

STORY GATHERING IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Story Gathering is one of the most rewarding (and fun!) parts of Phase 2. While you are gathering stories (and the data within those stories), you are also learning about and connecting with people in the community. It can be such a powerful experience, and it is a very important piece of Community Heart & Soul. Whether you gather stories in a group setting or with individuals, this guide can help the Heart & Soul Team plan and strategize for Story Gathering.

Group Storytelling

There are many methods for the Heart & Soul Team to gather stories in a group setting. You may choose to use props to stimulate conversation or you might want to focus on hearing from community groups as they share with each other. You may even structure your storytelling event around photos of your town! The most important element of any group storytelling is the design of the activity. Be sure to create thought-provoking discussion questions and plan for a facilitator to guide the conversation.

It is important to consider the space where you are hosting the story gathering activity. Is it welcoming to all? Is it a safe and comfortable space? Think about the size and composition of the group. You want participants to feel supported and comfortable in the storytelling setting. For many people, this may be the first time that they have participated in an activity like this.

Before forming a circle, you may want to start with a quick pair-up activity where participants form groups of two and answer a question such as, “What do you love about our community?” Starting the event in a more informal way will warm-up participants and prepare them for the larger group storytelling activity.

Below are some example group storytelling methods to inspire your Story Gathering Sub-team as they put together your Story Gathering Strategy.

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Story Circle	
Setup	Organize chairs in a large circle
Supplies	Flipchart, easel, and markers
Activity Layout	<p>Welcome and Introductions: The facilitator will introduce the story circle and describe the purpose of discussion, which is to use stories to learn what matters most to the community. Invite participants to briefly introduce themselves.</p> <p>Description:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the process: In a circle, one by one, each person shares a story. • Set ground rules: Everyone participates, shares honestly, allows space for others to speak, is respectful, is curious, seeks common ground, etc. <p>Sample Story Prompt: What is one thing about your community that makes you want to live here? Please tell us a brief story about how this affects your life.</p> <p>Recording: Use the flipchart to story highlights. Record the event.</p>
Variations	<p>Photo Story Circle: Ask participants to bring a photo that illustrates an important and meaningful community experience. Use this theme to organize the storytelling event.</p> <p>Object Story Circle: Ask participants to bring an object that represents an important and meaningful community experience. Use this theme to organize the storytelling event.</p>
Fishbowl Story Circle	
Setup	Organize two circles of chairs in concentric circles (the inner circle should be smaller than the outer circle)
Supplies	Flipchart, easel, markers, and copies of the Story Listening Notes Form
Activity Layout	<p>Welcome and Introductions: The facilitator will introduce the story circle and describe the purpose of discussion, which is to use stories to learn what matters most to the community. Invite participants to briefly introduce themselves.</p> <p>Description:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the process: In two circles, the inner circle shares stories while the outer circle takes notes. Switch. • Set ground rules: Everyone participates, shares honestly, allows space for others to speak, is respectful, is curious, seeks common ground, etc. <p>Process: Have people from the inner circle share a story. Have the outer circle take notes with the Story Listening Notes Form or any other form of notetaking.</p>

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	<p>As a person from the inner circle finishes sharing, they move to the outer circle, and an outer circle participant exchanges seats and moves to the inner circle.</p> <p>Sample Story Prompt: What is one thing about your community that makes you want to live here? Please tell us a brief story about how this affects your life.</p>
Triad Interviews	
Setup	Organize chairs throughout a large room in groups of three
Supplies	Copies of the Story Listening Notes Form
Activity Layout	<p>Welcome and Introductions: The facilitator will introduce the format of the triad interviews and describe the purpose of discussion, which is to use stories to learn what matters most to the community. Invite participants to briefly introduce themselves.</p> <p>Description:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the process: Everyone in the room forms groups of three to gather stories. You can do as many rounds as time allows. • Set ground rules: Everyone participates, shares honestly, allows space for others to speak, is respectful, is curious, seeks common ground, etc. <p>Process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break out into groups of three. Make sure that the groups are spread out so that they can comfortably have conversations. • Take turns telling stories. For each interview, one person will ask the questions, one person will answer the questions, and one person will be the recorder (taking notes and/or recording the interview). Take about 15 minutes per person, and then switch roles. (45 minutes total) <p><i>Interviewer:</i> Use sample questions as a starting point for the interview</p> <p><i>Recorder:</i> Take notes on the Story Listening Notes Form and/or record</p> <p><i>Storyteller:</i> Enjoy!</p> <p>Sample Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did you come to live in our community? 2. Where would you take a friend or relation, so that they could ‘experience’ our community? 3. Tell us something about our community, something that happened to you, or something that happens here regularly that reflects what is great or what you love about this community. 4. What would you miss in our community if it wasn’t here? Why?

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	5. What about our community is important to continue into the future? What would you change, if you could?
Community Group Storytelling	
Setup	Organize chairs in a large circle
Supplies	Flipchart, easel, and markers
Activity Layout	<p>Welcome and Introductions: The facilitator will introduce the community group storytelling activity and describe the purpose of discussion, which is to use stories to learn what matters most to the community. Invite participants to briefly introduce themselves.</p> <p>Description:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the process: In one large circle, members of two community groups take turns telling their stories, based on a question posed by the facilitator. • Set ground rules: Everyone participates, shares honestly, allows space for others to speak, is respectful, is curious, seeks common ground, etc. <p>Process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule community group discussions with 8-12 representatives of one or two targeted audience(s) from the community, such as a faith organization, a community club, or a homeschooling parent group. • Community group discussions can be designed in many ways, such as using props like pictures or a set of questions to spark discussion. It is best to use a facilitator who is not a member of either group. • Intersperse group members around the circle. Ensure that storytellers from the groups alternate as they answer a question/tell a story. <p>Heart & Soul Team Planning Activity: Use the Community Network Analysis to think of various groups in the community. Brainstorm focus group pairs and create three to five sample questions and/or prop suggestions that could guide a storytelling session with the two groups.</p>

Individual Interviews with Storytellers

Get Organized

As a story gatherer, here is a quick checklist to help you get organized.

- Recording device:** What has your Team decided to use for recording? Most smartphones work well for capturing audio and video. Make sure to test the device you plan to use prior to gathering the story. Check your volume level, locate the microphone, and determine how to position your recording device. Do a test to ensure that you are comfortable with your device.
- Location:** Where will you meet? Make sure that it is a comfortable, quiet space where there will not be outside noise that may affect the quality of your recording.
- Camera:** To take a photo of the storyteller (a phone can work just as well)
- Paper/notebook:** For additional notes
- Forms:** Release Form, Demographics Information, question list

Develop Your Introduction

Here are some words that you can use to help you think about how to introduce Community Heart & Soul to the storyteller.

Thank you so much for taking time to talk with me today! We really appreciate your time and your willingness to take part.

We are a group of volunteers from across town, including many local organization members and residents, who are working on a long-term plan for our community. We want to know what people love about our community and hear what they hope for in our community's future. We want your help in figuring out how to get us there.

We want to hear from as many people as possible, like year-round and seasonal residents, people who work here and live elsewhere, people from each part of our community, young people, seniors, homeowners, renters, teachers, farmers, parents... you name it!

Stories are one of the ways that we connect with people and include everyone's voices. We are hoping to hear about what's important to you and what you value about our community. We also want to know what is on your mind right now – your hopes and concerns about our community, and what we can do right now or in the future.

The information we collect from the community will be used to write Heart & Soul Statements. These statements will represent the things that matter most to the whole community. They will be used to guide decisions that we make as a community.

I would like to record you/take notes so that we have a good record of our conversation. The notes will be shared with others who will be listening to the stories. Is that OK with you? Are you ready?

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Map Out Your Interview Questions

Develop opening questions that work well rather than a long list of interview questions that hit on every possible topic and issue. Here are a few sample questions:

What do you want to learn?	Sample questions
Thoughts on what matters most in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What brought you here, and why do you stay? • What matters most to you about living here? • What special place or characteristic captures the spirit of your town? • What, if lost, would fundamentally change the character of your town? • What do you want your children (or grandchildren, nieces, nephews) to experience here when they grow up?
Thoughts on a person's hopes and concerns for the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you hope to see, feel, or experience in your town five years from now? • What would make staying here easier? • What would you like to see be the same here five years from now? What would you like to see changed?
How to target a specific story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about a time when.... • Can you give me a specific example of when...? • What is your favorite memory of when...?
To dive deeper with a question or a topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me more about that? • What do you mean by that? • Why is that important to you? • Why is that a critical part of the story? • What about your experience speaks to what's important about your town?

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The questions you ask shape the information you gather. Interviewers can use a series of questions which encourage people to share specific experiences that lead them into talking about what matters most to them. “What” questions usually move into the “how” and “why.” Here’s an example:

- Q: “**What** do you love most about living in your town?”
A: “I love the sense of community.”
Q: “**How** do you see this sense of community show up in your town?”
A: “It’s in the way we all know each other and care about each other.”
Q: “Can you tell me about a time when you felt or saw this sense of community?”
A: “Sure. I see it every Saturday morning when I go to farmers’ market. I always run into friends or my daughter’s teacher or someone from my book club. It takes me an hour to pick up a head of lettuce by the time I’m done catching up with everyone.”
Q: “**How** important is it that you have places like the farmers’ market to have these kinds of interactions?”
A: “It’s really important. It’s places like the market, the corner store, or the library where you just run into people—these chance happenings make me feel more connected to this place.”
Q: “**Why** is this sense of community important to you?”
A: “I guess I feel like part of the community—that I belong here and people are watching out for me.”

Sometimes people respond by first talking about the past or current concerns or hopes for their community. Use questions to help the person speak to how those concerns or hopes relate to what matters most to them about his/her community. Here’s an example:

- Q: “**What** do you love most about living in your town?”
A: “I used to love how vibrant downtown was.”
Q: “**How** did that vibrancy show up?”
A: “There were always lots of people shopping. And I could get what I needed there.”
Q: “Can you give me an example?”
A: “Well, I used to be able to find white socks at the general store. And I used to run into at least three or four people that I knew just running errands.”
Q: “**Why** did that matter to you?”
A: “Well, for one, it saved me time to be able to get stuff all in one area. And I just really liked running into my friends—it was nice to connect while doing everyday stuff.”
Q: “It sounds like both convenience and those community connections were important to you? Do you feel like those things still matter?”
A: “They do.”

Remember to respect your interviewee’s wishes. If there is a topic s/he does not want to talk about, simply move on with your interview. You should make that clear at the beginning of the interview.

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It's Interview Time

1. Get comfortable and make sure the storyteller is comfortable too
2. Introduce yourself and give the storyteller an overview of your community's Heart & Soul (see tips above in Develop Your Introduction)
3. If you are recording audio or video, make sure this is okay with the storyteller. Ask him/her to sign a Release Form—this includes permission to use audio, video, or photographs
4. You have already prepared your list of questions. Make sure that you have some additional questions ready in case you need them. Be flexible and let the interview flow naturally
5. Through active listening, you will show that you are appreciative of their story. Listen specifically for the following:
 - a. What is important to the storyteller about the community and why? Which types of places, which specific places, and which aspects of the community does the interviewee mention?
 - b. What are the storyteller's concerns about the community?
 - c. What does the storyteller see as the community's strengths or weaknesses?
 - d. What are the storyteller's ideas? What would they change, keep the same, or protect?
6. Before wrapping up, ask if there is anything else they would like to share. Be sure to thank them for their time and sharing their insight
7. When you are done, quickly look over your notes (if you took written notes) and ask the storyteller to clarify anything that you did not understand. Make any changes necessary so that the interview notes accurately reflect their answers. Don't worry; there will be a recording, so your notes are not the only source of information
8. Take a picture of the interviewee after the interview, with his/her permission
9. After the interview, spend a few minutes with your notes. Write what you remember from the interview that you did not have time to record

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Tips for a Fun, Productive, Successful Interview

A good story gathering session is an extended trusting exchange. It is also like digging for treasure. It takes some preparation, but the rewards are rich! Here are some nuggets of advice we would like to share with you.

- Listen. Really listen so you can respond and follow up. Take your time. Don't rush, or rush in. Silence opens hearts. Let the storyteller fill the silence, not you. The rewards are great. Give visual, not verbal, feedback. Nods and smiles go a long way. Your interest is the key to great stories.
- Keep your eye contact, be engaged, and pay attention. While it is important to take notes, remember that the storyteller is your priority.
- Don't be tied to your prepared questions; use them as a reference. If you find that the conversation is veering off-topic, you can always refer to your question list to bring it back on track. Always respect the storyteller and the stories s/he is sharing.
- Avoid judgment and assumptions. Be curious, be interested, have fun!