

ONE YEAR LATER: TELL US SOMETHING SPINS A NEW STORY

Since 2011, Marc Moss has fostered the art of storytelling in Montana. From participating in an initial concept during a Missoula radio hour to heading a series of large-scale events across the state, Moss has encouraged participants to be a part of humankind's centuries-old tradition of sharing stories with one another. He recently spoke with *Montana Press* about his work with "Tell Us Something," a Montana-wide storytelling event based in Missoula.

Since the novel coronavirus pandemic started, Tell Us Something faced immediate effects and had to restructure and reimagine the storytelling event.

Montana Press: How is the Tell Us Something experience evolving with the changing times?

Marc Moss: Whew, good question! We're doing the best that we can. My initial response early on was denial before there were any reported cases in the tri-state area. Then disbelief, which gave way to depression. I am crawling out of that, summer and getting outside helps. Obviously we had to cancel all of our in-person events this year. That's a huge hit to our revenue stream, which is where we generate most of our income.

I still want to give people the opportunity to share their stories in a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment. I am still figuring out how to best do this.

We still want to provide educational opportunities to the public, and we still want to give people a chance to get their stories heard. So, in April, during the shelter-in-place order, I held the first-ever Tell Us Something storytelling intensive workshop. It was free, and seven people participated. I had a two-hour session in the morning with one group and another two-hour session in the afternoon with another group.

Four hours of Zoom a day for an entire week was exhausting. Still, I learned a lot, and the participants learned a lot too. Out of that came the first-ever live-streamed Tell Us Something storytelling event. Since then, I've hosted another five-week intensive workshop and co-taught (with Maribeth Rothwell) an intense two-hour a day, five-day long, tightened-up version of the workshop at the University of Montana through their Creative Pulse graduate program.



MP: After the first experience of virtual storytelling online in April, what were some of the challenges you faced? What were some of the triumphs?

Moss: The first challenge that comes to mind was likely transparent to most viewers. I always want Tell Us Something events to be as inclusive as possible. Because of that, maybe three years ago, I started hiring American Sign Language interpreters to provide interpretation of the stories for the live events in Missoula and Helena and Butte. Things need to be accessible. The more events that make them so, the more other events will do the same.

I saw, with a live-streamed event, an opportunity to experiment with how that inclusivity and accessibility can be done. I thought I could use the technology available to me to utilize Closed Captions instead of ASL. Zoom supports it, so I tried going that route. And the short version of that story was that it failed.

I tested it out with the person that was going to provide the CC service the morning of the event and things seemed to be working as expected. The night of the event, as the show started, the person we hired to provide CC was unable to make it work. In the moment I made the decision to pull the plug on it.

I later learned that CC is inaccurate and, to have it done right, expensive too. Having learned that, for the event in September, I've hired two ASL interpreters to interpret the show.

The other big challenge was raising revenue during the show in April. I advertised the show as being "free or pay what you want" and 800 people tuned in live to watch the live stream. None of them paid. The storytellers still all got paid, though some of them opted to gift that money right back to the organization. Since the live stream, an additional 500 people have watched the show for free. Part of it, I'm sure is that I made the focus of the evening, as I always do, the storytellers and their stories. I didn't hound people to donate. We need to find that balance.

MP: Were you still able to work with youth this summer in the storytelling camps? How were you able to manage this?

Moss: I was able to work with youth, though not in a way that I expected. I was scheduled, pre-COVID, to provide live in-person storytelling summer camp via the Zootown Arts Community Center (ZACC) summer camp series.

When the pandemic hit, everything was thrown into uncertainty. Once everything reopened, the ZACC gave summer camp instructors the option of teaching their camp outdoors in a socially distanced setting. Because that setting was a heavily used public park, I felt that all of the uncontrollable variables about people outside the camp not social distancing or wearing masks was too big of a factor to safely run the camp for the kids and for myself. So I opted out of providing that camp.

I was able to work with youth, along with 14 other teaching artists, providing asynchronous learning content through the SPARK! Arts Ignite Learning program. Anyone can access the content and the teachers are incredible (sparkartslearning.org/spark-creativity-at-home).

The teachers really shine in this experience, and you'll find lessons ranging from storytelling to dance to mindfulness exercises, ceramics instruction, stress management for parents, and theatre lessons. The content is really compelling and useful.

MP: How do you think our stories may change in the coming years, after facing a world distanced from one another for the foreseeable future? Will everyone have a "pandemic" story, for example, or do you think the experience will simply get woven in the stories of everyday life and become part of the fabric of our experience?

Moss: Everyone has a pandemic story, for sure. Right now, we are all experiencing a collective trauma. We've never experienced anything like this in our lifetimes. People are scrambling to pay their bills, to stay employed, to find childcare. They don't have the bandwidth to pitch their story to a storytelling pitch line.



In May, I thought that I would host a June storytelling event on the theme "Love in the Time of COVID." I encouraged people to pitch their story about how they were coping with COVID and the surprising beauty and moments of love that they are experiencing as a result of the, at the time, slower pace, the focus on what's really important. No one called the pitch line. People aren't ready. We are all still processing this global trauma.

People often process things through stories, and when they are ready to figure out how to tell their story, when they are ready to share their stories, Tell Us Something will be here.

Live in-person events seem impossible right now. As science finally solves the pandemic, with a vaccine, better guidelines, better education, and, for people, better compliance, we will begin to see live in-person performances open responsibly. I can't imagine what "going back to normal" looks like, or if it is even possible. We are all learning and navigating uncertainty as best as we can.

MP: What do you see for the future of Tell Us Something?

Moss: The next live streaming Tell Us Something event is scheduled for September 16, 2020. We are proud to feature storytellers who were engaged in an intensive week-long storytelling workshop and are live streaming 6 storytellers share their true personal stories.

The theme is a little looser than usual this time: "Come as You Are" and will feature ASL interpreters to accommodate our Deaf friends.

Storytelling begins at 6 p.m. and to get tickets and to learn more, you can visit tellussomething.org.

In the future, Tell Us Something will continue to host storytelling workshops and we will continue to host live storytelling events. They definitely look a lot different.

I also want people to know about the Tell Us Something podcast. We've had a podcast for 10 years, and people can find the archives at tellussomething.org.

During the time where we're unable to gather together in person, I realized that this is a real opportunity for people to gather together in a different way. I invited past Tell Us Something storytellers, to join me in conversation. A conversation about what they have been up to since they shared their story, what the experience of sharing their story was like for them, and give us some behind-the-scenes details about their story.

I'm thinking of it as a "Meet the Storytellers of Tell Us Something" series. Anyway, after the interview, I then play the story that they shared at Tell Us Something. It's been a really fun process, and it's been interesting learning how to conduct a conversation-style interview and logistically how to edit the audio of multiple people talking together. It's also been very rewarding hearing how important the experience of sharing their stories has been for people. People can find the podcast wherever they get their podcasts or stream episodes for free at tellussomething.org ★

—REILLY NEILL

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