



# 2020 Annual Report

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**Photo Description:** 4 Workshop participants sitting at a table together, the table is covered with The Stories of Us books, coloured markers, and paper, each workshop participant is working independently

**Photo Credits:** Marie Roder Ascunsion

**We seek, collect, and  
share stories of new and  
developing 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.

# Board of Directors

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>President</b>                | Alexandra Tamiko Da Dalt   |
| <b>Vice-President/Secretary</b> | Anthea Foyer   |
| <b>Treasurer</b>                | Darren Sutherland  |
| <b>Directors</b>                | Andrew Chung<br>Trevor Haldenby<br>Jeannette Hanna<br>Jeanne Lesage<br>Trishia Nashtaran<br>Teresa Wiens |

## Team

|  |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| <b>Founding Executive Director<br/>(November 2020)</b> | Blair Francey     |
| <b>CEO (December 2020)</b>                             | Jennifer Chan     |
| <b>Program Manager</b>                                 | Mathura Mahendren |

# Message from the Board

This was an unprecedented year for the Department of Imaginary Affairs. While the world navigated a global pandemic and grappled with the inequalities it magnified, the DIA team pivoted to new approaches and imagining different futures.

The team has remained creative and nimble throughout 2020, continuing to focus its work on the communities with which the DIA engages. The Stories of Us brought together educators and refocused to deliver curriculum and training to teachers across the country. The Storybook Project provided an opportunity to connect before the pandemic hit, fostering the togetherness and imagination that is signature to DIA's work. The Time Capsule, Canada's Futures, and #SuddenlyRemote took stock of the present while using those reflections to envision new futures.

At the end of 2020, the Board began planning to bring on new members and we are looking forward to welcoming the new directors joining us in 2021.

We are hopeful and excited for the recovery and our projects to come. Stay safe and take care.

Sincerely,  
The DIA Board of Directors

# CEO's Message

What a year 2020 has been! For so many of us, it was a year that we never could have imagined. As an organization and team that prides itself on imagining equitable futures, I am not sure we can say we saw that happen in 2020. We were pushed to our mental limits in so many ways, while also being so grateful and privileged to have our health and safety through it all.

They say that 2020 (and now 2021) is a historical moment. We are living in a time unlike any other. We are in collective trauma, grief, joy, community, and togetherness even while we are apart. This is a year where we saw huge moments of compassion and generosity while also witnessing horrific levels of systemic racism and oppression. For me, I have survived this year by looking forward and beyond this moment in time.

What we have realized is that we are an organization rooted in imagination. For us, that has meant having our eyes and ears open to what is happening around us, taking in stories, letting out a very large exhale, and then asking ourselves — but what if?

What if this is when everything changes?  
What if this is when everything stays the same?  
What if this is when we can make anything possible?

These questions motivated us to keep imagining equitable futures at times when that felt so out of reach.

As 2020 came to a close, I stepped into a solo leadership role as Executive Director and now CEO. The shift towards being an organization led by a Woman of Colour in the same year that George Floyd was murdered, when Black Lives Matters protests felt vital despite an ongoing pandemic, and when racialized people are experiencing much higher rates of COVID infections and deaths felt nerve wracking as well as necessary.

I carry with me a huge sense of responsibility to do justice to our mission and vision, as well as to push others to do their part — to not just imagine equitable futures, but to make them possible.

Take (self) care,

Jenn





# The Stories of Us

Heading into 2020, we expected The Stories of Us to go national. Our plan was to figure out how to start scaling and sharing the work we had been doing within Toronto and within Ontario.

Like most nonprofit organizations, the pandemic required us to shift and rethink our approach to programming.

In January 2020 we held a Teacher Design Lab where we brought together 12 ESL teachers from Toronto and beyond. Our goal was to introduce The Stories of Us to more teachers by connecting them with educators with whom we had already been working. During this one-day event, we learned from teachers about the kinds of support they would need in order to bring The Stories of Us books and curriculum into their classrooms.



“Today I collaborated with like minds with similar goals to create new ideas to support newcomers in their journey. We talked about possible curriculum that can be implemented at each level. **It matters because the government has requirements and teachers need help to meet those requirements.** I'm walking away from today with lesson ideas, material ideas, excitement for new ideas and modules, and inspiration.” - *Teacher Design Lab Participant*

“Today I brainstormed teaching ideas with some great minds. **This is important because teachers rarely get to come together and share constructive ideas which would benefit us all.** I'm taking back some great lesson ideas as well as creative ways to make tasks and assessments fun.” - *Teacher Design Lab Participant*

**“Thanks so much for the wonderful, inspiring, thought-provoking and tasty workshop yesterday.** You are all so incredibly talented and thoughtful. It was great to meet all the other participants as well. I hope you got enough useful feedback to move forward.” - *Teacher Design Lab Participant*

This event and feedback gave our team a sense of momentum and a push to further invest in working with ESL teachers. We moved into planning a Teacher Training in March 2020. One of the main insights we gained from the Teacher Design Lab was the importance of allowing teachers to learn from each other and share key insights and takeaways. We have created the resources and the process necessary to make this sustainable for educators taking The Stories of Us into their classrooms across the country.

In addition to the Teacher Training, we also had planned a trip to the East Coast to deliver training in Halifax and Fredericton in June 2020. Within a two-week trip, we would have introduced and trained over 40 ESL teachers, librarians, settlement and community workers on The Stories of Us curriculum and materials, as well as brought printed books to distribute to public libraries and settlement organizations. However, with the news of the pandemic, we were forced to cancel all training sessions and travel.

Like so many others, we took April 2020 to process what we were going to do and how we could adapt. We had begun the year fully invested in making The Stories of Us as accessible as possible for LINC teachers, however the pandemic presented a massive disruption for ESL classrooms.

**"As the PBLA Lead at our LINC School, it's definitely a learning curve to help teachers of Foundations Literacy to CLB 4 adjust to teaching online. My biggest challenge is how to make everything I do mobile-friendly. Some digital activities can't be accessed properly by my students who don't have computers. Thus, the lack of access to suitable technology has been a barrier, at times. The screen on their phones is also very small for activities."**

**- LINC Teacher**

We re-examined our original approach. We felt that inundating LINC teachers with more responsibilities or requests during the pandemic had the potential to be damaging to everyone's mental health.

By June 2020, we had pivoted to working with informal English learning groups, like English Conversations Circles and Employment Training Programs. These groups and programs offered us access to different stakeholders. We used this time to recalibrate our approach, to establish new relationships, and to let people rest and recover.

By September 2020, we had put together curriculum materials for The Stories of Us and launched a microsite for ESL teachers to access on our website. While this made our curriculum accessible to teachers, and we have had over 75 teachers from across Canada sign-up for resources, we still find that the best way to be trained on The Stories of Us curriculum is to experience it, witness it, and then to put it into practice:

"The Stories of Us initiative is a wonderful resource for teachers to guide learners through reflecting on their life journeys to date and drawing on resiliency and hope for the future. The curriculum demonstrates a holistic understanding of learners and their needs." - *LINC Teacher*

"I spent a lot of time last night reading through many of the fabulous stories available. This is truly a necessary and amazing resource bank of stories. Thanks for doing this great work!" - *LINC Teacher*

"I have been an ESL instructor for more than twenty years. I am interested in pursuing this curriculum in the hopes that I can better empower my own students and encourage them to share their ideas and stories with others, should they choose to do so." - *LINC Teacher*

By the end of October 2020, we had fully trained a team of six Employment Counsellors to deliver The Stories of Us training with future clients.

As 2020 came to a close, we were reflecting on a year that looked very different than we had originally planned and now heading into the final months of our funding, we had to start thinking about sustainability and closure. We have grown and nurtured The Stories of Us and we are looking for future caretakers.

# **SOU statistics**

*(by the end of 2020)*

- **# of participants: 494**
- **# of workshops: 84**
- **# of partner organizations (defined as orgs we've run workshops with): 24**
- **# of languages (in terms of stories published): 18**
- **# of original stories published: 78**
- **# of stories translated down: 12**
- **# of translated down books: 29**
- **Total # of storybooks (including translated down stories): 107**
- **# of teachers who have accessed the SoU Curriculum site (since launch in September 2020): 62**
- **# of ESL teachers engaged (participated in co-designing the project): 24**
- **# of volunteer translators: 75**



# The Storybook Project

At the beginning of 2020, we were invited to bring The Storybook Project to help animate Family Day at Evergreen Brickworks. The event brought together 1500 people in February 2020. Over the course of the day, we met so many families sharing their stories and collaborating to turn the giant pages of The Storybook Project.



Our plan was to bring The Storybook Project back to the east side of Toronto in the summer of 2020. With financial support from Toronto Arts Council and Parks People, through the Arts in the Parks project, we were going to do community storytelling workshops and reveal a new chapter of the book.

We decided to defer instead due to the circumstances. We took the opportunity to reimagine the opportunity and have a fantastic new community storytelling project coming out in 2021.

# Our COVID Response

Like so many others, we had to take a big pause in March and April to wrap our heads around how we were going to adapt to the pandemic and remote programming. When we found ourselves struggling to process, we imagined that others must be too. The result was projects to help us make sense of what was happening.

## Time Capsule

We released 2 audio meditations and a letter writing exercise with the goal to capture life in the time of COVID. We thought it was going to be a shorter moment than it has been. We thought a few months later we would be sending letters back to people. None of us knew what was in store for us.

We continued to receive letters for months.

| #LETTERSTOOURFUTURE  |
|--|
| "Financially I am going to figure it out. I wish our world didn't revolve around the dollars. I wish we as a whole unit began to change our way for living, that's the real eye opener." |
| - Christina  |

| #LETTERSTOOURFUTURE  |
|--|
| "It tears me apart, it truly does, to know that no matter what I say and how much I plead, my 64-year-old mother and aunt, and 68-year-old father are risking their lives every time they decide to go outside. It makes me feel useless, like a terrible daughter, one who can't even guarantee her parents' safety." |
| -Pearl   |

#LETTERSTOOURFUTURE

"It's overwhelming sometimes. I want to cry in anger, in anxiety, in grief, in frustration, in sadness. I want to cry at the indifferent attitude I carry sometimes. I want to cry at the roller coaster of emotions I feel in the span of five hours, in the one evening."

- Amy



#LETTERSTOOURFUTURE

"It's like the earth is sending us a message which we are failing to understand and listen to. We are putting her in danger, she is getting ill and is dying, she needs help...it's clear the she is unhappy, she isn't breathing well. We need to listen."

-Anonymous



#LETTERSTOOURFUTURE

"It's frightening and numbing at the same time, and so many unsustainable parts of our world have been exposed for what they are."

- Alex



#LETTERSTOOURFUTURE

"I want to stop and thank the nurses and staff who have done everything they could to make me comfortable. I want to thank the doctors for all of their support, their kind eyes and tearful smiles. Grateful that these are the last images I see before me as I take my last breath."

- Kimberly





# Canada's Futures

We created a 5-module curriculum on foresight for grades 5-8 to test out while schools were in remote learning mode. Over the course of 12-weeks, we received artifacts from students about how they imagine the future based on what they see now.

The goal of Canada's Futures is to see what policies might look like if they reflected the values and perspectives of our youngest citizens. Long before they can vote, they are still forming their ideas about what it means to be a citizen.

We want to test what it's like to gather data from young people about:

- what they are observing about the world around them;
- what they think will impact the future the most;
- where they want to see change;
- what scenarios about the future worry them and which ones give them hope;
- and finally what actions would they take to ensure that tomorrow is different than today.

# #SuddenlyRemote Survey

In partnership with North York Community House and Marco Campana, we launched a survey last year to learn about how Settlement Workers — frontline and management — were adapting to suddenly working remotely.

We created the survey to learn about organizational culture, mindsets, and structures that might be supporting or hindering staff from adapting to the “new normal.” This was not an evaluation of how sector workers were doing their jobs, their effectiveness, or if they were still meeting their quotas. Instead, we wanted to know how they were actually doing mentally and emotionally.

We launched this survey in April 2020 and summarized survey results in May 2020. We did not intend to make recommendations or roadmaps of what agencies should do, as each agency was doing that on its own. This was an opportunity to acknowledge where the sector was, provide trends across the sector, and share the data for others to also draw their own conclusions.

We had 166 respondents who completed the full survey. They represented nine provinces and two territories.

We had intentions of doing a follow-up survey once the pandemic was over to see the impacts of being suddenly remote, we have yet to be able to do that.

# Funders

The Stories of Us would not be possible without the funding contribution from Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada.



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:

Seyed Mohsen Ahmadinejad

Amna Ahmed

Noha Amer

Tarik El Assal

Ixchel Cervantes

Penny Chien

Hanna Dada

Christelle Davis

Snezana Zana Dragovic

Omer Bashier Ali Elamam

Elodie Faid

Andressa Franca

Saeed F.T.

Mina Habibnejad

Stephen Renjie Hu

Qanita Hussain

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Thi Thu Ha Le

Xiaoming Li

Doan Nguyen

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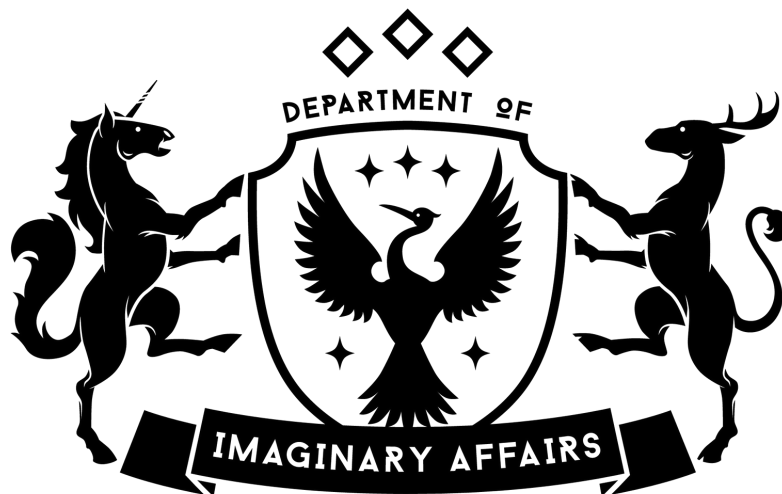
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