



The Absent Narratives Project 2020-2021

Empower

StoryArk seeks to create a relevant and accessible arts experience for students whose voices are underrepresented and to remove barriers that keep their absent narratives from being heard. We believe stories provide context and meaning for our lives and can inspire us to think more critically about how we fit into the world and ultimately about what responsibilities we have to each other. Through our on-going Absent Narratives Project, we strive to elevate youth voice and leadership in order to improve and ensure inclusiveness in our schools and our community. During StoryArk's creative process, students explore identity and produce podcasts, short films, music lyrics and a literary magazine that features prose, poetry and visual arts. Youth share these stories with themselves and with the general public, and by doing so, promote understanding and increase empathy for the student experience.

Everything we do at StoryArk is student initiated and student led. We rely on our pre-professionals (all recently graduated StoryArk alumni) to work with high school leaders to guide our content creation. The pre-professionals have diverse backgrounds and work with youth leaders who come from within the community served. Each team of students organizes themselves and creates a production plan resulting in a podcast, short film or literary endeavor. At the beginning of the process, whatever the medium, each creative team considers four key questions: 1) Who are you; 2) Where are you from; 3) Who are your people; 4) What are your dreams. From this discussion students explore relevant themes, determine genre, and decide upon a narrative structure. With the support of a professional writer from their medium, the students brainstorm, outline, plot, and develop the script. Once the script is written, artistic professionals including a director, sound engineer, editor and producer mentor the students as they cast the actors, rehearse, record, edit and produce a story.

Uplift

What's Your Story? How Do You Want To Tell It?

Whether podcast, film, literary arts or music lyrics, professional artist mentors and the pre-professional StoryArk staff support the youth in developing their narratives. Every story lends itself to a particular medium, and StoryArk offers youth multiple ways to best express themselves including:

Podcast

Students write an original script, create the sound effects, compose music, act the role, record, edit and produce an original podcast episode. Inevitably, what starts out as one episode develops into a series.

Film

Thanks to smartphone cameras, most students have the ability to shoot a film. StoryArk works with the resources students already own and connects participants to free tools such as DaVinci Resolve editing software in order to create original short films that have an impact. StoryArk loans out laptops, cameras, lights and other equipment as needed.

Literary Arts

Led by a student staff, the *Boom Site Newsletter* is published monthly as a multi-media digital newsletter featuring the original creative work of youth. Poetry, short stories, chapters from novels, screenplays, audio plays, illustrations, comics, graphic novels, photos, excerpts from podcast episodes and student short films are just some of the submissions students share. At the end of each year, all creative writing is compiled and published in an anthology called the *Boom Site Magazine*.

Lyrics

Our newest endeavor, StoryArk has hired musicians from the student band NUNNABOVE (as seen on America's Got Talent) to work with youth interested in writing song lyrics.

Amplify

The students create exceptional content, and it is shared in the following ways:

StoryArk Network *(students share with the world)*

Both a podcast, a mobile app, and a web page, the StoryArk Network features all our student programming and includes interviews with professional artists and students about their work. It is the central, 24/7, ongoing hub for all our stories whether uploaded on the podcast (Apple, Spotify, Google Play, Stitcher) or video (YouTube, Vimeo) directories.

StoryArk Festival *(students share with the local community)*

A celebration with a live audience, the StoryArk Festival showcases all our student storytelling plus a student band. Usually held in person with both indoor and outdoor activities, this year the Festival will be held online through Zoom with the student band NUNNABOVE, as seen on America's Got Talent, anchoring the show. It takes place in August at the end of our Summer Session.

StoryArk Network Live! *(students share with students)*

StoryArk student groups from all over come together to share and discuss their podcast episodes, short films, poems and stories with each other. It's an opportunity for youth to support and encourage each other in their creative endeavors while also growing in understanding and empathy for each other. It takes place in February at the end of our School Session.

Welcome to StoryArk's Virtual Community

When the pandemic hit, StoryArk brought all its programming online. To our surprise, we discovered the online writer's room to be a vibrant, productive space that can effectively meet students' felt need for connection. Instead of bemoaning the fact that we no longer could meet in person, our Pre-Professional staff created an online community built on what we call the "three pillars of goodness" that a virtual world can offer: 1) the ability to connect with peers locally, nationally and even internationally; 2) the ability to connect with professional artists both locally, nationally and internationally; 3) the personal nature of Zoom where students can easily show and tell. Through games, activities and breakout rooms, we energize the Zoom meeting and provide intentional times for students to build meaningful relationships with each other. Our hope is that in time, as Covid subsides, we can create a hybrid model that combines the advantages of the virtual world with the joys of the in person experience.

Whether online or in person, StoryArk is committed to providing a psychologically safe space where all voices are heard. We advocate for storytelling as a tool to increase empathy and understanding, build a sense of community, decrease polarization, and develop healthy communication. Our goal is to reach all youth everywhere in order to fulfill our mission to empower youth voices and equip young artists to thrive.

Braided Funding Approach

StoryArk wants all students regardless of background, socio-economic status, political leanings, and religious views to have their stories uplifted, amplified and heard. To that end, we use a "braided" funding approach where each "strand" allows us to weave a strong fabric from which to support youth. This funding includes: 1) government grants (Minnesota State Arts Board, Regional Arts Councils); 2) private grants (Hugh J Andersen Foundation, Fred C. and Kathryn B. Andersen Foundation, St. Croix Valley Foundation, Kemp and more); 3) School District Achievement and Integration dollars; and, 4) individual contributions through fundraisers and direct donations. Each strand of our braided funding supports different constituencies. School districts, through integration and achievement dollars as well as transportation funds, can help us reach underrepresented youth whose stories are absent from the mainstream narrative. StoryArk, through donations and grants, can support students that do not meet the school district's criteria including homeschooling, out of district and more affluent, mainstream youth. By uplifting all student stories, we can interconnect diverse youth to each other and within the broader community.