

A Story in Progress

Past, Present, Future



A Mission and Vision Statement



INTERNATIONAL
STORYTELLING CENTER

Founded 1973

What We Do

The International Storytelling Center (ISC) was established in 1973 as an educational and cultural institution. Over the last 50 years, our nonprofit organization has transformed a grassroots movement into a global storytelling revival.

Performance. Preservation. Practice.

ISC's work falls broadly into three categories: performance, preservation, and practice.



Fresh Air Photo

Performance includes all ISC's staged storytelling events. Each year, we produce more than 300 hours of live storytelling performances. Our signature programming includes the National Storytelling Festival and *Storytelling Live!* (a seasonal concert series).



Preservation honors the traditional custodians of the art form, including indigenous peoples. We celebrate and protect oral traditions from around the world, and honor our shared cultural heritage.



Mike Snyder

Practice is about how we use stories in the real world. We empower people to use storytelling to communicate ideas, build confidence, strengthen relationships, and help communities in distress.

The Bottom Line

We believe that stories are the building blocks of happy neighborhoods, more effective workplaces, and excellent schools. They can boost business, support personal health and wellness, and strengthen family bonds. Storytelling can bring about institutional change, hasten scientific advances, and promote peace.

As we approach the 50th National Storytelling Festival, we are recommitting to our mission to empower people to share stories that produce positive change.

We are stewards of tradition, and shepherds of a better future.

What We Believe

ISC has identified four core values that are essential to the organization. These are the beliefs that fuel our actions, inform our programs, and guide our decisions.

- We believe in the relevance of storytelling as a folk art. Art is powerful because it reveals the very essence of our humanity. Throughout history, people around the world have used stories to convey important information about their lives. We want to preserve traditional tales from the past and inspire people to use storytelling in their modern lives, at work and at home.
- We believe in inclusive programming and equal opportunities. ISC celebrates diversity. We work with many kinds of people telling many kinds of stories. A philosophy of inclusion guides the events we produce, from the talent to the audience. We work hard to make our programs and events widely accessible to people with different abilities, needs, and socio-economic backgrounds.
- We believe that listening is a skill that fosters a healthy society. The lost art of listening has been eroded by the mental clutter of our busy lives. Storytelling helps us cultivate that skill—as well as our capacity for empathy. Think about it: storytelling is always a two-way street, with a teller and a listener. Just paying attention to what other people have to say helps us better understand the world, and each other.
- We believe in our role as stewards of an essential tradition. ISC helped rally and professionalize storytelling into an industry when it was a dying art form. In the early years of ISC's history, we worked to celebrate and protect oral traditions from around the world. More recently, we've expanded our mandate to use storytelling to address the real-world challenges of the here and now.

What We Want: Our Strategic Goals

Think of this as an organizational to-do list. ISC's mission and values inform our broad institutional goals—that is, the stuff we want to get done in the near future.

ISC has chosen to focus on four strategic goals over the next five years:

1. Strengthen and expand our programs.
2. Diversify the ways in which we share stories.
3. Maintain strong financial health.
4. Strengthen our leadership activities and organizational capacity.

We'll explore these goals along with some of our existing programs in greater detail in the coming pages.



©Peter Aaron, Esto

Strategic Goal #1: Strengthen and Expand Programs

ISC is best known for producing world-class storytelling events. Our signature programs include the National Storytelling Festival, which is held the first weekend of October each year, and our *Storytelling Live!* series, a seasonal program with daily concerts. But that's just the tip of the iceberg.



Agility and Accessibility

Like other arts organizations and businesses around the world, ISC was forced to dramatically reimagine our live events in the face of COVID-19. The task was daunting, but the digital tools we developed to meet the challenge have paid off. We plan to build on this work to expand accessibility, add new features, and reach new people. Now *anyone* can come to Jonesborough!

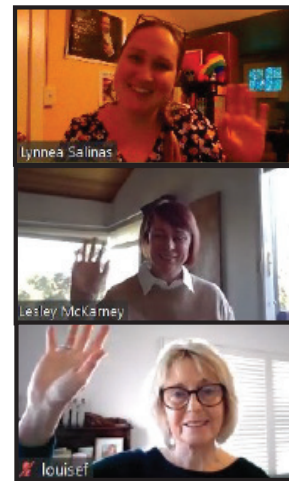
Applied Storytelling Programs

Our live storytelling performances are crucial to our organization and our revenue streams. But some of our most urgent work takes place offstage. ISC uses storytelling-informed programs to work with people from all walks of life, creating safe spaces for sharing and learning and building community by helping different kinds of people find common ground.

This practice is known as “applied storytelling,” and it includes all the stories we use in the real world to communicate in our daily lives.

Here are some of the areas in which ISC is rapidly expanding its applied-storytelling programs and initiatives:

- Education
- Health care
- Peace and reconciliation
- Leadership training
- Supporting at-risk youth
- Community building
- Science and technology
- Environmentalism



Program Profile: Stories as Medicine

Established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Stories as Medicine is a scalable training program that teaches frontline workers, caregivers, and health workers how to establish a strong sense of rapport, listen more attentively, and better manage stress and anxiety.

Spotlight on: Shero's Journey

The Shero's Journey is a two-week day camp for girls, taking place in the magic zone where fictional stories intersect with real life.

The innovative program was designed to immerse 10- to 13-year-old girls in a blend of storytelling and storytelling-adjacent art forms like dance, poetry, and photography.

Led by ISC staff and based on our Jonesborough campus, participants welcomed guest speakers and took local field trips, culminating in the public performance of original stories that the girls developed and produced themselves.

These simple stories revealed rich emotional worlds. One participant dealt with a scary episode in her family's life by casting herself as a detective, working to "solve the case" of her own confusion. Another participant dealt with her anxiety about pollution by imagining herself as a character who discovered she could talk to animals.

By using the arts to explore their identities, family histories, and societal problems, the girls were empowered to dream about their place in the world.

Shero's Journey at a Glance

- Day camp format
- Tween participants
- Story circles
- Field trips
- Peer collaboration
- Empowerment exercises
- Community recital

Other ISC Youth and Education Offerings

- Children's concerts
- Kids Institute (5th grade field trip experience)
- Learning Library (free online resource)
- Pro bono workshops for teachers
- Student ticket subsidies
- Young Appalachian Story Summit (annual event)



Strategic Goal #2: Tell Stories in New Ways

Stories tell us who we are and where we come from—and conversely, who other people are and where *they* come from. We're always looking for ways to bring storytelling into unconventional settings. As a major cultural institution, ISC's artistic programming reflects the diversity of our population. We also take an integrated approach to identifying and responding to the needs of underserved populations.

Storytelling for All

Everyone has a story to tell. It's our job at ISC to help you tell it.

It's also our job to create inclusive storytelling experiences that are widely accessible. A material commitment to diversity and inclusion is baked into everything we do. Our brick-and-mortar facilities are wheelchair and ADA accessible. Videos on the ISC website feature American Sign Language interpreters and closed captions, and we will continue to develop other ADA features to support everyone who wants to appreciate a story that's well told.

Different Kinds of Outreach

An organization that aims to serve many kinds of people needs to communicate with the public in multiple ways. In recent years, we've established and developed an array of multimedia offerings and partnerships.



Jay Huron

Peter MacDonald at the 2017 National Storytelling Festival (left), and Samara Huggins, the 2017 Poetry Out Loud national champion.

Special Performers at the National Storytelling Festival

- Alex Haley
- Peter MacDonald (Navajo Code Talker during World War II)
- Gee's Bend Quilters
- Pete Seeger
- Fred Haise (Apollo 13 astronaut)

Thinking Outside the Box

Our changing world constantly presents new ways to share stories. Here are some of our "outside-the-box" programs from the last few years.

- Developing an original videogame
- Poetry Out Loud (national contest winner)
- Documentary film series (in conjunction with the Smithsonian Institute and PBS)
- StoryVault podcast
- *Stories in Motion* (digital publication)

Spotlight on: ISC's Freedom Stories

Freedom Stories is an ISC initiative that weaves together storytelling, the visual arts, scholarship, and public discourse into events that are free for the general public to attend.

The two-year program was designed to explore and celebrate the contributions of African Americans to the economic, cultural, and religious histories of Appalachia. Historically, these contributions have been under-recognized.

Face-to-face storytelling has played a surprising role in historic struggles for freedom, equality, and justice. Freedom Stories participants have learned how storytelling was used in Black Appalachian communities, and how the history of Appalachia intersects with broader history of the Black experience in the United States.

Freedom Stories has unfolded as an ongoing collaboration between performers, humanities scholars, thought leaders, and community experts. In 2020, ISC developed and curated six virtual discussions that garnered international interest from people across multiple disciplines.



The Old Plantation (Slaves Dancing on a South Carolina Plantation), ca. 1785-1795. Attributed to John Rose.



Rev. Robert Jones, storyteller

Freedom Stories at a Glance

- A collaboration between storytellers and scholars
- Supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities
- Two-year initiative to illuminate African-American heritage in Appalachia
- Events are free to the public
- Reached tens of thousands viewers in 2020
- 81% of participants said the program motivated them to learn more about underrepresented histories in their own community

Strategic Goal #3: Financial Sustainability

ISC has strong fiscal health. The COVID-19 pandemic put a great strain on many arts organizations, and we are grateful that support from our loyal audience and institutional sponsors (plus smart planning and programmatic pivots) have protected our financial position.

In the coming years, we hope to grow our coffers, which will allow us to enrich more lives and impact economic growth in our region and beyond. Our long-time viability depends on drawing financial support from a wider donor pool, as well as grant support from federal and state agencies and foundations in the arts, education, health care, and other areas.



Regional Impact

In 2017, the National Endowment for the Humanities recognized ISC as one of 34 leading humanities organizations in the nation. This star status has helped us support our region with an estimated impact of more than 100 jobs and \$8 million annually. Our community development and tourism work helped establish the town of Jonesborough as the “storytelling capital of the world.” Our Site of Excellence program recognizes regional partners to expand our geographical impact and draw.

Useful Upgrades

The ISC storytelling campus is a year-round visitor attraction and facility rental space for special events like weddings and conferences. We recently upgraded recording and sound equipment in our state-of-the-art theater space, which will enhance the revenue stream from recorded programming and other uses.

Building the ISC Brand

In anticipation of ISC’s 50th anniversary, we plan to expand our merchandising and branding efforts. We will establish a multiyear fundraising campaign that will then transform into an ongoing culture of fundraising. As always, we will pursue grants and other sources of additional funding in our pursuit of building a better world through storytelling.

Spotlight on: Storytelling Sites of Excellence

In 2017, ISC established the Storytelling Sites of Excellence, a program that recognizes storytelling-related organizations of superior quality.

The program is our spin on a four-star review or stamp of approval. Awarded across a variety of cultural institutions, heritage sites, tourist attractions, and communities, the designation recognizes excellence in organizations that use storytelling to enhance their own core mission, whatever that may be.

The first Site of Excellence was awarded to our longtime regional partner, Dollywood's DreamMore Resort & Spa, in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. It was selected for the way the facility chose to integrate stories into employee training and the visitor experience.

Our organizations have been working together since 2014 to highlight the distinct cultural offerings of the Northeast region. In addition to strategic considerations such as cross-promotions, we partnered with Dollywood's DreamMore and the Smoky Mountain Songwriters Festival to launch Lyrics & Lore, an annual event that brings together some of the country's most talented storytellers and musicians to celebrate two rich traditions of the Appalachian region.

In 2021, ISC will award the second Site of Excellence to Unicoi County Hospital in Erwin, Tennessee.



Organizations that earn ISC's Site of Excellence designation have:

- Storytelling-related programs and processes
- Family-aligned values
- A commitment to cultural preservation, diversity, and inclusion
- The ability to promote positive change



Strategic Goal #4: Lead as a Cultural Institution

For nearly 50 years, ISC has been at the forefront of America’s storytelling renaissance, a revival ignited in 1973 by the first National Storytelling Festival.



The Festival is the world’s first, largest, and most acclaimed public festival devoted exclusively to the art of storytelling. Today, the event is still considered the crown jewel of the industry—and the art of storytelling has truly gone viral. It’s our honor to stand and serve at the forefront of this movement.

Growing Influence

Storytelling is one of Northeast Tennessee's primary economic drivers, attracting many thousands of visitors each year for ISC’s live events. Our beautiful storytelling campus is in the heart of downtown Jonesborough, Tennessee’s oldest town. As a regional leader in arts and culture, we have strong working relationships with residents and businesses in the surrounding communities.

ISC has also served as a national model for what’s known as “creative placemaking” practices, with community revitalization efforts that have been recognized and held up as exemplary by Main Streets of America.

Growing Organizational Capacity

A growing institution has growing needs—and with our ambitious outreach efforts, it’s critical to expand and strengthen our precious human resources. This includes ISC’s dedicated staff, a team of 500+ volunteers, and an expert board.

In order to continuously evolve, ISC needs to beef up its organizational capacity, particularly in the area of institutional development. We also want to make sure our staff is supported in their professional growth, including access to new technologies that support the ISC mission.

Spotlight on: ISC President Kiran Singh Sirah

Kiran Singh Sirah came to ISC in 2013, by way of North Carolina (where he went to graduate school) and the United Kingdom (where he was born). With family roots in Africa and India, Kiran recognized the power of stories to bring different traditions to life from a very early age.

Now an arts industry leader, Kiran is often invited to travel around the world representing ISC at conferences, workshops, and public events. He was one of six people worldwide who was recognized as by Rotary International and the United Nations for his work in using storytelling to advance human rights and world peace. In his home state of Tennessee, he serves on the board of Tennesseans for the Arts.

Geneva Peace Week

In November 2017, Kiran traveled to the United Nations in Switzerland, where he was recognized as a Champion of Peace for his long-time commitment to peace building and serving as an advocate for storytelling.



Kiran frequently delivers keynote addresses and other talks for organizations in the arts, government, and business. Here's a snapshot of some of his recent speaking engagements and important ISC collaborations.

National Endowment for the Arts
(at the Kennedy Center)

Idaho, Alabama, Tennessee, and
South Carolina Arts Commission

The City of Charleston

National Association for
State Arts Agencies (NASAA)

Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Dolly Parton's Imagination
Library Plenary

U.S. Congressional House and Senate

TedX

Creative Placemaking
Leadership Summit

U.S. Department of Defense

The White House

Library of Congress

Rotary International

Tennessee Valley Association
(economic development conference)

Alliance for Peacebuilding

National Park Service and Bureau of
Land Management

International Day of Peace (keynote
address, NYC celebration)

Key Partnerships

ISC has explored collaborations and affiliations with some of the nation's most foremost institutions, including the Library of Congress, the Google Cultural Institute, NASA, Rotary International, the Smithsonian Institute, and the United Nations. We're constantly building on these strong relationships to expand our programmatic reach in our region, across the nation, and around the globe.



Regional media partners:





INTERNATIONAL
STORYTELLING CENTER

Connecting the World through the Power of Storytelling

116 West Main Street, Jonesborough, Tennessee 37659

800-952-8392

www.storytellingcenter.net

In association with the Smithsonian Institution

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