

**EMPOWERING
YOUTH** *to become*

Storytellers

Taking children
on a literacy journey

by Paisley Aiken, MBA '10



For as long as I can remember, books have been an important part of my life. They've calmed me and helped me orientate myself in the world.

Before starting my MBA and having children, I owned a small retail store and worked as a publicist for authors. After completing my MBA, I wanted to do something that would nurture my values and creativity. Then, when my boys were born, I realized just how important it was to create space for them to nurture their own creativity. The problem was, I had little luck finding resources to do that.

That was until one day when my sister told me to check out 826 Valencia, a social enterprise by author Dave Eggers to increase and inspire literacy skills among urban youth. I did research and thought, "We need that in Victoria!"

However, 826 has a massive operating budget that serves a dense population; it couldn't be replicated in Victoria. So I spent time with 826 in California and tweaked some of its components to fit our local environment. That's how the Story Studio was born!

Story Studio's mandate is to inspire, educate and empower youth to become storytellers via fun project-oriented programs that show them they have stories worth sharing.

Among many other things, my MBA taught me the importance of strategic alignment, and this was useful for Story Studio. Running an organization like this is about always looking for ways to survive, and because of that people frequently want to partner with us. As such, I realized it is critical to remember what our mission is and ensure every opportunity we consider supports that mission.

That perfect strategic alignment happened one day when we were contacted by a teacher at Victoria West Elementary School. After holding a program there, we realized that classrooms were where we could have the biggest impact.

The idea also aligned with my current role as a teacher—reinforcing my goal of helping students be their better selves.

So the Story Studio, which began as a workshop model, became a not-for-profit charitable program after we fulfilled the criteria of creating a board and opened up new financing options necessary to make our programming accessible to schools.

Today we run programs to supplement what educators are already doing. This means we are able to work with students with diverse backgrounds and interests, and help them see themselves as participants in literacy, not just observers. The school program brings facilitators and volunteers into the classroom to support storytelling. The stories are illustrated by the students, typed, edited and bound into a book for the students to keep.

Our organization continues to evolve. While the school program is still the main focus, there are many others—from a successful online teen writing club to programs involving refugees.

Today, I'm proud to say that since its inception, the Story Studio has provided programming for approximately 10,000 local youth—80 per cent of these have been at no cost to the participant.

My dream for Story Studio is to be the go-to for youth and those supporting youth who need to develop their relationship with literacy. And I have plenty of inspiration to fulfill that dream, thanks to meeting students who tell me that they participated in the Story Studio and it made a difference, and bumping into parents who tell me how the studio has supported their child.

My eldest son, who participated many times, is now in university and wants to be a writer. I can't help but think that the Story Studio helped nurture that ambition.

These are, for me, the 'perfect' outcomes. ■

Photo: Anjula Rasanga