General Information

What is Gather to Grow?

Gather to Grow: A Cedar Valley Story Circle Project is a UNI Imagining America initiative to provide the tools and opportunities for citizens of the Cedar Valley to grow together through a shared experience of telling and listening to personal stories. This is accomplished through facilitated storytelling circles. This seed packet provides guidance for Gather to Grow Story Circle Facilitators (our Gardeners).

What is a storytelling circle?

A storytelling circle is a gathering of individuals committed to tending to their collective wellbeing through the shared telling of stories. Each person in the circle is invited to tell their own story, without interruption or comment and in turn is committed to carefully listening to the stories of others in the circle. Our particular type of story circle often ends with the group or an individual in the group creating a reflective art piece/project grounded in the full circle of stories.

Goals specific to the storytelling circle:

- Offer social support through encouraging generous community participation.
- Create a platform that is accessible and meaningful to community members.
- Build trust and familiarity, many times among strangers.
- Cultivate listening skills:
  - Participants are heard and feel heard.
  - Generate opportunity for continued reflection and connection.

The Role of Engaged Art in Gather to Grow

Generous donations from the Cedar Falls Art and Culture Board and the Center for Multicultural Education at UNI will allow Gather to Grow to begin with four pilot story circles, each involving a local artist (visual artist, poet, musician, theatre professional). Each artist will produce a publicly shared work inspired by their story circle. In the future, we hope that every story circle may result in a participant-generated art project. Art and cultural production are valued modes of expression. They are the things that move us, that aren’t merely marks on a surface, but speak directly to our hearts and humanity, and at the crux of the most powerful cultural works are stories. They are narratives that are passed down from generation to generation, experiences that are lived by the producer, and calls to the imagination for dynamic futures. What is a community without the stories of those who reside there? This community storytelling project will help to build our community’s social capital by giving a platform to a wide reach of residents in Cedar Falls and Waterloo, by encouraging a culture of deeper listening, and by archiving (with consent) and organizing stories for others to engage with outside of singular events.

Imagining America at UNI Commitment

We hope to ensure that as many perspectives and narratives are included in our project so the complex dynamics of the Cedar Valley might be further illuminated. We are working thoughtfully and intentionally to ensure equitable access to resources and networks. We are working with community partners who have experience in equitable and inclusive practices. The story circles will be held throughout the Cedar Valley with exact locations being the choice of each event host. We will assist in promoting the individual events as requested by the event host. The four pilot story circles will bring in both Cedar Falls and Waterloo artists and creatives, and public events/displays of their work will be shared with the Cedar Valley.