



## Case Study: Youth Story Circles in Phoenix School District

*Supporting the emotional and mental wellbeing of youth in the wake of the 2020 wildfire disaster*

The Almeda wildfire of 2020 has forever impacted the lives of so many families in the communities of Talent, Phoenix, and unincorporated areas of Jackson County. Displacing over 8,000 families and disproportionately affecting Latinx neighborhoods. People did not only lose their homes, but they also lost photographs, family heirlooms, business equipment, coping materials, their sense of community, and everything that they have worked for. The mobile home parks, which were most impacted by these fires, were the first place of memory or a sense of home for a lot of the Latinx children and youth. Families have been living in these mobile home parks for 15-35 years. So, everything they knew about their sense of home and belonging was destroyed in just a few minutes.

Although our first response to this crisis has been to provide food, clothing, shelter, and other material necessities for survivors, there is still a huge need for social emotional processing and healing. What I have observed in the wake of the fire is when you live in a culture that is threatening to Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities, you learn to live in survival mode and the last thing you focus on is mental health and wellbeing. As a Xicana who has grown up within the Latinx communities of Southern Oregon I know first-hand that mental health is often neglected by the people who live on the margins of mainstream society. It often feels like a privilege to seek mental health services when so many people within the community are focused on securing the necessities for daily survival.

BIPOC populations have faced a significant difference in accessing quality health care. We are more likely to be uninsured, less likely to access mental health services, and more likely to receive lower quality care. In Southern Oregon, the main barriers to accessing care that the Latinx community has faced is navigating cultural/social stigma, lack of cultural competency among providers, and language accessibility.

Knowing that youth or families may not access mental health services because of the stigma and barriers, especially in the Latinx community, I saw The Hearth's work in the youth story circles as an accessible way to provide support and connection for the youth. When we share our personal stories in community it allows for connection, healing, processing, and strengthening relationships. For mental health to not be a stigma, we need safe, communal spaces to talk about our experiences and process our emotions. This normalizes mental/emotional struggles and then it no longer becomes shameful, and we can reclaim our true stories and experiences.

*-Erica Ledesma, artist, community organizer, De La Raiz Project Director, The Hearth*

## STORYTELLING: A CROSS-CULTURAL PRACTICE THAT PROMOTES HEALING, RESILIENCE AND EQUITY

### ***Storytelling can increase climate resilience by fostering:***

- *Healing from disaster-related trauma*
- *Social connections, social resilience and a sense of community*
- *Understanding of individual and community needs*

Stories and storytelling have been described by anthropologists as hardwired in the DNA of human beings. While storytelling has been recognized as a compelling way to share information or influence people, it is only recently being more recognized for its capacity to support healing, to strengthen social relationships and resilience, and to bridge social differences. In a time of increased climate-related traumas, social inequities, and divisiveness; public health practitioners have an opportunity to contribute to social resilience by supporting and engaging in collaborative storytelling in communities.

***Storytelling helps make meaning out of suffering*** and can be used to support healing from different kinds of trauma (Wexler 2009). In the research literature, storytelling has been used to help people heal from family violence, physical illness, disasters, environmental and climate related trauma (Anderson 2015; Sakakibara 2008; Kargillis 2014; Nagamatsu 2021). Storytelling is a community healing strategy that can be used within and across cultures; it is adaptable to culture and context. Storytelling interventions have been used with different cultural groups and in many different parts of the world.

***Storytelling can help enhance social engagement, connection and health outcomes.*** There is increasing recognition that social connection is critical to good health, and storytelling is a powerful tool for increasing trust and social connectedness (Sehrawat 2017). Research suggests that storytelling is associated with improved health indicators or outcomes. Digital storytelling with the elderly has been studied and associated with improved brain health, memory and social engagement (Stargatt 2019). One recent study found that children recovering from illness in the hospital who were part of a group that engaged with stories had decreased cortisol when compared to a group that had a different kind of social interaction with adults (Brockington 2021).

***Stories foster empathy and can help increase understanding*** of individuals and communities whose lived experiences are very different from our own. Storytelling can be used as a research or assessment tool to bring an expanded understanding of problems and solutions from the perspective of communities who are being most impacted by an issue and who have been historically marginalized (McCall 2019; Palacios 2014).

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Hearth is a non-profit organization based in Ashland, Oregon that teaches and promotes storytelling to build and strengthen relationships within and across communities. In the wake of the 2020 wildfires, The Hearth trained volunteers in compassionate listening techniques, collecting survivors' stories and helping to connect volunteers with individuals, resource sites, nonprofit organizations and relief efforts across southern Oregon. OHA funded The Hearth's project as part of a study exploring the impacts of climate change on youth mental health.

Relying on their Compassionate Listening Team, which was comprised equally of Latinx and Anglo leaders, The Hearth invited students to learn about mutual social-emotional care through "story talk"—narrating personal experiences to peers who listened compassionately. Facilitators led sessions with students in both the Phoenix High School and Talent Middle School. Classes ranged from eight students to as high as thirty students in a class and were made up of 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. In these sessions students engaged in exercises that allowed them to write, reflect, listen, and share their personal experiences/stories with each other. Our main objectives in each class were:

- Help students connect with themselves and with one another through the sharing of personal experiences.
- Learn skills for compassionate listening.
- Understand how the language of story functions.
- Explore/practice telling and listening to stories.
- Notice some of the elements of good storytelling (listening, sensory details, desire)
- Learn skills for offering peer-to-peer emotional care.

---

*Circles themselves are healing. To be heard and accepted by your community is healing. This is different than Western models of therapy where emotional trauma is hidden in professional offices and dealt with by specialized trained therapists. These Western models treat hard life experiences as shameful and dangerous. In circles students normalize difficult situations, recognize they are not alone, and discover that within the group there is enough care and wisdom to hold one another."*

*Facilitator and former School Counselor*

---

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM YOUTH STORY CIRCLES

In each session, students learned about the elements of story and were given story prompts to either respond to in writing or verbally in small groups. Small groups were facilitated by one of

The Hearth's Compassionate Listening Team. Exercises were structured to allow for anonymity, which seemed to help many students to feel more comfortable sharing.

#### ***Examples of Story Prompts***

Tell about a place you loved as a young child

Share about a struggle you've been engaged in this past year

*"One fear I have..."*

*"One struggle I have..."*

*"One thing that I am learning in my story/life at this time."*

*"Given all that you've been through this past year, what is your story right now."*

#### ***Feedback from students***

*"This is the closest I've felt to my classmates."*

*"It's comforting to hear I'm not the only one struggling"*

*"I shared the same feeling of the person sharing. When they felt joy, I felt joy. When they shared something sad, I felt sad."*

*"Everyone shared depressing stories and experiences, but I could feel myself in each person's story and that made me feel less alone and that's a joyful feeling."*

#### ***Wisdom and encouragement from students to one another***

Some students openly shared about their struggles, and their peers would offer encouragement and wisdom.

*"I want to say something to everyone...I want you all to know that I see you and I love you."*

*"You just need to take it day by day."*

*"Whoever wrote that, I know exactly what you are feeling."*

*"Things are hard right now, but this time will pass, and things will get better."*

#### ***Facilitator observations***

- Students expressed a lot of suffering
- Most students were relieved to learn that they were not the only ones suffering.
- Students share that no one in the schools, nor in the home is allowing students to talk about their experiences of fires and pandemic.
- A lot of student worries are tied to social standards (appearance, being emotionally positive, being successful).
- Students (in their stories and processing) shared they are experiencing high levels of social anxiety and depression.
- Youth desperately seek to be heard and accepted.

- Many students expressed a wish for self-love and a sense of belonging.
- Students expressed that when they felt heard and seen their distress, despair, anxiety lessened.
- Through the exercise's students were able to show and receive peer-to-peer care.
- Students expressed feeling happier and more connected after the sessions.
- Many students expressed that this was the first time they felt actually seen, heard, and known by other classmates.
- Students enjoyed listening to the experiences of their peers.
- Students have a great capacity to show care for each one another.

In the student's written stories, many shared that the pandemic had been very challenging to their mental health; and some talked about experiencing personal growth through these difficulties. Several mentioned how the wildfires had affected them and added to the significant stressors of that year.

---

*THIS is going to be the work of public education in the years to come. Not math. Not science. Not history. But finding a way to rediscover our own (and each other's) humanity and interconnectedness. And it's going to require teachers (including myself) to be REAL and VULNERABLE in ways we never have been before. And let me just be the first to say that this is going to be hard, and uncomfortable, and difficult.*

*Until we start modeling what it looks like to be real, rather than pretending like we have it all together and aren't struggling ourselves, these kids won't give themselves permission to work through the pain and trauma of the past year.*

*-Phoenix High School Teacher*

---

OHA conducted a study on the impacts of climate change on youth mental health based on youth experiences and perspectives, educational, mental and public health professionals as well as the research literatures. The study found that as climate-related anxiety, stressors and disasters increase, students will need increased social emotional support and services to foster healing and resilience. Youth and professionals also identified the need for accessible spaces where youth can connect with one another and share their feelings of distress about climate change. Storytelling is an important culturally adaptive tool for create space for social connection and sharing and foster social emotional support.

**For more ideas and examples on utilizing storytelling to promote climate resilience, see the OHA Climate and Health Program's [Story Project Tool](#).**

## References

---

- Anderson, K., & Wallace, B. Digital storytelling as a trauma narrative intervention for children exposed to domestic violence. In J. L. Cohen, J. L. Johnson (Eds.) & P. P. Orr (Collaborator), *Video and filmmaking as psychotherapy: Research and practice* (pp. 95–107), 2015. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group
- Brockington, G; Moreira, APG, Buso, MS; da Silva, SG; Altszyler, E; Fischer, R. Storytelling increases oxytocin and positive emotions and decreases cortisol and pain in hospitalized children. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Jun 2021*, 118 (22) e2018409118. doi: 10.1073/pnas.2018409118
- Kargillis, C; Kako, M; Gillham. Disaster survivors: a narrative approach towards emotional recovery. *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 2014.
- McCall B, Shallcross L, Wilson M, et al. Storytelling as a research tool and intervention around public health perceptions and behaviour: a protocol for a systematic narrative review. *BMJ Open* 2019. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2019-030597
- Nagamatsu, S; Fukusawa, Y; Kobayashi, I. Why Does Disaster Storytelling Matter for a Resilient Society? *Journal of Disaster Research Vol. 16 No 2*, 2021.
- Palacios, J., Salem, B., Hodge, F., Albarran, C., Anaebere, A., & Hayes-Bautista, T. (2014). Storytelling: A qualitative tool to promote health among vulnerable populations. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 26, 346–353. doi:1043659614524253.
- Sakakibara C “Our Home Is Drowning”: Iñupiat storytelling and climate change in Point Hope, Alaska. *Geographical Review* 2008; 98:456–75. doi:10.1111/j.1931-0846.2008.tb00312.x.
- Sehrawat, S., Jones, C. A., Orlando, J., Bowers, T., & Rubins, A. Digital storytelling: A tool for social connectedness. *Gerontechnology*, 2107, 16(1), 56–61. <https://doi.org/10.4017/gt.2017.16.1.006.00>
- Stargatt, J. Bhar, S.; Bhowmik, J; Al Mahmud, A. Implementing Digital Storytelling for Health-Related Outcomes in Older Adults: Protocol for a Systematic Review. *JMIR Research Protocols*, 2019 Dec; 8 (12): e15512. Published online 2019 Dec 20. doi: 10.2196/15512.
- Wexler, L., DiFulvio, G. T., & Burke, T. Resilience and marginalized youth: Making a case for personal and collective meaning-making as part of resilience research in public health. *Social Science & Medicine* 2009, 69, 565–570.