



# 2019 Annual Report

---



# We seek, collect, and share stories of Canadians from coast to coast to coast.

## **Vision**

We see Canada as a place where everyone feels welcome and has a strong sense of well-being and belonging.

## **Mission**

We seek, collect, and share stories of new and developing Canadians from coast to coast to coast. Every story we hear helps us learn more about the people who live in Canada and how we as a nation define what it means to be Canadian. Through our projects, we strive to utilize stories to build a nation of empathetic citizens, public services and policies.

Our practice utilizes design thinking as a way of tackling challenges facing Canadians in civic engagement. We believe that the well-being of our communities relies on the strength of each and every person in Canada feeling represented by the decisions made around them. Our projects focus on telling the stories of new and developing Canadians.

We define “**new**” as newcomers; individuals who have chosen to call Canada home. About 1 in 5 individuals in Canada are foreign-born bringing their own culture, languages, and stories with them.

We define “**developing**” as youth; individuals who are growing up in Canada. Approximately 25% of Canada’s population are youth who are more diverse, connected, socially engaged, and educated than ever before.

Our projects aim to gain a clear understanding of the evolving definition of what it means to be Canadian from these individuals, to develop a deeper sense of belonging and well-being as a citizen, and engage citizens in their communities in active decision-making.

## **Values**

Community-led  
Future-oriented  
Co-Design  
Systems Change  
Empathy

# Board of Directors

President	<b>Jeanne LeSage</b> , CHRL, MBA Arts Consultant, LeSage Arts Management
VP / Secretary	<b>Anthea Foyer</b> Culture Planner, City of Mississauga
Treasurer	<b>Darren Sutherland</b> Senior Manager, Deloitte LLP
Directors	<b>Jennifer Green</b> Philanthropy and Programs Director, Toronto Arts Foundation <b>Trevor Haldenby</b> Orchestration Director, Syntegrity <b>Jeannette Hanna</b> VP, Strategy, Trajectory Brands Inc. <b>Brian Phillips</b> Owner, World Salon <b>Alexandra Tamiko Da Dalt</b> Communications Coordinator, Dying With Dignity Canada

# Team

Executive Director	<b>Blair Francey</b>
Director of Programming	<b>Jennifer Chan</b>
Program Manager, The Stories of Us	<b>Mathura Mahendren</b>

# Message from the Board

It has been another busy year for the team at the Department of Imaginary Affairs. We have watched the organization grow and mature over the past year as they settled into the work with The Stories of Us thanks to the funding provided by Immigration Refugee Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

The response that the project has received from the newcomers who have participated in the project and the ESL teachers who have used the books in their classrooms has been fantastic to see.

We know that the team has worked hard to move the work forward while also being adept at pivoting when necessary. It's not always easy for an organization to shift the focus of a project quickly. However the DIA team has been open and ready to respond to the needs of the people who benefit from the work the most when a need is presented.

At the end of 2019, the Board undertook the process of looking to expand its membership and put out a call for interested parties to submit their intention to join. We are looking forward to engaging with the new members in 2020.

Sincerely,  
The DIA Board of Directors

# Message from the Executive Team

Growing pains don't just apply to humans as we go through life.

The second year of funding from Immigration, Refugee, Citizenship Canada (IRCC) for The Stories of Us allowed us to really dig into the work. The initial phase of getting the project up on its feet (watching it take its first steps) was behind us and we were getting to know it better, understand the potential impact of the work, and trying to figure out what path it would take us in. It very much is our 'child' and watching it mature and grow has been a fascinating experience for all involved.

When we set out down this three year path to develop The Stories of Us, we really were walking in blindly with an idea in hand and some thoughts on how we were going to achieve that idea. Of course it became clear that shortly after we started those said thoughts were not going to pan out the way we thought.

But that's okay. That's where the DIA shines. We understand that in the process of designing a new project from the ground up, there are bound to be twists and turns, peaks and valleys, and yes, one or two pivots. We've learned a lot in this past year which has altered the way we've approached The Stories of Us. The underlying foundation of the project has not altered; providing stories of the newcomer experience for newcomers, by newcomers.

What has changed is the way that we approach the work, the model we use in the classroom, how we envision these stories being used, and what kind of curriculum we could create surrounding these stories.

We've grown as a team too. We have settled into our roles and been able to work together, albeit remotely, to support one another when needed. We continue to provide insight into our process through our #thisismaginationatwork blog posts. We started these posts as a way of not only being open and transparent with those who are interested in our work, but to also provide a space of reflection for ourselves on the work we've been doing.

The year also brought about some difficult lessons we had to learn. Our focus for The Stories of Us has always been to bring to light the stories of newcomers and the journeys they take to come to Canada and what happens when they settle here. This year we were faced with a situation which forced us to pause and reflect on how we deal with the sensitive nature of these stories as well as the political and cultural nature of the experiences the newcomers we deal with go through. It was a learning experience for the whole team, one that was tough to face, but an important lesson that we needed to learn.

While there was unintended harm, the experience has taught us a valuable lesson in understanding the sensitive nature of the work we are undertaking. The stories we have been told are the personal truths of the storyteller. We are not here to cast judgement. We are here to provide a space for those stories to be told, we are not here to police or censor stories, no matter how uncomfortable they may be for some. We are better for it thanks to this experience and will continue to ensure that we never lose sight of the delicate nature of this work.

We reminded ourselves how important relationships are.

As the year closes, we are looking forward to what the following year will bring for us and the work. New prospects and partnerships are bubbling and we are excited about where our work will take us next.



Blair Francey  
Executive Director



Jennifer Chan  
Director of Programming

# The Stories of Us

“I’ve learned more about interacting with groups by telling our own stories and relating them to my everyday activities.”

– Workshop participant

While our first year was quite successful in our eyes, it also held up a mirror to our limited capacity as three people working various levels of part-time to manage a non-profit while juggling other, sometimes full-time, jobs. There is a combined conviction and frustration that comes with knowing that we have the collective skills and networks to realize our mission in bigger, bolder ways AND being humbled by the constraints of time and money.

## Testing the multi-workshop series model

April 2019 marked the end of three six-workshop series we ran in partnership with two LINC classes at the Mennonite New Life Centre and an employment training program at New Circles. A total of 44 newcomers participated across the three series, and 26 of them published their stories with us. These three series were our first foray into testing a multi-workshop model as a way of building stronger relationships and trust with and between participants, eliciting more in-depth stories, and providing participants with adequate time to write and share their stories. We worked closely with the LINC teachers and the employment training program manager to design a curriculum that would be most relevant to each set of participants.

We implemented The Stories of Us six-workshop series with the participants in New Circles Employment Training Program from March–April 2019. They had used our storywriting curriculum with a cohort of Employment Training Program participants.



“I wanted to let you know that we used your curriculum in the current session again and received very positive feedback from our participants. It is a wonderful program and we are so grateful to be able to use it in our training.”

– Joanna, Employment Training Coordinator at New Circles

## Showcasing our work

By March, we had accumulated a set of stories from our initial workshops and we wanted to make a more conscious effort to get them in front of more people. We were thrilled to be a part of the HAPPENING Multicultural Festival arts exhibit in May–June, which received great feedback from the festival organizers and attendees. Around the same time we also showcased the storybooks and the broader The Stories of Us project at Toronto Newcomer Day in May. Both events served as opportunities to test how the storybooks were received by the broader public.

In our attempt to expand the reach of our stories beyond Toronto, we contacted libraries in other Ontario cities to see if they might be interested in hosting a display featuring our storybooks. It was our hope that even if we were not able to physically go to or host workshops in these cities, exposure to our books and project in community spaces like libraries would direct more people to our online library. In the best case, anyone interested in submitting their own story to be published would have our contact information and would know how to. Through this outreach, we were able to build partnerships with both Whitby and Thunder Bay Public libraries who have both agreed to host The Stories of Us display in their spaces in early 2020.



## Milliken Mills Library

In July 2019, we piloted our Youth x Storytelling as a 4-part storywriting workshop series in partnership with the Immigrant Youth Centre at CICS Markham. At the end of the series, we trained 4 staff at CICS Markham so that they could facilitate the workshops for youth on their own in the future. Late last year, one of the staff we trained (Sarmini) got in touch about facilitating an SoU workshop series for youth at Milliken Mills Library in Markham, which we were thrilled to hear.

“The workshop flowed well despite the limited number of participants. I felt that I had ample time to get through the activities and concepts without having to rush through them. I could see that quarter way through the workshop, the youth felt more comfortable with being vulnerable and sharing personal experiences.”

– Sarmini

## Conferences

On December 5-6, 2019, we participated in the TESL Ontario Conference, which happened in Toronto, as both an exhibitor and a presenter.

Our exhibit featured our growing collection of The Stories of Us storybooks, including multi-level storysets (the same story available across different CLB levels) as well as themed story packages (which included stories that explored similar themes like Mental Health, Employment, Family, and War). The intention behind this design was to appeal to LINC teachers who are looking for materials relevant to the CLB level(s) they teach as well as resources that are relevant to the PBLA module (often based around a theme) that they are teaching. We were able to connect with several hundred ESL teachers over the two days. We found that teachers really appreciated that the books featured stories by newcomers (they felt their students would be able to relate), they liked that they were categorized by CLB level, and were genuinely surprised that the resources were available for free online.

During the TESL Ontario Conference, our Director of Programming, Jenn Chan, also delivered a presentation about The Stories of Us, called “Reimagining ESL Libraries: By Newcomers, for Newcomers.” Considering the session was the last session of the last day of the conference, we were happy with the number of attendees, about 15-20 teachers attended the presentation and subsequent Q+A. Feedback from the participants, as collected by TESL Ontario, was largely positive.



“Jennifer was a very energetic person. She believes that investing time in relationships it is very important and I agree with her. They are writing newcomers histories in English and in their first language, for all different class levels, to encourage people to keep going. Even if they think it’s too hard to learn the language, it’s going to be worth it.”



## Moving Beyond Toronto

Barrie Public Library was interested in bringing The Stories of Us workshops to their English Conversation Circle participants, but shared with us several constraints that would get in the way of delivering our current six-workshop model. 1) The circle participants only met for 2 hour windows once a week; 2) They were more comfortable telling their stories orally, which makes sense given the nature of how they connect with each other in the circle, than in written form; and 3) a workshop series over six weeks was far more than they could accommodate (and frankly we wouldn't have been able to afford going to Barrie six times). To make this work, we co-designed a set of guiding questions with the librarian that would help the circle participants articulate their story in an intuitive order. Next we hosted a remote training with all of the circle facilitators, sharing the rationale behind the project and the questions we were asking, and offered tips in coaching participants through answering these questions and in doing so, telling their stories. In the weeks leading up to our in-person visit to the circle in September, the facilitators worked with their participants to coach them through telling their stories. As a result, when we showed up, they already had a list of participants who were interested in having their stories audio-recorded and we were able to have one-on-one informal semi-structured interviews with them in which they told their stories. 67 students participated in the storytelling activities, and 5 of them have published their stories with us.

Another connection we made outside of Toronto was with HMC Connections, a settlement agency based in Oakville, Ontario. They were interested in holding a one-day story-writing workshop for their newcomer clients. They too shared that it would be difficult to ask their clients to come out to multiple workshops, so we agreed on one 4-hour workshop on a Saturday. Our goal in the workshop was to get participants comfortable with the idea of storytelling, brainstorm potential ideas, and spend some time writing out a rough draft. Based on participants' and the host organization's feedback, we were successful in this goal. Several participants shared that the session had felt like a sort of group therapy and were enthusiastic about having regular gatherings like this.



In July, we facilitated a 4-workshop series for a group of youth at the Immigrant Youth Centre at the Centre for Immigrant and Community Services (CICS Markham). At the end of the workshop series, we also trained a group of four youth workers at CICS on the curriculum, in case they wanted to facilitate it again for other groups of youth.

Similar to the LINC and employment workshop series in March / April, we put together a Youth x Storytelling curriculum which includes a compilation of activities, templates, and tips that are necessary to facilitate this workshop series.



# The Storybook Project

We were finally able to bring our giant storybook out of storage and showcase the 144 stories we had collected for Nuit Blanche in 2015 at Evergreen Brickworks for two weekends in November as well as we hosted cocktail hour at the Future Cities Canada Summit.

We had been contacted by the team behind the Future City Centre within Evergreen Brickworks in August to see if we were interested in helping them to develop a community space within the newly renovated kiln space, now known as the TD Future Cities Centre. Evergreen Brickworks is a reclaimed space in the Don River in Toronto that is committed to promoting city building conversations.

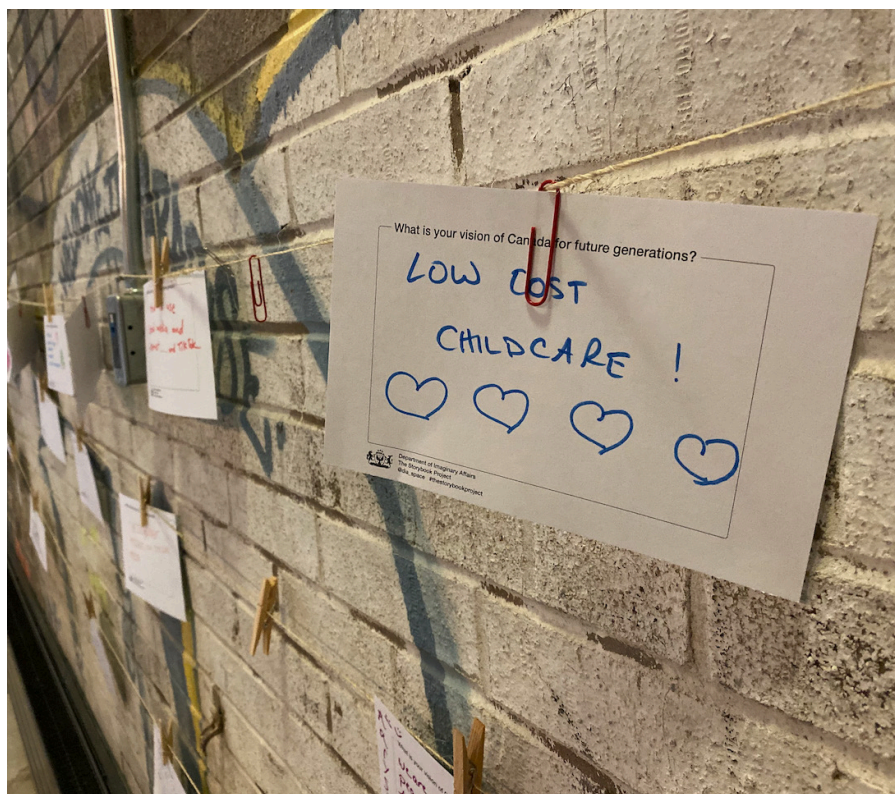
The team at Evergreen Brickworks overseeing this new space had reached out to us, along with 5 others not-for-profits, because of the work we do around story collecting and community engagement. We were joining the inaugural members of the Community Studio within the Future City Centre. Our task was to help them define what this space could potentially be and activate it over a period of time once the TD Future Cities Centre was officially reopened to the public in October. We chose the weekend of the Day of the Dead as the Brickworks hosts a huge celebration that day for the community as well as the following weekend to showcase the book and collect more stories.

The Storybook Project was a natural fit for the activation. Being able to showcase the stories we had collected allowed us to go back to our roots and start collecting new stories for the next chapter of the book. We set up tables around the perimeter of the space and continued to activate the space by hanging any stories we collected on the walls. By the end of the two days we were there, we had collected another 100+ stories and drawings from those who visited the space. We tailored the questions we were asking to echo our more defined mission of helping new and developing Canadians.

1. What's your vision of Canada for future generations?
2. What celebrations from culture would you like to share with newcomers?
3. What wisdom would you like to share with youth?
4. What rituals would you like to learn from newcomers?
5. What would you like to learn from young people?

The weather on both weekends was less than desirable, including one weekend, where there was nearly a flood! Nonetheless, we were excited to meet with families and visitors to the Evergreen Brickworks and be able to collect more stories. Especially seeing our questions ignite new conversations for parents and children.

As a member of Community Studio, we were gifted tickets to the Future Cities Canada Summit as well invited to showcase our work. We were excited to get to share The Storybook Project with over 300 city builders from around the world.



# Funders

We gratefully acknowledge the funding for The Stories of Us from:



Immigration, Refugees  
and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés  
et Citoyenneté Canada

# Volunteers

We could not complete the work we do without the help of our incredible team of volunteers. A heartfelt thanks to all our volunteers:

Abdillahi Mohamoud	Lobna Elsebelgy
Abeer Brki	Louisa Yue-Chan
Alexandra Tamiko Da Dalt	Manuel Gilberto Garcia Aguilar
Amna Ahmed	Martha Aguilar
Andressa Franca	Maryam Yousefi
Angela Carvaho	Min Cheng
Baris Bilgen	Mina Habibnejad
Bernard Ma	Mohamed Hussein
Christelle Davis	Mona Rateja
Christine De Guzman	Mustafa Kirgul
Dania Habbob	Omer Bashier Ali Elamam
Diana Alandete	Penny Chien
Hadeel Khashim	Pupul Bisht
Hanna Dada	Qanitah Hussain
Herminia Garcia	Qiwen Jin
Ixchel Cervantes	Rosita Kwok
Janet Lopez	Sanket Shah
Jennifer Wieskopf	Sarah Haque
Juan Carlos Gonzalez	Seyed Mohsen Ahmadinejad
Khawla Alquaisi	Snezana Zana Dragovic
Lama Abou-Merhi	Stephen Renjie Hu
Lama Al-Abweh	Tara Al-Hadithy
Lidia Gabriela Jarmacz	Trishia Nashtaran
Lifang Zhang	Zorica Grujin



[dia.space](#)



[@dia\\_space](#)  
[#deptimaginary](#)



[/deptimaginaryaffairs](#)