

The Story of StoryCorps: *Celebrating the Story in Each of Us*

By Craig Harrison

StoryCorps, the oral history project that has recorded more than 20,000 interviews with everyday Americans in the past six years, operates under the belief that we all have a story to tell. Through its various initiatives using facilitators, community partners and sponsors this non-profit ensures that stories of Americans of all walks of life are recorded, heard and preserved for us all. And in 2009, they're here in San Francisco!

The Core of StoryCorps

Founded in 2003 by David Isay, an award-winning radio producer, StoryCorps is based in Brooklyn, NY, where a staff of thirty oversees nationwide operations. StoryCorps conducts oral histories using fixed locations and mobile units to reach diverse populations and record their stories, a pair at a time! The results: audio CDs that interviewees and interviewers take home with them, and copies that are archived with the Library of Congress to become part of an oral history of America.

Not only is StoryCorps recording the lives and experiences of everyday people to preserve their memories, it is also promoting listening, which storytellers know leads to increased understanding and deepening connections. As a result of the interview process, family members and loved ones learn more about their heritage and the experiences of others. The richness of peoples' lives is relived in interviews conducted in soundproof trailers and recording booths. Some are repurposed through excerpts played on National Public Radio, and compilations have been published in a book, *Listening is an Act of Love* and a companion CD.

How it Works

People intent on interviewing others make reservations for a one-hour recording session held at one of various StoryCorps locations around the country. Then, in the quiet booth, with the help of a trained facilitator, one person interviews another about his or her life. After an hour, a 40-minute CD is produced for the interviewee. (A donation is requested, though not required.) And a release form signed by most authorizes a copy to be shared for posterity. In this manner, children interview a parent or grandparent, a person may interview a friend, or a person will conduct an interview with a co-worker. On occasion, a facilitator will interview a person if they don't bring along someone to interview them.

Unearthing Stories

The questions asked are generally open-ended to elicit the wealth of stories with surprising detail that most of us consider irrelevant. According to Sarah Geis, StoryCorps coordinator in San Francisco, the interview process itself loosens people up after about 20 minutes; interviewees are often surprised at the stories they share. Kasha Ho, one of three facilitators with StoryCorps in San Francisco, further explains the interviews: "Laughter and tears are common; people always ask if we hear arguing, but honestly, I've yet to! An often-heard refrain from interviewers of the stories uncovered: 'I had no idea!'"

The Griot Initiative

Among StoryCorps' initiatives is one focusing on recording the stories of African-Americans. *The Griot Initiative* is a partnership with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, which is recording the rich stories of the experiences of African Americans. **Lifemark, SAAC's** partner with the **2007 Bay Area Storytelling Festival** and ongoing supporter of concerts, hosted StoryCorp's community storytelling mobile at their **Oakland Chapel of the Chimes** location.

The Stagebridge Story

When Mary Trahan, a south Berkeley senior read that the Griot project was coming to the East Bay to interview African-Americans about their experiences, she told Stagebridge storyteller Marijo about it. Marijo contacted StoryCorps and learned they had already recorded in San Francisco, with low African-American turnout. StoryCorps sent Marijo a large package of promotional materials. She then began zealously canvassing Oakland restaurants, shops, churches, theatres, stores and BART with her enormous stack of brochures soliciting locals willing to share their stories when *The Griot Initiative* returned to the Bay Area. She met skepticism and reluctance on the part of many to record personal stories. "Just how was this information to be used?" they asked cautiously. Undaunted, Marijo persevered.

Marijo simultaneously lobbied Stu Kandell, founder/director of StageBridge, about their becoming a community partner for this project. Local churches and community groups similarly partnered with *The Griot Initiative*, and in the summer of 2007, interviews were conducted at the First Congregational Church of Oakland, at City Center and the South Berkeley Senior Center, whom Marijo had also arranged to become a community partner for this initiative.

The experience was rewarding for interviewees and interviewers. Liz Nichols, Stagebridge storytelling director, thoroughly enjoyed the experience of interviewing seniors for this project: "It was an honor to bring in and interview some of the seniors we work with, 'ordinary' people who are extraordinary. To see how honored and respected they felt was great, too. Plus, I got to know them better."

Giving Voice to History

Liz continued: "I was in conversation with Lillian Edwards, now in her eighties, who grew up the daughter of sharecroppers in the Jim Crow South. She is pure country and a natural storyteller. The StoryCorps format led me to ask questions and elicit stories she'd never shared with me before, and maybe never really connected with her civil-rights era experiences. Lillian said she never really understood what discrimination was; her parents tried to shield her from discrimination, but when she moved to Chicago as a young single mother it hit her —she *could* buy a Coke in a white neighborhood, but couldn't drink

it in the store. She got mad and said, 'Give me my money back!' That's history in a nutshell!"

Mary and Marijo — Completing the Story Circle

As part of *The Griot Initiative*, storyteller Marijo, 73, interviewed Mary Trahan, 85 of Berkeley, the woman who had first brought StoryCorps to her attention. Through Stagebridge, Marijo had been teaching storytelling to Mary and others at the senior center. Their connection deepened through the StoryCorps interview process as they both learned they share a nursing background and other experiences living through calamities and changes.



Marijo and Mary Trahan (right). Photo: Stagebridge

Mary's was one of four recorded interviews Marijo conducted with seniors in one day. Marijo's advice to others considering whether to record with StoryCorps: "It's not about revealing a family's secrets. You decide what to talk about. There are many areas of our lives we *can* talk about. Not bad stuff but good stuff."

Of the value of recording family history Marijo says: "It's important for genealogy, for descendants to document a family's lives." Said Marijo of the recording experience: "It's exhilarating to see elders receive their recording and take it home."

The Richness of Life's Experiences

For Mary Trahan, who was born in Telephone, Texas, in 1924, recording with StoryCorps was like an episode of *This Is Your Life*. Mary was able to share her experiences growing up in Wichita Falls, Texas, where she sang and played piano as a kid. She described driving past the Liberty Bell regularly while living in Philadelphia ("I never did see the crack!"), and of her travels to Africa and Europe. She described her doll collection, of meeting big bands, getting a Nat King Cole autograph, and more. Said Trahan: "I have a daughter; three grand-daughters, *too-many* great grand-children!" After chuckling, she continued: "Recording my story is good history for the child, grandchild, great grand-children. In history, they don't tell you the full story. Especially with blacks. Credit isn't often given."

Outreach Initiatives Enrich the Story Pool

Other initiatives of StoryCorps include a *September 11th Initiative* to record stories of those touched by the events of 9/11, a *Memory Loss*

Initiative, to record the stories of people affected by memory loss, and *StoryCorps Alaska*, to record stories of Alaskans. Stagebridge was one of many community sponsors. A percentage of recording reservations is set aside each month for interviews scheduled through community partners to give voice to their constituents.

Partnerships and sponsorships are key to StoryCorps and its initiatives. StoryCorps works with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, National Public Radio and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Sponsors include State Farm Insurance, and numerous foundations, institutes and funds that help defray the costs associated with recording stories.

Listening: An Act of Love

A compilation of fifty StoryCorps interviews has been edited into a book, *Listening is an Act of Love*. Interviews are organized into themes of home and family, work and dedication, journeys, history and struggle, and of fire and water, which include stories of 9/11 and hurricane Katrina. Love permeates them all. The edited versions published in the book are each several pages in length. Stories in this book are alternately poignant, funny, sad, hopeful and powerful. They simultaneously embody the American spirit and the human spirit.

A National Day of Listening

The day after Thanksgiving last year inaugurated a National Day of Listening. StoryCorps encouraged Americans to spend an hour interviewing a loved one, using questions similar to those found in the book and on its website, www.StsoryCorps.net. A do-it-yourself checklist, favorite StoryCorps questions and recording tips allow people everywhere to conduct their own interviews with family members. For more about this day of listening, visit www.storycorps.net/diyl.

Your Turn...StoryCorps in SF and Near You

Listen to KALW (91.7-FM) Cross Currents, 5 pm Monday-Thursday. NPR three times a day each Friday. Morning Edition 3-9 am on KQED (88.5-FM).

For an interview: A StoryCorps booth is currently installed at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. Appointments open up every few months. Call 800-850-4406 or e-mail www.storycorps.net/record-you-story/locations/san-francisco-ca.

Mobile Booths (Airstream trailers outfitted with recording studios) travel the country yearround. To become an outreach partner and request a booth: www.storycorps.net/about/inquires/mobilebooth?submit=view.

Berkeley based storyteller Craig Harrison tells tales of humor and humanity. For more on Craig visit www.hackinBoo.com or call him at (510) 547-0664. In honor of his mother's birthday he recorded a StoryCorps interview with her on February 26!