

Ohio Humanities

*Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio*

Ohio has been among the states hardest hit by the opioid epidemic. As part of its commitment to engage Ohioans in “Real Conversations about Real Issues,” Ohio Humanities awarded a grant to support *Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio*. This project included the publication of an anthology of first-person accounts of addicts, their families, first responders, faith leaders, social workers, teachers, medical professionals and others impacted by opioids. Discussion sessions were held in eleven Ohio communities. These conversations allowed participants the opportunity to share their own stories and to learn how other individuals and organizations were confronting the crisis. Finally, the grant funded the website [NotFarFromMe.org](http://NotFarFromMe.org), which hosts discussion guides for community conversation as well as resources, including podcasts, videos, and links to stories related to the topic. The goal of *Not Far From Me* is to help Ohioans think critically about addiction, create empathy, combat stigma, and allow participants to share their collective experience and wisdom in addressing the opioid epidemic

2019 Schwartz Prize Nomination

Ohio Humanities

*Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio*

*There is a place not far from me-  
A place of despair.  
Its poets tell of life within,  
Where hope is seldom found.  
Gerald E. Green*

In 2017, Ohio had the second highest rate of opioid-related deaths in the United States. Over prescription of opioid painkillers and the introduction of deadly synthetic opioids such as fentanyl have devastated communities all over the state. Thousands of lives have been lost to opioids in Ohio, hundreds of families torn apart, while local and state resources have been stretched past the breaking point attempting to respond to the crisis.

The opioid epidemic is a complex problem that impacts not just victims and their families, but also health care professionals, first responders, law enforcement, social workers, schools, faith communities, and treatment centers. There are no easy answers on how to repair the damage done to the lives of individuals, families and communities. What is clear is that in the search for solutions Ohioans need to marshal all the resources at their disposal. Including, especially, the humanities.

## **PROJECT AIMS**

Two scholars from the Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine, Dr. Daniel Skinner, Assistant Professor of Health Policy, and Dr. Berkeley Franz, Assistant Professor of Community-Based Health, recognized the need for a humanities-based approach to addressing the crisis. In 2018, they reached out to Ohio Humanities regarding a book project they were working on. They already had a commitment from Ohio State University Press to publish an edited volume that would focus on the historical origins of the opioid crisis, the political factors at work, and ethical dilemmas at the heart of the community-level responses. At first, Dr. Skinner and Dr. Franz sought a grant for publication of the book, but as they discussed the project with Ohio Humanities staff it became clear that a much broader and far reaching project was possible. Out of this collaboration came *Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio*.

Ohio Humanities is focused on engaging Ohioans in “Real Conversations about Real Issues” and funding a state-wide, humanities-based conversation about the opioid epidemic was an obvious fit for our major grants program. While the edited book was a crucial element for this project,

staff helped Dr. Skinner and Dr. Franz design two additional ways for Ohioans to take part in this important conversation - -discussion sessions in communities across the state, and a website with resources that people can use for continued conversations at any time and in any location. The goal of both the community conversations as well as the website is to help Ohioans think critically about addiction, create empathy, combat stigma, and allow participants to share their collective experience and wisdom in addressing the opioid epidemic.

In addition to creating opportunities for Ohioans to engage in real conversations about the opioid crisis, *Not Far From Me* stands out for its ability to facilitate unique and important relationships. First was the involvement of staff from the Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine in a humanities-based project. Dr. Skinner and Dr. Franz understand that to change perceptions about addiction, and thus outcomes, people need more than statistics. They need stories. The partnership between medical college faculty and a state-wide humanities organization demonstrates the potential when the social sciences, humanities, and medicine are joined to address significant issues in society. The institutional credibility of both the Heritage College and Ohio Humanities helped ensure that this project would receive serious and significant attention around the state.

Second, when deciding where to host community conversations, it became clear that the best partners were local libraries. Ohio has one of the most robust and well-funded library systems in the country. From large cities to small towns, libraries in Ohio are important community centers. Partnering with local libraries opened up new ways of reaching potential participants and ensure that the conversations would be held in locations that are often at the center of public life.

Finally, *Not Far From Me* brought together an amazing collection of stories written by individuals from across Ohio. Recovering addicts, family members, first responders, law enforcement professionals, social workers, a high school football coach, clergy – Ohioans shared unique perspectives on how the opioid crisis has impacted their lives. This project not only brought them together, but the anthology, the discussion sessions' and the website allow their stories to inform and inspire countless thousands of people throughout the state.

## **PROJECT IMPACT**

### **BOOK**

*The motivating impulse for this book...was our belief that if the narrative about opioids in Ohio were to impact policy in a meaningful way, then it would have to be revised. We thought that this revision was best carried out by actually listening to Ohioans who had experienced opioid abuse firsthand and providing them a platform on which to tell their stories.* Introduction, *Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio*

Published in the late Spring of 2019, *Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio* contains fifty-three submissions from ten Ohio counties. This collection of essays, poetry and art work was edited by Drs. Skinner and Franz. It is divided into five sections: “Establishing Place,” where contributors illuminate the spaces in which opioids have affected the state as well as efforts to reclaim those places; “Processing Loss,” “Making Sense,” essays on how the epidemic evolved in Ohio; “Devising Solutions,” and “Challenging Assumptions,” which examine the difficult conversations that Ohioans still need to have.

This collection is a testament to ability of the humanities to challenge us intellectually and emotionally. There is great power in first person narrative. The pain, frustration, anger, and hope of the contributors allows readers to experience how deeply this crisis has affected people throughout the state. The wide variety of contributors, including mothers and fathers, recovering addicts, a high school football coach, social workers, medical professionals, first responders, civic leaders, and clergy, is a reminder that no segment of society has been immune to this epidemic.

*Not Far From Me* also explores the different perspectives Ohioans have regarding the origins of the crisis and how best to solve it. Assumptions about addiction, treatment, pain management, personal responsibility, and a host of other issues are challenged by the essays, poems and artwork. Longstanding tensions, such as the divide between rural and urban communities, come to the fore in a number of the essays and add additional layers of complexity to addressing the epidemic.

## DISCUSSION SESSIONS

In the early summer of 2019 Drs. Skinner and Franz began to host facilitated discussions in eleven Ohio communities, including Columbus, Mentor, Euclid, Chillicothe, Waverly, Nelsonville, Dayton, Athens, Pickerington and Lima (one session will occur in mid-September in Licking County). Each session was held at a public library and promotion for the events was conducted in traditional media (print, radio), social media, and the project website. Library partners promoted the sessions to their patrons and through social media accounts.

The format was designed to be flexible, but each session included introductory comments by the authors, a reading from the collection (sometimes by the contributor), an interactive exercise, and an engaging, discussion between community members facilitated by the editors. Coordinators for the project noted

*While we carefully planned semi-structured activities for the community conversations, the direction was sometimes unpredictable and conversations would inevitably turn to how participants can exchange information on community resources and ideas for engaging local institutions. When not overly programmed, humanistic conversations about addiction naturally open spaces for community connectivity that extend beyond the formal program.*

Attendance at the sessions varied from fewer than ten to more than forty people. The size of the group did not adversely impact the quality of discussion. The project evaluator observed that

*The number of people who attend conversations like ours varies from town to town and county to county. Sessions ranged from a few to several dozen participants. Yet, in undertaking this kind of community-orientated programming, it was clear that the size of the group did not affect the substance of the conversation. No matter how many participants attended, the conversation was vibrant and often unpredictable.*

Each community has its own relationship with opioids, but two interrelated themes emerged from the various conversations. First, there was a diversity of backgrounds of those who attended. At the Athens session, for example, there were two women who ran a women's shelter, a filmmaker, a teacher, an artist, and a graduate student. This diversity made it possible for participants to take part in some robust conversations about how best to address the crisis because no one was experiencing it the same way.

The second theme was the capacity for these sessions to create a space where people could talk about their experiences. This is no small feat given the stigma attached to addiction. The design of the project places great value on first-person narrative. The discussion sessions resulted in people not just sharing their ideas but also rooting them in deeply personal experiences. The evaluator observed this firsthand:

*Perhaps unsurprising, but worth noting in light of the stigma often associated with discussing addiction: most ideas and discussion points were accompanied with a narrative tied to an individual's life experiences. Not only did these experiences provide additional context for discussion points, but they helped to create a familiar and respectful atmosphere that welcomed all viewpoints and reduced stigma. This, in turn, allowed participants to share increasingly personal and sensitive accounts of addiction in the community and in their homes.*

## WEBSITE

The third part of this project was the creation of a website, NotFarFromMe.org. While the website reflects many of the themes of the printed anthology, access to it is not required to make full use of this digital platform. It was designed to house stand alone materials to help facilitate discussion.

Resources on NotFarFromMe.org include five community conversation guides. The topics follow those outlined in the book. Each section contains three detailed discussion plans, including openers, a short passage from the book, and questions. The resources are easy to download and are free to use.

Other resources on the website include podcasts that examine addiction, recovery, and how the crisis is being addressed across the country, text documents, short reviews of books related

to the topic, and links to Ted Talk videos. Two videos linked on the site are from a first responder talking about her experiences treating those who overdose and a recovering addict who recounts his struggle to safely stop using prescription opioids.

## WHAT WAS LEARNED

The *Not Far From Me* project highlights ongoing issues that Ohioans will continue to address. Some issues predate the opioid crisis while others are more directly tied to the epidemic. One of these has to do with the disparity of resources across the state. Historically there has been tension in the state between its rural and urban areas. Resource allocation has been uneven and this has been a significant problem when it comes to finding the funds and expertise to help addicts and their families. This issue was noted in the community discussions. In Nelsonville, participants expressed exhaustion that two adjacent counties could have very different resources at their disposal. This has not stopped under-resourced communities from innovating solutions. But there remains much more work to be done in connecting organizations and local government with each other and with the money and professionals that they need to help families.

Like the rest of America, Ohio has a long history of battling racial discrimination. This is not the first drug-related crisis to hit the state, but the response to it has exposed what some African American leaders feel is a response rooted in racism. The terms “epidemic” and “crisis” have been widely employed when discussing the use of opioids. African Americans have wondered if such language would be used if white communities had not been among those hit hardest by opioid use. The heroin epidemic of the 1990s disproportionately impacted predominantly black neighborhoods. African American leaders in Ohio remember the response from the state and federal government as tending to focus more on arresting those addicted than helping them find treatment. As one participant at a community conversation remarked, “If this was a prison filled with black women, we would not have all these programs.” Racism in Ohio transcends opioid use, but the crisis and the response have served as a powerful reminder that these old wounds have not been healed.

The widespread use of opioids among individuals of all socio-economic backgrounds has challenged traditional thinking about drugs and drug users. Some Ohioans, including some law enforcement officials, first responders, and medical professionals, still view drug use and addiction through the lens of personal responsibility. If someone has an addiction, then the fault lies with that person for taking drugs in the first place. Yet the legal origins of the opioid crisis, with so many people being prescribed highly addictive pain medication by physicians, raises questions about those assumptions. Are those addicted to opioids victims, and if so, how should they be treated? There is a growing focus among medical professionals and law enforcement on learning to be empathetic with individuals struggling with opioid addiction, but what does that mean when some individuals continue to overdose and refuse to seek help to treat their addiction?

The reality that there are still communities in Ohio that are not willing or are unable to admit the problem. Storytelling and discussion are powerful tools, but not very helpful when people do not choose to participate.

*Community members in Pickerington reported that while there is a lot of discussion about opioid addiction around the state, their community remains in denial. While we had a good, passionate group in attendance, the empty chairs were a poignant symbol of the absence of open dialogue in their community. Our book and project's title--Not Far from Me--became a major discussion point, with the group feeling that it perfectly captured the problem in Pickerington: a problem that was everywhere, but was still highly stigmatized.*

There are unexpected costs for those who battle an opioid addiction and their family members. Individuals in recovery discover a harsh new reality when it comes to finding housing and employment. The stigma of addiction is real and not easy to overcome. And the emotional toll on children who have lost parents and other family members to overdoses will not be known for years, or even decades, in the future.

Even with all of the unanswered questions and unsolved problems, *Not Far From Me* makes clear that this crisis, as devastating as it is, has not taken hope or resolve from Ohioans. Perhaps the greatest impact this project makes is to remind us of how resilient humans are, and the power of narratives to help individuals and communities to confront and overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. A way forward will be found.

## **FINANCIAL**

*Not Far From Me* received a \$20,000 grant from Ohio Humanities in 2018. Those funds were designated for expenses related to the community conversations, an external evaluator, and the creation of NotFarFromMe.org.

Funds for publication of the anthology included a \$40,000 grant from the Connect and Collaborate Program at the Ohio State University, plus in-kind contributions of \$22,000 and \$20,000 respectively from the Ohio State University Press, and Ohio University.

## **LINKS**

[www.notfarfromme.org](http://www.notfarfromme.org) Project website

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JNvXMdhjcg> Community conversations promotional video

<https://vimeo.com/344408505> Podcast with Dr. Daniel Skinner