A lifetime of interviewing strangers as a radio journalist and producer, Mr. Isay insists he’s in it for the long haul. “I was a happy child,” he says. He often lived in the library of his elementary school in New Haven, Conn., and did poorly in school just 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 a forum to people like his younger self. “If you remind us that we matter and that we aren’t so forgotten, these interviews hopefully encourage people to not give up.”

Mr. Isay was 15 when his family moved to New York City in 1963, 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 accident that left him in the hospital for six months and being told by the motorcyclist, “Kid, don’t worry about it, we’re turning right around, and you’re about to see the most beautiful truck you’ve ever seen.” As the train passed through the abandoned, eerily quiet City Hall Station on its way back to Detroit, 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 psychologist like his father. Richard Isay, who pioneered the profession’s shift away from treating gay patients as mentally ill. But Mr. Isay realized 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 stumped on an eye-catching storefront in New York’s East Village. He learned that the owner, 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 grace, he called radio and TV stations but couldn’t drum up interest. Amid the success of one small community radio station, Mr. Isay could never stomach himself. “From the moment I hit record, I knew that was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life,” he writes in his 2009 book “Calling.”

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 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 has his idea for One Small Step come to 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.”

“We need to get close to realize things aren’t as dangerous as you thought.”

Lazarus, “It’s striking.”

StoryCorps itself has earned support from across the political spectrum, including Steve Sack and Mark Kopp’s Heartland Foundation and Charles Koch’s Stand Together Trust. Tucker Carlson has called it “one of the coolest things in this country.” So far this year, Mr. Isay plans to bring the program to Capitol Hill: “We are going to do interviews with members of Congress and judges from all over the country.”

In a fragmented society, Mr. Isay says it’s “one of the really cool things about bridge divides.” He notes that the program’s high demand from corporations and nonprofits, “We’ve been doing phone calls for bridge divides,” he says, “because it’s suddenly occurred to people that we have a huge problem with human connections in this country, and everybody wants to figure out what we’ve figured out.”