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All Our Hearts: Sharing Stories of Love, Grief and Hope from the Opioid Crisis

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My Community

Since the beginning of the Social Journalism program, I've aimed to serve the opioid-use disorder (OUD) community.

I care about this community on an individual and global level, because like so many others, I've lost someone close to me as a result of OUD. I was 15 when my sister Angela overdosed and died. I wrote a [personal essay](#) in May 2019 that explains my experience of Angela's opioid-use disorder and how it impacted my understanding of the disease.

Since beginning the Social Journalism program at CUNY, I've explored several aspects and perspectives of the opioid-use disorder community. In one of my first Medium posts last year, I wrote: "My intention for working with the addiction community: to be an intentional listener, provide a helpful presence, and engage with human connection."

Through personal experience and ongoing observation, I've learned the power of stigma, and how it can debilitate an already struggling community. Stigma creates shame, which can make someone experiencing substance dependence feel that much more unable to seek treatment and recovery from their disease. The issue I'm focusing on for this practicum is how journalists can bring empathy to their work as we continue to report on the opioid epidemic and the folks who are most affected by it.

Where it all started

In October 2018, Maddie Linsenmier died as a result of opioid-use disorder. Her sister, Kate O'Neill, wrote an incredibly humanizing obituary, which was published in Seven Days, and went viral. Individuals from all over the world were commenting on the obituary, sharing their own stories of people they love and lost as a result of opioid-use disorder.

As a result, in January 2019, Seven Days hired Kate O'Neill to write a year-long series called [Hooked: Stories and Solutions for Vermont's Opioid Crisis](#). And Seven Days deputy publisher Cathy Resmer proposed a related project: an online memorial that would allow families to memorialize their loved ones the way Kate did for Maddie, to awaken empathy for the opioid-use disorder community — our community.

In the spring, Cathy hired myself and Claire Skogsberg to help develop what is now [All Our Hearts](#).

Side note: I remember reading Maddie's obituary when it went viral, and thinking to myself, "This is how I want to tell stories from my community." I never would've thought I'd get the chance to meet Kate, let alone work on a project she is associated with. I cannot express how fulfilling this experience was.

The development of All Our Hearts

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All Our Hearts is an engagement journalism project that reached people from all over the United States. The intention of the project is to awaken empathy for lives affected by opioid-use disorder, and also offer an opportunity for family members and friends to heal through storytelling.

When Claire and I joined the team in June 2019, we were referring to the project as Remember Them. It was brought to our attention that that name, Remember Them, was stigmatizing in itself. It isolated people affected by the opioid-use disorder to *Them*. *Those people, over there*. It created a separation, the opposite of what we wanted to do. Because in reality this is all of us. We are all affected directly or indirectly. Everyone knows someone affected by this disease, and too many of us lost our someone to it.

Claire and I were responsible for helping to develop a form that now serves as an initial interview for people who want to share their loved one's story with All Our Hearts. We developed the foundation for this memorial project over the course of nearly three months.

We met with community members who work with individuals and families affected by opioid-use disorder, and produced a set of prompts that aim to help us learn who a person was at their core, and the life they lived before and through their opioid-use disorder. My own life experience felt especially helpful for this - I was able to ask myself, "How would I respond to this question, if I was sharing Angela's story?"

After several rounds of editing within Seven Days and a couple weeks of user-testing, we were able to complete three stories for the public launch of the form on August 21, 2019.

How All Our Hearts Gathers Stories

After a form is submitted, we conduct a follow-up interview with the person who shared the memories, and then we produce a story about their loved one in their own words.

My Practicum – Community Engagement for All Our Hearts

[Sam Stones](#) honor Sam Cohn, a Vermonter who died when he was 14, unrelated to the opioid epidemic. Over the years, Sam's friends and family have come together to create stones in his memory, and leave them all over the world for strangers to find. The stones provide a link to the Sam Stones website, where people can learn about Sam's legacy. After meeting with Sam's dad, John Cohn, and learning about the production process, I was confident we could develop our own version of stones for All Our Hearts – and we did.

Cathy agreed to keep me onboard following the summer internship to be the heart stone project coordinator for All Our Hearts.

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Developing our own version of stones was an opportunity to have direct community engagement. We produced 200 heart shaped, clay stones and which have our web address on one side. I planned two public events, both of which took place at the same venue in Burlington, VT – Generator.

For the first event, we invited individuals and families who helped us to produce the initial stories for the project. They helped us to mold the clay stones and imprint the web address with a stamp. The stones were fired at the Burlington Arts Center, and stored there until the second, public event which was held on Sunday, December 8, 2019.

At the reception, we explained how they can spread awareness of the project by leaving the stones in different towns, states, and countries.

Metrics, Outcomes & Impact

Since we launched the All Our Hearts website in September, we've published 50 stories of individuals from all across the continent — from Orlando, Florida to Las Vegas, Nevada; from Dallas, Texas to Cobourg, Ontario, Canada.

Tens of thousands of people have visited the website; we've logged more than 110,000 page views in that time. We've been written about on [BuzzFeed.com](#), [Boston.com](#) and been featured on CNN's "On the Story With Lynn Smith."

Here's some feedback the All Our Hearts team received from people who shared a story about a loved one. They gave us insight about how the process of developing their loved ones stories affected them:

"Writing this was harder than I thought, but I love the way it came out and I hope that it can bring more hope than sadness." Elaine Day, who submitted her brother's story to All Our Hearts: <https://www.allourhearts.com/dave-decosta/>

"Thank you for giving my grief a voice. It was incredibly helpful for me to share Jessica's story. I don't often get to talk about her at all, let alone our journey together through her addiction. It was emotional but cleansing as well. I have gone to the site myself several times to read it again.

I was hoping it would open up a dialogue in my family, with my husband and son and even with my brothers who never talk about her and have distanced themselves emotionally from me since her death. It did not accomplish that sadly. I don't want to assume what anyone else's feelings are but it feels to me like people just want me to move on! I am rebuilding my life, slowly, piece by microscopic piece, but I don't think I will ever "move on". My daughter was a part of me and who I am is different now since her death. This pain is engraved on my heart and although I laugh again and can find moments of joy, the volume and color of life is turned way down now. I don't imagine there is any moving on.

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Despite all that I continue to talk about my daughter and try to raise awareness and volunteer in the addiction community. Just as I will never just "move on", I will never stop trying to extinguish the stigma of this disease and will continue to try to bring hope to anyone suffering through this journey. If I could offer any advice to parents it would be to help yourself! Our children are not the only ones that are sick, so are our families. Getting help for myself through AI Anon and attending open NA and AA meetings were the first time I felt any kind of compassion for what my daughter suffered from and was able to let go of anger and move toward healing. The principals I learned there also helped me survive her death and are helping me find some hope for my future.

I hope more families will continue to share their stories and find healing." -Kelly Almasy, who submitted her daughter's story to AOH: <https://www.allourhearts.com/jessica-almasy/>

The Takeaways

We have a responsibility to learn and grow with the ever-changing multimedia platforms, and revolutionary digital tools at our fingertips, so it's easy to forget about the basic engagement journalism techniques and approaches we should continue to tap into. Journalism does not have to be an article, photo story or social video to make an impact or grow an audience. Journalism can take form by simply having a conversation, hearing and listening without scribbling quotes, observing the environment in which a community may exist, or helping to bring people together who have information needs.

I often think about one of our first assignments which lasted the duration of our Community Engagement course. We had to post one photo a day to Instagram, which taught me to have an eye for anything interesting in my surroundings. Having to post a photo every day on Instagram was a great challenge to take a moment and appreciate what was part of my environment. It made me more aware, and ultimately capable of practicing ethnographic skills within the opioid-use disorder community.

I learned how difficult and time consuming it is to plan a single event... and then another shortly after. There are so many details that you wouldn't typically think of as an attendee –

Who will cater? How many seats do we need? Does the event space have a podium, stage, PA system, and projector? What if nobody comes? What is the real purpose of this event? How do we measure success? How will this impact the community? How many speakers should we have? How long should each speaker talk? What is the budget? Who will set up? Who will clean up? Who will provide flowers for centerpieces? How many tables do we need? Why should the community care that it's happening? – and these are just a few of the questions that come up when you're planning an event.

I learned through making the stones that we are allowed to be deeply connected to the work we do and produce as engagement journalists. I sat with individuals who have lost a loved one to opioid-use disorder and experienced a human connection that often feels

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lost. That connection showed me the importance of this project for the people sharing stories with us. It allowed me to be part of the community and use my engagement skills to impact it.

It was through planning the second event with the incredible Seven Days team that I learned how important a team is. It takes so much energy to create a space that is specific and purposeful, and we did that together. At the second event, family members who shared a story with us briefly spoke about how All Our Hearts has impacted them, and in the audience were city councilors, the mayor of Burlington and state legislators — people who can make the decisions that have a direct impact on the community. All Our Hearts is inspiring action.

When I consider what may be my most critical insights from learning engagement skills this is what comes to mind:

- Engagement journalism is not radical, it's actually just taking us back to the basics of what the press wanted to do in the first place – to fulfill the information needs of humanity.
- It is crucial that we value and prioritize human connection through our reporting process, from beginning to end. We owe that to the people we are engaging with.
- Without listening and observing, we are not truly understanding the information gaps a community may be experiencing.
- Just because you're part of a community, doesn't mean you know *everyone's* needs. I learned more about opioid-use disorder in the last 18 months, than I ever knew before. It began to impact me when I was 9-years-old – I'm 25.

If I could share a piece of advice with the August 2018 me, brand new to the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, it would be this: it's okay if this process takes time – it will. It will be overwhelming, rewarding, emotional and worth it. Don't forget to acknowledge your present perspective, not just your past experience surrounding opioid-use disorder – try to assess how that experience did make an imprint on who you are, and learn how to be a better journalist and facilitator through that.

In general, when someone is just beginning to work with a community, I would suggest you don't dive in too quickly, and always ask yourself, "Is this what I think the community needs, or is it what the community is telling me it needs?"

Degree Highlights

My work was published several times while at CUNY, but one of my most favorite and important articles is about the importance of using stigma-reducing language when addressing the opioid-use disorder community. I was asked to write this piece by a paper in West Virginia, my home state. I interned at [Shatterproof](#), a non-profit working to destigmatize substance use disorder and advocate for evidence-based treatment, which is where I had the opportunity to learn more about how stigmatizing words and phrases can impact several aspects of substance use disorder including: access to treatment, treatment approaches, and a person's confidence to feel worthy of treatment and recovery at all. This piece is also special to me, because it is the last piece I had

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published while pursuing my degree in Social J: [Substance Use Disorder & Person First Language: Why is Matters](#)

As mentioned before, I interned at Shatterproof for the duration of the fall 2019 semester. I learned about the nonprofit while walking through Herald Square at the beginning of April 2019. I stumbled upon a breathtaking installation that showed “a brain on opioids.” It was the perfect opportunity to produce a photo essay for an upcoming assignment. I did so, but then used the photos for a personal essay I wrote, which was published by Shatterproof. Shortly after it was published, they offered me the fall internship. This is a piece I am most proud of: [Humanizing Hope](#)

At Shatterproof, I had the opportunity to contribute to the blog. I wrote this piece concerning the [prescription opioid distributors and a \\$260 million settlement](#) in October 2019. In this piece, I found data showing access to medication assisted treatment (MAT) and how limited physicians are in terms of prescribing these life-saving drugs.

I found that the most helpful social media for sharing my work was Twitter, the majority of the time. But, if I wanted to interact directly with people experiencing opioid-use disorder or people who are in recovery, Facebook was my best bet. Closed groups for this community exist on Facebook, and offer a purposeful sense of community for individuals experiencing such an isolating disease. Here are some [ethical guidelines](#) I developed as I learned more about the community, and better understood how I’m part of it.

I helped to develop [www.allourhearts.com](#) with Seven Days, a Burlington Vermont based publication. Myself and one other intern developed [this form](#) together over the summer, which launched on August 21, 2019. Seven Days launched the website in September, which is where we gather and publish stories. Although I’m parting with the project, it will continue to tell these important stories of lives affected by opioid-use disorder.

The final assignment for the Start-Up Sprint course was really helpful to me. I was able to break down the purpose of developing the stones – I had to be extremely specific, which helped me better understand my process as a facilitator and journalist. Find it here: [Engaging with Isolation](#)

Final Medium post: [#Socialj19](#)