

# Storytelling to Preserve a Community's History

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## ABSTRACT

*Community based participatory research (CBPR) can inform researchers of the latest trends, policy issues, and business practices that impact community members' everyday lives. The Center for Research on Inclusion and Social Policy (CRISP) at Indiana University Purdue University—Indianapolis (IUPUI) invited five graduate students from different disciplines at IUPUI to participate in a collaborative, community-based participatory project with the Harrison Center for the Arts, a community-based art gallery, near the Martindale Brightwood community. The art center strives to preserve the culture of the neighborhood, in the face of gentrification, by allowing its members to act as storytellers through community arts. Through discovery, the CRISP researchers found that storytelling is essential not only for preserving history but also for addressing inequalities from a community-centered perspective.*

## INTRODUCTION

Storytelling has the power to send a message, preserve culture, history, and influence change. In the 2019-2020 school year, The Center for Research on Inclusion and Social Policy (CRISP)

at Indiana University Purdue University—Indianapolis (IUPUI) invited five graduate students from different IUPUI disciplines to participate in a collaborative, community-based participatory project with the Harrison Center for the Arts (Harrison Center), a community-based art gallery, in Indianapolis' Martindale Brightwood community. As CRISP Fellows, it was our goal to hear and make sense of the stories about residents' perceptions regarding the Pre-Enact Indy program as well as understand the impact of changes that were happening in their Martindale-Brightwood neighborhood. We visited long-term and new residents to capture their stories, memories, and reflections about the neighborhood history and the recent changes and trends that have impacted Martindale Brightwood. The overall focus of our research was how the community engaged in Pre-Enact Indy, a Harrison Center program that was instrumental in bringing Martindale Brightwood's history to life for its residents in an interactive, festive environment.

The Pre-Enact Indy event was created to empower neighborhood residents by allowing space for them to share their hopes and dreams for the neighborhood and future generations. The primary purpose of the event was to create a new reality for future generations that illuminated the cultural and historical heritage through the arts, music, theatre, dance, paintings, and cultural drumming ceremonies. Even though the long-term neighbors

did not have enough economic wealth to stop the gentrification of their neighborhood, they wanted to make sure they still had ownership in preserving the cultural history of their community. This opportunity was a breath of fresh air for graduate students because we rarely have the space to hear the true stories of the people in the communities that surround our academic institution. Though we may participate in local community events and affairs, vote, and visit local coffee shops and diners, the true history and stories of local neighborhoods may be undisclosed to us as outsiders coming in to take from the neighborhood without participating with the neighbors.

### **CRISP FELLOWSHIP EXPERIENCE**

In our CRISP Fellowship Experience, as doctoral students, we had the fortunate opportunity to gather data from interviews, then collaborate with the neighbors to verify the information so that we could analyze, interpret, and organize the information for dissemination through CRISP. This community relevant research was important to the community and the university because it centered the voices of residents and presented some social disparities, inequities, and information to address complex policy issues that CRISP worked on in their office. This project had an indirect focus on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status as the residents shared their perspectives on the gentrification that was happening in the neighborhood. The project also provided an opportunity for us to understand the intersections of race, class, and gender as the long-term residents were mostly African American, the newer residents were mostly White, and the developers in the area were mostly companies headed by White males. Exploring these different identities helped us understand the effects on the well-being of some residents.

The IU Public Policy Institute launched the Center for Research on Inclusion and Social Policy with Dr. Breanca Merritt serving as the Founding Director in 2019. The mission of this center is to evaluate solutions by supporting local organizations in understanding their programs that address social policy issues that affect Indiana residents. The CRISP Clinic Fellowship provides service-minded students with hands-on experience working alongside policy analysts and community organizations to develop data-driven solutions while also leveraging classroom skills.

Our CRISP experience in community engagement research provided us with a rich learning opportunity. Ten students from various programs across IUPUI's campus were selected for the inaugural cohort which began in the 2020 spring semester. The group was split to work on two projects that focused on housing issues and the arts. Our team was designated to study the impact of arts programming in a local community. As members of this cohort, we contributed to the project as Black doctoral students, experienced teachers, activists, and business associates.

We find it important to mention the project was moved to the zoom platform in accordance with state, local, and university shutdown orders for maintaining health during the COVID-19 pandemic. We had to shift to online visitations between March and June 2020 until later in the summer months when we met face-to-face as outdoor activities were permitted. As early career researchers, this transference helped us understand the nature and the uncertainty of community-based participatory research (CBPR) when working with and in the community.

In our academic process as community-based participatory researchers, we learned the procedures of research as we transcribed tape-recorded interviews of the residents' stories. We

verified the information with the participants for accuracy to make sure we captured their words. After we transcribed the transcripts, we organized the data and interpreted and analyzed it using thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The CRISP staff worked closely with us to support our understanding and interpretation of the data to help us grow as researchers. They provided us with information on how to analyze and interpret data during our CRISP workshops and seminars. These seminars and workshops were valuable because they enhanced our knowledge and research skills. We were able to identify themes that emerged from the data: feelings about neighborhood changes, the art and history of the neighborhood, and building a sense of community between long-term residents and newer residents. Each theme falls under the research area of social inclusion in Indianapolis. The African American communities in Indianapolis have been overwhelmingly marginalized since the 1960s (Pierce, 2005).

As CRISP Fellows, we engaged in research for ten months that illuminated the perspectives of the Martindale Brightwood residents. In our community-based participation, we spent time visiting and chatting with up to thirty neighborhood residents, local business owners, and community leaders. Specifically, we interviewed the twenty-year veteran Executive Director of the Harrison Center, Joanna Beatty Taft. We were also introduced to the organization's "Greatriarchs" which we will discuss later in this report.

Through our CBPR project, we learned that Martindale Brightwood is a complex community and many of the residents in Martindale Brightwood valued the community as a family-centered, historic space. But we also learned that other people who resided inside and outside the community may have only seen the space as a blank slate that could be molded and shaped

into a different cultural landscape mainly for economic purposes as the new homes being built in the community would increase taxes and cause a displacement of some current residents who experienced low wealth.

## **INSIDE THE HARRISON CENTER**

On one chilly Friday afternoon in late January 2020, with our researchers' hats, we traveled to the Harrison Center for the Arts to meet with Joanna Taft for our first interview. Since the year 2000, this organization has served as an advocate for community arts, education, and programming that is equitable in its approach to cultural development. For the Martindale-Brightwood community, this is a neutral space for local residents to meet.

As we walked into the ornamental space, Joanna and her team cleared spaces for us to meet in the lounge area of the art center. We immediately recognized this art center was a space for healing and a place where community members came to connect for well-being and rejuvenation. According to Sobonfu Somé (1997) community is the spirit.

To our surprise and excitement, we met one of the community's elders as she was leaving the art center. As she departed from the center, she gave Joanna a hug and mentioned that she would see her on the porch. Since meeting on the porch sounded unusual, Joanna informed our research team that the community members met at weekend porch parties. Porch parties were a creative space to bring community members together to fellowship and bond over food and drinks while sharing stories. This opportunity for neighbors to swap stories created First Friday's events at the Harrison Center. First Friday provides space for community artists to come together and tell stories through printmaking and oral histories of the Greatriarchs. Their oral histories play a vital

role in teaching the new community members as well as the youth about the rich history of their neighborhood.

The Greatriarchs are long-term residents of the Martindale-Brightwood neighborhood. They are leaders, nurturers, mentors, and friends of the old and new residents of their neighborhood.

Collectively, our interest grew as we engaged in participation with community members to hear their stories because the media from the event did not capitalize on the spirit of Martindale Brightwood. Our research efforts were facilitated. She helped us coordinate meetings and engagements with Mrs. Taft and community members to hear their perspectives on the Harrison Center for the Arts and the Pre-Enact Indy program. As a team, we initially developed 50 questions for our interview with Joanna but with the allotted hour to meet with her, we knew that we had to revise our interview questions to ten so that we could navigate the interview session successfully and obtain valuable information about the art center's history. The most significant question for us to pursue in this research study was to gain an understanding of how the community felt about the Pre-Enact Indy event.

## **THE MARTINDALE BRIGHTWOOD COMMUNITY**

The origin of this neighborhood is quite unique. Originally, it was two separate neighborhoods, Martindale and Brightwood, that were located near the railroad and merged in 1992 to form one neighborhood, which is the oldest in Indianapolis. According to Fuller, the residents of Martindale-Brightwood have faced displacement and the emergence of industrial pollution (2016, p. 204). The development of Interstates 65 and 70 cut through and divided the neighborhood displaced residents. Since many residents could not get loan

approvals for home repairs, they moved out to relocate on the east side of Indianapolis to more affordable homes that unfortunately increased vacant homes in the area. This change has brought about gentrification which according to the Polis Center is the cultural and racial displacement due to a shift in increased housing costs and income levels. With this change, many of the homes in Martindale-Brightwood were no longer passed down from generation to generation.

Martindale-Brightwood is a predominantly Black neighborhood located in the near northeast side of Indianapolis bounded by 30th Street, 21st Street, Massachusetts Avenue, and Sherman Drive. Based on SAVI data, The Martindale Brightwood community has a population of 5,666 residents and the median household income is \$25,972. The majority of the homes in this neighborhood were built before the 1970s.

The original Martindale Brightwood community had children playing in the streets and had neighborhood cookouts, porches filled with neighbors who participated in games and dances, there was also attendance and support at the local church and school events by the Martindale Brightwood neighbors. Now the neighborhood suffers from isolation because the new neighbors who have moved into the area fence themselves and their property in which demonstrates a lack of care for neighbors, and it eliminates a sense of friendly community by stripping away a spirit of place and a legacy of history.

The Martindale Brightwood community in Indianapolis has a rich history. Fortunately, many members of the community have lived there for over 50 years. The longevity keeps the neighborhood's memories alive with the help and support of the Harrison Center. This center provides opportunities for the Martindale Brightwood residents to keep the spirit of



**Figure 1. Greatriarchs of the Martindale-Brightwood Community**

community in the hearts and minds of residents through the art of storytelling. The Harrison Center provides new residents with care packages filled with artifacts and a calendar about their community and its members.

### **USING STORIES TO BUILD COMMUNITY**

Stories help us understand and learn from other people's perspectives about their experiences, challenges, and the impact of transformations in their communities. Storytelling connects humans by giving us a sense of who we are as people, cultural groups, or a nation (Del Negro & Kimball, 2021). Transformations such as where there once stood a multitude of oak trees, now stand modern buildings taller than those trees. But the question is, how many oak trees can we find when there is a new car parking garage on the east end of the neighborhood block where children once played? Most people, especially those who are new to an area will only notice a space as it appears in the present day. But for the long-term dwellers that grew up in the neighborhood, they still see the park where they kissed their first love or met up with friends to play kickball.

According to Richie (2014), oral history is an active process in which interviewers seek out, record, and preserve such memories. Oral history collects memories (the core of oral history), and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews (p.1). Although a critique on oral histories offers a challenge about memory recall, Serie McDougal III (2017) states people may be more prone to make mistakes or make up information when asked to recall information that occurred in the distant past. In community-based research, the life experience of people is beneficial and can be used as raw material to provide a new dimension to history (Thompson, 2017). As we engaged in dialogue with the residents, the interview provided a means of discovering written documents and photographs which may not have otherwise been traced (p. 5). As well, interviews bring together people from different social classes and age groups who would more than likely rarely meet or get to know each other closely (p. 10).

As community-engaged researchers, we were able to hear the stories about the shifting and changing neighborhood between 16th and 25th streets as we attended one of the porch parties with the Greatriarchs. They said the changes became

apparent to residents as people moved in and out on a regular basis. One resident stated, “the neighborhood began to decline when the money moved out. It was not just a White flight. It was also Black people who had the means to move.” Another long-term resident of 33 years mentioned that the names of the streets have changed as things have evolved into a different neighborhood space. Another long-term resident commented, “our neighborhood has been emptied and outsiders are moving in, buying up homes, and taking over with new homes that are \$200,000 or more that only white residents can afford so they are closer to downtown. Many of the original neighborhood residents have moved away or have passed away and the homes have been left to younger family members.” Another resident added, “it’s sad that they have been irresponsible by selling the homes that have been in the families for decades.” The long-term residents advised that the developers

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are renovating homes but not repairing streets and sidewalks in certain parts of the neighborhood.

Even though, as a CRISP research team, we were supposed to find out about the Pre-Enact Indy program, we heard the stories from the residents’ perceptions that Pre-Enact Indy was a nice community event, but the real impact was the

changes and trends that were happening in the Martindale Brightwood neighborhood was the bigger concern to the long-term residents. It was our research assignment to be the resource for the Harrison Center in the community to find out what the residents felt about engaging in Pre-Enact Indy and what changes needed to be made to the program. As with any community-based research project, when engaging with community residents, a new focus could emerge with new research questions that the community members wanted to pursue projects that would meet the real needs of the community.

The long-term residents we spoke with were not as interested in the Pre-Enact Indy festival but were more concerned with what they could do to save their home, their legacies, and their children’s future in that neighborhood. They felt like they were in a constant battle with the impact of gentrification in their neighborhood. They felt their neighborhood identity had become a memory with the new development and gentrification that was happening which was causing a loss of art and the original history of Martindale Brightwood. These emotions and feelings of the neighbors are significant to the community members’ needs and concerns regarding their neighborhood. It was assumed that the Pre-Enact Indy program would be an anti-gentrification intervention to empower the current residents, but to many of the residents the program was a nice experience but did not fully address the needs and concerns of the neighborhood.

With all the reconstruction in the Martindale Brightwood community, some of the residents felt their identity was erased with all the changes. A few of the long-term residents advised how oral history is important to maintaining historical truth about an area. Therefore, they made sure that we understood how the businesses in the area have

also changed and were not really meeting the needs of the long-term residents any longer. “We used to walk down the street to buy shoes, clothes, and groceries, but not anymore. We have to travel far

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to get those things now. When you don’t have a car, it’s hard to get around,” they said. This change in the neighborhood has brought attention to the need for economic recovery and is seeing more local businesses open. A resident mentioned “We need grocery stores, like Aldi, where things are affordable, and we can walk to.” The residents all agreed there should be more local, affordable restaurants for families to gather to enjoy good home-cooked meals as a place to foster community well-being, and social cohesion. They advised how these spaces will also develop healthy relationships for residents as well as support economic resilience for long-term and newer residents during the neighborhood changes.

At the conclusion of the project, the residents recommended that the community liaisons working with the university host more community meetings and events to improve community engagement. These meetings would include all relevant community stakeholders such as community leaders, community developers, government officials, university leaders, long-term and new residents, school leaders, and the youth. Once the community roundtable is formed there could be an equitable discussion about:

1. Affordable housing to increase homeownership for Black residents.
2. A quality education for all students, especially students of color.
3. Provide opportunities for more local businesses to operate in the neighborhood, especially for Black entrepreneurs.
4. Support upward mobility and access to start businesses.
5. Engage youth with more history-themed programming including archives and artifacts, so they can learn the historical story of the neighborhood.

This community-based research project helped us, as graduate students, to see the power of the existence of the arts in communities. For members of Martindale Brightwood’s community, their artistic expression is storytelling. As we see, storytelling empowers community residents to craft their own stories with opportunities to share their voices, opinions, memories, and reflections. Therefore, stories provide multiple ways to communicate histories that give a keen sense of place and identity such as this story about the vibrant Martindale Brightwood neighborhood.

Community engaged work and the arts introduced us to innovative ideas and illustrated a community’s culture that can be instrumental in community research, and this was a valuable influence in our graduate research work. We found this research opportunity to be fulfilling, especially as we had to deal with the sudden shift in our learning environment due to COVID-19. Our vulnerability during that disrupted time allowed us to find creative ways to connect with the neighbors of Martindale Brightwood such as the “porch parties” where we attended an informal gathering with the long-term residence to hear their stories.

If given the opportunity, we recommend the CBPR research approach because it can teach graduate

students about real world situations and gives them opportunities to see where policy decisions may need to be made to create community changes for the betterment and well-being of some residents. CBPR is a research approach that seems more sustainable for the community and the university because it creates academic research that is impactful and beneficial while maintaining a community's culture.

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Figure 2. Items from the Harrison Center's care package for new residents



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