

GOOD

The Fact That Changed Everything: David Isay and StoryCorps

by [Bekah Wright](#)

Memories



**“NO ONE SHOULD
EVER LOSE THE VOICE
OF A LOVED ONE.”**

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While a food coma descended on his family after their 1978 Thanksgiving feast, 12-year-old David Isay opted to do something other than nap on the living room couch. Among the dinner guests were his grandmother, an advice columnist for the *New York Post*, and her two sisters. Cassette recorder in hand, he decided to interview the trio.

As Isay entered his early 20s, he began to lose the older generation he'd interviewed, leading him to unsuccessfully scour his parents' house for the cassette. "Ultimately, that's what led to the creation of [StoryCorps](#)," he says, "I wanted to make sure no one ever made the idiotic mistake I did of losing the voice of a loved one—to ensure other people were able to have for themselves, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, this record of the life, voice and spirit of someone who matters to them."

As a public radio producer, Isay's way of tackling such a project came naturally. Started on "spit and glue," as well as funding from small foundations and the Corporation of Public Broadcasting, StoryCorps was born in 2003. With a small group in tow, Isay built a booth in the middle of New York's bustling Grand Central Terminal. The booth is still open to anyone hoping to honor a loved one by listening to their story. A trained facilitator manages the process. "The 40-minute interview is the most distilled and encapsulation of a person's life," says Isay. "The act of being recorded reminds people that their lives matter and they won't be forgotten."

A CD is given to the interviewee and another stored for all posterity in the [American Folklife Center](#) at the Library of Congress. Excerpts from some interviews can be heard via NPR's [weekly broadcasts](#) of *Morning Edition*. "These are authentic stories of courage, decency and hope that remind us of the importance of listening and of how lives can be lived to their fullest." What's Isay's own belief? "If we spend less time screaming at each other and more time being human beings with one another, we'd be a better and stronger country."

With Isay serving as the nonprofit's founder and president, StoryCorps has expanded over the years, with booths popping up all over the country. "We're working hard to weave story into the fabric of this country and to touch the lives of every American family," he says. "We have a long way to go." Indeed, the United States population currently tops off at 314,414,448. StoryCorps continues to cover ground, having conducted more than 45,000 interviews with 90,000 people in its first nine years.

Program facilitators generally take on a one-year tour of duty, traveling between America's big cities and small towns. "Every life matters equally and instilling that truth into our culture is what's StoryCorps is all about," Isay says of the program's mission. At the end of a tour, facilitators tend to relay what Isay terms the "wisdom of humanity." "People are basically good," Isay begins the list of top three lessons learned. "If you think you can judge someone's interior life by how they look, you're dead wrong. And, don't wait—say the things you want to people who matter to you now."

StoryCorps regularly receives high praise from both NPR listeners and participants in the program. This doesn't surprise Isay. "The voice is a very powerful record of a human's life," he says matter-of-factly. The program's one obstacle, as with most nonprofits, is funding. Still, says Isay, "It's not rocket science. It's a simple idea that's worked beautifully."

As for Isay, his initial purpose for launching StoryCorps came full circle this summer. That was when, on the night his father passed away, Isay listened, for the first time, to the StoryCorps CD he'd recorded. His reflection on the experience? "The soul is truly contained in a person's voice."

Celebrate StoryCorps' National Day of Listening this November and interview someone you care about. Submit your idea for the [National Day of Listening GOOD Maker Challenge](#) by 10/29 noon PT.