

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

March 11, 2023

David Isay was 22 when he learned his father was gay. "It was very confusing for me," he says. "The myth of our house growing up was that there was nothing we couldn't talk about, but the truth was there was one massive secret underneath everything." When he discovered that his mother had known the truth but stayed married for years to keep the family together, he was furious: "I didn't talk to either of them for a while."

Mr. Isay, 57, reckons that this revelation helped to inspire StoryCorps, the nonprofit he founded 20 years ago to prompt and preserve meaningful conversations between people. "StoryCorps is very much about saying the important things to the people who are important to us," he says on a porch swing outside his Brooklyn home, which he shares with his wife, journalist Jennifer Gonnerman, and their two children. "It's about having closure with the people you love."

The success of StoryCorps helped to inspire a new program called One Small Step, which facilitates 50-minute conversations between strangers with opposing points of view. Launched in a few cities in 2021, it will soon roll out in more locations as well as online. "We perceive that we are much more polarized than we actually are," Mr. Isay says. "If we can actually get this thing to take root and convince people that it's our patriotic duty to see the humanity in people with whom we disagree, we believe we can make a difference."

When Mr. Isay first launched StoryCorps as a booth in New York's Grand Central Station in 2003, he says his friends and family told him he was crazy. "I mean, it is crazy that this thing actually works," he acknowledges. Since then, over 625,000 people across the U.S. have volunteered for StoryCorps interviews, in which participants ask their friends and loved ones the kind of profound questions that often go unspoken. "It's about asking what you always wanted to ask," says Mr. Isay.

The exchanges, which run to about 40 minutes, are recorded, and many are made available online. All are deposited for posterity in the Library of Congress, making it the largest collection of recorded human voices ever gathered. Mr. Isay is eager to broaden his reach. "We have researchers testing how we can do this at scale through digital tools," he says.

Despite a lifetime of interviewing strangers as a radio journalist and producer, Mr. Isay insists he's an introvert. "I was a pretty unhappy kid," he says. He often hid in the library of his elementary school in New Haven, Conn., and did poorly in school in part because he was so insecure. "People get these images of themselves. I was overweight and

depressed, and I thought I was stupid," he recalls. One ambition of StoryCorps is to offer uplift to people like his younger self: "By reminding us that we matter and that we won't be forgotten, these interviews hopefully encourage people to not give up."

Mr. Isay was 15 when his family moved to New York City in 1981, which gave him a much-needed "fresh start." He did better in school and delighted in the city's sense of possibility. He vividly recalls waking up disoriented from an accidental

nap on the 6 train and being told by the motorman, "Kid, don't worry about it, we're turning right around, and you're about to see the most beautiful thing you've ever seen." As the train passed through the abandoned, ornately tiled City Hall Station on its way back uptown, Mr. Isay was dazzled: "That kind of magic is the stuff I love."

As an undergraduate at New York University, Mr. Isay initially planned to become a psychiatrist like his father, Richard Isay, who pioneered the profession's shift away from

treating gay patients as mentally ill. But Mr. Isay sensed it wasn't the right fit. "People assume I must be the world's greatest listener, but if you asked my wife, she would fall down on the floor laughing," he says. "If I'm not interested, the lights go off."

In his early 20s, while taking a year off before medical school, Mr. Isay stumbled on an eye-catching storefront in New York's East Village. He learned that the owners, a husband and wife, were recovering heroin addicts with grand ambitions to

create a Museum of Addiction before they both died of AIDS. Believing they deserved some attention, he called local radio and TV stations but couldn't drum up interest. The news director of one small community radio station asked Mr. Isay if he could cover the story himself. "From the moment I hit 'record,' I knew that this was what I was going to do for the rest of my life," he writes in his 2016 book "Callings." National Public Radio picked up the story and Mr. Isay withdrew from medical school: "My fate was sealed."

As a radio documentarian, Mr. Isay entered prisons and housing projects to gather stories that often went unheard. "Especially people who feel they don't matter, the act of being listened to

'You need to get close to realize things aren't as dangerous as you thought.'

reminds them that they do," he says. With StoryCorps, Mr. Isay wants to share the power of listening with more people: "We want participants to feel better about their lives when they walk out of the booth."

Mr. Isay says his idea for One Small Step came in the lead-up to the 2016 elections, when it became clear that Americans were increasingly segregating along ideological lines and losing faith in institutions. He notes that the pandemic compounded these trends by forcing people to keep their distance. "You need to get close to realize things aren't as dangerous as you thought," he says. Participants in One Small Step fill out questionnaires about their politics and are matched with a discussion partner who has different views. "Many leave the conversation becoming friends," says Mr. Isay. "It's striking."

StoryCorps itself has earned support from across the political spectrum, including Steven Spielberg and Kate Capshaw's Hearthland Foundation and Charles Koch's Stand Together Trust; Tucker Carlson has called it "one of the coolest things in this country." Later this year Mr. Isay plans to bring the program to Capitol Hill: "We are going to do interviews with members and chiefs of staff, but we may keep them private because there's no incentive for politicians to reach across the divide right now."

In a fragmented society, Mr. Isay says StoryCorps's tools for bridging divides are in high demand from corporations and nonprofits. "We've been getting phone calls after phone calls," he says, "because it's suddenly occurred to people that we have a huge problem with human connection in this country, and everybody wants to figure out what we've figured out."



WEEKEND CONFIDENTIAL | EMILY BOBROW

Dave Isay

The StoryCorps founder believes in the power of meaningful conversation to bridge divides.