

Carnegie

RESULTS



StoryCorps

Sharing the Stories of American Lives

Dave Isay had planned to become a doctor when he unexpectedly veered off into a very different path: healing a nation torn by political division and, later, devastating tragedy through the power of our own spoken words.

“I was headed to medical school,” explained Isay, the founder of StoryCorps, which encourages all Americans to record the stories of their lives. “I knew that it wasn’t what I was meant to do. Then I accidentally fell into radio when I was right out of college and found my calling,” Isay said.

That calling, backed by a small seed money grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York, grew into an organization that, in the span of less than a decade, has recorded more than 43,000 interviews with Americans at locations throughout the nation. These everyday American stories are heard regularly on NPR.

StoryCorps began its work in 2003 with a \$30,000 grant from Carnegie Corporation, one of the initial grants that helped get the project going. It grew rapidly with the support of other funders. Later, in 2011, the Corporation provided an additional grant for a 9/11 commemorative project that won a prestigious Peabody broadcasting award, the second such award for StoryCorps. Animations and other recordings from friends and loved ones recalling those who perished in the attack will be featured at the National September 11 Memorial Museum in New York City.

Isay edited three books from the rich StoryCorps archives that became *New York Times* bestsellers. And StoryCorps can boast of a rare achievement: all of its interviews are archived in the Library of Congress in Washington.

The current popularity of StoryCorps seems light years away from 2003, when the organization was struggling to pay its bills and fill up a recording facility at New York's Grand Central Station. "Actually getting people to sign up and go to the booth was a struggle in the early days," Isay recalled. "And now, I was in Los Angeles on a book tour. And someone raised their hand and said, 'I made a reservation to go to StoryCorps' [mobile booth] in L.A. ...seconds after reservations opened, and I was number 1,500 on the waiting list,'" Isay marveled. "It's really come a very long way since just eight-and-a-half years ago."

Much of the credit goes to indefatigable Isay and his staff. Isay was a MacArthur "genius" Fellow as a radio documentary producer before he started StoryCorps. To Susan King, a former Carnegie Corporation vice president whose External Affairs office gave Isay the first Corporation grant, Isay's vision reminded her of "early Sesame Street, early Teach For America. He was on the outer edge of ideas."

Though Carnegie Corporation was among the first handful of funders for StoryCorps, make no mistake: the Corporation grants for StoryCorps have been quite small compared to major foundation projects—a total of \$65,000

in two grants separated by eight years. But the grants were also awarded when StoryCorps needed real help, especially in the beginning, when the project's survival was at stake. And those involved believe the grants have been multiplied many times in terms of helping to raise additional funds for StoryCorps.

"You always hope that a Corporation grant will be a catalyst," said King, "a show of faith from a significant foundation" that sparks the ability of a fledgling organization to raise far more funds from other donors.

"Carnegie Corporation is probably as much of a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval as anything in philanthropy," said Gara LaMarche, StoryCorps' Board chairman. "The Corporation is a very valuable funder to have," added LaMarche, former president of The Atlantic Philanthropies, "and undoubtedly, in the early days, helped [serve] as a validating story for other funders as well. 'To its great credit, the Corporation saw the potential of StoryCorps in those early days...and helped them launch.'"

After working with the organization as a funder himself, LaMarche became Board chairman in 2012. He said, "I love the democracy of StoryCorps. Anybody in any station of life can do it and have a very compelling story, whether they are rich or poor, black or white, gay or straight." Even celebrated political opponents have come together for a StoryCorps interview.

The New York City-based StoryCorps grew and prospered on its own, until it needed the modest but timely 9/11 grant from the Corporation. Like the earlier grant, it didn't neatly fit in any existing Corporation funding categories. But it matched a huge concern for all Americans, particularly the New York-based foundation that, from the moment of the tragedy, sought to help the city rise from the ashes of the World Trade Center.

So the StoryCorps September 11 grant "wasn't really about the Corporation. It was more about the tenth anniver-

sary of 9/11,” says Geri Mannion, program director of Carnegie Corporation’s U.S. Democracy and Special Opportunities Fund. “It aligns with our interests, our history of support of New York in the wake of 9/11, and it was kind of a perfect opportunity. And I think it just seems like the right thing to do.”

For Carnegie Corporation, the story of these grants is about leverage as a byproduct of a worthy project. “We always leverage our money. We always realize that we can’t do it all,” Mannion explained. “We don’t want any organization to be dependent on one source of funding. Sometimes, what’s great about our funding or anybody’s foundation funding, it can be early for seed money. It can also be the money that just fills the final gap that’s needed. And both are really important pieces,” Mannion said.

“We’re just as comfortable being part of a larger puzzle that comes together to support something,” she noted. “In fact, we’re more comfortable about that because it allows us to think of an organization as more sustainable.”

Creating a National Conversation One Interview at a Time

StoryCorps’ oral history mission began with a bold choice of recording booth location: Grand Central Station, home to many harried New York commuters.

Isay recruited oral history legend Studs Terkel to cut the ceremonial ribbon in 2003. At age 91, Terkel flew in from Chicago for the occasion. “Today we shall begin celebrating the lives of the uncelebrated!” Studs Terkel declared.

The booth started out busy after a “burst of publicity,” but then faced a lull, Isay said. Early on, he remembered, StoryCorps facilitators would go into the streets and “try to encourage people, homeless people, whoever it was, to come into the booth and do an interview.”

But Isay also knew very early on he had struck a nerve. A homeless person asked to donate her food stamps to StoryCorps because the interview “had been such an important moment in her life,” Isay recalled. A man proposed to his girlfriend in the interview booth. Another extraordinary moment occurred when a World War II veteran talked openly about the war and started crying. His wife of 60 years remarked, “This is the first time I ever heard him cry.”

All of these experiences happened “within the first week or two of opening,” noted Isay, demonstrating the power of the booth for everyday Americans. Eventually the Grand Central booth became well established.

Another major question mark for the fledgling organization was where to find a permanent repository for the StoryCorps archives. Isay quickly landed what may be the most prestigious address in America for his collection: the Library of Congress. The Library boasts what former library official Peggy Bulger describes as “the largest ethnographic archive in the world.”

“When he first had the booth in Grand Central Station, he realized very early on that he needed a permanent archive. The archiving part of it would be just as daunting as doing all the interviews,” Bulger said. “So, he approached me because I was directing the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. And I said immediately, ‘Of course.’ You know, this would be just a continuation in a very twenty-first-century way of what was happening during the Federal Writers’ Project in the 1930s.”

The Library of Congress/StoryCorps relationship has greatly boosted the growth of StoryCorps. Many are drawn to the booths because they know their words will be preserved for posterity. “Our participants think it’s a big deal,” said Donna Galeno, the organization’s director of programs. “For many people, that’s why they want to do a StoryCorps interview: to know that their great-grandchildren’s grandchildren can hear their voices.”

Bringing Real Discussion to a Polarized and Distracted Nation

The recorded interviews are a powerful antidote to the lack of conversation in a plugged-in world of computers and phone texts.

“The purpose of StoryCorps goes beyond collecting for oral history and for the future, but really is also about having two people be in the booth together and really listening to each other, which is amazing in today’s world,” Bulger noted. “We’re always multitasking. We never really listen. If we’re listening, it’s with one ear, and we’re texting and this, that and the other.”

StoryCorps is a more in-depth way to view people’s lives than popular forms of sharing. The session can have much more meaning and depth than a photograph or a social media posting, Isay noted.

“I may be biased,” he said, but “you can’t get closer to the soul of who a human being is than what ends up on those CDs over the course of this 40-minute conversation when people are asked to talk about what’s most important to them. And it’s not how much money you made or where you worked.”

The heart of the experience is creating what StoryCorps calls “a sacred space” in the recording booth. Interview facilitators are experienced in finding ways to alleviate the potentially nerve-wracking situation of facing the microphone. They meet with participants, who often are in pairs, before they enter the StoryCorps booth to tell them what to expect. Inside the booth, trained facilitators use proven techniques to relax the participants.

“We play a little bit. It lets [people] get used to the microphone,” explained Galeno. StoryCorps personnel might ask interviewees such trivial questions as, “What did you eat for breakfast this morning?”

The relaxation techniques work to promote a bond

between the participants, notes Gara LaMarche, so facilitators only step into the actual conversation when needed. The StoryCorps board chairman has gone through the process several times, including being interviewed about his life by his daughter. “It somehow encourages more intimacy and more candor. You almost forget about the microphone.”

StoryCorps even brings strange political bedfellows together inside the small booth. “What I love about StoryCorps is that it truly does transcend political differences,” LaMarche declared.

He once brought together ideological adversaries: commentator Mary Matalin, seen as conservative, and publisher Arianna Huffington, who has been portrayed as liberal, for a StoryCorps conversation. “They talked about their mothers and they talked about their fathers. They talked about families,” LaMarche explained. “All human beings have certain things in common. They had a wonderful conversation.”

Before starting to record interviews, founder Isay worried that the intimate process might even spark violence. “When I opened the booth, I had fears of ‘Jerry Springer’ moments with people shooting each other and all this stuff. And nothing like that has ever happened,” he said. “You know, in many ways, I think StoryCorps is a very, very hopeful project. [People] think very carefully about who they’re going to bring and bring someone who almost always is very important to them.”

Recordings can be made available for posterity or simply pocketed by participants. “At the end of the interview, you sign a release for it to go to the Library of Congress and be broadcast, or you don’t. We don’t care,” Isay noted. “You walk away with the CDs; we couldn’t be happier that you came.”

But StoryCorps found, surprisingly, that nearly all the interviewees granted permission for outside use, Isay said. That “speaks to how much it means to people to leave this record for history.”

But being able to opt out from public exposure was really important for 9/11 families, some of whom may feel battered by media attention “basically sucking life out of people for the story,” Isay said.

“We hope this is just the opposite, that we’re giving a gift. Instead of the people who we’re interviewing having something taken from them, they’re being given something by having the opportunity to do these interviews,” he added. “And they were sick of the journalists, they were sick of everybody else. They were so used to being tested and prodded and interviewed by people in white coats. And StoryCorps was just about them.

“This was an opportunity for them just to remember—in any way they wanted to—the person that died,” Isay pointed out. “Not just for what had happened on September 11, but who they were.”

9/11 Stories: New Impact a Decade Later

By the time the 9/11 grant came around, the budding StoryCorps, aided in its survival by the initial Carnegie Corporation grant, had grown into a full-fledged institution bolstered by numerous other funders. “On this particular grant, the thing that we liked about it, StoryCorps itself is a very well-known entity,” noted Geri Mannion.

Once again, the grant filled a pressing need, but didn’t easily fit in with any standing Carnegie Corporation funding categories. StoryCorps held a major grant from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation that had just run out with a major anniversary looming.

One pressing need that Carnegie Corporation’s \$35,000 grant to StoryCorps fulfilled was for three days of interviews in September 2011, right around the time of the 10th anniversary of the tragedy.

A sense of reflectiveness was a critical reason for StoryCorps to partner with the National September 11 Memorial Museum to gather 9/11 memories a decade later. Former Library of Congress expert Bulger termed it “incredibly important because ten years after, people have had time to reflect... People have really in their own minds processed what actually was the impact of that event on their own lives.”

StoryCorps and the September 11 Museum were particularly concerned about seizing the opportunity to land family members who might have traveled to New York or were focused on reminiscences because of the anniversary. “We have a certain number a year that we budget for,” said Ryan Pawling, manager of partnerships at the September 11 Museum in New York. Any more interviews needed additional funding.

The Carnegie Corporation-funded interviews were a very small part of an ambitious StoryCorps plan to record the stories of every one of the nearly 3,000 September 11 victims through family members and friends. “We are on a mission here,” Galeno declared. “We announced at Ground Zero with Mayor Bloomberg that we were going to collect one remembrance for every victim, and we have been faithful to [that effort] all these years.”

The September 11 Museum is a powerful partner in that effort: it is hosting the interview tapes on its Web site and will feature them when the museum opens. The museum’s relationships with 9/11 family members aid the recording effort. “It’s been a very successful partnership,” museum director Alice Greenwald said.

The recordings help remember the victims as individuals, not just part of a collective American tragedy. “What we want to convey... is the nearly 3,000 people [who perished] weren’t abstractions, they were people,” Greenwald explained.

In the tapes, you hear “a daughter saying, ‘you know,

my dad loved nothing more than his red Porsche. Except my mother.’ And you start laughing. You realize they were people,” just like anyone, Greenwald said. “It’s been hugely beneficial to us” to have the recordings. In fact, there will be a dedicated StoryCorps recording booth at the museum when it opens.

Animations Aim for a New Audience

StoryCorps turned to a seemingly unorthodox method to illustrate the lives of 9/11 victims—animation. This was a new way to reach audiences for an organization whose work had been based solely on sound, not pictures. Yet, the animations have been an overwhelming success, and were featured on the home page of YouTube, the wildly popular Internet video site. The cartoon-style animations appeal to an audience that might not have the exposure to StoryCorps in its more traditional forms. “The YouTube viewers are different than the NPR listening audience,” said StoryCorps’ Galeno. “I would imagine a much younger group of viewers. This is the digital era and there are different ways for folks to interact with our content,” she said. “This is just another way to reach out.” Deborah Leff, ex-StoryCorps board chairman and former executive for ABC’s *Nightline* interview program, adds, “What’s really remarkable to me about these animations is, for a relatively modest amount of money, the reach is extraordinary.”

Animation was also a way for the StoryCorps production to stand out in the clutter of 9/11 stories, especially around the tenth anniversary. “It’s a different way to tell a story that’s been told a million ways,” Galeno pointed out. “We’re barraged with media about 9/11, but animations are incredibly unique...and different.”

Still, StoryCorps needed to address the question of taste, animation being a form of media often used for enter-

tainment. “Yes, these are cartoons and Carnegie Corporation obviously trusted us”—as did another funding partner, Galeno acknowledged. “We made sure what we did were respectful and elegant and graceful” depictions of 9/11 victims’ stories.

September 11 Museum director Greenwald wasn’t sure at first that animation was a proper form to commemorate victims of such a somber event. “Initially, I was not convinced, to be perfectly honest,” Greenwald said. “There was a point at which Dave wanted us to put the animation on our Web site. And we felt that in the context of our project it could be misunderstood somehow as trivializing these experiences.”

But while to some they may seem odd at first, the animations quickly grow on a viewer as an apt way to illustrate the family and love relationships of victims. Greenwald now plans to use the animations in the auditorium of the museum as part of the introductory experience. She likened it to a “movie cartoon before the main feature.” Greenwald also hopes that it will serve to spur more people to tell the life stories of loved ones lost in the national tragedy. The cartoons can serve “as a way of saying if you have a 9/11 story or want to remember someone, please speak to somebody on the museum staff.”

The animations can also serve to make the story relatable for younger museum-goers, who may not be old enough to fully appreciate or even remember 9/11. “As far as children or teenagers go,” the museum’s Pawling explained, “it’s one of these media that allow [the museum] to get the story across to people who wouldn’t otherwise be paying attention.”

The animations contributed to a proud milestone for StoryCorps. Its 9/11 commemorative coverage won a Peabody award. “Winning the Peabody...it is like the Pulitzer Prize” for the broadcast industry, said Leff.

Carnegie Corporation’s Mannion realized that while a

bit different from the norm, funding the animations could also be a creative way to tell an important story. She noted that Carnegie Corporation's history in such creative media includes the landmark Sesame Street: "We have funded lots of different areas of media that... wouldn't necessarily be the first thing you thought of," Mannion observed. "Who would have thought the Muppets would have been such a teaching tool—and look at them now."

"For any creative project, it's how you get the audience. And these days, there's a multitude of social media that are used to engage people... Twitter, Facebook, YouTube," Mannion said. "Foundations have to be open to that."

Feedback arrived through StoryCorps' educational StoryCorpsU program, indicating that the technique has helped in the classroom. "Many teachers used the Carnegie Corporation-funded animations as a way to facilitate discussion around the 9/11 anniversary," StoryCorps reported, and "found them to be a powerful means by which to engage students in meaningful discussions."

Geri Mannion is gratified with the results of the Corporation's 9/11 StoryCorps investment. "It shows that foundations should have a little bit of money that's available that allows you to sort of go off the direct path to do [projects] on occasion that are just really innovative, opportunistic," Mannion observed. With StoryCorps, "you couldn't ask for anything better," she said. "You could spend millions or hundreds of thousands of dollars for a project and not have it come together as well as it did for this relatively modest amount of money. And it's a project that will have staying power that we hope will carry it well into the future."

The technology has changed just in the nine years since the recording organization's founding. StoryCorps used to mail CDs to the Library of Congress. Now, they simply transfer digital files. But whatever the format, what is on the recording reflects real life, according to former Library of Congress official Bulger.

"You know, the politicians are going to tell you what you want to hear," Bulger said, "but real people are going to tell you what they're really thinking."

Much of StoryCorps' success revolves around Isay, who, working in tandem with special assistant Kathrina Proscia, can be a whirlwind in action. "Dave is a charismatic figure and he is the classic kind of visionary founder," noted LaMarche. Isay's "been this terrific salesman for StoryCorps. He believes so passionately that if we only get people talking, the stories of so many people will make a better world."

With such individual dedication and as the head of a lean organization (only four executive team members are listed on its Web site), StoryCorps might face significant difficulty if Isay decided to leave the nonprofit that he founded. In fact, planned obsolescence was once his goal for the organization.

"I thought we would do it for ten years and take it down," Isay explained. But having seen StoryCorps' potential, he says now, "I would fight hard to make it something that would be around for a long, long time."

Despite rapid growth in less than a decade, StoryCorps hopes to have an even bigger impact on America in the very long-term future, according to Isay. "When we launched with the Carnegie Corporation funding, we were, like five people, probably with a budget of about \$150,000 to \$200,000. And now we're about 100 people with a \$6.5 million budget. But I don't think we've even begun to touch the potential of what I hope this thing will be," Isay predicted. "I don't think we're going to know the true value of what we've done here for another 100 years."

Last year, Carnegie Corporation of New York celebrated its own centennial. Its small but significant role in creating archives that will be available at the Library of Congress for decades and centuries to come clearly dovetails with goals of Andrew Carnegie, Carnegie Corporation's founder,

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continued from page 7

who opened up many free libraries for the public. "I think it's amazing that the everyday people who participate in StoryCorps will be able to say to their families, 'Well, we're in the Library of Congress,'" remarked Geri Mannion. "This is one thing in particular I think Andrew Carnegie would smile down upon."

To find out more about StoryCorps visit www.storycorps.org

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