the stories with to make connections?
9. Where could the stories be shared?

Appendix G – Community Partner Survey

Sent to Community Partner board members via email including a link to the Mentimeter online survey.

1. Did the stories help create connections (scale 1 - 5)
 1. Within the group
 2. across groups
 3. in Smalltown
2. Did the workshop allow you to (scale 1 - 5)
 1. involve people in Community Partner you did not already know
 2. increase trust with people
 3. identify Smalltown's strengths
 4. identify Smalltown's challenges
 5. collect input that will help Community Partner set priorities
 6. provide a safe place for people to share
3. What did you learn about the Smalltown community that you did not already know?
4. What Smalltown strengths did the stories help you identify?
5. What Smalltown challenges did the stories help you identify?
6. What actions will you take as a result of hearing these stories?

Appendix H – Shared Story Collection

Month	Story Title	Storyteller
January	A perfect snow day - getting cold and taking chances	White female, 41 – 61
February	Only English I Knew	Korean female, 61+
March	Called to music	Black male, 18 – 41
April	Stickball with Mom - every day with her was a lesson!	Black male, 61+
May	Purple, green beans - before our time	White female, 61+
June	Camping with Dad, Deer hunting with Dad, Full moon hike with dad	Family
July	Smalltown County Lake was the place to be	White female, 61+
August	\$1 Pocketknife. Priceless.	White male, 61+
September	Children's Library kissing tub	White female, 61+
October	Halloween on the Loop says it all	White female, 61+
November	Smalltown came to help when Grandma's house caught fire	Black female, 61+
December	Christmas surprise - Elk's Home lights	White female, 61+

January

A Perfect Snow Day

By White female, 41 - 61

When snow starts falling around here, everyone gets excited about meeting up. “Where are we going to meet? Are we meeting at Grandma Coleman's a mile up the road? Are we meeting next door at Ben and Caryl's?” Everyone starts texting and calling. “Where are we meeting? Where are we meeting? Can we drive there? Are the roads too bad? Or do we have to walk?” These are all the questions that I always think of on snow days.

Everyone has to look for their sleds now. Or they bring in their float from the pond to sled down or they bring in their actual sled. Maybe you're even bringing your canoe or a food trough. We have used the troughs before.

Do not forget the gloves, the hats, the scarves, the face mask. And then do not forget, of course, to bring all the extras of all those things because the kids are going to get wet and cold and everyone is going to want a new set of everything. Then we all walked and met at Grandma Coleman's and everyone started sledding. Everyone started taking turns using their sleds, “I want to try your sled. I want to try your sled.” But the part that was always so hard was as fun as it is to go down the hill, having to walk back up the hill. We would go and we would go we would go until our legs hurt from walking up the hill. Somebody brought hot chocolate. Everyone went down to the bottom of the hill to have hot chocolate and then you had to find the energy to walk back up the hill and go down a couple more times.

At the end of the night, everyone trying to figure out now what? We got here with all the energy to get here to meet, but we all had to somehow make our way back home with all the sleds behind us and all the hats and the gloves, and the crying children.

But after a day like that, I just remember feeling so much closer to my friends, my neighbors, my family, and my community. It is days like that, that fill in the days, making good memories. On a day that is such a beautiful snowy day, you could stayed home and been happy and warm, but it is also so fun to get cold and take chances and go on long walks and meet up with your neighbors and play.

That's my Smalltown story.

February
Only English I Knew

By Korean female, 61+

I was born in South Korea where I met my husband. I have lived in Smalltown County since 1967. Since then, Smalltown has been home.

In Korea, my friend was an interpreter. Her career in language was to translate Korean and English. She learned English and then started getting interpreter jobs. My husband was stationed in Korea. We had a get-together - a big party. He was looking at me. I thought he wanted to talk to my friend, but my friend said he wanted to talk to me. My friend had to translate. While we talked and she translated he said he wanted to see me again.

That's when we met. Then you know what parents do. They worry about a different country and being so far away from home and not knowing what's happening. All that stuff that makes families concerned. So, it was a long process and a hard time. Finally, we got married in April of 1967 and right away I came to the United States in October. I couldn't speak English. Maybe just "I love you." That's all I knew. But that was enough.

My husband was from Smalltown. Everybody in his family was in Smalltown. He was a homeboy. He is gone now and I'm still grieving. He was a good man. And he was so good to his wife. He always spent money all the way but no children. He didn't care. He stuck with me. He didn't know we'd be together so long in a partnership. He is the only man I knew. Some people may go five times but still not be happy. I miss him but I am staying in Smalltown. Smalltown is the only home I know.

That is my Smalltown story.

March

Called to Music

By Black male, 18 - 41

On July 4, 2010, eight-year-old me stands in the choir stand of Sharon Missionary Baptist Church. As I stand with the choir who's called for their next song, my Aunt DD announces that today's musical presentation will be a special guest playing the song. Master Tanner Sharpe, my name, rang loudly across the sound system. The choir and the congregation were in complete shock after a roar of applause. They led me to the piano. I walked down from the choir and approached the piano with three other great musicians seated next to me; a bass player and two keyboard players. I was intimidated yet supported. The song begins. We sing "How great is our God." As I played the song, the whole choir was in tears listening to this eight-year-old leave the music like an old pro. So many emotions flooded my mind. And before I knew it, the song was over. Yes, in my mind, I thought it was over. Hugs and tears surround me as I go back to my seat. My Aunt Jean hugged me so the beads on her dress nearly put my eye out.

I wrote this story because from what I thought would be a one-time experience developed into a young man whose whole career is a full-time music director. This goes to prove correct the scripture "Despise not the days of small beginnings."

Anytime I think about Smalltown, I always think about church. Anytime I think about church, I think about me playing and that's my life. That's all I know. That's my career. And that's what I think about when I think about home and love and community is church.

That is my Smalltown story.

April
Stickball Challenge
By Black male, 61+

We were all home – my mom, my brother and my sisters, dad, granddad, and Big Momma. We were all at work on chores. It was a Sunday. School was out. We were taking a break from our chores. My brother and I were challenging each other as to who could hit the ball the farthest. Mom asked if we wanted to play stickball. We said, “Sure!” Brother and I thought we would be playing against each other. So, we went to pick teams. And my mother said, “No, we don't need to pick teams.” She said she would play against all of us. Well, we couldn't believe that. We thought, “Well, this is going to be easy.” Anyway, long story short, Mom was to beat us 20 to zero. We couldn't strike her out. We couldn't get any runs. She showed my brother and I that we needed a lot more practice.

My mom was an athlete. She had quite a reputation even with her brothers as far as playing stickball with them. They respected her as much as she was good. She was warm and loving. Every day with her was a lesson.

That is my Smalltown story.

May

Purple, Green Beans

By White female, 61+

I moved to Smalltown in the week of Christmas in 1984. We moved here from Salina, Kansas. We drove a truck full of stuff from Kansas to Smalltown, emptied it into a house, got back in the car, and drove to New Jersey to have Christmas with my husband Tony's parents. I was not unpacking and trying to have Christmas with a three-year-old.

We had been in Kansas where Tony was taking a yearlong internship at a place called the Land Institute, where he studied alternative agriculture. He'd been offered a job as an organic gardener at a school in western North Carolina which is where we were going to go next. But just before our time finished in Kansas, the person who currently occupied the job in North Carolina, decided they weren't going to leave. So, Tony didn't have a job. And we were left asking "What are we going to do now?" Right at that time, my parents who were living in Israel at the time, called to tell us a tree had fallen on their house in Smalltown and needed somebody to go live in it. They asked, "Would you go there?" We thought, "Oh, we'll go there for a few months." This was December 1984.

There we were in our early 30s, with a three-year-old. We decided that we would try to be part of the farmer's market. And Tony really studied about it. He'd learned that the best way to be successful in a farmer's market is to either grow things really early before all the other farmers or to grow unusual items. So, he tried both. He grew an early spring mix and every color of lettuce that you can imagine and even purple, green beans. They were beautiful purple, green beans. This was the Spring of 1985...in Smalltown.

My job was to take this harvest to the market while Tony stayed home with our daughter. I made a beautiful display of all the different colors of lettuce and the highlight was these purple, green beans. As an elementary school teacher, I made really nice posters about everything. I went early and set up my display and I waited for customers. And waited. And I waited. And I started hearing little conversations. "What do you think that is? I don't know. I'm not going over there." Finally, one brave soul came up and asked, "What are those things?" I said, "They are like green beans, but they're purple." He asked if he could take one home to his wife. I said they're only 30 cents a pound. And he said, "I don't think so." He turned and laughed. And later someone said something about "Why did I put organic on the poster?" and I explained because all of these were grown organically, and this guy said, "You should have moved to Floyd County."

So, the point of my story is it is surprising we stayed here that long after that welcome, but we are still in Smalltown 40 years later. I bet I could sell purple, green beans today. They would sell right away. Maybe Smalltown is catching up.

June

Camping with Dad

By family

This story is about camping with my dad. A couple of days ago. We went camping in the woods at our house. Dad and I went up to the top of our lot. First, we set the tent up and put sleeping bags and blankets in there. We also put flashlights and some snacks. We ate the snacks then we went to bed. And then, at three in the morning, it started to rain. Dad put the tarp over the tent, and we stayed out. We went back home in the morning. I told this story because it is a reminder of fun times and good memories here on our property.

Hunting with Dad

By family

I love living in Smalltown. I enjoy hunting and hiking in the Smalltown mountains. I love watching beautiful wildlife, such as birds, turkeys, deer, and snakes. On this specific hunting trip, my dad and I got in the deer stand about an hour before sunset. We got in the stand and got seated and got ready. And then just waited. We had been in the stand for about 25 minutes before we saw the first deer. I waited for it to get closer. I aimed and then shot. I was going to wait about 10 minutes before getting down to make sure the deer was completely dead. While we waited a second deer came up, so my dad shot at the second deer. I wanted to share this story because it was a fun time to enjoy the Smalltown mountains.

Full moon hike with Dad

By family

I am 15 years old, and I've lived in Smalltown for 10 years. I want to share a story about the first time my dad and siblings and I hiked Sharp Top. My dad had heard about a full moon hike with a group. When we got to Sharp Top the group had already left but we thought we could catch up, so we started hiking. The full moon made it easy to see the trail. We weren't able to catch up with the group. We had to stop and go home before we made it to the top because it was so cold and hard for my younger siblings. We hadn't prepared since it was a last-minute adventure. But now my family has climbed Sharp Top many times and taken friends too. I wrote this story because it was fun and memorable and Sharp Top has become a family favorite.

Smalltown County Lake – the place to be

By White female, 61+

I have been in Smalltown since 1934. My thoughts are not so much of an incident, or a single story but just how growing up in Smalltown shaped the rest of my life.

The way of life we had was slower being in a small town. But it was peaceful, and it was safe. And we knew that. We had no problem running all over town day and night and feeling safe. I never knew not to feel that way. And that's a good way to be because it helped me feel that way in other situations as well.

We didn't have a great many commercial activities to do. We had a couple of movies. One closed during the war. We had to make our own entertainment and we did that and that gave us lasting friendships that I don't think we would have got anywhere else.

The normal entertainment in the school year in high school was to go to the ballgame or whatever season it was. Then we'd end up at somebody's house, usually in their basement. And there would be a record player and some refreshments and that was the weekend. You don't lose those friendships, they stay.

In summer, the main thing and place was Smalltown County Lake. That was where everything happened - family picnics, church picnics, dating, everything. The thing was to get to the lake anyway you could get there - every day. And we tried and we went and that was our entertainment for the summer. It was really good entertainment.

During the war years, there was a closeness here that maybe a lot of people didn't feel in other places. But the effort then here in Smalltown was strong. We did everything to be patriotic; we saved tin cans, we even saved chewing gum wrappers. Some girls cut off their hair that was used to make parachutes. I never did go quite that far. But there was a strong effort to support the war. It was important to us to have that togetherness.

We learned to accept everybody because, in the school, that's where everybody was. And regardless of where they lived, or what their position in life was, they were just schoolmates. And we were accepting of them, and they were our friends. My roots go deep in Smalltown County. The first court forming the county was held in a grandfather's home, down in the New London area so I'm pretty well tied to the area.

I was gone for a short time and then came back and worked here until I retired. But it was good growing up here. I think of Halloweens and how we did trick or treating. It wasn't so much that we'd go from house to house, but our teachers were the ones who set up parties. We'd go into the teachers' homes, and they would have wonderful tables spread for us. And it just I think showed the closeness that there was within our schools and our community. Don't think you get these sorts of memories in a bigger city. I may have missed some things from a big city. But I don't think I missed much.

\$1 Pocketknife. Priceless.

By White male, 61+

It was October 1966. And I remember that the Vietnam War was raging in parallel with our life. We had this simple but complicated life trying to keep the farm going and get the taxes paid by December. Our cash crop was tobacco. We had a pretty good year with it, but we had these mounds of tobacco that were in the barn that were being cured. We got right up against market day. And we all had to pitch in and tie it up, stack it up, and get it ready for market, which is quite a process. I was 10. My job was to climb up in the tobacco barn, which was probably 25 feet up on the poles. Because I like to climb, they would always send me up and I would bring down the tobacco.

There were mounds of leaf tobacco leaves all around us. It was nighttime. I can remember the smells of tobacco and kerosene from the lamps as there was no electricity in the barn. And I remember my brother and me, dad and my three uncles, my grandpa, two grandparents, and the neighbors came over because they had tobacco too and we helped each other out. There were probably a dozen of us in this tiny little room with mounds of tobacco. The old people were stringing yarns and we were in there working. It's cold and dirty. I was wearing rags because we didn't have fancy clothes or that type of thing. We had work clothes and school clothes and none the two shall meet. Of course, one day the school clothes would graduate to work clothes, but anyway, it was dirty. We worked late into the night, and it was even a school night – we worked until three in the morning. Whew. Then we finally got it all done. There was a lot of pressure to get it done. But nobody lost ourselves over it. We just stayed and kept going and kept going and kept going.

My feeling was as a young boy - I felt needed. I learned the value of work. We always worked. But at some point, you just kind of cross over this little border, and you say, "I'm needed and I'm 10 years old, and I'm capable." It gave me a very, very good feeling. My grandfather was so proud of me. After we sold the tobacco, he brought me back a \$1 pocketknife, which I still have to this day.

Smalltown Children's Library Kissing Tub

By White female, 61+

I moved to Smalltown in April of 1974 to be the children's librarian - the first professional children's librarian at the Smalltown Public Library. The Children's Library was a separate building from the main library in a historic, beautiful, Victorian house lovingly known as the Louise Wharton house.

Shortly after I moved to Smalltown, I became involved in the Junior Women's Club and volunteered to help with community improvement projects. One of the member's sons had died. He had been coming to story hour and died very suddenly and very tragically from cancer as a five-year-old. The club decided to use their funds to dedicate their project to Alan Panky.

We remodeled the library. I was part of the club and had a choice of colors and decorations. The library was remodeled in 1976 so part of the colors were red, white, and blue for the front room, and we had jungle print, orange, well, melon, lemon, and lime sherbet colors for the picture book room, and other colors in the other rooms. But the main feature of the remodeling besides the dragon mural on the wall, going up the steps, painted by Piedmont label artist Jane Carter, was the bathroom downstairs. This bathroom was remodeled into a reading room in memory of Alan Panky. And the feature that became beloved and immortalized in the memories of the children of that generation was the reading tub. We took the existing clawfoot tub and converted it into a sofa by cutting the front side out, and heavily padding it with carpet. As it was the 70s, we of course did bright gold, shag carpet. The inspiration was that the new reading room would be adjacent to the picture book room and be a place where the toddlers would go cozy up to their mothers for reading.

Well, the library was just down the street from Smalltown Elementary School. The big kids would walk down after school. And rather than it being a toddler book-reading tub, it became the kissing tub! My desk was down the hall and around the corner just two rooms away. Often I would go in there and have to chase out the fifth and sixth graders who found out that was the best place in town to come to make-out comfortably.

Now, 45 years later, those middle schoolers are parents and even grandparents. They remember fondly that reading tub where many had their first kiss, compliments of the Smalltown Children's Library.

That's my Smalltown story.

Halloween on the Loop

By White female, 61+

Halloween is the hallmark holiday in Smalltown. Everybody loves Halloween in the Loop. The houses are decorated beautifully, the adults are dressed up, the kids are dressed up, and you just hear laughter and see smiling all evening. Everyone is having a good time. Everybody is a part of it.

It's something that I dreamed of when my husband and I first got married. We were big-time runners. We'd always run the loop. When I think of Smalltown I think of the loop. We loved running on Halloween. We loved seeing all the trick-or-treaters. I remember the excitement when I was four months pregnant and running the loop with my husband. He touched my belly and said, "That's going to be us you know." We were so excited to be part of it with our growing family. And we did.

The tradition grew through the years. We started at our house with our kids dressed up. We take our pictures on our porch, same time every year, same place every year. And then trick or treating and meeting up with friends and neighbors. We walk around the loop all evening and end up at our friend's house. The neighbors come out, the kids put their candy down, we have loads of food, everything's Halloween themed and chili and autumn and fun. The kids run back and forth between the houses. It's so trusting and wonderful.

I picked Halloween to write about as My Smalltown Story because it's such a loving and happy evening in Smalltown; the closeness of Smalltown, the secure feeling, the support we give each other, and the fun we have together.

That's my Smalltown story.

Smalltown came to help when Great Grandma's House Caught Fire

By Black female, 61+

In 1959, my family home which belonged to my great-grandma caught on fire. My great-grandmother my mother and my dad along with 12 children were living in the home. Everything we owned from the top of the foundation was in our home. I get upset when I talk about this. My baby sister was upstairs. She was crying. We thought she was saying "frog." Mom sent somebody up there to see. She was about two years old. The rest of us left without a fight. We went out, grabbed each other's hands, and took the pictures. And we hollered "FIRE!" Momma told us to get across the road. But I stuck with her. I was 13 years old. She had a trunk because she thought it was full of important papers. But it was my grandma's trunk with her junk. I had to tow that trunk on my knees because I couldn't push it. We got the trunk across the road. Momma was going back to the house because she had to get the till that, my daddy, just bought. And she went behind the house to get the till. She ran behind the house. The house fell. Oh, I thought the house fell on Momma. I was running back up there to her when a man caught me to hold me back. And then this lady that lives up on the hill came to me and said "Where's Bessie?" And I told her "Up there!" She went up there and saw Momma had gotten to the cold bin and was all covered in smoke. If it had not been for her I would have lost my momma. But we lived in her home for a while. And then we got another home and had a better life - mom and dad and the kids.

The kids have all grown and left home. We had some good people. We have a good community giving up things and helping. I want to thank Smalltown for coming together and giving and helping on the day when somebody's house catches on fire. Everybody comes out - that's what makes Smalltown.

That's my Smalltown story.

Christmas Surprise

By White female, 61+

24 years ago, Bruce Johannesson and I decided to purchase a house in Smalltown, since my teaching job was in Roanoke, and Bruce was the manager of Virginia Employment in Lynchburg. We were really lucky to find our wonderful 100-year-old farmhouse on Peaks Street. After some strenuous negotiation, we were able to purchase the house.

My house in Roanoke sold and we had a couple of days grace to move here. Our moving date was December the 23rd. The day came and the movers arrived. We spent hours and hours cleaning, arranging, and moving into our new house.

Dinnertime arrived. We had seen a Chinese restaurant on what we realized later was Bridge Street. So, we went for dinner. We were dirty and dressed as we were, we really didn't care because we figured we didn't know anybody.

After a lovely, restful, and delicious dinner, we started driving back to our new home thinking we would fall into bed that night. We got to the corner of Bridge Street by Smalltown Middle School and the traffic was backed up miles. Bruce said, "Oh my goodness, there must have been a terrible wreck right in front of our house." 20 or 30 minutes later, we finally got to our driveway just five houses from the school.

Just as we turned into our driveway, we realized that every other car was turning left onto College Ave. We were perplexed and thought "What is going on? What is this all about?" We had no idea.

We later found out about The Elks Home Christmas lights, a wonderful Christmas tradition. Since then, every year we join the parade going to The Elks Home and take a look at the lights. That is my Smalltown story – a Christmas surprise.