

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING AMONGST
SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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by

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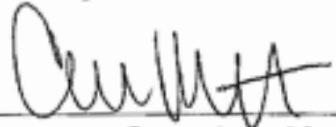
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THE POWER OF STORYTELLING AMONGST
SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Brandon R. Mowinkel

Doane University, 2023

Supervisor: Dr. Lyn Forester

“Stories are a powerful structure for organizing and transmitting information and for creating meaning in our lives and environments” (Green, 2004, p. 1). Storytelling, as a tool, is used within every organization, business, school, etc., to make sense of the past, bring context to the present, and create a vision for the future. This narrative study collected the stories secondary school administrators often share with their students. Twelve secondary school administrators from across the United States, who have attended at least one National Association of Secondary School Principals Advocacy Conference, participated in this study. Stories were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 35-75 minutes. Each interview was transcribed, coded, and analyzed for latent themes. The stories shared during each interview were restoried and included as individual narratives within the study. All 12 narratives were member checked for clarity, context, and accuracy. Five themes emerged from the interviews: stories are personal, stories make connections, stories teach lessons, stories create a vision, and COVID-19. Secondary school administrators use their lived experiences to guide students in making sense of their past, providing context to their present, and creating a better vision for their future. Ultimately, stories have the power to change lives.

Keywords: shared lived experience, making connections, lessons, creating a vision, narrative, stories, storytelling

DEDICATION

“I believe in you, Dad.”--Zephyr Mowinkel, June 2022

Completing this journey would not have been possible without the love and support of my family; this dissertation is dedicated to them.

First, to my amazingly talented and beautiful wife, Shelly, who has been by my side for the past 28 years. I would not want to do life with anyone else. The love and support you continuously provide are unmatched and have been evident throughout this journey. You took on many roles during the past three years as I pursued this goal and did them amazingly well. Thanks for always encouraging and pushing me to keep going. I cannot wait to write this next chapter in life. I Love You!

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No journey or story is written in isolation. The protagonist is surrounded by characters that guide them to their ultimate destination. For those that share the lived experience of completing a doctorate, or any advanced degree, you know how vital these supporting characters are as they lift you up when it is needed the most.

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No matter what route you take, if you complete the journey, you will reach the same destination. This destination is a work we feel energized to share. One we look back on and wonder in amazement how it could have come from us. (Rubin & Strauss, 2023, p. 308).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Purpose of Study.....	4
Significance of Study	6
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	7
History of Storytelling	8
Definition of Storytelling	11
Worldview and Storytelling	12
Storytelling as a Tool.....	14
Storytelling for Organizational Leaders	17
Make Sense of the Past	21
Provide Context to the Present.....	25
Create a Shared Vision for the Future.....	28
Conclusion	30
CHAPTER 3: METHODS.....	33
Qualitative Approach	33
Narrative Inquiry Approach.....	35
Role of the Researcher	38
Data Collection Procedures.....	41
Data Analysis Procedures	43
Validation Strategies	45
Ethical Issues	46

Summary	47
CHAPTER 4: Findings	50
Part 1: Context of Study.....	50
Research Questions	50
Introduction to Participants.....	51
Constructed Narratives.....	52
Part 2: Participant Narratives	52
Interview 1: Steve	53
Finding the One Thing	57
Interview 2: Don	58
Value of Relationships	59
Lessons Through Sports.....	61
Janae.....	63
Stories Make Us Human	65
Interview 3: Chad.....	65
Journey Back Home	66
Appreciate Your Surroundings	67
Shared Lived Experiences.....	69
Phil’s Story.....	70
The Value of Storytelling.....	72
Interview 4: Holly	73
Open Book	75
Personal Trauma	76

Making Connections	78
Interview 5: Brent	79
COVID-19.....	80
A Collective Story.....	81
Student Perspective	83
Interview 6: David	84
Being Committed	85
Coming Home.....	90
Family Struggles	92
Shared Lived Experiences.....	95
Why Storytelling?	97
Interview 7: Mary.....	97
Half-Truths and Social Media.....	99
Shared Family Experiences.....	100
Reid’s Story	101
Listening... ..	102
Family Histories.....	103
Why Storytelling?	104
Interview 8: Rachel.....	104
Rachel’s Journey.....	104
Big Moves.....	105
“I Love You...”	107
Full Circle	112

Interview 9: Ron.....	114
The Path	115
Lessons in Sports	116
Knowing Your Role.....	118
Choices and Connections	118
Interview 10: Gary	120
Origin Story	120
A Lion’s “ROAR”.....	121
Opening a New Building	122
Finding Connections	123
Everyone’s Path	124
Interview 11: Vince.....	125
Finding His Path	126
The Road Back to Education	127
Showing Your Passion.....	127
Making Connections	129
NFL Dreams.....	130
Why Storytelling?	132
Interview 12: Aaron	132
A Job Offer	133
Laying the Groundwork	134
A Collective Story.....	135
Aaron’s Story	136

Why Storytelling?	138
Summary	138
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	140
Summary of the Study	140
Themes and Subthemes	142
Theme 1: Stories Are Personal.....	143
Steve.....	144
Don.....	144
Chad.....	145
Holly.....	145
Brent.....	145
David.....	146
Mary.....	146
Rachel.....	146
Ron.....	146
Gary.....	147
Vince.....	147
Aaron.....	147
Subtheme: One Adult.....	148
Steve.....	148
David.....	148
Ron.....	149
Gary.....	149

Vince.....	149
Subtheme: Being a Trusting Adult	150
Steve.....	150
Don.....	151
Chad.....	152
Holly.....	153
David.....	153
Mary.....	154
Ron.....	155
Vince.....	155
Theme 2: Stories Build Connections	156
Subtheme: Connections with Students.....	157
Steve.....	157
Don.....	157
Chad.....	158
David.....	158
Rachel.....	158
Ron.....	159
Gary.....	160
Vince.....	160
Aaron.....	160
Subtheme: Traumatic Experiences	161
Holly.....	161

David.....	161
Mary.....	161
Subtheme: Connections with Community	162
Chad.....	162
Brent.....	162
David.....	163
Rachel.....	163
Gary.....	163
Theme 3: Stories Create a Vision	164
Steve.....	164
Holly.....	165
Brent.....	165
David.....	166
Rachel.....	166
Gary.....	166
Vince.....	167
Aaron.....	167
Theme 4: Stories Teach Lessons.....	168
Steve.....	168
Don.....	169
Chad.....	169
Holly.....	169
David.....	169

Mary.....	170
Rachel.....	170
Gary.....	170
Ron.....	170
Vince.....	171
Theme 5: COVID-19	171
Brent.....	172
David.....	173
Discussion of Research Questions	174
What stories do secondary school leaders share with their students?.....	174
How do the stories secondary school leaders share with their students relate to the leaders' own lived experiences?	175
Why do secondary school leaders share stories with students?	176
What are the perceived outcomes secondary school administrators have when they share stories about their lived experiences with their students?	176
Limitations of the Study	178
Implications	179
Suggestions for Future Research	179
Conclusion	181
CHAPTER 6: My Story	183
Stories Matter.....	183
January 29, 2023	183
January 27, 1996.....	185

The Aftermath	189
Lessons Learned.....	190
Storytelling.....	191
Epilogue	192
References	194
APPENDIX A: NASSP STATE COORDINATOR EMAIL	205
APPENDIX B: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE.....	206
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....	209
APPENDIX D: MEMBER CHECK FORM.....	211
APPENDIX E: JOURNAL ENTRY (1/28/23).....	212
APPENDIX F: RESEARCH LOG	213
APPENDIX G: CENSUS REGIONS AND DIVISIONS MAP.....	217

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“To be human is to live a story” (Cho, 2021, p. 2).

I paced back and forth in the dimly lit school hallway, focusing on my upcoming foe, one I had faced many times before. “Next up on mat 2, from Osmond, Brandon Mowinkel...” was my cue. I pulled off my warmup and threw it to my wrestling coach, and as I entered the gym, a chorus of boos greeted me like a tidal wave coming to shore. While more than ready to take on my physical opponent that day, as a sixteen-year-old, I was not prepared to handle the self-made hurricane that awaited me at that moment. My actions, hubris, and confidence of the season had finally caught up to me. Little did I know at the time, those few minutes, packed into a small-town Nebraska high school gym, would become one of the many stories I would tell and retell over the next quarter-century in hopes that others would not make the same mistakes.

Statement of the Problem

Human life is a collection of stories lived and shared. Since the beginning of time, stories have been told and retold to pass down information and shape the larger narrative upon which we live (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Cho, 2021; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kowalski, 2015; Pettigrew, 1979; Riessman, 1993). Stories are at the core of who we are and convey our values and beliefs both individually and as a community within the larger society (Cho, 2021; Collison & Mackenzie, 1999; Denning, 2011; Gargiulo, 2002; Godin, 2005; Harris & Barnes, 2005; Hutchens, 2021; Maanen, 2011; Miles et al., 2020; Oltman & Bautista, 2021; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Salicru, 2018; Simmons, 2015).

Immense power lies within stories (Godin, 2005; Simmons, 2015) as stories “help [humans] to make sense of what we are, where we come from, and what we want to be”

(Soin & Scheytt, 2006, p. 55). The lens through which humans see the world is shaped and framed by the stories we live and share (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Eisner et al., 2017). Every individual not only gets to own their own stories but place meaning to and frame the stories they consume (Riessman, 1993). Our values and beliefs are shaped by the stories we live and construct our view of the world (Hamon, 2020).

The study of storytelling and the power it holds is as vast and broad as there are people inhabiting the earth. While storytelling is as old as time, it is only since the late 20th century (Rhodes & Brown, 2005) when researchers such as Polkinghorne, Fisher, and Boje, among others, brought narrative research into the world of academia. Narrative paradigm theory, the theory that all humans are essentially storytellers, is widely used by storytelling researchers and provides the lens upon which narrative research is based (Fisher, 1984).

Every aspect of how humans live their lives tells a story and helps explain how people behave and live the way they do (Maanen, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1988). We are perpetual storytellers and must be aware of what our actions and words tell the world. However, stories are never concrete and are left to the listener's interpretation (Eisner et al., 2017; Riessman, 1993). The listener's worldview and biases will ultimately shape a story's interpretation as connections are made that can be either good or bad (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Simmons, 2015). The truth of a story is the author's responsibility, but those truths are at the listener's discretion. (Riessman, 1993).

Each business or organization has certain “truths” upon which a foundation is built and stories are framed. Organization leaders in all fields of work rely upon

storytelling to help shape and mold employees or members as stories have the power to foster action, relay and reinforce values, share knowledge and create a vision, among others (Denning, 2011; Simmons, 2015). Cultures are reinforced through organizational stories and can have either a positive or negative impact on a micro or macro level. Stories are also the impetus for change. A great story is not only memorable but will resonate with the listener and spur action (Guber, 2011).

Stories drawn from the lived experience of the teller will ultimately provide the listener with meaning to the past, context to the present, and a vision for the future (Boal & Schultz, 2007; McAdams, 1993; Takala & Auvinen, 2014; Taylor, 2001). Stories told and retold help frame the meaning of why a particular event happened. Present circumstances result from lived experiences and provide context to the here and now. Lastly, growth and lessons learned through lived experiences help shape an imagined future based on the stories shared.

Within the field of education, administrators, teachers, and other support staff often use stories with students to frame events or issues which happen throughout a school day. These conversations often involve the use of story. Veteran secondary school administrators (and educators) have many lived experiences from which they draw, giving students greater context and understanding of their current circumstances and the world in which they live. Rapport is often built between administrators and students through the stories shared, creating a vision for a student's future.

As a secondary school administrator, I often use stories to provide context and meaning with my students. Using stories of my lived experiences, I have witnessed firsthand how stories can help frame students' understanding of their current situation

while laying a path for their future endeavors. A vision for a student's future may be formed when a connection is made between their lived experiences and the stories shared with them. Our collective lived experiences, those of students, staff, and school community, build a library of stories from which all administrators can draw.

Throughout educational storytelling literature, endless examples of stories used within the classroom and school buildings can be found. Storytelling as a tool is also taught in some graduate programs to guide future administrators as they transition into leading a building. Stories of success, failure, heartache, growth, change, etc., can be found as administrators are organizational leaders who have a great responsibility within their roles. However, throughout the literature, examples of stories school administrators share with their students are lacking. This study aimed to close that deficiency as it collected the stories secondary school administrators used with their students and why they did.

Purpose of Study

Storytelling is used in every industry and within every organization to establish and affirm a foundation upon which they stand. The same holds true in the world of education. From the school community at large down to an individual teacher, educator, or administrator, stories are an integral part of the profession. Derived from their lived experiences, every educator has stories from which to draw, giving meaning to the past, context to the present, and creating a vision for the future.

Within the role of school administration, stories are used to build culture, reinforce values and beliefs, and establish relationships with staff, students, and the community. A myriad of literature exists, both research-based and anecdotal, on the

power of using stories within the school setting. As organizational leaders, administrators must have a repository of stories that help frame the various situations they face daily. While a multitude of collections of stories exists, the stories secondary school administrators share with their students are scarce.

The following study addressed the deficiency in the literature by collecting the stories secondary school administrators shared with their students answering the following questions:

1. What stories do secondary school leaders share with their students?
2. How do the stories secondary school leaders share with their students relate to the leaders' own lived experiences?
3. Why do secondary school leaders share stories with students?
4. What are the perceived outcomes secondary school administrators have when they share stories about their lived experiences with their students?

This study used a narrative methodology to collect stories secondary school administrators share with their students. As leaders, the stories we share reveal not only who we are but our values, beliefs, and worldview (Cho, 2021). Semi-structured interviews ranging from 35 to 75 minutes were used to collect those stories and answer the research questions. Stories were collected, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using various research techniques to find latent themes. Journaling and memoing before, during, and after each interview was used for documentation purposes and to tease out themes, concepts, and main ideas.

Purposeful sampling identified 12 participants for this study. Participants were National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) members who attended

the annual National Advocacy Conference in Washington, D.C. The initial participant request was done via email and sent to NASSP members serving as state coordinators. Attendees of the National Advocacy Conference and, in particular, NASSP state coordinators were selected as the pool of participants as these individuals possess a wide array of professional (lived) experiences and are trained to use storytelling as an advocacy tool. Secondary school administrators were the target audience for this study.

Significance of Study

Stories have the power to influence organizations and individuals both positively and negatively. Each day in schools throughout the United States, secondary school administrators interact with students for various reasons. Veteran school administrators often draw from their lived experiences to make decisions and influence their students, giving meaning to the past, providing context to their present reality, and help guide a vision for their future.

Collecting stories they share, also provide administrators of all experience levels an opportunity to connect with their own lived experiences. Within each story often lies a lesson and opportunity for growth within the listener. As humans, we connect with others' stories to help guide our understanding of the world and create a better future for ourselves. This narrative study provides those connections.

This study can be used as a professional resource and, through administrator leadership coursework and development, as a guide. Organization leaders must be able to use stories to help their students and staff create a better vision for themselves.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Story is an immensely powerful tool as it impacts every aspect of our lives. Regardless of the business, industry, field of study, or individual belief system, stories are used to help frame our understanding of the world. One story can never tell our whole story, however, there are some stories we live and tell that have the power to impact not only our vision of the future but others as well.

One must understand what a story is, as well as how and when it is used by an organizational leader, before exploring the stories secondary school administrators share with their students. The history of storytelling dates to the beginning of human existence and is defined differently based on each individual's understanding and use. The literature on storytelling is immense but often broad and anecdotal. Regardless of the field of study, commonalities exist to provide a clear understanding of the power storytelling has in our lives and those with whom we interact.

One such commonality is the use of storytelling as a tool. While each author or researcher has a different framework for using storytelling, much of the literature indicates that stories can be used to (a) give meaning to the past, (b) provide context to our present, and (c) create a vision for the future. Stories reinforce or challenge our understanding and worldview while guiding us to a vision for what our future may hold. Stories are the foundation upon which our cultures exist and for as long as there have been humans, there have been stories. “There’s always a dialog between the past, the present, and the future” (Rubin & Strauss, 2023, p. 181).

History of Storytelling

The use of story to connect people dates as far back as human existence (Cron, 2021). From the earliest cave dwellers to modern-day influencers, telling a meaningful story has always been a tool to link us with our fellow man (Aidman & Long, 2017). Humans, by nature, frame life using stories (Rhodes & Brown, 2005), which gives meaning to our past, provides context to the present, and is a medium to share a vision for the future (Boal & Schultz, 2007).

Cron wrote, “We didn’t invent story; we discovered it” (2021). Initially told through oral traditions, story has evolved from cave paintings to modern movies and through the constant stream of information shared online (Cron, 2021). Stories continue to be shared as they allow humans to make sense of the complexities of life (Brown et al., 2009), transfer knowledge from generation to generation (Kowalski, 2015), create social cohesiveness (Hsu, 2008,) and convey values (Collison & Mackenzie, 1999; Kowalski, 2015). The clothing we wear, the jobs we hold, the cars we drive, the neighborhoods we live in, and many other factors relay our story and what is valued in our societal cultures (Rhodes & Brown, 2006; Maanen, 2011). Our lives are deeply rooted in and our brains are wired for story (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Gallo, 2017) as this plays an integral role in the human experience (Thomas, 2012) and how life is made meaningful (Brown et al., 2008).

With the continual advancement in technology and our desire to be constantly connected with our fellow human beings, our stories are being broadcast for the world to see and hear. Never have humans been so willing to share their stories with others. According to the Pew Research Center (2021), 72% of American adults used some form

of social media as of February 7, 2021. With so many Americans on social media, even the lack of an online presence relates a story to the world. And the world is listening.

As content consumers, we know more about our neighbors, enemies, co-workers, celebrities, and the latest random YouTube star than we even wish to know. The world has become a global society as individuals interact and communicate with known and unknown people and bots from the screens in front of us. While technological methods, platforms, and devices have evolved rapidly, the human brain continues to learn and communicate via stories (McKinney, 2019).

What we share and consume through social media is directly related to the worldview established through the stories we have lived and are a lens for every decision we make (Godin, 2005). However, those worldviews aren't strictly confined to our personal lives. Organizations, businesses, churches, non-profits, political parties, schools, and communities share stories for "meaning making, culture creation, knowledge transfer, organizational development, branding and marketing, and more" (Hutchens, 2021). Stories have power (Simmons, 2015), and as Godin (2005) states, "they can turn a small market into a cult, into a movement and then a trend, and finally into the mass market" (p. 50). Narratives intertwined with one's worldview can significantly impact both positively and negatively upon an individual and society as they yield "an incredible opportunity and an awesome responsibility" (Simmons, 2015, p.4).

While story is a part of the fabric of our lives (Aidman & Long, 2017; Salicru, 2018) and has been since the beginning of time (Cron, 2021), it wasn't until the late 20th century (Rhodes & Brown, 2005) when narrative research became part of academia through the work of Fisher, Boje, and Gabriel, among others. Fisher's (1984) narrative

paradigm theory is widely used in the storytelling arena to provide context to the field of storytelling research. This theory asserts that “humans are essentially storytellers” (Fisher, 1985, p. 7) and “all meaningful human communication is in the form of storytelling” (*The Narrative Paradigm*, 2014, “Introduction” section). While storytelling research is still relatively young, it provides rich and unique data not found in other methods of analysis (Stutts & Baker, 1999). In addition, however abundant storytelling literature is, much of it is anecdotal in nature.

Browse the business, self-help, or social sciences section in any bookstore, and one is bound to find book after book that uses story to provide context and evoke a sense of emotion to create change. Story is widely used in the business world to help corporations or organizations gain followings, make change, establish brands, and improve the overall bottom line. Authors such as Sinek, Simmons, Horsager, Godin, Heath & Heath, et al. frame their work around the premise of story. This work can also be translated to be used in nearly any organization and has the power to create meaningful (intended or unintended) change (Denning, 2011).

The internet has also become an endless pool of resources about the power story has to influence. Google “storytelling” and millions of blog sites, storytelling agencies, corporate videos, websites, and other resources will be at one's fingertips (Simmons, 2015). However, as Simmons (2015) shares, one can easily be distracted by digital storytelling and “be suck[ed] into a black hole of frustration that distracts you from developing your story using the original storytelling format: telling your story in person” (p. 203).

Definition of Storytelling

The definition of storytelling has as many variations as there are stories that exist in this world. According to Merriam-Webster (2021), “story” is “an account of incidents or events.” But each author, researcher, and storyteller defines what story is and how it can and should be used differently. From the simplistic, (Denning, 2011), to the complex, (Simmons, 2015), several commonalities across research exist as to how story is defined. Denning (2011) defines story as “simply giving an example” (p. 6), while Simmons (2015) describes story as, “a reimagined experience narrated with enough detail and feeling to cause your listeners’ imagination to experience it as real” (p. 22). Ultimately, stories give context to and make sense of the world in which we live (Cron, 2021). However, story is best defined through the storyteller and the stories they share with the world.

Stories are powerful tools as they help humans take complex concepts and turn them into memorable experiences for the listener (Harris & Barnes, 2005). Connections are made through our unique stories as we are collections of all the stories ever lived, told, and shared. Stories make us individually unique but also bridge the gap that exists because of our differences (Taylor, 2001). Human existence is made more memorable when shared through stories (Tesler et al., 2018).

It is also important to note that throughout the literature on storytelling, the terms *story* and *narrative* become entangled and synonymous. Each can be defined separately, with narrative being given a more profound meaning by some authors and researchers. Brown et al. (2009) state, “There are, in particular, no hard and fast rules for distinguishing between stories and narratives or storytelling” (p. 324). Rappaport (1993)

distinguishes the difference as narrative is used when speaking at the community level, while story is used when referring to individuals. Salicru (2018), citing several authors, distinguishes narrative from story as “narratives have a plot and more coherence and structure, while stories lack a plot and are more fragmented and non-linear” (p. 133). However, Salicru (2018), along with Rose et al. (2015), Brown et al. (2008), Auvinen et al. (2013), and even Rappaport (1993), among others, ultimately use the two terms, story and narrative, interchangeably within their research.

Worldview and Storytelling

“Storytelling is not something we do. Storytelling is who we are” (Gallo, 2017, p. xix).

Humans identify who they are by authoring and telling their stories from their current lens (Cho, 2021). The worldviews individuals posit are constructed through the stories our families tell while being absorbed through the cultures in which we live (Cho, 2021; Eisner et al., 2017; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Godin (2005) defines *worldview* as “the rules, values, beliefs, and biases that an individual consumer brings to a situation” (p. 39). Organizations and their culture are built upon the individual stories of those that inhabit that space. Humans make sense of and understand the world around us through the lens which we see it through and live (Feldman et al., 2004; Morgan & Dennehy, 2004).

Once one’s worldview is established, it is exhibited through the places we live, the information we consume, and the stories we share. However, while worldviews are deeply ingrained in who we are, we are not tied to them forever as they are merely what we believe today (Godin, 2005). Brown et al. (2009) explain that storytelling allows one

“to widen the space of lived experiences in which they construct but also disrupt fantasies of work, self, organization” (p. 326). By framing stories to speak to one’s worldview (Godin, 2005), new doors and perspectives can be opened to the listener, and one can evaluate their thinking and understanding of the world around them.

Organizational members tend to view events and actions similarly (Brown et al., 2008). The leader of any organization, though, must be cognizant of the various worldviews their members or employees possess (Godin, 2005). Taking these various worldviews into account, the leader as storyteller can gain entry into the listener's world, if done so respectfully (Godin, 2005). Simmons (2015) states, “to sit in someone else’s chair or to walk a mile in his shoes: this is the kind of research that produces stories that make customers, employees, or donors feel important again” (p. 170). Stories, when chosen wisely, provide the lens for better understanding for the listener (Denning, 2011). If one fails to do this, the message becomes invisible (Godin, 2005).

When the stories we consume and live conflict with our current worldview, humans tend to destroy those stories we disagree with while buying into those stories, even lies, which support our beliefs (Simmons, 2015). Whether true or not, stories that align with our current worldview and speak to us begin to spread, for good or bad (Godin, 2005). This is never more evident than in our contemporary society, where the impact of false narratives is played out and shared day after day on social media and other forms of human communication. History would indicate that when leaders frame stories that social actors can embrace, societal cultures and norms can be advanced to support any reality (Brown et al., 2009).

One such example has been studied in depth by historians and social scientists: Adolph Hitler. Takala and Auvienen (2016) used a narrative inquiry approach to examine how Hitler had such power and influence on German society during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Through his unyielding charisma, a cult of personality was born, and with it brought about the rise of the Third Reich and subsequent chaos in Europe and much of the world (Takala & Auvienen, 2016). Hitler was able to garner power and maintain it through his ability to share stories to frame the past, give context to the present, and provide a “better” vision for the future of Germany (Takala & Auvinen, 2014). Through framing, manipulation, and propaganda, Hitler used information-rich stories (Takala & Auvienen, 2014) to feed people's worldviews—in destructive and harmful ways (Gargiulo, 2002). Hitler exposed the world to “the dark side of storytelling” (Salicru, 2018, p. 136).

One’s worldview is a powerful force that directly impacts the information we consume and the stories we are willing to share and live. While an individual's worldview can be challenging to penetrate, it is not impossible to change. “A story well and properly told opens up possibilities of action for me, rather than foreclosing them; it broadens and deepens my world” (Hummel, 1991, p. 38).

Storytelling as a Tool

One of the world's oldest (Spagnoli, 1995) and most powerful (Aidman & Long, 2017; Barker & Gower, 2010; Guber, 2011) teaching tools (Rappaport, 1993), story is used in every aspect of human life. Stories exist because we are human, and the communities in which we belong: churches, sports teams, businesses, organizations, political parties, media outlets, schools, etc., all have stories to tell (Rappaport, 1993).

Individual groups and organizations can be defined by a unique narrative (Barker & Gower, 2010; Martin et al., 1983; Rappaport, 1993). The flexibility of storytelling makes it an excellent tool for both individuals and organizations (Rose et al., 2015).

Organizational stories are an integral part of who they are and build a foundation upon which the culture stands. Without stories, organizations could not function (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975). Organizations, their managers, and leaders use story to educate their members or employees for various reasons (Carr & Ann, 2011). For new members of an organization, story can be used for indoctrination (Mitroff & Kilman, 1975). Storytelling helps promote and ingrain the history of an organization, embody its values and beliefs (Denning, 2011), and are shared among its members to help communicate and create understanding (Feldman et al., 2004).

As a tool, organizations can build, create, or share “culture, knowledge, context, data, information, and emotion implicit to the work” (Rooney, 2020, p. 31). When analyzing literature within the organizational leadership genre, many different types of stories with varying messages are used for specific purposes. Each author has a storytelling framework when managing or leading an organization.

One often-cited storytelling author is Stephen Denning. In his book *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, Denning (2011) states,

Storytelling [is] more than one tool: it [is] at least a whole array of tools that [can] help achieve multiple purposes such as sparking people into action, communicating who you are or what your company is, transmitting values, sharing knowledge, taming the grapevine, and leading into the future. (p. 9)

Storytelling is more than just one tool; it is an entire discipline that anyone can use effectively when studied, developed, and put into practice. Denning (2011) identifies eight narrative patterns leaders can use within their organization:

- Sparking Action
- Communicating Who You Are
- Communicating Who the Company Is--Branding
- Transmitting Values
- Fostering Collaboration
- Taming the Grapevine
- Sharing Knowledge
- Leading People into the Future

In *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*, Annette Simmons (2015) provides another storytelling framework that guides organizations and business leaders in making emotional connections with and moving members to action. This framework comprises six types of stories: Who-I-Am, Why-I-Am-Here, Teaching, Vision, Value-in-Action, and I-Know-What-You-Are-Thinking stories. Within the six frameworks are four “buckets” from which the storyteller can draw stories: a time you shined, a time you blew it, a mentor, and a book, movie, or current event. As leaders, our values and beliefs are revealed through the stories we author and share (Cho, 2021). Leaders must have well-established values and beliefs if they want to influence those who are willing to listen (Simmons, 2015).

Another popular tool or framework for storytelling in leadership is “A Hero's Journey,” which provides a clear and concise message for the organization (Miller,

2017). This framework, initially coined by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1972), uses the mythology of a hero overcoming a significant obstacle to achieve victory (Boal & Schultz, 2007). In *Building a Story Brand* (2017), Donald Miller uses the “hero” narrative to help businesses create a brand and invite consumers into the story the company is telling. The “Hero's Journey” framework follows a consistent pattern: A character (1) has a problem, and (2) meets a guide who (3) gives them a plan, and (4) calls them to action that (5) ends in success and helps them avoid failure (Miller, 2017). The theme of struggle is evident in the hero’s journey, and through one's battles or hardships, the leader or organization is transformed (Boal & Schultz, 2007).

The number of storytelling frameworks within organizational leadership literature is endless and varies depending upon the field, business, or organization in which it is being used (Simmons, 2015). However, when used effectively, stories provide the listener with a better understanding of the lesson shared and the ability to remember the story long after it has been told (Kowalski, 2015). Whether used to spark change, illicit emotions, create action, transmit values, instill, preserve, or build culture, story is an essential tool for leaders who seek organizational improvement (Denning, 2004). “The most powerful tool we can use to organize information, so people don’t have to burn very many calories is story” (Miller, 2017, p. 9).

Storytelling for Organizational Leaders

Humans cannot go through life without accumulating stories or sharing those stories to provide the listener a sense of who we are as a human. The mere fact that we are alive means that we share stories with the world while gaining insight into our

cultures, knowledge, values, and beliefs (Gargiulo, 2002; Eisner et al., 2017). But stories are not just collected as artifacts; they are a part of every aspect of our lives (Brown et al., 2009). The media we consume—movies, books, personal anecdotes, etc.—impact and influence the stories we live as they often coincide with personal worldviews (Simmons, 2015; Taylor, 2001). Humans are a culmination of the stories lived, heard, and shared throughout life (Taylor, 2001; Eisner et al., 2017).

“Story is atomic. It is perpetual energy and can power a city. Story is the one thing that can hold a human being’s attention for hours. Nobody can look away from a good story” (Miller, 2017, p. 15). When one is immersed in a good story, whether the teller or the listener, all of our senses become heightened and bring about a deeper and more meaningful experience (Simmons, 2015) while allowing us to make sense of what is being told (Morgan & Dennehy, 2004; Weick, 1995). Meaningful stories have the power to elicit emotion (Brown et al., 2009; Pinkerton, 2003; Rose et al., 2015) and thus evoke a call to action (Simmons, 2015). The audience may roar with laughter or shed tears of joy, pain, or sorrow, and these emotions can endure long after the story is finished (Aidman & Long, 2017).

Ultimately, storytelling builds a human connection from the teller to the audience (Rose et al., 2015). However, without stories, we may lack a connection to our past as we cannot make sense of the foundation upon which our own stories are written (Gargiulo, 2002). In an acceptance speech for the Theodore Roosevelt Rough Rider Award in North Dakota, author Larry Woiwode (n.d.) explained why people continue to live, work, and thrive in even the most remote places on earth, such as North Dakota. Woiwode stated:

You won't know the answer unless you establish the particularity of the place, and the people who lived here in the past, by talking to your parents, who talked to their parents, you can be sure, who even more surely talked with and were taught by theirs, until the generational lines come to press across your forehead, in covenant, like a baptismal seal. (as cited in Taylor, 2001, p. 26)

Through our personal interpretations, we can “draw lines of connection or disconnection—good, bad, relevant, or irrelevant” (Simmons, 2015, pp. 13-14). Our “covenant” lies within those generational stories that only exist because our parents spoke to their parents, who inevitably spoke to theirs (Taylor, 2001). But stories don't have to speak directly to an individual's personal story to have power. While stories tell people who you are (Denning, 2011, p. 91), they also tell your organization's story (Gargiulo, 2002).

The businesses in which we work and the organization to which we belong all have a story, and frequently this story is told with the use of data. However, “soulless data” can become “memorable, resonant, and actionable” if it is brought to life using story (Guber, 2011, p. 4). Facts have no discernible meaning without story (Cron, 2021). Organizational stories are much more compelling than statistics and numbers alone (Rose et al., 2015). If the teller can make an emotional connection between the data and the listener through story, the listener is more likely to act (Kowalski, 2015).

Stories can have a contagious component that turn a simple idea into a best-selling product or even a movement. Stories have the power to persuade and transform (Cron, 2021). To Brown et al. (2009), storytelling is the currency in which communities exchange experiences and practice trade. A well-told story that resonates with the listener

will be shared time and time again if it is easy to share and they believe it is worth retelling (Godin, 2005). Once a story begins to spread, it can have a tremendous impact— for good or for bad.

Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (2002) provides various case studies where this very phenomenon occurred across society. Gladwell theorizes that just as viruses spread, so do ideas, behaviors, and messages. Word-of-mouth stories have the power to decrease crime rates within cities or start obscure fashion trends among niche groups that spread to the mainstream market. Once a story begins to manifest and connect with a few, it will spread to social circles and a larger community resulting in a cultural or societal change.

A similar theory can be found in Jim Collins's best-selling book *Good to Great* (2001). Collins explains how one slight push, paired with a continuous effort, can eventually create a movement within a business or organization using the flywheel as a metaphor. Flywheels are heavy and take a great amount of energy to begin to spin. It doesn't happen all at once but instead is a culmination of little pushes which eventually causes it to spin. Once the flywheel is in motion, it spins freely using its own momentum and energy to remain in motion (pp. 164-178).

The same holds true with the use of story within an organization. No one action is ultimately responsible for success; it is a culmination of a continued approach to betterment found through feedback. Organizational members tell, reframe, retell, and reframe stories again in a continual cycle, bringing life to the stories (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Morgan & Dennehy, 2004) and creating a flywheel effect that elicits a stronger narrative for the organization (Collins, 2001). In the end, an organization's culture is

solidified by the stories each individual shares, which creates a collective set of moral virtues (Carr & Ann, 2011). The culture of a particular place or organization is affirmed (Jacobs, 2018), established, and reinforced through stories (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975).

Culture—good or bad—is formed and perpetuated within organizations by stories (Rose et al., 2015). Just as with individuals, organizations will have stories that are passed down from generation to generation (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975) and become a part of the institutional memory of its members and used to create a future vision (Gargiulo, 2002). “If it is important to the culture, you will find a story that tells what is important and why” (Simmons, 2015, p. 14).

Regardless of the framework used and the particular type of story told, each individual and organization shares three types of stories to influence the listener. All stories either make sense of the past, give context to the present, or provide a vision for the future. Taylor (2001) states, “Story tangles in its web the particulars of human experience past, offering it to us compellingly in the present, giving us our best hope for surviving into the future” (p. 12). To put it more simply, stories are who we are, providing guidance for the future (Soin & Scheytt, 2006). McAdams (1993) stated it isn’t until one emerges into adulthood that they can begin to arrange their lives as “the past as they remember it, the present as they perceive it, and the future as they imagine it” (p. 62).

Make Sense of the Past

In his now-famous commencement address to the Stanford Class of 2005, Steve Jobs made a case for the importance of knowing the stories of your past to pave a path for your future. “You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them

looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future” (Jobs, 2017). Storytelling allows those “dots,” the complex moments in history, to be more easily understood (Rose et al., 2015).

Our narrative identities, or connected dots, are “formed through the lived, internalized, and evolving stories by which humans live” (Cho, 2021, p. 1). Every individual, business, society, culture, and organization has a history that has been told and retold (Cho, 2021) throughout time to make sense of our current reality (Boal & Schultz, 2007). Stories make our history available to us to sort past events, give meaning to them, and learn from others' past experiences (Boal & Schultz, 2007).

Throughout our upbringing, we are told myths, metaphors, and other stories that answer many of the questions humans have, such as “how to manage time, authority, safety, money, ethics, and whatever else is important” (Simmons, 2015, p. 14). Many of these sense-making stories are based upon the spiritual teachings of Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammed, among others, which are not only complex (Gargiulo 2002; Rose et al., 2015) but also have a significant impact on our core understanding of the world (Armstrong, 1992). As human beings, our upbringing impacts the cultural values, beliefs, and principles that extend into our professional lives (Oltman & Bautista, 2021, p. 97).

Organizations rely on an understanding of their history, shared through good stories, to be effective in their mission (Bolman & Deal, 2017). When told at the right time with the right purpose, a story can have a considerable impact on the culture of an organization as it will spark an emotional appeal within the listener (Cron, 2021; Marshall & Adamic, 2010). Often organizational stories will be based upon myths that convey timeless themes (Salicru, 2018) passed down from employee to employee

(Gargiulo, 2002). Mythical stories hold tremendous power while also reinforcing loyalty and support for the organization's culture (Bohlman & Deal, 2017).

Myths often serve as an origin story and “unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon” (“Myth,” 2021). When used in a corporation or organization, myths create corporate heroes who have performed legendary tasks that provide context for the current culture. Culture, both a product and a process, is a collection of the accumulated experiences of its members (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

In the book *David and Goliath*, best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell (2013) uses story to explore a variety of cases in society in which the underdog became victorious. The ancient myth of David and Goliath, found in the Christian Bible, tells the tale of an invincible giant, Goliath, being struck down by a single rock slung from a mere shepherd, considerably less formidable than Goliath. Gladwell, using this myth as a framework, explores various cases in which humans were able to face their fears, overcome significant obstacles, and ultimately achieve success. The use of such stories within a “complex adaptive system” (Boal & Schultz, 2007, p. 413) can characterize the culture, values, and beliefs of a particular organization (Collison & Mackenzie, 1999).

However, in organizational leadership, myths do not need to be thousands of years old to be impactful; stories can be created when needed and may hold significant power (Simmons, 2015). Corporate myths and history allow the listener to communicate culture through the collection of stories its members tell (Schneider et al., 2013; Simmons, 2015). “Every war story, anecdote, critique, or acknowledgment creates the cultural climate of your team” (Simmons, 2015, p. 22).

Part of the collection of stories in which an organization is built is that of an origin story. An organization can quickly create a narrative within its membership through origin stories that make connections to their own lives (Godin, 2005). New employees are informed rapidly and indoctrinated into the culture through a well-told story (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975). After a time, these same members will become the teachers and pass down institutional knowledge (stories) to the next group of new members (Bolman & Deal, 2017). One such example shared in numerous texts and studies is that of Southwest Airlines.

Southwest's identity and culture are shaped by the stories it was founded on and continue to be shared today. Its founder, Herb Kelleher, wanted to create an airline that was "cheap, reliable, and entertaining" while allowing its customers to "roam about the country" (Denning, 2011, p. 113). The telling and retelling of Southwest's origin story, engrained within its values and mission, has created folklore that nearly everyone inside or outside of the company knows (Sinek, 2009, p. 72). As one of the nation's premier carriers, Southwest Airlines lives out its values and continues to thrive, regardless of the current economic and societal factors (Horsager, 2009). Their "Why" is crystal clear (Sinek, 2009) and is embedded in every fabric of the corporation (Denning, 2011) through its story. As Denning (2005) stated, "If you can build your entire organization around delivering a particular story, you've dramatically increased the chances that this story will actually get told" (p. 140).

Using story gives humans great insight into who they are and a better understanding of their past (Cron, 2021; Gargiulo, 2002). Stories can take complex situations and place meaning in them (Rose et al., 2015). Our prior actions are

rationalized through stories about our past that give us a connection to our present and the future when told and retold by strategic leaders within an organization (Boal & Schultz, 2007).

Provide Context to the Present

Just as “story is a sense-making device” (Miller, 2017, p. 9) to help us understand our past, those stories have been the path to the present in which we live (Taylor, 2001). We can frame our current circumstances through the stories we consume, live, and tell. Stories help organizational members form a deeper understanding of the organization's culture, values, and beliefs. They can navigate those complexities when stories create a shared experience that is relatable and memorable (Tesler et al., 2018).

Stories work because they are “sticky” and offer the teller a chance to share information efficiently (Rooney, 2020). When organizations face challenges, framing them through story can help all stakeholders better understand the obstacles they face and how they may overcome those challenges (Miller, 2017). We make sense of actions, events, and situations in unique ways (Boje, 1991; Brown et al., 2008), and “stories still offer us some of the richest and most enduring insights into human identity and the sociocultural context in which we live” (Cho, 2021, p. 11).

Within our organizations, story is used to transfer information and emotion (Salicru, 2018) and helps its members “comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict” (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988, p. 15). A bridge from the past to the present can be built upon the foundational stories (myths), which are ultimately told and retold within the organization or culture (Maanen, 2011; Pettigrew, 1979). An organization's culture, morals and beliefs, values, and expected norms are all transmitted,

created, and reinforced through the stories shared by its leaders and members (Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Salicru, 2018; Simmons, 2015).

Organizational stories provide insight into nearly all aspects of an organization (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Not only is storytelling important from a top-down perspective, but it is also an essential tool in which a manager collects and receives knowledge in return. (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, Czarniawska, 1997). One tool used to foster learning and understanding is the sharing of stories related to important events and ideas along with the people responsible for them within a complex organization (Aidman & Long, 2017; Boal & Schultz, 2007; Morgan & Dennehy, 2004).

One common method for bringing context to the present is using fables to reinforce the organization's values, beliefs, and cultures (Salicru, 2018). Fables are lessons that are based on morals and are “invariably inviting, fun, and inspiring” (Armstrong, 1992, p. 3). Moral stories help us bring context to the situations we may be facing in our current reality. The values of an organization can be explained through fables which then reinforce the organization's culture.

Deemed an inspirational fabulist, author Jon Gordon uses fable-like stories to frame modern-day issues that individuals or organizations face. Books such as *The Energy Bus* (2007), *The Seed* (2011), and *The Coffee Bean* (2019), among others, present the reader with a captivating story in which the character overcomes a life struggle to learn a lesson and ultimately have a positive influence on those around them. These modern-day fables have become a staple in the realm of organizational leadership.

David Hutchens is another such author who uses traditional fables to bring context to the present day for organizations and leaders. Hutchens's books (1998, 2001,

& 2016) help organizations frame the issues and problems they face. Managing change, reinforcing values and beliefs, and organizational learning are tackled through fables and bring context to an organization's current reality. Similar to Donald Miller's *StoryBrand* (2017), Hutchens's work provides a framework for organizational leaders to design better stories for their employees and organizations. However, some of the most impactful moral lessons come from an organizational leader's own stories.

An effective organizational leader will be able to take stories from the organization and their personal experiences and weave them into a narrative to bring context to the challenges the organization faces. Stories give meaning to events and experiences (Rappaport, 1993), and thus the receiver of this information can make sense and create order from this knowledge (Boal & Schultz, 2007). As the preferred sense-making currency within an organization (Boje, 1991), leaders must be willing to be vulnerable, finding the stories that connect to steer the organization along the right path (Brown, 2018; Cron, 2021; Gargiulo, 2002; Hutchens, 2021). However, for the audience to make sense or a connection to the story, they must be able to "infus[e] their working lives with meaning" (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 7). "An appropriately told story ha[s] the power to do what rigorous analysis c[an't]; to communicate a strange new idea and move people to enthusiastic action" (Denning, 2011, p. 2).

Stories have the power to shape and influence any organization and, when told clearly, convey what the company believes in (Armstrong, 1992). Not only do stories give meaning to data (Senffner, 2015; Simmons, 2015), they provide order (Boal & Schultz, 2007) and context upon which our organizations can then shape and frame a

vision for the future. If an organization is going to be successful and effective, it must have stories worth telling (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Create a Shared Vision for the Future

Taking the lessons learned from the foundational stories of our past, along with the context of our present-day stories, shared narratives are developed within an organization and are used to create a vision for what the organization can become (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Kaye & Jacobson, 1999). Building upon the established norms, culture, and identity of an organization (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Rhodes & Brown, 2005), the vision process can commence in what Kaye and Jacobson (1999) refer to as “wisdom shared forward” (p. 46). The sharing of organizational life stories (Boal & Schultz, 2007) can build trust within its membership along with establishing a shared common narrative, a vision for what the future can hold, and encourage future behaviors or norms to be implemented (Caminotti & Gray, 2012; Katzman, 2012).

An organizational leader aims to provide a rationale for past action while also providing a legitimate reason for the need to create a new vision (Boal & Schultz, 2007). Visions are rooted in the many lived experiences of a leader’s past. A leader’s foundational blueprint is a starting point for where this change may occur, as it is also a great indicator of the organization's future behavior, success, or failure (Boje, 1991).

To create a shared vision, several factors must be considered. Having a solid shared history in which members feel their work is “part of a larger organizational story” (Marshall & Adamic, 2010, p. 22) that encompasses the values, beliefs, and mission of the organization is important to achieving the overall goal (Simmons, 2015). Each member must be able to envision the future possibilities for the organization. This is

typically found through the stories of the past and the narrative in which they are living in the present (Katzman, 2012; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Taylor, 2001).

Organizational leaders must be able to build trust among the members to move in the desired direction (Simmons, 2015). Team members must be able to share their experiences and stories openly and frequently to ensure there won't be any traps or unmanageable differences when developing a future vision. One of the inevitable pitfalls of building a shared vision is that members will be forced to examine their current reality, knowing that change will inevitably be a part of the vision process (Gargiulo, 2002). Stories of all different types can be used to build this trust, and it can include the use of fables once again.

In *The Lemming Dilemma: Living with Purpose, Leading with Vision* (2014), Hutchens uses storytelling based around a fable to instill important qualities organizational members must possess to create a shared vision and ultimately achieve the goals the organization has set out for itself. The main character sets out on a quest to find their personal mission and vision and creates an organizational culture (Hutchens, 2014).

Fables can create change and a vision within an organization; however, personal stories drawn from the organizational leader's lived experiences often hold great power (Simmons, 2015). A leader's foundation is built upon lived experiences and guides them into creating a vision for themselves and the organization. Stories bring context to complex adaptive systems and help frame the future vision for organizational members (Boal & Schultz, 2007).

Stories help develop a shared vision and serve as a call to action "that engages and excites their followers" (Senffner, 2015, p. 32). They are a tool to promote change

and instill or reinforce the desired culture (Rappaport, 1993). A vision that is merely just a story doesn't evoke change. Andy Raskin states, "Organizational leadership is about inspiring others to make a story come true" (as cited in Rooney, 2020, p. 32). People can be moved and transported into new ways of thinking when the teller can activate new stories from within the listener (Simmons, 2015). If the shared story of the organization is believable enough and worthy of sharing, the greater chance there is for that story to be lived out (Godin, 2005).

To be an effective organizational leader, one must also have the ability to tell a good story. Story has considerable power to illustrate a new concept, inform new members of an organization about its cultures, values, and beliefs, create change, motivate, or deescalate a situation, just to name a few (Cron, 2021; Gargiulo, 2002; Harris & Barnes, 2005, Hutchens, 2021). Stories provide us with a tool for making data more meaningful (Simmons, 2015). According to Hutchens (2021), "story is data with a human soul" (p. 12). Most importantly, storytelling allows leaders the ability to "articulate their visions by telling stories and promoting dialogue in which an organization's past, present, and future coalesce: stories and dialogue about our history; stories and dialogue about who we are; stories and dialogue about whom we can become" (Boal & Schultz, 2007, p. 426).

Conclusion

Through the literature review, it is evident that storytelling can produce "a rich body of knowledge unavailable through other methods of analysis" (Stutts & Barker, 1999, p. 213). The types and frameworks in which stories are told are endless. Myths, fables, folklore, and other story forms are a valuable source of data for researchers

wishing to explore the impact of storytelling (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). “Stories [give] the researcher access to the unconscious yet projective images of what the organization [means] to the manager” (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 4).

Literature and research about storytelling can be found in nearly every career and academic field, including education. Books, blogs, podcasts, and many other mediums where educators and administrators use storytelling to impact their school communities are readily available. In the book, *#OwnYourEpic: Leadership Lessons in Winning Your Voice and Your Story* (2021), high school principal. Jay Dostal uses stories to frame the lessons he has learned from his career as an educator. Other current or former school administrators have written books using story as the premise for improving various aspects of education: *Culturize* (Casas, 2017), *Kids Deserve It!* (Nesloney & Welcome, 2016), and *The Innovator’s Mindset* (Couros, 2015), are just a few. The use of storytelling as a tool has also been explored in educational leadership programs (McDonald, 2017). While the literature is rich with many examples of educators using storytelling within their professional roles, one area is lacking.

Absent from the literature on storytelling in the educational setting are the actual stories that secondary school administrators repeatedly share with their students that give meaning to the past, provide context to the present, and create a shared vision for the future. By exploring the stories secondary school administrators share with their students, the following research questions can be answered:

1. What stories do secondary school leaders share with their students?
2. How do the stories secondary school leaders share with their students relate to the leaders’ own lived experiences?

3. Why do secondary school leaders share stories with students?
4. What are the perceived outcomes secondary school administrators have when they share stories about their lived experiences with their students?

Through our stories, a picture of who we are, what we value, and our vision for the future, both individually and organizationally, becomes apparent to both the teller and the audience (Fisher, 1985). The literature is saturated with authors such as Armstrong, Denning, Gallo, Miller, Simmons, et al., who provide frameworks for developing stories that organizational leaders can use to have an impact on those they interact with daily.

Green (2004) summarizes the power of storytelling:

The power of stories has been recognized for centuries, and even today, in Hollywood and beyond, storytelling is a multi-million dollar business. Stories are a natural mode of thinking; before our formal education begins, we are already learning from Aesop's fables, fairy tales, or family history. Indeed, some researchers have even claimed that all knowledge comes in the form of stories! Although this strong claim has been questioned, it is generally agreed that stories are a powerful structure for organizing and transmitting information, and for creating meaning in our lives and environments.

(p.1)

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Humans, by nature, are storytellers (Fisher, 1985) and thus should be studied using a methodology that brings life, meaning, and context to their lived experiences. Famed educational philosopher John Dewey saw experience as the key to understanding the diverse and complex social environments in which people live and learn (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Building upon the work of Dewey, Clandinin and Connelly stated:

Experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum—the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future—each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future...there is always a history, it's always changing, and it is always going somewhere (p. 2).

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the stories secondary school administrators share with their students. The central question of this study was what are the stories secondary school administrators share with their students. Specifically, the study answered the following questions:

1. What stories do secondary school leaders share with their students?
2. How do the stories secondary school leaders share with their students relate to the leaders' own lived experiences?
3. Why do secondary school leaders share stories with students?
4. What are the perceived outcomes secondary school administrators have when they share stories about their lived experiences with their students?

Qualitative Approach

As a research methodology, qualitative inquiry has progressed through a wide array of changes in the past century (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). It provides a nearly

endless number of approaches to choose from when conducting a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The evolution of qualitative research coincides with societal changes. It includes approaches such as traditional, blurred genres, postmodern, and the current, critical inquiry, with many approaches and subgenres appearing in between (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The nature of the discipline studied also impacted the evolution of qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher has the latitude to use various methodologies and data collection protocols to explore, analyze, and provide meaning to the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Eisner et al., 2017).

Qualitative research is intentionally broad, with each author and researcher exploring its definition based upon the discipline being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research requires the researcher to become immersed in their participants' natural setting. The aim is to achieve a holistic understanding of the participants or phenomena while providing meaning and context about their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). The social world in which people live is contextualized through "the meaning people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 8).

Within qualitative research, data is collected using various methods and often goes beyond a simple interview. The participants and their experiences are studied and interpreted through "field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Rich content and context are gleaned through a collaborative process between the researcher and their participant(s), using inductive and deductive analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

People are a collection of lived experiences that become the stories shared with others. This collection of stories creates a grand narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) used to provide further context to one's present and create a vision for the future (McAdams, 1993). Using a qualitative research methodology, stories secondary school administrators share with their students were collected and analyzed as to why the stories are shared and how they related to students' lived experiences.

Stories are powerful tools within the educational administration profession and guide students to better understand the world in which they live. When an individual tells and retells a story, the teller and the listener assign meaning to the experience and frame the meaning to coincide with their understanding and view of the world (Riessman, 1993). A qualitative research approach allows the researcher to explore the vast complexities, contexts, and meanings that stories shared by secondary school administrators possess.

Narrative Inquiry Approach

A narrative methodological approach lends itself to the research and study of the power of storytelling amongst secondary school administrators. Using narrative inquiry, the researcher collects stories and analyzes them for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the study's participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). People live stories, and the telling and retelling of these stories creates a more profound meaning and a better understanding of the world in which they live (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories are also prone to reinterpretation based upon the experiences and recollection of the teller (Riessman, 1993). The lived experiences and worldviews of the listener will impact the meaning placed upon any story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative methodology is one of the least structured methodologies within the qualitative research realm. Unlike other methodologies, narrative “does not fit neatly within the boundaries of any single scholarly field” (Riessman, 1993, p. 1). What is being studied and the questions posed to the participant(s) can change during a narrative inquiry as more information and insight is collected about the participant or phenomena (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because “meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal” (Reissman, 1993, p. 15), aspects of the stories that intrigue the researchers will naturally guide a study.

Researchers using a narrative approach have various strategies to guide their study. Narrative research aims to gather stories and can be done in a multitude of ways including interviews, field observations, pictures, documents, music, journals, artifacts, letters, and any other sources in which a story can be told or created (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). When an account of a lived experience is shared through the eyes of those that experienced it (Creswell & Poth, 2018), “narrative is the best way of representing and understanding [that] experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 18). Through these data collection methods, stories are shared individually or, more commonly, co-constructed between the participant and researcher as narrative inquiry is a collaborative process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, narrative inquiry is never an exact record of events.

Even if they have a shared lived experience, no two people will ever have the same thoughts, feelings, memories, or emotions about an event (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Eisner et al., 2017). Stories and narratives are always interpreted by those that interact with the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993). Each participant, “self,

teller, listener and recorder, analyst, and reader,” can assign meaning to the story (Riessman, 1993, p. 15). Yet, once the account is recorded, the researcher and author are responsible for its truths (Riessman, 1993).

“If we want to understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). The researcher collects and analyzes stories using a narrative methodology to gain greater insight and understanding into the stories secondary school administrators share. Experience and life are inevitably intertwined, and “[humans] learn about education from thinking about life, and we learn about life from thinking about education. The study of education is the study of life” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxiv). If educators, specifically secondary school administrators, are committed to helping students learn and grow, the stories administrators share must be collected and analyzed by those within these roles.

Ultimately, narrative inquiry aims to unveil unique perspectives or insights while gaining a deeper understanding of phenomena or human participants (Riessman, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher analyzes the collected stories identifying turning points upon which action changed the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maanen, 2011). Actor and narrator Mike Rowe, on the podcast *The Jordan Harbinger Show* (2021), shared, “all insight comes through a series of discoveries, and great narratives are informed by anagnorisis that leads to a peripeteia. And that's a discovery that changes the direction of the narrative” (10:42). Anagnorisis and peripeteia, both terms derived from ancient Greek literature, refer to the point in a story where the protagonist has a discovery about another character or themselves or has

a reversal of fortune; a turning point (Maity, 2021). The same holds true for narrative researchers, as the turning point in one's story is where the power of story lies.

Role of the Researcher

Influenced by the writings of Donald Miller (2010), Austin Kleon (2012), and many others, I believe that stories hold immense power. As a secondary school administrator, I have witnessed how one story, told, retold, reframed, and reshared (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) can impact students. Stories make connections to lived experiences and can foster a mutual understanding between the teller and the listener. By providing meaning to my past and context to the present for my students, a well-told or timely story can create and shape a vision for them moving forward.

My role as a secondary school administrator allows me to be immersed in stories. I rely on the power of story to frame conversations. I often share stories with our staff and students that have defined my personal and professional life. Stories of struggle, perseverance, joy, pain, and a myriad of other emotions are seated deep within my values and beliefs and are recounted when the moment calls. Additionally, a collective grand narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is created within a school community by the stories students, staff, community members, and patrons live and share. This grand narrative aims to guide and direct my actions and the story I live and tell. At the appropriate time, a well-told story has the power to impact a life both positively or negatively.

Narrative is both a methodology and phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and is the basis for our work as researchers (Polkinghorne, 1988). Polkinghorne (1988) stated that researchers “are concerned with people’s stories; they work with case histories

and use narrative explanations to understand why the people they work with behave the way they do” (p. x). Narrative researchers are social constructivists by nature as they use stories to “seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24).

Social constructivism allows the researcher to negotiate the meaning of the stories told through the participants. Meanings are often varied and open for interpretation as the complexities of the data are explored within a social constructivist framework (Maanen, 2011). Throughout the data collection process in a narrative study, meaning is discovered through a collaborative and inductive approach while using the participants’ worldviews to frame the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A narrative inquiry approach using a social constructivist framework allows the researcher to discover a theory or patterns from the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). “There is no binding theory of narrative” (Riessman, 1993, p. 16), however, Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm theory builds upon the premise that all humans are storytellers, and the stories we learn and hear growing up, influence our view of the world (Hamon, 2020).

“The construction of any work always bears the mark of the person who created it” (Riessman, 1993, p. v). Within the narrative inquiry field, it is impossible to separate the bias the researcher holds and the meanings placed upon the stories collected. Bias becomes a part of the research itself and will significantly impact and direct the study.

My own biases come from my view of the world, which can be attributed to growing up in small-town, rural Nebraska, and in a household of a secondary school administrator. My beliefs are deeply rooted in the value of strong public schools and the

stories of educators who have lived out their passion and purpose within these buildings. Since I was born, I have been surrounded and impacted by the endless educators I have known as a student and as family friends. I can recount endless stories my teachers and administrators shared with me and my classmates, which have impacted me and even my desire to complete a doctoral degree. My personal biases include my beliefs:

1. Secondary school administrators have stories they are willing to share with their students about their lived experiences.
2. Secondary school administrators have lived experiences that will resonate with students.
3. Stories can be used to frame nearly every issue that may arise in a secondary school building.
4. Stories have the power to shape a future vision for students.
5. Stories create a deeper relationship and rapport between secondary school administrators and students.
6. Students are willing listeners to stories shared by secondary school administrators.
7. Public schools often provide the needed systems and support for students to succeed inside the classroom and through extracurricular activities.

Narrative inquiry allows each individual to interpret the stories they are exposed to and frame them to fit one's worldview (Riessman, 1993). Everyone's stories are rooted in biases as it is impossible to escape the view of our world in the moment of sharing (Rubin & Strauss, 2023). However, stories are not static but bound to interpretation and

reforming to give greater meaning and purpose depending on the frame in which we are using them (Riessman, 1993).

Data Collection Procedures

Purposeful sampling was used in this narrative study to explore the stories 12 secondary school administrators share with students. Participants in this study were current National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) members who attended at least one annual National Advocacy Conference in Washington, D.C. The initial request for participants was sent via email to NASSP members who have also served as NASSP state coordinators for their respective states.

Attendees of the annual National Advocacy Conference and, in particular, NASSP state coordinators were used for this study as they are taught to use storytelling to enhance advocacy efforts at the local, state, and federal levels. In addition to attendance at the National Advocacy Conference in Washington, D.C., state coordinators have required attendance at bi-monthly Zoom (2023) videoconference meetings. Telling one's story is a constant theme during these meetings. Advocacy efforts at all levels are based on the lived experiences of school administrators within their buildings and the potential impact of proposed legislation. Additionally, by the nature of the position, state coordinators have multiple years of experience as secondary school administrators and are nearly always considered veteran administrators.

Participants were solicited for this study through an email sent to all current NASSP state coordinators (see Appendix A) in August 2022. A follow-up email to the same group was sent in October to secure the necessary number of participants. The email asked for voluntary participation and outlined the parameters of the study. One

participant was personally invited as they previously attended a National Advocacy Conference and met the necessary requirements to be a participant.

Participants provided consent (see Appendix B) for Zoom (2023) interviews. Once consent was gained, participants were asked to recount stories they often share with their students. Interviews lasted 35-75 minutes, with follow-up conversations conducted in instances where clarity, context, or intent needed to be more clearly defined and understood. All 12 interviews were conducted between September and December 2022.

In January 2022, a pilot interview was conducted using the semi-structured interview protocol found in Appendix C. The interview protocol consisted of two open-ended questions with five follow-up questions and multiple prompts to frame the conversation around the stories secondary school administrators share with students. My experience as a veteran secondary school administrator (15 years), my role as the current NASSP state coordinator for Nebraska, and as a multi-year attendee of the National Advocacy Conference allowed me to connect with participants' shared experiences.

Serving in these roles enabled me to dive deeper into the stories shared through the interview process while also relating to my own lived experiences through self-reflection. Before and throughout the data collection process, I used a research journal to capture my own experiences, insights, reflections, and interpretations regarding the stories I share with my students and those I heard from the participants. Memoing, the act of recording self-reflections using collected data to make connections (Given, 2008), was done immediately following each interview and during and after each transcription.

Zoom (2023) was used to record each interview as distance and availability for in-person interviews was limited with a nationwide participant pool. Transcription services

through Otter.ai and Zoom (2023) were used for the initial transcription of each interview. Interviews were then personally reviewed for accuracy by the researcher, making the appropriate corrections to the initial artificial intelligence transcription. Additional details, such as mannerisms, emotions, long pauses, etc., were added to the transcript when appropriate. Once complete, interview transcriptions were uploaded to Dedoose (2023) software for coding and further analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative research analysis is the process of understanding the words participants share with the researcher. Data collection can be done through numerous practices, including: “observations, interviews, documents, media, and artifacts” (Miles et al., 2020, p. 7). The data collected is raw and must be analyzed by the researcher to place understanding and meaning to the participant’s words. However, each researcher comes to their own conclusions as qualitative data analysis is interpretive based upon their worldview, values, and beliefs (Eisner et al., 2017; Miles et al., 2020).

Data collected through a qualitative methodology provides rich, vivid, and often complex descriptions. For meaningful conclusions to be drawn from the data, it must be analyzed multiple times. With an abundance of collected data, the researcher must select the areas of most importance and use techniques such as memoing, coding, categorizing, and condensing to organize and ultimately make connections and conclusions that can be verified (Miles et al., 2020).

Within any story, the listener (researcher) must take the participants’ stories and contextualize and place meaning related to their own lived experiences. “Narrative smoothing” brings a participant's story to life and brings meaning to the researcher’s

experiences. However, when smoothing occurs, the participant's intent and meaning can be lost or changed due to the omission of data based upon the researcher's assumptions, biases, or beliefs (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Renowned American artist, Laurie Anderson, references this smoothing experience within stories in her art installation *The weather*. "[With stories] you try to get to the point you're making, usually about yourself or something you learned. You get your story and you hold onto it, and every time you tell it you forget it more" (Anderson, 2021, "A Story About Story" section).

"Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told" (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p. 20). The researcher reorganized the stories collected through the interview process and placed meaning to the stories. In narrative research, "analysis and interpretation work in tandem to find narrative meaning in the process of storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 108).

Memoing took place after each interview placing meaning to the individual stories with moments of impact, epiphanies, and plot points identified. Memoing using a research journal and within Dedoose (2023) allowed for connections to be made and meaning placed on the participants' stories and the researchers' lived experiences. Writing "trigger[ed] the thinking process" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 243) and compartmentalized big ideas and themes which emerged from the interviews (Maanen, 2011). Throughout the entire research process, journaling helped organize the researcher's thoughts, feelings, emotions, and ideas.

Each interview was coded multiple times using Dedoose (2023) software. Established codes were grouped, and latent themes were derived from the interview transcripts, memos, and journal entries (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

With coding and themes completed, a more complex understanding of the stories emerged within the larger societal or cultural dimension in which they were used (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maanen, 2011).

Validation Strategies

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), a qualitative research study must be “credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable” (p. 202) to ensure its trustworthiness. Various strategies can be used to ensure the data collected and analyzed meet these four criteria. Due to the nature of a narrative study, it is vital to establish validity checks with both the researcher and the participants before beginning the research study.

Member checks (see Appendix D) were used to ensure the data’s credibility (internal validity). Participants were asked to verify the restoried narrative derived from each interview. The focus of the member checks was placed on the content and accuracy of the narratives contained in Chapter 4. Inaccuracies were corrected by the researcher and resubmitted to the participant for accuracy. Negative case analysis was not used as each participant shared at least one story that fit the central question of the study.

An audit trail was used to check for dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity). Journaling using handwritten notes in a paper journal was included in the audit trail. After each interview, memoing took place using a paper journal. Further memoing was included using the Dedoose (2023) software during and after interview transcription to keep the data contained in one location. Lastly, a research log (see Appendix E) was used to validate the steps taken throughout the study.

Lastly, purposeful sampling strategies demonstrated transferability (external validity). Participants in this study had various similar lived experiences, having attended a National Advocacy Conference and serving as secondary school administrators for at least seven years. However, each participant had a unique story related to their lived experiences. The narratives collected through the interview protocol allowed for thick descriptions with detailed information from the participants.

Ethical Issues

When conducting any form of research, the researcher must be cognizant of the ethical factors present within the study. The researcher must make a concerted effort to minimize potential harm to the participants in the study. This can be done with careful and deliberate preparation and planning before starting any research study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Following the institutional review board (IRB) process, every effort was made to minimize potential harm to the participants in this study. Ethical issues can arise during all phases of a qualitative research study due to the flexibility and emergent design of such studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Before the study, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and factors such as time, comfortability, anonymity, and topic content that may have prohibited their participation. Participants affirmed their involvement in the study through the “Consent to Participate” form (see Appendix B). Participants also had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The information included in the “Consent to Participate” form included:

- title of the study
- principal investigator

- purpose of the study
- anticipated interview format and time commitment
- known risks and discomforts associated with participation in the study
- potential benefits and/or compensation for participation
- assurances of participant confidentiality and anonymity
- information related to the Institutional Review Board, including contact information
- disclosure of voluntary participation and right to withdraw from participation in the study

All efforts were made to keep the participant's identity anonymous and confidential only to the researcher. Steps to protect the participant's personal information were made to prevent unauthorized access from outside parties. However, absolute anonymity was not promised and, as such, is outlined in the "Consent to Participate" form.

Summary

Storytelling is an art and skill as old as time. Stories give meaning to the past, provide context to the present, and inspire a vision for the future. The stories humans share are part of our lived experiences and are influenced by our current view of the world. We learn through story as "experiences leads to further experiences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.2).

The study of storytelling is best done through a qualitative methodology. Intentionally broad, narrative qualitative research allows the researcher to collect and analyze stories while being immersed in the participant's world (Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Miles et al., 2020). The researcher can use a variety of qualitative data collection methods such as interviews, observations, field notes, document analysis, etc. Using social constructivism, the researcher places meaning on the stories. However, each individual has worldviews and biases, impacting the lens through which the stories are retold.

This narrative study collected and analyzed the stories secondary school administrators shared with their students. The study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What stories do secondary school leaders share with their students?
2. How do the stories secondary school leaders share with their students relate to the leaders' own lived experiences?
3. Why do secondary school leaders share stories with students?
4. What are the perceived outcomes secondary school administrators have when they share stories about their lived experiences with their students?

Participants for this study were current or former NASSP members who have attended a National Advocacy Conference, with an initial request for participation sent to NASSP state coordinators. Personalized communications to individuals who fit the criteria were also used. Participants were asked to take part in at least one semi-structured interview in which their stories were collected. Additional conversations occurred to ensure the context and content of the interview were accurate.

The data collected through the interview process were transcribed using Zoom (2023) and Otter.ai and analyzed using Dedoose (2023) software. The researcher coded the transcripts to identify latent themes. In addition to the coded interviews, the researcher memoed and journaled, helping organize the researcher's thoughts, feelings, emotions,

and big ideas. Member self-checks were conducted, with each participant approving the narrative constructed from the interviews.

Secondary school administrators often use stories to connect with their students through their own lived experiences. These stories hold the power to change lives for the better (and sometimes, worse). By making a concerted effort to record, document, and analyze stories told to students, lessons for current and future secondary school administrators can be learned.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

By nature, humans are storytellers (Fisher, 1984). The stories humans create and share shape how they live their lives. Stories also provide meaning to the past, context to the present, and a vision for the future (Boal & Schultz, 2007; McAdams, 1993; Takala & Auvinen, 2014; Taylor, 2001). The findings of the study are outlined in two parts.

Part 1 provides context to the study. The research questions are reviewed along with the demographic information of each participant. Demographic information is provided as it provides a lens into each participant's worldview.

Individual personal narratives are found in Part 2. Using information provided through each individual participant interview, narratives were constructed and retold using their thoughts and words. Each narrative was member checked as outlined in Appendix D for accuracy and authenticity.

Part 1: Context of Study

Research Questions

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the stories secondary school administrators share with their students. The central question of this study was what are the stories secondary school administrators share with their students. Specifically, the study answered the following questions:

1. What stories do secondary school leaders share with their students?
2. How do the stories secondary school leaders share with their students relate to the leaders' own lived experiences?
3. Why do secondary school leaders share stories with students?

4. What are the perceived outcomes secondary school administrators have when they share stories about their lived experiences with their students?

Introduction to Participants

Twelve secondary school administrators from across the United States, each with their own unique worldview, participated in the study. Each participant has attended at least one National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) National Advocacy Conference, with many attending multiple conferences. Attendance at the National Advocacy Conference provided validity for this study as attendees have been taught the importance of framing conversations with elected officials around the premise of stories. Of the 12 participants, 11 were current or former NASSP state coordinators for their respective states.

Each participant in this study is considered a veteran secondary school administrator serving in their roles for seven years or more. As veteran school administrators, each participant has pre- and post-pandemic experiences that influence their leadership and the stories they share.

Participants worked in schools with a wide range of student populations, the smallest being 200 (7th-12th graders) and the largest at 3,000+ (9th-12th graders). Using the United States Census Bureau “Census Regions and Divisions of the United States” map (see Appendix G), participants represented all four regions and five of the nine divisions (*Census.gov*, 2021). Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, their school, and any student, teacher, or other individual names (if shared).

Demographic information is included to give the reader insight into the participants’ current worldview. Worldviews are shaped by the environments and

communities in which individuals reside and the people with whom they interact. While demographic information does not provide the complete story of each participant, it does provide insight into the stories they may live and share in the present moment.

Demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Name	Gender	School Name	Years as Admin	School Size	Grade Levels	US Census Region	US Census Subregions	City/Town Size
Steve	Male	Prairie View High School	10-14	1460	9th-12th	Midwest	West North Central	10,000
Don	Male	Elk Crossing High School	15+	600	8th-12th	Northeast	New England	14,000
Chad	Male	Evergreen Empire High School	15+	720	9th-12th	Northeast	New England	4,400
Holly	Female	Green Mountain High School	5-9	1000	9th-12th	West	Mountain	34,000
Brent	Male	River Bluff High School	5-9	2500	9th-12th	South	South Atlantic	17,000
David	Male	Eastern Palms High School	15+	2100	9th-12th	West	Pacific	90,000
Mary	Female	Polkville High School	15+	700	7th-12th	West	Pacific	10,000
Rachel	Female	Snow Fields Technical High School	10-14	400	9th-12th	West	Pacific	290,000
Ron	Male	Blue River High School	10-14	200	7th-12th	Midwest	West North Central	1,000
Gary	Male	Lynnville High School	5-9	550	9th-12th	West	Mountain	7,000 (unincorporated)
Vince	Male	Desert Sands High School	15+	3,000	9th-12th	West	Mountain	325,000
Aaron	Male	Cypress Heights High School	10-14	3,000	9th-12th	South	South Atlantic	25,000

Constructed Narratives

Individual narratives were constructed from interviews lasting 35-75 minutes. The interviews followed the semi-structured interview protocol found in Appendix C. Each narrative begins with a quote from their interview, which brings authenticity & voice (Maanen, 2011). Once completed, each narrative was member checked for accuracy.

Part 2: Participant Narratives

The following narratives were constructed from the individual interviews conducted during fall 2022. In total, secondary school principals from 12 states are represented, each with a unique view of the world. Each participant has at least two commonalities: a member of NASSP and attended at least one NASSP National Advocacy Conference. However, each has their own unique story to tell. Here are their stories.

Interview 1: Steve

“It's making that connection with a kid so they can see that you're a human being, that you see value in them.”

Steve's worldview was shaped growing up on a dairy farm in the rural Midwest. His path to serving as a high school assistant principal and freshmen academy principal at Prairie View High School has taken him across state lines. He served as a teacher at a reservation school, a technology coordinator, and a rural school principal. Currently, he oversees 450 students in a freshman academy housed in a 1500 student high school. Throughout each of his stops, his focus has been making connections with students and finding the “one thing” that makes a connection and ultimately changes a student's life for the better.

Life on the dairy farm was hard work. It took a commitment, a specific discipline to live day in and day out. He also had a father who “was a hard ass. When he lost his temper, he lost his temper! You were wrong, he was right, and there was no going back.”

His father and life on the dairy farm provide Steve with endless stories of determination, commitment, hard work, and perseverance that shaped him into the person he is today. These same stories also provide an opportunity to connect with his students and be on their level. “I want to see [life] through their perspective.”

Seeing life through a student's perspective is an opportunity to connect to Steve's own personal experiences in high school and college. Steve was not a great student in high school. He struggled to understand math and especially algebra. However, when it came to running track and cross country, that is where Steve excelled.

Steve's high school track coach saw his talent for running circles around a track. Coach D took a vested interest in Steve and began to make a personal connection that would benefit him greatly. An industrial technology teacher, Coach D could help him overcome his struggles in Algebra. "He would give me the same type of 10-step problems but do it a little differently. I saw the value [in his approach], and I got an A in his class and was barely pulling a C in my algebra class." In retrospect, Coach D was able to make a connection with him because he saw the talent Steve had in running circles for long distances and the value he had as a student. After all, Steve was willing to put forth effort into both. "If you don't put any effort into it, you're not going to find value."

"My academic brain didn't turn until my freshman year of college." Steve credits his second college advisor for helping him piece things together and create a future vision and path for his success. "He knew I was swimming deep and that wasn't going to make it." Together they evaluated Steve's goals, which included running track and cross country for four years and graduating from college. Ultimately, Steve obtained his goals, and credits his relationships with his high school coach and teacher and his college advisor for making his goals a reality. They also gave him an understanding of the impact meaningful relationships can have on students.

Stories of life on the farm and academic struggles are often his go-to when working with students. "What's the goal? What do you [student] want to do?" His lived experiences provide a foundation upon which a relationship is built, and goals and dreams can be formulated. Together, Steve and his students try to find value in something, just as his track coach did for him. He often tells students to pick the one class or activity they are interested in and build upon that. Value can be found in anything if

they are willing to put effort into it. However, sometimes it is difficult to find value in anything if students have gone through a difficult situation and experienced trauma. Steve is that caring adult to help them navigate these difficult times. The following are three stories Steve shared of his students and their shared lived experiences. The first is Joey's.

Joey was a freshman student who was identified for special education services. School was unimportant to Joey, and he believed all his teachers "HATED" him. He struggled to find value in anything. Steve often worked with Joey using his whole bag of tricks to make a personal connection and "find that one thing" that Joey could build upon. "You're a great kid. You're just not getting it yet. We will find that value."

Steve always remained encouraged, even as Joey was routinely sent to his office. But he stayed the course. "Hey, this is a step back. This is a bump in the road. I still think you're a good kid. We just got to do some approaches differently. You know, you can't tell the teacher to screw off."

Slowly but surely, Joey began to come around. A relationship was built and trust was established between Steve and Joey. Eventually, Joey shared that he had an interest in mechanics. Together they had found that one thing and Joey was enrolled in a mechanics class.

The next three years were not always perfect, but Joey would graduate on time with his classmates. At his graduation party, Joey's adoptive parents thanked Steve a thousand times for never giving up on him. While Joey's path to graduation may not have always been easy, ultimately, his story was one of success because of shared lived experiences and trust built on the stories Steve was willing to share.

Students with known and unknown traumas pass through Prairie View High School halls daily. Steve has seen and worked with these students throughout his entire career. However, in the second story, when it comes to Jax, he may have had one of the most extreme cases he had ever dealt with.

Jax was an extremely guarded, shy, and emotional student. “I asked him [Jax] how his day was and he would break into tears.” Jax never knew his dad; his mom went missing in middle school. For weeks they looked for her before finally finding her body hidden in the garage. She had committed suicide. Jax had never needed a trusting adult more than at that moment, and he found two: Steve and his administrative assistant.

During his freshmen year, Jax was invited to eat lunch in the office. Steve would share stories and try to get Jax to open up. Day after day, they would chat a little more, and Jax began sharing his story and interests. It took time, but they found a shared connection: hunting. Steve is a self-proclaimed terrible shot but loves to hunt pheasants. Steve’s hunting stories led to Jax sharing his desire to trap shoot. Soon after, Steve and Jax’s grandmother devised a plan to get him a 12 gauge and a spot on the school-sponsored trap team.

Steve watched Jax compete, and knew he had found his one thing. “I went out and watched him shoot one night and he was 100 times better than I was, and he would just beam. Now he comes in and he smiles at us; he talks. He’s behind graduation pace, but he’s going to do it.” Through their continued conversation, Steve also learned he is a history buff, so now they share stories of history films like *Band of brothers*. A connection was made, and Jax’s life was changed because Steve saw value in Jax. Jax just needed time to find it in himself.

The third story is about James. Kids often come through the school doors with personal issues and struggles they cannot control. For James, he had the deck stacked against him. His dad was in and out of prison, and his mom rarely had time for him. His ADHD was “to the max level. A kid that couldn’t sit in his own skin and save his life.” But Steve saw value in James and the need to find that “one thing.” Steve’s experiences of working hard on the farm resonated with James as he loved to work. “Put that kid outside with a lawn mower, he was a hell of a worker.”

James loved landscaping and was a master with a lawn mower. The school social worker and Steve got him a job with the school’s grounds crew. James found value in working hard on the landscaping crew. Now years later, James will still stop in and have a conversation with Steve because of the connection built based on their shared experiences of hard work.

Finding the One Thing

Steve shares stories because it builds a connection with his students based on shared experiences. Stories are also a way to find that one thing that students see value in and put forth effort in doing. Doors are opened through stories, and lives are changed for the better. Especially with students who feel the world is against them.

The stories we tell are about finding that common shared interest, that common shared experience. When kids come in, especially in their freshman year, they come in pretty guarded. They come in pretty shielded. They don't know you, so you try to find out one thing to talk about. That one thing that would get them talking about their day. If they're into a certain musician...you just try to connect that one thing, so it's not just, ”Hey, you need to go to class. Hey, you need to get

your homework turned in on time.” They hear that nonstop and just tune out. It’s like a good classroom teacher. Every good classroom teacher I ever had wasn’t perfect in their subject matter. They were just good at connecting with kids.

Interview 2: Don

I believe the only way you can demonstrate relational transparency is by showing people who you really are and breaking down facades. They can’t conceptualize you as a person without knowing your story. Period. They [stories] make us real. It makes you more than just that person.

Don never forgets the moment or the chaos that ensued. The entire student body was gathered in the gym for a typical pep rally that quickly turned into anything but ordinary. A gunshot rang out among the crowd leaving a gym full of 1,700 students scrambling for safety as they fled. As Don and a friend ran out of the building, they spotted the assistant principal chasing after the perpetrator. Once outside, they ducked for cover under cars until their safety was assured.

Don’s path to Elk Crossing High School (ECHS) is full of rich experiences dating back to his high school days, many revolving around sports. Elk Crossing High School, Don’s current school, differs significantly from his experience growing up in an urban New England city. When it comes to connecting and bringing people together, Don believes sports have a way of transcending generations in a way that other genres of stories cannot. To fully understand who Don is and his values, one must know his background and journey to this moment.

Don grew up in a household of educators. His father was a teacher for 40 years, and his mother was an educator, serving as a para and Sunday School teacher. Even with

the experience of having his parents as educators, a career in education was not something he aspired to do; instead, he “sort of fell into it.”

Sports media was his first love, and even to this day, sportscasting is something he does on the side. After college, Don was met with a critical juncture in his story: deciding whether to move halfway across the country to further his career or find a different career path, he chose the latter. Falling back on the foundation his parents had built, he decided to stay close to home and give teaching and coaching a shot. Twenty-two years later, he is still in education, having served in an administrative role for 17 of those years.

Value of Relationships

Relationships are at the core of Don’s values and beliefs—which he learned early on in his career—and would benefit him extensively throughout his various teaching and administrative roles. However, he found out that not everyone holds these same beliefs. As he was moving up the administrative ladder, he interviewed for a position where building relationships was not what the school was looking for in a candidate. His disappointment was short-lived as he was soon offered a principalship closer to home, eliminating 2½ hours of commuting each day. Life has a way of working out for the best.

Don serves 600 8th-12th students at Elk Crossing High School. Due to district reconfiguration five years ago, this year’s seniors will be the first to attend ECHS for their entire careers. Elk Crossing’s rural nature has been something Don had to adjust to as his worldview was shaped around his urban upbringing. He took the subway and public transit to school daily as the district had no bussing, something his students cannot

relate to. Growing up in an urban high school is different from what his students experience at ECHS.

Students at ECHS enjoy a certain level of intimacy due to the relationships they can build with each other in a smaller school. Don recounts the moment he knew ECHS was going to be different. Don vividly remembers one of the first conversations he had with students as he stepped into the principal role.

“I walked in to meet with students at Elk Crossing, and I remember saying, ‘so how many kids are in like a typical class here?’ I meant like in a classroom. I figured I'd hear 20-25.”

“Oh, there's 115 of us,” a student responded.

“Oh, you guys mean like in your class, like the class of 2018. I meant like in a typical class. One hundred fifteen sounds smaller than my ninth-grade gym class.”

A moment of silent reflection between both the students and Don ensued before he put it all back into perspective. “It's kind of great to be in a place where everyone's going to know each other.”

Even though Don and his students' high school experiences appear drastically different, there is value in sharing his story, as connections can still be made. “It's about context for me, for the kids. They [students] also should hear that there's a big, big world out there.” He wants his students to see the world as more than what is within the walls of ECHS, both good and bad. His stories can shape students to see the world as more than their little corner of New England.

With relationships at the core of who Don is, he wants to foster those among his students and staff because his educational experiences sometimes lacked them. But this

comes with a caveat. “I think there's a challenge because if you don't establish some sort of relationship first, you run the risk of proselytizing or being just, like, some guy telling them about the way it used to be.”

One of the foundations of ECHS is a commitment to safety. Don wants to ensure a safe learning environment and does not want his staff or students to experience the fear he felt on a November day many years ago. Sharing experiences of growing up in an urban high school brings context to this commitment.

It was the day before Thanksgiving, and the previous night's events, far removed from Don or his friends, led to this moment. Don and the entire student body were gathered for a pep rally when a gunshot rang out through the gym rafters. Unbeknownst to him at the moment, the football team captain had taken a swing with a pool cue at a gang member in the pool hall the night before. The captain's selfish impulse that night was now affecting every member of the student body. Chaos erupted, and he vividly remembers his assistant principal running down the street after a guy, someone Don recognized, a student that had been in his father's class the previous semester. Don ran for cover, finding shelter under cars until his safety was assured and the threat of violence had subsided. Forever emblazoned in his mind, he will never forget the feelings and emotions of that late fall day.

Lessons Through Sports

Equipped with an arsenal of stories and lived experiences, Don fell back on a select handful as the 2022-2023 school year began. Whether it was a student assembly, orientation, or staff assembly, he found these go-to stories resonating within the ECHS community. As a successful high school athlete and coach, he drew upon the lessons

learned from being involved in athletics. Don's rich repertoire of stories allows him to connect in meaningful ways while entwining stories gained through his experiences.

"Everybody talks about how the last couple of years have been so hard and this and that, and at some point, we need to focus on winning today." A highly successful coach in his own right, Don compiled a career record of 254-32-6 with a stretch of 77 consecutive wins. "I can remember the 32 losses. I can't remember the 254 wins." But regardless of whether his team won or lost, he approached preparation for the next game the same way. He prepared his team to win, today.

Don often uses an obscure quote from one of basketball's greatest players of all time, Bill Russell, "You never know when a winning streak is going to start." If he could prepare his teams to win today, the rest would take care of itself, and it usually did. After the 77-game win streak ended, his team would turn around and win the next 19 consecutive games. His focus, and that of his team, never wavered. They were prepared to win, today.

Rapport and relationships are also something Don builds using his own experiences as a successful high school athlete. He enjoys going out to track practice and reminiscing about his days on the track team with student-athletes. "I did the decathlon and set the school record, and they [students] hear that and they're like, 'Wait? This guy who's now 5' 11", 230 pounds was once 5' 11", 165 pounds running a :50, 400.'" That was a long time ago [laughter]." Sports are a way of closing the generational divide and connecting his story with his students. Sports also bring people together that, at the surface level, may seem like they have nothing in common.

Don's high school soccer team was comprised of student-athletes who spoke eleven languages. To be successful on the pitch, the team understood they had to find a way to "get it together." The team could look past their different upbringings and worldviews and learn valuable lessons Don carries with him to this day. While they found success on the field, they also found the value of building strong relationships which have lasted well beyond their playing days.

Relationships formed and bonds established during that season remain true to this day. Twenty-five years later, one of his teammates lives down the road in a nearby community and they recently got together for dinner. The value lies in bonds that are established that can last a lifetime. "I want them [students] to understand that relationship will matter to them someday based on the experience they share with somebody on a field this year."

Janae

Throughout his career, Don has witnessed first-hand the value, impact, and importance of stories in his role as a secondary school administrator. A highly successful student and athlete, Janae seemed to have it together on the outside. This could not have been further from reality. Inside, she struggled immensely with the load she was carrying and was nearing a breaking point.

Contemplating quitting the team, Janae came to visit Don in his office. She was stressed about nearly every aspect of life: grades, sports, and home life. Her course load consisted of multiple Advanced Placement classes, at her parent's request, and it was becoming too much; something had to give. Drawing from his own experiences, Don shared stories of the joy he got from being involved in extracurricular activities and the

memories he made in high school. He also posed a question. What would her lasting high school memories be if she gave up being a team member? Empowered with courage and wanting to create her own memories, Janae knew a challenging conversation with her parents was needed. At the end of the day, she wanted to write her own story.

Janae could have sacrificed life-long memories and relationships and thrown in the towel. Instead, Don was able to provide context from his own experiences and help her frame what she wanted out of her remaining high school years. A difficult conversation ensued, which reset everyone's expectations, including those for herself. Ultimately her Advanced Placement course load was diminished, and it opened the much-needed time and energy to explore talents and find success in areas she could have never imagined.

Soon, Janae was excelling in areas of life she previously would not have had time for. She was making life-long memories in areas that, a few months before, were not on her radar. Janae became the lead in the school musical and the field hockey team captain. When it came time to apply for colleges and write application essays, she wrote about the conversation she had with Don, the impact it had on her path, and the story she was ultimately able to write for herself. Even without a heavy load of Advance Placement classes, she landed at an outstanding college. The memories created on the stage and with her teammates on the field are worth more than anything she could have learned by taking "42 Advanced Placement courses."

Nearly a decade later, Don still has Janae's college entrance essay on his bulletin board behind his desk. He will often take it down and have current students read it as a

lesson in overcoming obstacles. Students may not always be able to relate to Don's story. However, they can relate to Janae's. Collectively, they all share a common connection.

Stories Make Us Human

For Don, it's not just about being an administrator who tells stories for the sake of telling stories. A storytelling administrator "has to be contextualized around your presence in students' lives." The opportunity to share one's story is always there if an administrator is cognizant of the circumstances and events surrounding them. None of this will matter if meaningful relationships and connections have not been established.

Recently Don found himself "shooting the breeze" with a group of students at halftime of a football game. It was an opportunity to share his life experiences and be a "real person" to his students.

Sometimes you see kids who give you the 'WHOA!? I never knew that about you!' And then you give them a fist bump and make a connection. It's like, yeah, you'll never forget that about me. And it makes us human. I'm not just the guy in the tie who says hi to everyone."

Don enjoys these moments and works diligently to leave a positive impact on his students and school. His story becomes part of their story, and in turn, they share a lived experience.

Interview 3: Chad

"[Stories] are a way to relate to people in a real way and bring some life relevance [to the conversation]; a connection."

Chad's journey to the principalship has landed him right where it all started. Raised in beautiful, rural New England, he finds himself as the principal of his alma

mater. His roots at Evergreen Empire High School (EEHS) are deep, as his parents also once taught there. Chad is a shining example of Evergreen Empire's legacy. However, being an educator was not what his parents encouraged.

Journey Back Home

After graduating from high school, Chad attended Boston College, pursuing a degree in business administration. As his senior year approached, he watched as his friends bought suits and interviewed for internships and positions in big firms. He began to question if this was what he wanted for himself, his career, and his life.

Chad had a change of heart only one semester short of a degree. Instead of business meetings, spreadsheets, and year-end reports, life took him down a different path familiar to him and his family. The following semester, he picked up a heavy course load in English education to make up for the years spent in the college of business. Additionally, he began work on his master's in educational administration. If he was going to enter education as a career, he wanted to lead a building someday.

In 1995, Chad landed his first job and "fell in love with teaching. I would have been completely happy doing that for the rest of my career." But as fate would have it, one of his mentors recruited him to be his assistant principal in a neighboring district. He stayed in the role for a year and a half while learning much about himself and what he wanted out of his career. He realized that while he enjoyed administration, being an assistant principal was not a good fit. "It was a great experience, but I don't take direction well [chuckle]." After some self-reflection, he decided to look at positions closer to home, eventually landing him back where it all started.

At 29, Chad secured his first principal position at Freedomville Academy, the oldest continuous school in his home state. While not his alma mater, deep family roots were already established within the community. Chad's grandfather graduated from Freedomville Academy, a poignant fact he felt gave him an instant connection to the school and community.

Shortly after accepting the position, Chad attended a dinner event with Freedomville alums and shared that his grandfather was a 1935 graduate. As the evening's events came to a close, an elderly gentleman approached Chad with a question. "Now, who was your grandfather?" the old man asked.

Chad politely responded with his grandfather's name.

"He couldn't have graduated in 1935. I graduated in 1935, and your grandfather was a year older than me."

Chad chuckled, retelling the story. "Only in [rural New England] are you going to say something that innocuous and get called on it."

Freedomville Academy would be his professional home for eight years before moving to a K-8 building. He was called back home four years ago to serve as the principal at his alma mater, Evergreen Empire High School. He is "loving every minute of it so far, except for the COVID years."

Appreciate Your Surroundings

Chad has an appreciation and deep reflective spirit not found in many principals. His worldview is framed around his experiences with family and Mother Nature in rural New England. When one is cognizant of the world surrounding them, they pick up on

many lessons that can be missed. This appreciation is generational, as the stories that shaped him are the ones that have been passed down from his grandparents.

As a kid, Chad often heard stories of his great-great-grandfather who served the surrounding communities. As the “overseer of the poor,” he was responsible for driving through “the hill farms” with a trunk full of canned goods, food, and other supplies, distributing them to those in need. While Chad never met his great-great-grandfather, his story of looking out and caring for others continues to be shared.

Chad’s grandparents on his mother’s side were also teachers in the area. His grandfather was an ag teacher and often marched his students down to the farm to dehorn cattle. They would come back to school smelling like a barn, a fact that many of his colleagues failed to appreciate. After retirement, his grandfather continued to serve his school and community as he was elected to the school board.

Each of these stories has meaning and contextualizes Chad’s personal story. They also offer a connection that can be shared with his own students. Chad’s understanding of these generational stories, combined with his own lived experiences growing up, is indubitably intertwined with those of his staff, students, and community. For Chad, stories are a tool to provide meaning and understanding to the world that surrounds us all.

As he interacts with his students, he wants to ensure they appreciate all that nature provides as well as the oral, generational history of the place they call home. One such story is that of his grandfather and his friend, George, who owned a hunting camp. Told as a fable, his story is based on his real-life experiences.

George owned a cabin in a beautiful, secluded part of the state. He spent hours upon hours walking through the trees watching for animals and enjoying his

surroundings. Tending to his land, he built a tiny house, planted a garden, and tended to the trails. One day, he noticed a particular bird was hanging around watching his every move. Befriending the bird, they formed a bond and soon shared in their experiences in the woods together. They watched the animals, took walks, and enjoyed each other's company.

One day, George's grandson came to visit, and this startled the bird. He was not sure if he was a friend or a foe. Assuring the bird that he was a friend he flew over to his grandson and befriended him as well. The bird was just looking out for George but gained another friend in the process.

Shared Lived Experiences

Not all the stories Chad shares with his students are fabulistic in nature. Stories of his struggles and successes are shared to make connections with students and provide context to their own lived experiences. Growing up at EEHS makes forming bonds even easier. He and his students have shared lived experiences, only a generation apart.

Chad's high school athletic career was like a roller coaster; he experienced the highest of highs and lowest of lows. Each season provided an array of lessons he shares to this day. "At one point, our [football] team was recognized by *USA Today* as having the longest active losing streak in the country. You know, we were 0-24 going into my junior year. I was the quarterback. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

On the flip side of the struggles, the basketball team experienced great success on the court. They qualified for the state tournament, and in his own words, "I wouldn't trade it for anything." A theme emerges through these stories: take advantage of the

opportunities in front of you. “It could always be worse; you can always find good in the bad.”

Connections to students’ lived experiences can be made beyond the playing field or the basketball court. Chad describes a conversation he recently had with a student who was convinced his teacher hated him. Chad jokingly shared that this student was a member of the “Carhartt Mafia,” which opened the door for him to share a story, build a relationship, and instill an important lesson. “I love these types of kids.”

A student was upset because of a single negative interaction with a teacher. Convinced that the year was ruined, Chad quickly reframed the conversation and the student’s attitude. Chad knew exactly how to approach the situation.

“Do you hunt?,” a question Chad already knew the answer to. “Are you successful each time you go out?”

“Well, no,” the student responded.

“The hunting season isn’t ruined because of one bad day. You can always find something you like every day that you go out.” By reframing the situation through lived experiences, relationships and connections are built. Chad was able to redirect the student positively with self-reflection. It is always about appreciating the opportunities around you and the time you have on earth. You never know when a moment of gratitude and appreciation will present itself.

Phil’s Story

Life can be really “heavy” at times, and from the outside, we cannot see the struggles others are going through. Kindness and compassion can go a long way in improving other lives. Phil was that kid for Chad.

Phil would have been a member of the “Carhartt Mafia.” A student always on the edge of dropping out, Phil had many personal redeeming qualities which drew Chad to his story. Phil’s parents were split, and he resided with his father. Tragically, his father sustained a head injury falling off a ladder. Overnight, Phil became the man of the house, and his focus and attention were directed away from his schoolwork.

Determined not to let Phil fail and become another statistic, Chad and the staff took him under their wing. The school raised money and provided additional support for him. Phil was enrolled in a local career and technical education center. Chad took him to a Red Sox game in Boston. Yet, through all their efforts, Phil continued to slip further and further, and Chad began to have naysayers. “How much more can you do for this kid?”

Chad's response, “I’m not going to sleep at night if we don't do this. We do it because it’s the right thing [to do].”

To everyone’s disappointment, Phil eventually dropped out of high school. Their efforts could not offset the sense of responsibility and freedom he now had. After moving to a new community and school, Chad lost touch with Phil and his story. Unfortunately, just as tragedy had struck Phil’s dad, it also found him. A few years later, Phil was killed in a motorcycle accident. However, that was not the end of the story.

A few years after Phil’s death, a former colleague of Chad’s shared a story. The colleague’s son happened to work with Phil. They ran into each other and began to reminisce about his high school experience when his connection with Mr. Chad came up. As they talked, Phil asked if he would share his sentiments with Chad. “Tell Mr. [Chad], if you see him, I really appreciate all the work he put into me.”

Chad worked hard to ensure Phil would be a success in life. While his efforts fell short academically, he was learning through every story Chad shared and the good deeds he did for him. Their stories would come full circle. Phil provided the ultimate lessons for Chad. He shares Phil's story with students and staff so others can recognize that you never know what impact you can have on an individual or yourself.

When I'm working with kids and when I'm working with teachers, I try to make it evident that it's not necessarily obvious [your impact]. It's about the kid and doing everything you can to support the kid. But what's more important is your own mental health and wellness. To be able to look yourself in the mirror and sleep well at night knowing you did everything you possibly could to help a kid. I probably feel I would not have been named as the person who impacted his [Phil's] life. But I know if I had not done everything I did, I certainly wouldn't have been recognized.

The Value of Storytelling

Playing off his leadership strengths, Chad sees storytelling as a vital component in leading and interacting with his students, staff, and community. He finds stories a tool to connect to individuals on a human level. His stories are about appreciation for what you have and finding the good in all situations, even ones that end tragically. Stories aren't just told, they are written collaboratively, and for him and 12 of his current seniors, theirs is one of educational careers filled with shared lived experiences.

As luck would have it, due to career moves and advancements for Chad, he has served as the principal for 12 of this year's (2022-2023) seniors at Evergreen Empire High School during their entire K-12 educational careers. Thirteen years of stories have

been written collaboratively, including those of bad class trips and the bus breaking down on their way home from rafting. His students will share these stories for a lifetime, and if they are lucky, they will be passed down to the next generation.

Interview 4: Holly

It's hard to build a relationship with people when they know nothing about you. How do they learn anything about you until you tell them some of your story? Being compassionate and able to share the stories and then knowing that you trust them enough to share your story with them, I think, is huge.

Holly's path after high school was a series of discoveries that led her to the assistant principalship at Green Mountain High School (GMHS) in the American Southwest. The daughter of a teacher and a school psychologist, education was not the first option for a career choice. "My mom, God bless her, never wanted either me or my sister to go into education. So naturally, I ended up in education, and so did my sister [laughter]."

Attending Northern State University, Holly received her undergraduate degree in psychology but had yet to make plans once she graduated. "A bachelor's in psych is good for grad school and grad school." Searching for a direction beyond college, life presented an unexpected path back home.

Holly's mother became ill, and she soon moved back home. Needing a job, she interviewed for a special education position at the local school district, a position she was not fully qualified to teach. Even without her full certification, Holly still received an offer. She accepted; her career in education was set to begin.

Before Holly even started her new position her mother passed away. Not wanting to renege on her commitment to the school district and leave the school in a challenging

situation, she decided to stay. But without a special education background, Holly soon found herself at a crossroads.

The role of a special education teacher was “trial by fire” during those first two years in the classroom. Having never written an IEP, she began to doubt herself and her abilities as a teacher. She felt she was a “terrible teacher” and was doing a disservice to her students. After some self-reflection, she pursued other career avenues and left the profession altogether. Yet, within three months, she realized she missed the classroom and, more importantly, the kids.

Holly took a two-year leave from education to finish her degree while working as a corporate trainer for a large national restaurant chain. Once completed, she returned to her former district as a special education teacher in a self-contained classroom. Over the next few years, she taught various roles in multiple grade levels spanning elementary, middle, and high school.

The subsequent years provided Holly with many stories of professional growth, perseverance, and self-reflection. She completed a master’s degree in administration, changed positions, and moved schools. Eight years ago, she landed as an assistant principal at Green Mountain High School.

Simultaneously, Holly saw a tremendous amount of personal growth. She met and married her husband and started a family. But after several administrative advancements failed to come to fruition, she decided to look at positions closer to home. Each day she had an hour and a half drive, and she now had a baby at home. By securing a position at Green Mountain, she was able to dedicate more time to her family and less time behind the wheel. Each life event provided her an opportunity to self-reflect and make decisions

that were best for her and her entire family. They also provide a book of stories she is able to share with her students.

Open Book

Holly is a self-proclaimed open book. “[Life] gets really deep and dark in some places.” She feels students must know that as a teacher and school administrator, she has gone through difficult times as well. For her, stories are a way of making a connection and helping guide students through even the most difficult times. Stories also bring context to situations and provide lessons from her own lived experiences, many of which she openly shares.

Growing up, Holly was always a part of the gifted program in school. Academics came easy to her, and rarely, if ever, did she have to study. Holly could take an Advanced Placement class, get a “B,” and feel great about it because it was weighted. She knew how to play the game and keep in good standing by doing the minimum amount of work.

During her freshman year of high school, she took her first non-honors class, World History. Based on the teacher's grading practices, she quickly figured out how to get an A without ever writing an essay. At that moment, she thought it was great. But she soon realized that her teacher was not doing her any favors.

It was only when she entered college that she learned how to study. While she maintained an excellent grade point average in high school, she knew she was not challenged and retained very little information from her classes. As a teacher, she wanted to ensure that her students had a different type of experience. She wanted to create a challenging environment where students learned content and grew in their skills and abilities.

Although she has been out of the classroom for nearly a decade, she continues to use this story with the students she interacts with as an assistant principal. By framing grading and academic conversation around her experiences in the classroom, valuable lessons can be shared with students about personal growth and never settling for the status quo. But student life and struggles are not always as simplistic as grades; they are often filled with drama and, unfortunately, trauma.

Personal Trauma

Holly can relate to students through the personal trauma she experienced. As a victim of sexual assault herself, Holly feels a responsibility to help students through this highly traumatic life event.

I obviously do not go into specifics or details with my students because that's not the purpose. The purpose is so they understand that it's not their fault. They didn't do anything wrong. They're not broken. They're not trash; they're not dirty. They can grow up and still have a really good life in spite of the trauma that has happened [to them].

Students who have experienced trauma often reach out to Holly because of the relationships she has built with her students and their families. It is also a testament to her relationships with the other administrative team members (two males and herself) at Green Mountain High School; a team that has been together for the past four years.

Word has gotten around. 'Hey, you can go talk to Ms. [Holly]. It's fine.' I think part of it is that there's more of a feeling amongst my female students that they need to talk about some of these things [issues/trauma]. I think that they [female students] feel like they can trust me and both my colleagues. So we've been able

to build that with our students. And it's a crappy story to have to share, but you know, just trying to explain to kids about eventually being okay even when bad things happen.

While students feel comfortable coming to her or her colleagues with issues, she also understands the importance of being open and honest.

Students often ask, "How did you get over it [sexual assault]?"

For Holly, she must be "very, very honest." Survivors never get "over it" as if it will "magically go away." Instead, it is about learning to take this traumatic event and turning it into a strength. However, Holly also understands that these events impact not only the student but also the family.

Whenever a student brings concerns to her, she asks herself several questions. What is the relationship like with the family? Does the family know the sexual assault has even happened? Has the assault been reported to law enforcement? Do the student and their family want it reported to law enforcement? The answer to each question is essential in guiding the direction of the conversation. Additionally, as a mandatory reporter, Holly knows and understands her role. She wants to ensure the families are informed and a part of helping the student navigate the coming days.

Holly feels fortunate that students are comfortable coming to her for help and support but realizes she will not always have all the answers. Outside resources are available if the students and families know where to look. Holly's experience, both personally and professionally, allows her to be that person to guide students to the help they may need. Her story is only a single pathway to making a connection so everyone can work together for the betterment of all students.

Making Connections

Holly sees great value in storytelling as stories make connections through shared lived experiences. All humans have a story to tell. However, people cannot get to know one another if they are unwilling to share and take an interest in each other's story. With this comes a certain level of vulnerability and honesty with oneself. It also relies on relationships, trust, and understanding. Once trust has been established, Holly's students allow her to be a part of their story and see life through their eyes.

Green Mountain High School was honored to host a congressional member and state representative in a round-table discussion with students. The representative asked students about their experiences with social issues on campus. Quickly a student spoke up, sharing her experiences with racism at GMHS. While not easy to share these difficult experiences, the student felt comfortable enough in this environment to speak up. Extremely proud of this young woman, Holly wanted to ensure that she knew her voice was being heard.

Digging deeper into the student's comments, Holly asked follow-up questions to understand her experiences better. Cognizant but not informed of issues facing her students and school, she still wanted to know if racism existed among students or staff. The student answered, "Both."

The student and her friends were invited to continue the conversation with Holly and share their stories so she could better understand the issue at hand. She wanted to have those stories because she didn't have them for herself. "How can I share yours [story] and make your experience better?" Stories bring understanding to complex issues. Being willing to listen to others and their unique experience can make a connection

where there may not have been previously. Richer and more vibrant stories with great meaning can be written if everyone is willing to listen to those with different lived experiences than our own.

Holly shared several examples of nameless students with whom she has been fortunate to share her story: students whom she taught as a classroom teacher, former students who come back and work at GMHS, and families she has built mutual trust with over the years spanning multiple siblings. Embedded within each of these stories was her use of storytelling as a developmental tool to build relationships and make personal connections.

It [storytelling] is so important to building relationships. To be open and honest and share as much as possible. That's my why. I just want people to understand that I'm coming from a place of caring and love, and it has nothing to do with me thinking one thing or another.

Interview 5: Brent

“Our story this year is ‘our house.’ This is our house where we take care of our house. We respect people in our house. We treat this like it's our house and again building in that [culture] piece.”

Brent's journey to his current position follows a typical pattern seen by many educators. After graduating high school, he attended a state university two hours from home. With a bachelor's degree in special education, he entered the teaching profession and taught for five years. Inspired by one of his elementary school assistant principals, Brent always knew he wanted to lead in some capacity eventually. Ms. Brown was an educator who “brought fun to school,” and Brent wanted to do the same.

Leadership opportunities would soon present themselves to Brent. As a teacher, he jumped on opportunities to serve his school. He also knew it would help “get his foot in the [administration] door.” He landed his first assistant principal job at River Bluff High School (RBHS) before moving to an elementary for several years. As the 2019-2020 school year concluded, COVID-19 had schools and communities in its grip.

Concurrently, a new adventure awaited Brent. The school superintendent had approached him, asking if he would be willing to return to River Bluff as the principal. “And there’s really only one answer ...”

COVID-19

Brent stepped into the role of principal at River Bluff High School during one of the most peculiar times in American history. At his first staff meeting, he broke the news that they would teach in person and online during the upcoming school year. The challenges of the moment, compounded by the uniqueness of the situation, were enormous. In those moments, decisions about what was important and what needed to be let go of for the time being had to be made while trying to maintain and build upon the culture at RBHS.

I think for the past two years, and probably in all American schools, we probably turned our eye to a lot of things that we didn’t think were serious. I mean, even things as simple as dress code. I told my team that’s not an issue; we’ve got to deal with these ‘close contact calls.’ We’ve got to make sure they’re doing X. We’re going to make sure they’re doing Y. We’re going to make sure we’re doing Z, and I think we lost sight of some things that were really important to be completely honest.

Leading amid a pandemic was like working triage. School leaders and employees made decisions with the information they had at the moment. They did everything possible to keep the school doors open while maintaining some form of “normal” in classrooms, on sports teams, and through activities. For the River Bluff school community, that normal revolves around being actively involved and giving back to their larger community.

A Collective Story

River Bluff High School is a large school of 2,500 students on the outskirts of a metropolitan, coastal city in the South. The administrative team consists of seven assistant principals, each holding various responsibilities. But this does not stop Brent from jumping in where he is needed, whether dealing with discipline, attending activities and events, or working one-on-one with students.

Brent is proud of RBHS and the work the students and staff accomplish collectively. A strong foundation has been established upon which they operate.

I go into classrooms now and do observations, and I’m blown away! I’m like, these kids are smart. The content they’re learning hasn’t changed much from the standards that we had in place when I was a student, but the depth and breadth of the knowledge they receive is just unheard of.

But these experiences are not limited to just the classroom.

Involvement is not just encouraged at RBHS; it is an expectation. Sharing his own lived experiences, he knows the importance and impact of extracurricular activities.

“Without being involved, I probably would have found myself in a lot more trouble.”

Brent's childhood posed some challenges as he grew up in a single-parent household with three siblings and a mother who worked the night shift. "Fortunately, we're all pretty successful adults now. It [success] came by a little bit of grit and a lot of hard work." He will admit that he was not a perfect student growing up, but that is one of the reasons he got into administration. Sharing his story is an opportunity to connect with students that pass through the halls of River Bluff High School and instill the lessons he learned along the way.

Brent's belief in the value of extracurricular involvement is at the core of RBHS. Living this belief day in and day out lays the groundwork for students to pave a future path for themselves and the school as a whole. The RBHS staff works diligently to get each student involved in something. If students find one thing they can be engaged in, connections can be made while they explore and grow in their abilities and skills. "Nine times out of ten" students who pass through his office, when asked, aren't involved in anything; they come to school and then go home.

Extracurricular activities allow students to be bigger than the four walls surrounding them each day. Brent's encouragement is to "do something bigger than yourself. Do something where you can pour yourself into an extracurricular activity and have a good time doing it as a team to highlight yourself and others." Collectively this builds a strong positive school culture at RBHS. However, he understands this doesn't just happen by luck. It takes concerted effort and hard work.

While Brent is not hesitant to share his personal stories with students, he focuses on the students and staff writing better stories for their community. "Our community pours a lot into the school system. In designing this year, we want you [clubs] to pour

back into our community. We want a club to be more than just a club.” This [school] year (2022-2023), whether it is a club, sports team, or fine arts group, each group/team must volunteer 10 hours of their time in some capacity to their community. Along with volunteering within the larger community, Brent’s other focus is increasing student engagement.

Student engagement at activities has always been strong at RBHS but starting in the 2022-2023 school year, Brent and his staff wanted to make it more of a priority; “we wanted to ramp it up.” With the help of his assistant principals, the “Cat Pack” has organized tailgates with music and free food provided by local eateries. “They [students] are painting their bodies and all that stuff, really getting into the school spirit.” But it’s not just about athletics. Increased student engagement has spread across sports into the fine arts and other activities. At a recent choral concert, the entire baseball team was in attendance, supporting their peers and classmates. “That was huge! For those kids [choir students] to see athletes in the seats was a really big win.”

Student Perspective

Brent frames stories with his students so they can envision a brighter future for themselves, their peers, and RBHS. A culture of involvement and pride has been well-established through his eyes. When asked what students would say the story of River Bluff High School is, his response aligns with one of a strong school culture.

[Students] would probably tell you that we have extremely high expectations and that our teachers are top-notch! They [teachers] care about kids. I tell parents all the time we’re like a waffle house. We’re open 24/7/365. If you were to walk the halls right now, and we’ve been out of school for an hour, teachers are in

classrooms full of kids because they're tutoring. They are going above and beyond.

Collaboration between staff and students can also be seen within the RBHS motto, "Our House." As valuable members of the "house," students also have a voice regarding matters within RBHS. The administration works closely with students to ensure they are being heard. "We [staff/admin] can't always agree with students on certain things they want to see ... but we definitely listen. We lean in and take their suggestions where we can." Certain matters mean more than others; for RBHS students, one of those matters is Homecoming.

"Homecoming is really big around here." Part of the culture is having fun, and Homecoming provides the opportunity to celebrate and have fun. "They'd love to do it every week of every year if they could."

By giving an ear to listen and opportunities for student engagement, a collaborative school story is being written at River Bluff High School, where the students, staff, and community have a voice in paving the path to a brighter future.

Interview 6: David

'I have a picture for you. My grandma told me to bring this to you as a present.'

"Oh well, that's very sweet. And who's your grandmother?"

'She told me to just give you the picture.'

"She hands me a picture and it's my homecoming date, my junior year of high school. [laughter]"

David's connection to Eastern Palms High School (EPHS) and community are as deep as the roots of the mightiest oak tree. Since before EPHS was even a school, his

family was firmly planted within the larger community. However, at first glance, David appears to be an outsider. As a white male with 30 years of educational experience, he does not look like the majority of his students. Eastern Palms High School is an inner-city school with a population of nearly 2,400 students: 94% Hispanic, 91% poverty, and 67% classified as English Language Learners. But for David, this is and always has been home.

Since the day Eastern Palms opened, it has been a special place for David and his family. His aunt was a member of the very first graduating class. His mother, only two years older, did not get this opportunity as the school opened as a freshman-only school that first year. Nestled on the outskirts of a large metropolitan area, Eastern Palms was a farm community in the 1950s. However, it played host to movie stars as it was known for its numerous country clubs and as a getaway from the city.

Growing up, David worked in the fields, picking onions and green beans, saving money for a car. While the community has grown immensely over the past 70 years, the socio-economic disparity still exists. An overwhelming number of families continue to live in poverty, while a mere fifteen miles away lies a community with the highest per capita income in the county. Lincoln Avenue is the unofficial east/west demarcation line, with riches to the west and poverty to the east. “We have the poorest in the world, and then we have the richest in the world.” This is his life, his worldview. One he is immensely proud of and often shares with his students.

Being Committed

David has often been posed the question, “Why?” Why did he want to return to his alma mater, and why is this school so special? For him, the answer is simple; Eastern

Palms has given him so much. Without EPHS, the teachers and the staff, his path in life would be drastically different. He would not be who he is today and almost assuredly not be leading 2,400 students and several hundred staff members. During each chapter of his childhood, individuals were there, looking after his well-being. Just as so many individuals impacted his story, he wants to ensure he can give back to the students who pass through EPHS daily.

As a teenager, David essentially grew up in a single-family household. His mom and dad seemed to be in an endless cycle of splitting up and getting back together. Chaos ensued at nearly every turn as his dad was an alcoholic and “very” abusive. In the 1960s, there were not social workers or Child Protective Services. David’s life became increasingly difficult as he transitioned into teenage life, and he recognized and understood more of what was happening around him.

David began to shut down during the later years of middle school. Instead of a safe place for learning, school became a place of anger. Not only did he begin to shut down, but he hated everyone. Once a successful student, he flipped. Unlike today, the support and interventions for students dealing with abuse and trauma did not exist. Amidst a deep spiral, he found hope, encouragement, and support from a few caring adults who were bound not to let him fail.

Putting on a false front, David hid his personal struggles from everyone. “I was trying to be very protective, bravado, to prevent anybody from knowing. I didn't want to go to foster care. I didn't want anybody to know.” While David was not willing to share his struggles, others were picking up clues that something was different with him. Many of these clues came from the source of his struggles, his dad.

The husband of one of David's middle school teachers happened to work part-time with David's father during the summer delivering bread to local grocery stores. The husband saw his father's struggles with alcoholism and shared them with his wife. Having a small insight into the family's life and struggles, they knew they needed to do something to help protect David as he transitioned from middle school to high school. The duo made a call that would forever change David's life for the better.

Without David's knowledge, his teacher reached out to one of her friends in the English department at EPHS. David recapitulates how he believes the conversation played out. "You got to watch out for this kid. He's got a lot of potential, but he's so angry, and he's going south fast."

David's middle school teacher was right. Within the first week of class, he had been kicked out of math class twice for his sarcastic attitude, and his already elevated anger began to boil. At home, life was getting increasingly difficult.

One night while his mom was away, his father pulled David out of the shower and threw him in the street. But the abuse was far from over, and he continued hiding it from everyone. "A lot of weird stuff was happening. When I had to get stitches, I lied to the doctor. They stitched me up, and I ran before they could report me to the authorities." Having some insight into his struggles and seeing what was happening in school, his 9th-grade English teacher swooped in, and he became her project.

Soon, David found himself eating lunch every day in Mrs. Anderson's room. Like his middle school teacher and her husband, the Andersons were a teaching duo. Mr. Anderson worked at Eastern Palms and was David's World History teacher. Together, the Andersons took David under their wing and were going to make sure he stayed on track

academically and behaviorally. They also knew that for him to be successful, he needed to be involved in extracurricular activities in some form. David recounts arguing and arguing about having to be involved. Unbeknownst to him, this was not working in his favor. Instead, the Andersons saw a talent David never knew he possessed; the ability to debate.

David's schedule was reluctantly changed to incorporate a speech and debate class as an elective. He continued to pitch a fit, but this only enhanced his abilities. Each day he went to practice, he got better and better and also enjoyed the friendships that began to develop. But as the first tournament approached, he was adamant he would not attend. This time, though, for a particularly personal reason.

To compete in speech and debate, one must look the part: button-up shirt, tie, and dress shoes, all of which David did not own. Yet again, the Andersons were there to help him out. A trip to a local department store ensued, and David was outfitted with the wardrobe he needed to compete. But the love and support from the Andersons did not stop there. On tournament days, he would find extra cash in his pocket for a slice of pizza so he could hang out with his friends after the competition.

Time and time again, the Andersons provided support for David. They wanted nothing more than for him to have a great high school experience, regardless of the struggles he was facing at home. David appreciated the attention he was receiving and the support he needed to blaze a trail of success. By the time he completed his freshman year, he had a 4.0 grade point average, qualified for the state tournament in debate, and made friends with many of his teammates on the debate team.

The Andersons were David's guide rails of encouragement and support for two years. Successful at getting him involved in speech and debate, they wanted him to try out other sports and activities. They "forced me into a club and then made me sign up for tennis and swim because I didn't know anything about basketball, baseball, or football [chuckle]." Once again, he found success winning ribbons and having a great time on the court and in the pool. David recounts, "All of a sudden, life's getting good." However, this would be short-lived, and his world would soon be turned upside down again.

As David's sophomore year concluded, his mother decided to take "him" [dad] back again, and "life went to hell in a handbasket." Forging documents, David bought a plane ticket and ran away from home. At midnight, he showed up at his grandmother's house in Arkansas, where he would stay for the summer. As summer gave way to fall and with the start of a new school year approaching, his uncle took him back home. Upon his return, his dad was still in the picture, and nothing had changed. David's home life continued to be thrown into chaos.

During David's junior year, a different trusting adult entered his life. Mr. Smith knew he needed someone to look out for him. As his assistant principal, Mr. Smith kept an eye on him and, once again, provided the support David needed to stay on the right track. He would also be there in some of David's darkest moments.

"I'm bleeding. I need help," was David's first call to Mr. Smith. It was midnight, but within minutes Mr. Smith was at the pickup point and brought him to the hospital. After receiving several stitches in his head, Mr. Smith brought him back to the safety of his house for the night. The following day, Mrs. Smith applied foundation to cover up the stitches and bruises so that he could return to school and participate in speech and tennis.

The Smiths understood the importance of keeping David at school and involved in school activities. Like the Andersons, they encouraged him to expand his involvement to an even greater level at school.

As a senior, and with the urging of Mr. Smith, David was elected as activities director while also serving as the mascot commissioner. To label David as a success would be a gigantic understatement. Topping off his high school career, he finished with a 4.0 grade point average and was valedictorian of his class. “I was Eastern Palms High School that year, but behind the scenes, nobody had any idea of all the horrendous stuff that was happening.”

David befittingly credits the Andersons and Smiths for changing the whole trajectory of his life. “They turned my life around. I never had to want for breakfast or lunch. I never had to worry about if I was going to be safe.” After graduating from college with a business degree and working for a large national retailer, he soon realized his career would not be in the business field. He was destined for a career in education because of his lived experiences. “I became a teacher because that’s what changed my life.”

Coming Home

When the opportunity came to return to his alma mater, the choice was easy. Despite what was happening at home, David had an overwhelmingly positive experience at EPHS. He attributes this to the caring individuals he always had looking out for his well-being. David knows many of his current students come from similar households and situations as he experienced. He wants to give back to the community that made him who

he is today. “This school saved my life multiple times. And I want to give back in the same way people did for me.”

With a 92% Hispanic student population, many doubted David’s ability to make a connection to the student body at EPHS. One of his biggest naysayers was the former principal, a Hispanic man who did not speak Spanish.

“The kids aren’t going to accept you,” expressed the previous principal when David stepped into the EPHS principalship.

“You watch and see,” proclaimed David in response. “I’m more connected to this community than you ever dreamed of being. And I was right.”

Using his own story, many students can relate to the struggles, trauma, and poverty he endured. However, he has an additional tool in his back pocket; the ability to share his story in Spanish.

That’s how I make the connection right off the bat. Instead of this old white guy that has nothing in common [with students], it’s like, ‘You’re one of us! You went to this school. Your life was like ours.’ I know what it’s like to be poor and not know what you’re going to eat. They find out that my life was very much like theirs and that I understand them. I have a relationship with them that most of my teachers can’t figure out because I was these kids. I was them.

To be “one of them” also means that he must be present, and David takes this even a step further. David is always at sporting events, concerts, play productions, or other events happening around campus with his camera. Thousands of pictures are snapped, then shared with students through an Instagram account and a Google Drive folder. Students are free to download any picture they want as a reminder of their

experiences at Eastern Palms. For David, pictures are another way of telling the EPHS school story and making a connection with each student.

To me, that's my way of connecting with kids. They feel loved, valued, known, you know. Kids want to be heard. They want to be known. They don't want to be number 18 in the grade book or to be known by their student ID number. So, when I take pictures and send them to the yearbook, it's a story for them because they feel like, "somebody knows me." To me, that's my way of connecting with them in the same way my assistant principal and teacher did for me when I was in high school. I want them to know that I care and that they matter to me. So, they [students] just ... it's like they flock. They all want pictures. But that's how I get to know all 2,149 of them.

Family Struggles

"This school [EPHS] is family," and when it came time for David's daughter to choose a high school, he wanted her to have that same experience. With a high school closer to their home, people questioned their decision to enroll Callie at Eastern Palms. But once again, EPHS provided a tremendous experience for the family. David, not yet the principal at EPHS, could do all the dad things that come with being the parent of a high schooler. He was involved in the Band Boosters and the School Site Council. While Callie enjoyed her experience and excelled, his younger son had significant reservations about attending his dad's and sister's alma mater.

Coming out of middle school, David's son, Ryan, wanted something different. According to Ryan, David "forced him" to attend the same middle school where he served as the principal. Ryan wanted the "freedom" to be his own self and attend the

same high school as his friends. David and his wife relented, setting up a story he shares yearly with his students.

Ryan was “Mr. Social Butterfly” in high school. He valued going out and having a good time with his friends. Even though school was not his first priority, he entered his senior year on track to graduate on time with his class.

As his senior year was rapidly coming to a close, Ryan began fooling around. While he had completed the required number of credits to graduate, he needed to pass his Government/Econ class to meet the district’s graduation requirements. As graduation crept closer and closer, his grade in that class kept slipping further and further. Within weeks, it went from a C to a low D, still passing but just barely. Two weeks before graduation, Ryan failed to turn in several assignments, and his grade was now failing. To make matters worse, Ryan was not getting along with his teacher. However, there was still hope.

Ryan’s teacher reached out to David’s wife to inform her that, with a passing grade of a certain score on the final, Ryan could still graduate on time. David happened to be on the East Coast at a professional development training that week and received a call from his wife informing him of the situation. David immediately returned a call to his son, and a plan was set up. A three-day weekend awaited Ryan, and he was to utilize the time to buckle down and study for the one test he needed to pass to graduate. Follow-up calls were made back home on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. During each call, Ryan assured his father that he was studying. David would soon discover that he “was lying through his teeth.”

Ryan took the final on Tuesday; he did not pass. In fact, he did less than stellar. Unbeknownst to his parents, he was out having a good time with his friends instead of studying like he had assured his dad. Two days before graduation, the family got the official call from the district office. Ryan had indeed failed to meet the school's graduation requirements.

David and his wife were devastated. Ryan was embarrassed. His grandma had flown out to help celebrate this major life accomplishment, but now there was nothing to celebrate. Instead of donning his cap and gown and receiving his diploma, he was enrolled in summer school, retaking the one class he needed to finish high school.

Ultimately, Ryan took summer school and completed the necessary requirements to receive his diploma. But as his second high school graduation day approached, Ryan was adamant he would not walk. "I'm too embarrassed. I screwed up. I blew it. I disappointed everyone and my family," Ryan exclaimed. David and his wife attended the ceremony without him. For David and his family, it was a difficult few months that took time to process fully.

David felt guilty that he was on the East Coast the last few days before Ryan took his semester test. He is confident that if he had been home, he would have been able "to keep his thumb on him" and get Ryan across the finish line. For the longest time, the fact that his son failed to graduate on time ate him up inside. However, with this story comes a silver lining and a lesson he always shares with the students at Eastern Palms.

In retrospect, Ryan knows and understands what he gave up for a few days of fooling around and enjoyment, a sentiment he openly shares with David. "Dad, you need to tell my story. Tell these kids don't do really well [in school] and then get the weekend

before graduation and throw away 12 years because you're too busy having fun and not buckling down." David's wife hasn't always been so willing to have Ryan's story shared. She did not want her son to relive the embarrassment. Ryan's response to his mother, "If dad can save some kids from being stupid, do it."

Each year at the senior's first meeting, David shares this very personal story with his students. A reminder that nothing is guaranteed and to not become complacent just because they have come this far. They need not succumb to "senioritis" and hold each other accountable for crossing the finish line. David does not want other students to experience what he and his family went through with Ryan.

On David's desk sits a picture of him and his son. It is a reminder of this painful story they experienced but also one of hope. "Is he successful now? Did he turn it around, buckle down and go to a junior college to be able to make it move forward? Yeah, but the sad thing is he learned the hard way." After his failure, Ryan could have taken a much different path in life. But he did not.

Shared Lived Experiences

When asked if Ryan's story resonates with his students, David did not hesitate to share the story of Alex. A student with many obstacles in life, he overcame them through piecing together the stories David had shared with him and his classmates. How Alex's EPHS story would end is a moment David will never forget.

David always tells the freshmen that if they blink, it will be their senior year. For the seniors, if they snap their fingers, it will be June, and they will have graduated. David shared a conversation from Alex's perspective once he returned to school after caring for his mother.

You kept telling us that school goes by quickly, and then you told us the story of your son. I kind of gave up because I had to help my mom with my sisters, and I wasn't doing my homework. I got lazy. Then I came back, and I think I was starting to get senioritis. My friend kept reminding me, "Hey, don't throw it away. You've already gone to school since kindergarten. You are a senior now. Don't throw it away." The other day, I walked by and I saw on your desk that picture of you and your kid. You know the one you said that like blew it at the end? I don't want to be that kid because you know, that gave me hope. I want to make you proud.

Ryan's story resonated with Alex, giving him hope and confidence to finish his high school diploma regardless of his mistakes and the work ahead of him. Alex owned his story and did not want to compound the mistakes by not completing what he had started. Together, David and Alex devised a plan. Alex would take a few online classes, in addition to his senior load, to recoup for those he missed during his junior year. Just like Ryan, Alex finished his coursework, but his lasting impact would come as he walked across the stage at graduation.

Alex came to the office two days before graduation to pick up his cap and gown. As he was passing through, he saw David and asked for a picture with him, just like the one of David and his son that sits on his desk. With David's pride overflowing for Alex, he wanted to be the one to shake Alex's hand at the graduation ceremony. He purposely stood on Alex's side of the stage, waiting for his name to be called. As he approached, he put out his hand. But instead of a handshake, Alex gave him a big hug and told him to

look that way. His mom was standing there waiting to take a picture. Ryan's story had come full circle. "That's why I tell that story."

Why Storytelling?

For David, storytelling is an opportunity to connect even deeper with the community he has called home for nearly his entire life. He uses storytelling as a tool to help overcome differences and bridge divides. His story and experiences are beneficial to growing and moving the district in the right direction. There is value in his lived experiences.

David recounts his path to landing the principalship at his alma mater. Whether it was opening a new building, taking over a building that needed a culture transformation, or being called in by the board to help settle boundary disputes, he got to where he is at today because he knew the story of the school district in ways that only a native son could. And because of this connection, he has maintained and built upon the family atmosphere at Eastern Palms High School.

The power of story will get you a lot further, but it has to be genuine. [It] has to be a real story. Everyone in history that was able to be a mover and shaker was because they used the power of a genuine, for-real story that grabbed people.

Because out of the emotion and the connection comes action.

Interview 7: Mary

"If you start with relationships first, and not superficially and not fake, just a simple question or authentic caring about another human being when you meet them, I think you can start to build trust pretty quickly."

The challenges of serving as a secondary school administrator can be tremendous. Navigating the transition from childhood to being a young adult is part of an administrator's responsibility that carries a heavy weight. Students are growing and learning about who they are and making adult decisions with “frontal lobes that are not fully developed.” The decisions students make as teenagers can have lifelong implications. Oftentimes, administrators must react to student behaviors in a manner that may not be popular with students or their families. If a relationship between a principal and a student has been established, these conversations become more productive. Yet, that does not mean there will not always be adversity to face.

As a veteran school administrator, Mary has made those difficult decisions. With over a decade of administrative experience at the building and district office level, she has administered consequences that were not always popular with students and parents. Regardless, she always kept the policy and personal side separated.

I always actually showed it [school policy] to them [students] and would highlight it with them. If you're not happy with this policy, this is the complaint procedure for you. If you're not happy with how I delivered it, this is the complaint procedure for you. These are two separate things. When we were able to separate the person from the decision that helps salvage that relationship.

While Mary works hard at separating professional decisions from the empathetic, human element, there are still times when life becomes messy. Parents upset with situations that arise at school, often use the principal as an outlet for their frustrations. Unfortunately, their grievances do not always take place behind closed doors, as parents (and students) turn to the very public platforms of social media.

Half-Truths and Social Media

Half-truths are sometimes all parents hear, and in the social media era, parents will often take to social media to vent their frustrations. The truth always lies in the middle, and what happens at school and the story shared with parents when students get home often gets convoluted. Her professional experiences dealing with parents have taught her many lessons. So have those she shares with her father, who has been known to take to the keyboard in defense of his daughter.

Mary realizes that not all the decisions she makes will be popular. However, she wants to ensure that her students understand the bigger picture and the ramifications of going home angry and venting to their parents. “I would say that if you are not happy with it [a decision], that is completely okay.” Even amid anger or disappointment, she wants her students to have a strategy for approaching conversations at home.

This is the channel of how we would have this discussion. Because if you go home and you’re still not happy with it, and you share it differently than [the truth], and your parent puts it on Facebook. ... If we could just make sure we always are speaking the truth that’d be awesome.

Living in a small town, Mary often gets tagged or will at least see social media posts from parents that are frustrated with issues. When a problem arises, she will call the parents to discuss the facts that took place, often relying on the personal connections she has built as a community member for over a decade. However, she usually is not the first family member to see negative posts. Her dad often beats her to the punch.

Mary’s dad is a “super defensive and proud man.” Just as parents use social media to stand up for their student, Mary’s dad does the same for her. Each set of parents is

“advocating off the belief that they know the whole story.” Unfortunately, neither side does.

Mary recounted many nights when she has taken to social media to do “damage control.” Phone calls or messages to her dad have been common. Sometimes, she has even had to respond directly to her dad’s social media comments.

Sometimes I put it out there publicly, “Hey dad, thanks for defending me, but it's good here.” or, “Hey dad, how about you delete that?” And when my mom was alive, I would tell her, “you need to go take the iPad from dad [chuckle].”

Mary and her students have a unique, common shared experience; parents who use social media to defend their children. It is relational, as both sides are defending their child’s truth. Parents are posting on social media because they love and care. Mary appreciates her father's support but wishes he would sometimes stay away from social media drama.

Shared Family Experiences

Many students who fill school hallways across the United States often carry unknown trauma. Students may struggle with abuse, mental health issues, or addiction, or are exposed to these traumas at home within their families. Just as Mary can relate to students through her father’s use of social media, she instantly connects with students experiencing trauma through her brother’s story.

Matt, Mary’s brother, has struggled with addiction his entire life, and within her community, addiction is “pretty heavy.” She can relate to struggling students as she knows what it feels like to wait for “that call.” She has witnessed the rehab experience

through her brother. Shared experiences, even ones stemming from trauma, create a connection and bond that can last beyond a student's time in high school.

Reid's Story

Reid was a nice kid who reminded Mary of her brother Matt. He was super impulsive with erratic behaviors. He also LOVED to run his mouth, with trouble always lurking around the next corner. While not suffering from addiction himself, she knew he was a "hot mess" and needed extra care and support.

Mary recognized Reid digging a hole he would be unable to escape if he did not turn his behaviors around quickly. Like her brother Matt, Reid had a mindset of doing everything himself and never asking for help. Mary reiterated time and time again that there was no shame in him reaching out to others. If needed, Reid had to have another trusting adult intervene, so he did not get into an unescapable situation. A lesson that came full circle years later in the most inconspicuous setting.

Stopping in at the local drugstore one evening, Mary had a few items to grab on her way home from work. The line was long, but as she approached the cashier, she was greeted by a familiar face, Reid.

"Oh my gosh, remember when you told me to call an adult and get help and not deal with it myself?" Reid excitedly proclaimed. "Yeah, somebody stole my car, and I knew who it was. I was going to take a bat over there, and then I thought, no, I shouldn't."

"I'm so proud of you. That's a really great move," Mary responded. Matt's story resonated with Reid. He learned to control his impulses and not make a bad situation worse, just as they had discussed many times in Mary's office. Those conversations had a

positive impact on Reid and the two formed a relationship over their shared experiences. She is even more thankful for his turnaround as Reid is now Mary's neighbor with a family and a good job with the county. "You can't give up on a kid because they're 14 and a hot mess."

Listening...

Mason was another student that reminded Mary of her brother. Always in trouble, he was also not your typical student. Mary often visited with him after being kicked out of class. She shared many of the same stories of her brother's struggles but saw minimal improvement. It was not until Mary sat back and let Mason talk that she learned what he truly wanted in life.

Mason's dad was frustrated with his son, and he could not figure out why he continued acting out in the manner he did. He shared with Mary that Mason had everything he needed in life and often took stuff away when he got in trouble. Even this did not change his behavior. Mary understood this dad's sentiments but recognized something was festering down deeper that needed to be uncovered. "It's awesome that you worked so hard to provide all these things. Sounds like you can take them away, and it doesn't change anything."

Mary and Mason had a good relationship, and she finally asked him what he wanted during a visit to her office. Mason's response was simple. It was not about having stuff. All he wanted to do was go fishing with his dad.

Mason transferred schools soon after their conversation, but not before Mary shared Mason's wish with his dad. A couple of years later, Mary ran into dad at the bank and was slightly nervous about how the conversation would unfold "because that could

go in only one of two directions.” Fortunately, it was a positive experience with dad thanking her for calling him out on what Mason really wanted. They now go fishing together. If it was not for Mary lending a listening ear, who knows how the story would have unfolded.

Family Histories

School is not always a happy place for students and families, and living in a small town can often exasperate the issue. Everyone knows everyone’s business, including their family’s history, which can have lingering effects from generation to generation. Decisions made by siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and even parents endure and influence family perceptions of the school. While not fair or accurate at times, some students attending Polkville High School come with a clouded conscious. Mary admits that their small town can be “rough.” A fact confirmed by the handful of former students serving time in the state prison. These students’ school experiences were often mired with negative experiences.

When working with these families, Mary always builds relationships first. She wants the school to be an inviting place for all students, not a place rooted in resentment. Working with her staff and providing additional help and support creates those bonds so that students can overcome the challenges they carry. Unfortunately, some students find their belonging in local gangs.

I’m not going to judge where you are finding your comfort and what you do outside of here, but I am going to judge in here, and we do have set criteria in here of how we’re going to choose to behave.

Respect is at the core of those conversations, as Mary understands where students' needs often lie. One example is if a student needs alternative educational opportunities, she finds a way to get them signed up for the GED. With her understanding of the unique needs within the community and her students, she will call a particular law enforcement officer because she knows which ones can help and which ones do not have the student's best interest at heart. Having the ability to separate her job responsibilities from the human side, Mary has been able to build and sustain relationships that benefit all parties.

Why Storytelling?

“Telling a story is the easiest way to build a connection.” By framing situations through stories, Mary can build trust and allow students to see her for who she truly is. Anytime a principal is willing to listen to a student's story, their lives can be changed for the better. You also can never predict who may be your future next-door neighbor.

Interview 8: Rachel

“I love you in a school and friend appropriate way.”

Rachel's journey to Snow Fields Technical High School (SFTHS) was a road full of bumps, potholes, and many twists and turns. Yet, through every adventure, dilemma, success, or setback, she learned a lesson and has a story that solidifies her values and beliefs. She cherishes stories and shares them as a tool to frame conversations with students about overcoming obstacles and envisioning a brighter future.

Rachel's Journey

Rachel was highly involved in the family business from a very early age. At the age of five, she was getting paid \$1.00 per hour to catch shoplifters. “Nobody expected a

[five-year-old] ponytailed girl to be watching you for shoplifting [laughter].” After Rachel finished high school, it seemed fitting to stay with the family business while pursuing a business degree. Even as a young adult, she had a hand in hiring and firing over 200 people a year. While life in the office was satisfying, Rachel also had an adventurous side.

Each year, from May until November, Rachel served as a whitewater guide on the Middle Fork Salomon River. She found joy floating down the river on six-day expeditions only to turn around and do it again the following week. Rachel relished meeting people from across the United States and even met her future husband working on the river.

For the next few years, the two continued as guides for river excursions and at a hunting camp. At a proverbial fork in the river, Rachel knew she had to decide on a career path. While the family business would always be there, she found satisfaction in training people and watching them succeed. After completing a master’s degree, a career in education awaited her.

Big Moves

A honeymoon trip to Alaska proved to be a turning point for Rachel and her husband. Drawn in by its beauty and with credentials to teach, Rachel applied for and secured only one of two business education jobs in the state that year. Coincidentally, it was in the same town they had spent their honeymoon. While the surroundings were peaceful and serene, life circumstances soon tested her resolve and their finances.

With Rachel’s husband laid up due to multiple back surgeries, she was the family’s sole breadwinner. In addition to her teaching responsibilities, she worked for the

city as an accounting auditor, a customer service representative for the Forest Service, and as a waitress. Their family was also growing with the addition of two young daughters. While tumultuous at times, the water was about to get even rougher.

After six years in her teaching position, Rachel was let go; her program was the casualty of budget cuts. Looking for a direction to turn, she began to explore positions in school administration. Encouraged by a well-respected school superintendent, Rachel obtained her administrative certification while working multiple jobs. “Rachel, there are some people who need to continue to be teachers, and there are some that need to move into administration. You need to move into administration. You have it.” With confidence instilled by her first superintendent and the need to find a job, she stuck her toe in the administrative waters, hoping to get a bite.

Having missed the hiring window, Rachel resigned herself to working multiple jobs for the foreseeable future. One day while working at the city office, she received a call that would forever change her path. Her first superintendent was on the other end of the line and had heard about her losing her position at the school. As the CEO of the state administrator’s organization, she was well-connected and assured Rachel that her big break was coming soon. Upon returning home, she checked her email to find that opportunity awaiting her.

Rachel’s first principalship was rough, to say the least. Adversity seemed to lurk at every turn, with community issues forcing the superintendent to resign and the entire school board to be recalled shortly after taking the job. The unique district comprised of buildings at four sites on four islands, each with very different demographics. Two islands were predominately Native Alaskans, while the other two were predominately

Caucasian. Cultural barriers existed between the tribal communities and those of the “Grateful Dead” parents, which had to be navigated. Lacking experience as an administrator, she took on the principal role, oversaw the remodel and construction at one of her building sites, and was now asked to complete all state and federal reporting.

For 2 ½ years, Rachel and her fellow first-time principal “figured things out” without the guidance of a consistent superintendent or stable board. Wanting a fresh start and new opportunity, the two of them looked to land new jobs, but this came with a precondition, “We were a package deal. It was either both of us or neither of us.”

As luck would have it, Rachel and the other principal landed administrative roles together in a new district. Rachel was a high school principal, while her colleague worked as a director in the district office. While they both got a fresh start, many of the same issues plagued them, specifically a lack of leadership at the top. They worked under four different superintendents in five years, with the last one nearly breaking Rachel’s spirit and marooning her career.

“I Love You...”

For the first three years, Rachel enjoyed her role as principal at Glacier Bay High School. In a school of 50 students, she got to know each student and their families personally. Relationships were at the core of her values, which extended into every aspect of the school.

Rachel also experienced professional success during her first few years at Glacier Bay. She was elected to serve on the state principal’s board and named the state principal of the year. She proudly accepted the award in October but was on an improvement plan

by April. Another new superintendent had been hired, and Rachel knew immediately that things would be different.

Issues and situations were happening out of the public's eye, between her and the new superintendent, that she knew needed to be documented. Soon, she had two three-ring binders full of notes about their interactions. Regardless of what was happening in the background, Rachel kept putting on a professional public persona. She also never wavered in her desire to build relationships with her students and families, an asset she would soon rely upon.

The following year, things went from bad to worse. Stress was getting the best of Rachel, and she lost 40 pounds. With little sleep and the dramatic weight loss, students and parents noticed and began asking questions. The private friction soon overflowed publicly as contracts were offered to all the teachers and staff for the following year except for her.

Stalled contract negotiations on top of her improvement plan only added to her stress and frustration. Rachel began to question how she had gone from being named the state principal of the year, to not having a contract in a 14-month time span. Upon returning from a teacher recruitment fair with her superintendent, Rachel flat-out asked about her lack of a contract. The superintendent responded very curtly, "This is why we need to talk. Meet me in my office tomorrow at 9:00."

The meeting was "horrible." For 3½ hours, Rachel listened as her superintendent went through her entire evaluation, with each category marked as "developing." The superintendent's motives were clear; she wanted Rachel fired. Tension and uncertainty were felt throughout their small community, with more and more questions being asked.

Walking across the street to her building after the meeting, she was met by a parent who was abreast of the ongoing, unsuccessful contract negotiations.

“Do you have a contract yet?”

“No, but I’m working towards that goal,” Rachel responded.

As she left school for the day, she contemplated what might unfold the following evening at the school board meeting, which was to be held in her building. Ultimately, all she wanted was a contract in hand and the opportunity to continue leading her building. She knew her students supported her but could have never imagined the events that would soon transpire.

The next morning Rachel walked into her building and immediately felt the love and support of the community. Overnight, students and parents lined the hallways with posters of support. Her office was full of balloons and flowers; she began to cry. The stress and anxiety had been building inside her for months as she put on a good face for the public.

Unbeknownst to Rachel, the same parents and students packed the school board meeting to show their support publicly. One after another, patrons spoke on her behalf, questioning why she did not have a contract while all the other teachers had already received theirs. All the while, the superintendent continually got up and paced. Trying to find a way to stop this outpouring of support, she made several calls to the school lawyers asking for advice. She already knew their response; they could not be stopped.

Eventually, the board went into executive session, and Rachel was ready with her three-ring binders in hand.

The board came out of executive session with a mandate; the superintendent had a week to resolve whatever issues existed in securing a contract for Rachel. Small-town chatter and gossip ensued. Regardless, Rachel continued to maintain a professional disposition.

“Ms. Rachel, what’s going on with your contract? Like I don’t understand,” one of her high school students asked.

Rachel responded in a manner only a skillful veteran could. “You know Erika, it’s just like with student discipline. If I deal with you, I can’t go run out and say, ‘hey, guess what Erika did?’ Just know that I’m working towards getting my contract.” What happened next is something she could have never predicted.

Rachel was sitting in her office when she was met by her secretary and a few frantic teachers. “What do we do? Do we mark them absent?”

Looking up from her desk, Rachel responded, “What are you talking about?”

“The kids are all headed across the street to the district office. They are doing a silent sit-in until you get your contract.”

Caught off guard, she knew she needed to turn to a trusted colleague for advice. She picked up the phone and called the state administrators association’s executive director. “What do I do? This is totally outside of anything I ever thought would happen.”

“First, take a deep breath,” he answered. “You need to go over and tell those kids you love them and then ask them to get back to class; they’ve made their point.”

Already on thin ice with the superintendent and still without a contract, Rachel did not want this to come back on her in any way. She immediately had her secretary call every single parent to ensure they knew what their student was doing and get permission

for their student to be absent. One by one, phone calls were made and each time her secretary was met with the same response. “Oh yeah, we knew they were doing it. If the superintendent has a problem with it, she can talk to me or my lawyer.”

With all her ducks in a row, Rachel made her way across the drive to the district office, unsure of what she may find. Walking through the front door, the room was eerily quiet. Without a staff member in sight, her entire student body sat in deafening silence. The students had made their point, and it was time for them to return to class.

You guys, I love you so much. I appreciate what you're doing, and you have made your point. So now I want to ask you respectfully. ... It's my job to make sure that you receive an education. You have voiced your right. Could I please ask you to go back now and continue to learn in school?

Individually, each student stood up, walked over, and hugged Rachel. She also heard the words she had shared with them so many times over the past four years. “I love you in a school and friend appropriate way.”

Rachel got her new contract and by September the superintendent had left. Regardless, after one more year at Glacier Bay, she knew it was time to move on. Challenging and difficult only begin to describe what she went through. But in her voice, you can hear a deep appreciation for the students, staff, and community and what they did for her during those difficult months. “It was one of the hardest times in life, but also one of the most special times as well.” She had navigated the roughest rapids of her career and returned to smoother waters.

Full Circle

After leaving Glacier Bay, Rachel made one more administrative stop before ultimately landing at Snow Fields Technical High School (SFTHS) and returning to her career and technical education roots. Rachel proudly serves the 400 students, some who travel up to 50 miles a day, at the school of choice.

Being a career and technical high school principal allows Rachel to dive back into her repertoire of stories from her many lived experiences through the years. Many lessons were learned while navigating river rapids, catching shoplifters, hiring and firing employees in human resources, teaching in the classroom, or serving as a school administrator. Not only does she share her story, but she encourages her staff to do the same.

We've tried to make it our mission [at SFTHS] to let kids know of all the journeys and loops that we took to get to where we're currently at, what it's taken, and the importance of, in our minds, having those professional skills needed to transition from one job to the other.

By sharing their stories, students learn more about each staff member beyond what they do in the classroom. Who are they as a person? What interests, talents, passions, and skills do they possess? Posted outside each staff member's door is a poster that includes a variety of information. Rachel shared what she expects outside of each classroom.

I want posted outside your door a picture of you. It doesn't just have to be you. It can be you with your kids or a couple of pictures. But I want you to not only list [your] name and business title but list your education. Let them [students] know

where you went to school. List the jobs you've held. Mine showed waitress, retail, business owner. ... List jobs you've held and advice for students. In my advice, I put, 'don't think that any role is beneath you.' If you want to succeed in life, you need to be willing to step in, in any capacity, to see what's needed.

These stories are invaluable as students learn that there is more to each staff member than what they teach. Passions lie within everyone; it is just a matter of showing them off to students. However, Rachel also understands the importance of sharing the real-life skills students need to land a job and have a successful career.

Students are taught the importance of punctuality, regular attendance, preparing for an interview, resume skills, and how to make a firm handshake. Rachel shares how easy it is for students to be passed over for positions based on their appearance. "I know five seconds after walking into an interview if I'm going to hire them. If they walk in smelling like smoke or a farm or overdosed with cologne, I'll cut the interview short. They aren't going to impress anyone [chuckle]."

Stories are an integral part of who Rachel is and how she leads. By sharing her own lived experiences and those of her students, she has established a culture at Snow Fields Technical High School where the stories of her students, staff, community, and alumni are valued. Through stories, students obtain the skills to envision a future down any career path they choose.

Rachel also understands the importance of sharing the stories of the success of her former students as well. Doing so forms a deeper connection between her students and the community. She shared that a couple of former students recently started their own detailing business. A story worth telling, she shared the SFTHS graduates' success with

the larger community. A few days later, the same two alumni showed up at an automotive advisory committee meeting, wanting to give back to the alma mater that gave them their foundation.

Rachel knows that sharing her own personal stories can build a greater connection with her students. “There’s power in helping students understand my why for doing what I’m doing and to help them define theirs.”

Interview 9: Ron

I was around many different things in college and in high school. I could have done the wrong thing. My mom would always say, “make the right choice. You’ve got to be the one to make good decisions. You’ve got to look out for yourself.” And I use that with kids all the time.

Life is about choices, and our choices are often rooted in the communities we call home and the families surrounding us. When it comes to a rural midwestern upbringing, one would be hard-pressed to find one more quintessential than Ron’s. Attending a consolidated high school consisting of four rural villages, one of which Ron called home, shaped his view of the world. His values and beliefs are deeply rooted in his ties to his local church and his mentors during his formative years.

A staple of small-town USA is its people. Everyone knows everyone, and Ron was surrounded by loving, caring adults who looked out for his well-being. In addition to his parents, he also had teachers, church elders, and a loving congregation, laying the foundation upon which he now stands. “I grew up with a really good minister and a really good church board around me as a kid.” Ron credits all these individuals for guiding him

into a career in education. However, it was not a straight path from high school to a classroom of his own.

The Path

Family has always played an essential role in Ron's life, including his post-high school and career plans. Ron had entertained attending Presbyterian Ministry in Dubuque with the encouragement of a church elder. His parents had a different career path in mind. Impressed by the 100% placement rate of students entering the teaching profession, his parents wanted him to attend the small, private college just down the road. Ultimately, his parents' vision became his own, although he had a few plans and dreams he wanted to pursue before securing his first teaching position.

Majoring in social sciences and history, Ron had a few options once he completed his degree. After student teaching, he could get a teaching job in small-town USA or continue his education by attending law school. He had studied and taken the LSAT while student teaching and had been accepted to law school eight hours from home. Seeking out this adventure, he packed up and moved away from the tight-knit community he had always called home.

Law school proved to be challenging for Ron. Academically he was succeeding, yet personally, uprooting and replanting without the support he always had was difficult. During his year in Oklahoma, both of his grandfathers passed away and he was called to come back home.

For the next few years, Ron substituted for various local districts while obtaining his Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction from the State University. Once he completed his degree, Ron secured his first teaching and coaching position in the state's

northeast corner, taking him three hours from home. During this chapter in his story, Ron found success as a coach and teacher, making many connections that would benefit him throughout his career. Stories are about foundations, and Ron's story once again called him to come back home.

After five years as a teacher, a principal position opened in a district only 14 miles from where he grew up and where his parents still lived. Recently married, Ron knew he wanted his kids to have similar experiences he did growing up as they provided the foundation for his values, morals, and beliefs. Life can take people on many paths, and sometimes that path takes us all the way back home.

Lessons in Sports

Sports often provide the arena to teach lessons and instill values in those who compete. As an athlete, coach, and school administrator, Ron has seen firsthand the impact sports can have on an individual, both positively and negatively. Stories about sports often provide deep context and vivid imagery upon which the listener can connect. Each lesson learned comes from an experience or story Ron has lived.

For many Midwesterners, sports are a way of life between the long, hot summers and the bitterly cold winters. Long trips across rural America for a Legion baseball game or a 6th grade basketball game in a dimly lit city auditorium built in the 1930s are the norm. Instead of stopping at McDonald's or Burger King between games, you grab a slice of pizza and a bottle of pop from the local gas station.

Regarding sports, Ron's parents could not have been further apart in their views. His mom was an all-conference and all-state volleyball player in high school. She was all in and so was Ron. His dad, a very analytical, cerebral, and quiet man, would rather be at

home watching Westerns. Ron had lived the midwestern youth sports scene and was excited as he entered his senior year, but there was a dilemma brewing on the inside.

Ron was a self-proclaimed “pretty decent” basketball player. At 5’10”, he had the hops to dunk the ball. When it came to competing, he worked hard on his skills to be an impact player on the team. Yet, as one of nine seniors on the squad, they all knew they would have to fill specific roles. And for Ron, this meant he would pick up a few minutes here and there while riding the pine. Ron knew he had the skills but struggled with his lack of playing time, especially when his talent came through.

I go back to my senior year, and I can still play it in my head. I got two steals, two layups, and two threes in the last minute and twenty seconds before halftime ... [pause] and then I never played the rest of the game. Coach Bertrand was like, “You got what I wanted out there.” I was in for a minute and a half and scored 10 points. I just went on a roll and [now] the odds were against me. So, I’m probably not going to do that if I went in in the third and fourth quarter, right? I wouldn’t say ...[pause] I never thought of quitting. But I would say it’s hard not to be bitter. It’s hard to know when you’re in practice and you kick somebody’s butt and the coaches say, “oh, every position is open.”

The lessons learned 20 years ago on the hardwood provide Ron the context when working with student-athletes and parents as a high school principal. He understands how it is “hard not to be bitter,” but because of their shared lived experiences, he understands their struggles. Unfortunately, in today’s youth sports culture, those conversations rarely happen as players will just quit or transfer to another school instead of embracing their true role on the team.

In today's sports culture, you will rarely find a high school basketball team with nine seniors still competing. Everyone wants to be the star, and oftentimes by eighth, ninth, or tenth grade, a player not in that role finds something better to do with their time. Ron's experience was unique as the nine seniors that year may not have always agreed with what was happening on the court but, "we got up at 6:30 in the morning, went to practice every day, and we all knew our role."

Knowing Your Role

Callie, one of Ron's student-athletes, was a junior looking forward to the upcoming volleyball season. The team was aiming for a state title as they had the players, focus, and disposition to end the year with a victory at the state tournament. Callie wanted nothing more than to be on the court for that final point, but instead, she was relegated to the sidelines as two "stud" freshmen outcompeted her in practice.

Ron recounts conversations with Callie during that successful yet tumultuous year for her. He shared his experience as a senior and his specific role. While her role was not setting up a spike or serving an ace, it was to be the best teammate she could be in the moment. She competed every day in practice to make her teammates better, and she was the best bench cheerleader during games; a role Ron said she was very good at. While maybe bitter for not seeing the court, she did not quit and was able to celebrate a state championship on the court with her teammates.

Choices and Connections

Everyone is faced with choices in every aspect of life, whether it's athletics, academics, or socializing on the weekends. The decisions one makes can greatly impact the path one takes in life. The foundations we have, which are rooted in our morals,

values, and worldviews, will often dictate our choices. When one knows and understands who they truly are, they have an easier time of deciding which choice to make.

Ron's foundation was established and reinforced from an early age. He never questioned his morals and values as he had a support network looking out for his well-being. At 14, he was an elder on the church board and knew the expectations that followed him in this role. But it wasn't just about making the right decision. It was about "looking out for yourself."

Tough choices presented themselves to Ron just as with any teenager. The temptations of partying, sexual relationships, and teenage mischief were present. But time and time again Ron was able to fall back on his foundation as he knew what the adults in his life expected of him. Whether the choice was accepting an alcoholic beverage or who was riding in his car as he cruised Main Street, he could always hear his mother's voice telling him to make the right decision. These stories are ones that Ron uses with students to frame their current circumstances and hopefully inspire them to make the right decision next time.

Part of being able to help his students connect to his lived experiences is being there for theirs. He can share his stories of making the right choice, but until a relationship has been built, it is difficult for students to trust his words alone. Ron also knows that he must physically be there for his students if a true connection can be made.

"Nothing makes wrestlers happier than when they think you're a basketball guy and you show up at a wrestling meet. Nothing makes a girl happier than when you show up at a softball game." But it goes beyond just being at activities, it's also about finding students' interests outside the school. A deeper connection can be made if he can find the

one thing students are into and then show interest in that. For example, music of all genres can bridge the generational divide and allow him and his students to get to know each other at a deeper level.

Having strong morals and values deeply rooted in small-town life provides Ron with the worldview and context to connect with his students. Stories are a critical tool that he uses to establish relationships. By sharing his story, a brighter future and path can be laid for his students to succeed as they transition from high school into the real world.

Interview 10: Gary

“I think they [students] understand that with hard work you can push yourself forward and become a better person. [A person] not to be defined by your failures, but how you respond to them.”

Gary grew up just down the road from Lynnville High School (LPS) where he currently serves as the 9th-12th grade principal. While only twenty miles from his hometown, the school he serves, and his alma have very different origins. One is grounded in tradition, while the other is like fresh Play-Doh, ready to be molded.

Origin Story

Lynnville High School is unique in many ways. Situated in an unincorporated community of 7,000 people outside an urban center in the western United States, the district serves 1,800 students. Originally a K-8 only district, the need to add a high school was evident as the community continued to grow. But first, the state legislature had to be petitioned to change state law for the addition of a high school.

In 2017, the state law was amended to allow elementary-only districts of a certain size to expand to include high schools. This amendment was made specifically for

Lynnville. A year later, voters of the district approved the addition of a 9th-12th grade building and Lynnville High School was born. In spring 2023, the first set of graduates will receive their diplomas from LHS. Gary is proud of the Lynnville community and the unique story that they wrote to become who they are.

A Lion's "ROAR"

“One of the things that we want to show is our ‘Lion ROAR’; being Respectful, Optimistic, Active, and Responsible.” Opening a new school building provided Gary the opportunity to build a school culture from the ground up. Using the school mascot of the Lion, the school and community are defined by the traits of the majestic beast. This same attitude travels with them when teams and activities are on the road. “[We] really set the bar high and make it so that people are excited when we come to their school, knowing that we’re going to be respectful to them and take care of their place.”

The “Lion ROAR” motto is a district-wide initiative extending through middle and elementary schools. Respect is a core tenant that is not only felt within the Lynnville district but also throughout the community.

Everyone is accepting of everyone in this community which has been a real fortunate thing to be part of. [Students] don’t care where you live or where your house is. Kids will sit down and eat lunch or breakfast together. It’s possible the wealthiest kid is sitting by someone whose family is just barely getting by, homeless, or whatever the case should be.

Culture is a big part of Lynnville and is evident in the stories Gary shares.

Gary loves the size of Lynnville High School. When full, it will have 700 students, big enough to offer students opportunities but not too big. The perfect size to keep the small school feel and know each student's name.

In a former role as assistant principal of a school of 2200 students, Gary was honored to read each student's name at graduation. At times he would read a name and look over to see who the student was, as the name was unfamiliar to him. When the first set of LHS graduates walk across the stage in spring 2023, this will not be an issue. He knows each student personally as he served them as both their high school and middle school principal.

Opening a New Building

While opening a new building and school has provided challenges, Greg and many of his students have a rich history of shared lived experiences. When he was appointed as the first principal at LHS, he was the Lynnville Middle School principal. For most of the 2022-2023 seniors, Gary will have been their principal for seven years. "I haven't changed my expectations of them. And they know that I'm going to hold them to a high standard. One of the best things to help build culture is the fact that they know me, and I know them."

As a relationship builder, Gary also sees the opportunity to bring students from outside the district into the newly formed Lynnville High School. Their stories are just as important as those of the students he has known for most of their educational career. He has found the new students are a great benefit as they bring another perspective, one of how great the students have it at LHS. "The grass isn't always greener ..." but for the students and staff at Lynnville, the grass is really green.

Finding Connections

Gary's lived experiences provide students context to their own struggles while paving a path towards graduation and life after high school.

If they [students] can see that I've gone through some of the similar things [struggles] that they have, that helps. I think they like to hear that they aren't the only ones that have had struggles and have had hard time going through things.

It's important to see that they can work through those problems and get through it and still have success.

Gary has been through those struggles and ultimately found success on the other side of them.

School was not necessarily easy for Gary. He had to work hard in the classroom and was not always successful. He recounts the story of his sophomore year of Geometry, where the teacher was also his basketball coach. He loved him as a coach, but he was far from stellar as a teacher.

He [teacher/coach] wasn't giving me any favors. He was doing what he thought was best for me. I had to prove my own self-worth and show what I could do. Just because I was one of his players, he wasn't going to pass me.

And Gary did not pass. He often jokes with his students that he took two years of Geometry. Not because he took Geometry II but because he had to take Geometry I twice. However, within those struggles, he learned a valuable lesson about accountability.

Things would get better for Gary. As a senior, he received the outstanding male student for his class. Even though he struggled academically, he continued to do what was right as a person. He made a point of working his hardest in everything he did, and

he was involved in many extracurricular activities. Most importantly, he treated everyone with kindness and respect. Gary understood the importance of having a well-rounded approach to life and had many mentors and role models who helped shape and mold him even after high school.

Everyone's Path

Preparing students for life after high school is an aspect of the job that Gary enjoys. He often shares his path from high school student to high school principal. Gary got into education not necessarily because he wanted to teach but because he had the desire to coach. He soon learned that he loved the classroom more than being a coach, and after a few years, he gave it up because he enjoyed teaching so much. "I could put more into it [teaching] and be more passionate about it."

Gary shares his experiences as they allow students to think and explore their own options as they transition from childhood into adulthood.

I was going to be a trainer for the New York Mets. You [students] don't have to know right now what you're going to do with your life. You don't have to go to college right now. If you don't know what you're going to do, get a job. Start taking care of yourself and try some different things out and find what you want to do. Do you miss being in school? Do you want to go to school for something different? Talk to your family members, talk to your friends.

Regardless of the decisions students make for their post-high school plans, he wants to ensure the school celebrates and supports them.

For students who have decided to pursue a college degree, the school celebrates with them. "Our goal is to get all the pennants of wherever a kid goes, whether it be a

college or a trade school, the military, and hang that in our counseling department and let people know what all the options are for our students going forward in the future.”

Gary’s had some unique experiences that have provided opportunities, such as opening a new school building, that other school administrators have not. His experiences help give students context to their current struggles or issues while creating a vision for their future. Shared lived experiences with his students have also built the culture that exists at LHS.

Interview 11: Vince

“You have to be willing to accept the fact that there’s going to be some bad days, some bad moments, but that doesn’t define, you know, your happiness.”

Like many college students, Vince struggled to decide what he wanted to do in life. Bouncing from one major to another (accounting, business, pre-law), he could not visualize himself doing any of these jobs for the next 20 to 30 years. Tired of “throwing money down the drain,” he reached out to his mother for advice. The subsequent conversation forever changed his life.

“You should make a career doing something that you love so much and with so much passion that if absolutely needed, you would do it for free.”

Instantly her words struck a chord with Vince. “It took me probably less than two seconds, and I thought to myself, you know, if I could teach kids and coach, I would possibly do that for free.” Profound and impactful, that one conversation forever changed the trajectory of Vince’s life.

Switching his major to education, his grades instantly improved. For the remainder of his undergraduate degree, he maintained a 4.0 grade point average. He

found his passion. Yet, his path to the classroom was not guaranteed. Vince faced multiple challenges and setbacks before entering the profession.

Finding His Path

Student teaching was a challenging experience for Vince. The cooperating teacher had a different teaching style and methods than he expected. Vince wanted to interact with students and have them dive deep into the social issues of the day. Regarding US History, the class he was teaching, that semester was very momentous. Newt Gingrich was in the throes of the “Contract with America,” and the OJ Simpson trial occupied every minute of the news cycle.

Unfortunately, his mentor teacher was nearing the end of a long career and set the bar low. He would teach each class for five minutes and call it good. Vince was frustrated with his experience but completed his student teaching experience and received his education degree. No longer feeling a passion for the classroom, he took time to reevaluate life and reflect once again on the profound words of his mother.

After college, Vince explored entering the family business in the chiropractic field. He needed a mechanism to pay for this expensive venture, so he visited the local Air Force recruiter. Having already obtained a college degree, Vince was on the fast track to officer training and then chiropractic school. Requiring a five-year commitment to the Air Force, Vince thought his path in life was once again laid out for him. He continued to work part-time at a local mortuary for a few months before being shipped off to officer training when he bumped into one of his former assistant principals, Mr. Grennel. This chance encounter provided the avenue to the classroom and back to his passion.

The Road Back to Education

During their brief meeting at the mortuary, Vince shared his story of signing up for the Air Force with the ultimate goal of becoming a chiropractor. Mr. Grennel invited him to visit his school and apply for a substitute teacher position while he waited to enter the military. The money was more than he was making, and he would get to use his education degree.

Vince took him up on the offer and visited the school. After a tour of the building, he was offered a long-term substitute position. At only 23 years old, he thought \$110 a day for subbing was a great short-term job to save money. What he soon found out was that he fell in love, a love for the kids and the profession. The long-term substitute position was everything he wished his student teaching experience would have been, and his plans to enter the Air Force were sidelined.

Mr. Grinnell was a mentor to Vince for many years to come. After completing two and half years at his school, Vince followed Mr. Grinnell as he opened a new middle school for the district. In 2003, Desert Sands High School (DSHS) was opened, and Mr. Grinnell was named the first principal. Once again, Vince would follow him but this time as his assistant principal. Vince's path to the principalship is directly tied to Mr. Grinnell. And if it were not for a conversation with his mother during college, he would have never entertained education as a profession. Vince found his passion; it just took a few setbacks, chance conversations, and opportunities to land where he is today.

Showing Your Passion

Vince is passionate about what he does daily at Desert Sands High School and has this same expectation for his staff. "I'm not going to hire you if I can't detect real quickly

that they [sic] have a love and a passion for all kids.” He feels it is important that his students see his love and passion play out daily in his interactions with them. Whether crowd surfing at an assembly, interacting with students at a football game, or in one-on-one math tutoring sessions, students can see his love and passion for what he does.

The kids have to feel that you care about them, love what you’re doing, and have a passion. I was part of the assembly, and I crowd surfed and the kids kind of passed me off. That’s the relationship that we have. We’re being watched all the time by both adults and kids. [They] have to see you have a passion and love for what you do. And I think that is infectious. You need to not just say you love kids and not just say that you love “those” kids; you need to love *all* [emphasis added] kids. We live and die by that [at DSHS].

Showing his love and passion is only one aspect of who Vince is. He also feels it is essential to help guide students in finding theirs. Even in a school of 3,000 students, he knows how important it is to understand students for who they are and build meaningful relationships.

Each year, Vince finds himself having a similar conversation with a junior or senior struggling to decide what direction to take after high school. Using the same advice he received from his mother in college they dive deep, collaboratively, into who the student is. What do you like to do? What are your passions? What could you see yourself doing if you had to work for nothing? Each of these questions helps formulate a plan moving forward.

Every answer students provide frames the conversation. If a student wants to be a skateboarder, what related careers are available beyond riding their board? The same

holds true for gamers, lawyers, police officers, doctors, educators, etc. The goal is to find a job or career that students love and can see themselves doing for the next 30 years; providing them with some level of satisfaction. Vince shares his personal story as an example of the many paths one may take to get to where they want to be. He also encourages his students to have a “Plan B ... and C ... and D” just in case it doesn’t work out or their passions change.

Making Connections

Overcoming struggles and obstacles is a part of Vince’s story that he is open and honest about with his students. He feels it is essential that students know “their principal also had [academic] struggles he had to overcome.” Math and science came easy for him, English not so much, with grammar being a significant hurdle. With time, he learned strategies to help him navigate English class.

I couldn’t sit by my friends. I would purposely have to discipline myself not to sit by my buddies because I had to. I had to focus in on the teacher. I had to make sure I asked for clarification. I would come to early bird. I would come in after school and during lunch if that were [sic] an option.

He shares a connection with students that often come to him for tutoring and support. Having lived many of his students’ struggles, he can share his personal narrative as a testament to what it takes to overcome these obstacles. “When they [students] see me as human and that I’ve also had academic struggles, it makes them feel not so helpless. They can overcome whatever struggles they’re having.”

NFL Dreams

The Desert Sands Football program is a perennial powerhouse, often being ranked among the best high school teams in the country. DSHS has a roster full of players with exceptional skill and talent who aspire to play in the National Football League one day. While a lofty dream for many, Vince knows he needs to ensure these players also have a plan B in case they do not make the league. For many players, plan B includes teaching and coaching after finishing their playing days. As a worthy alternative to the NFL, Vince enrolls them in the teacher academy housed on campus so a foundation can be laid in case their dreams of stardom do not come true. But what happens when a student with superb talent enters high school without the focus of making it to his sophomore season?

Sam was a football coach's dream. With natural ability, talent, and size, he was destined to be a star at DSHS. Unfortunately, he had one big strike against him: He thought school was optional. As a freshman, he skated by on his athletic abilities and soon found himself in trouble both academically and behaviorally. Visiting the office regularly, Vince got to know Sam, his struggles, and his needs. "I joked with his mom at his graduation last year, [that in] his freshman year, he probably broke the Desert Sands record for most hours spent being yelled at or reprimanded by me. It was *a lot* [emphasis added] because it was just constant." During their time together, a relationship of trust was established, and it could not have come at a better time. Nearing the end of his sophomore year, the world would come to a halt, and Sam no longer had frequent visits to Vince's office to help guide him in his journey.

In March of Sam's sophomore year, in-person schooling was shut down. Sam was relegated to online school for the next year without football or activities and could have

easily packed it in. Vince was not going to let that happen. Virtually, he tutored Sam in math and “rode his butt in the other classes” to ensure his football dreams could remain intact. Vince saw Sam’s potential from the day he walked on campus but knew he needed someone looking after him. He was not going to let a worldwide pandemic destroy Sam’s dreams.

He’s [Sam] got the best personality ever. That sometimes gets him into trouble a little bit [laughter]. But he needed a different type of love from me. He needed more of a father figure. I wasn’t going to allow him academically to fall through the cracks like so many other kids do. I kept my claws firmly in him to get him across the line. And, you know, to this day, he calls me one Sunday a month. His mom is still a part of my parents’ Booster Club even though she doesn’t have a child here anymore. And every once in a while, she’ll bring me a dish of her homemade macaroni and ham cheese [sic]. It’s the best! But that’s putting your words into action, where it’s not just me telling you that academics are important. I’m showing the kids that just because I’m the principal doesn’t mean I can’t come in and help tutor you in math.

Sam is a success! Even with the loss of his junior season to COVID-19, he received a Division I scholarship offer from a Pac-12 school where he is a rotational player. Vince watches with pride on TV each Saturday in the fall. Sam’s life was changed for the better because of Vince.

Why Storytelling?

Vince has a deep love and passion for what he does that is not often openly seen in school administrators. He lives this out daily in his interactions with his students and staff. He does it because he loves his students and wants nothing but the best for them.

We're in this business to change lives for the better. And I share stories because if I can make a connection and show them a commonality that I have with them, then I think I have a greater chance of changing their life for the better. I feel comfortable sharing with them whatever I need to share story-wise to make that deeper connection and hopefully help them get on a path that's going to help them be more successful.

Interview 12: Aaron

"You can teach me things, but once you put it into a story and get me involved in a story, it means more. It's more memorable. It's more real. It's more exciting."

In a day and age where schools across the country struggle to find qualified classified and certified staff, Aaron rarely has this issue. As principal of Cypress Heights High School (CHHS) for the past eight years, he is proud to share his students' many varied opportunities. Aaron has a deep passion and enthusiasm for his school and education; a trait he openly shares with his students.

Cypress Heights has a tremendous number of opportunities for its students. While many would consider a building of 2,700 students large, the students of CHHS experience the best of both a rural and urban setting. Nestled between the coast and a prominent tourist destination, the campus houses various career academies, an International Baccalaureate Program, a daycare for staff and students, citrus fields, and a

cattle operation. Students get experiences that will make them successful wherever their careers take them. However, Aaron's goal is to have them live, work, and raise families in the place they currently call home.

A Job Offer

One answer to the escalating teacher and staff shortage in schools across America is to "grow your own." Selling students on the benefits of life as an educator is something that Aaron takes great pride in. Enthusiastically, he paints a picture for his students of a rewarding life working back at Cypress Heights after high school. Seeds are planted long before students graduate high school, a story he is excited to share.

I want to give you [students] your first job offer. When you graduate at the end of the year, I want you to come back and work with me to make this an even better school than it is now. I know you like your teachers, and they like you, and I want to get you in your own classroom with your own students.

Weaving a narrative through personal stories of success, students have taken him up on his invitation. Currently, 54 alumni are working on his campus, half having graduated since he took over the principalship in 2015.

I had them [current employees] as a student. I walked with them across the stage. I've worked with them to be a substitute and go to college. And now, when they graduate, they're back here with their own room.

Through self-reflection, Aaron developed his plan to ease the employee shortage crisis. He witnessed CHHS students well prepared for a world beyond high school and securing jobs that offered less than what a job at the school provides. By framing the

benefits of a career in education, he has successfully gotten his graduates to work in his building.

Everyone says the pay is low and comes with many headaches, and I'm like, no, not really when you look at it. You can be 23 years old and make \$50,000 a year. You can have your summers off. You can have health benefits. You can have ten personal days. You can get married, have a mortgage, and have a cell phone bill. Why ever leave? You already know the vision. You already know the mission. You already know the expectations, so come back. The biggest story I tell students is how great education is. Why don't you come back here and make a living of it and work here with your friends?

Laying the Groundwork

Students interested in taking up Aaron on his offer are given a foundation for future success at CHHS. Student schedules are accommodated to include opportunities to explore the profession and give them valuable experience. Whether serving as a student aide, working with the front office staff, doing custodial work, or working in the cafeteria, a student receives a period a day to work side-by-side with the staff.

Cypress Heights location is also ideal. Six colleges and universities are located within an hour drive, and Aaron finds a way to use this to his and the students' advantages. College students are encouraged to schedule classes with a day or two open each week to come back and work. As a paraprofessional in the district, they earn between \$15-\$17 an hour. By working two or three days a week during their off days, students earn good money and valuable experience within the classroom.

When it comes time for students to complete their internship (student teaching) experience, they are welcomed back to complete this at CHHS. From the time students show interest in education as a junior or senior, a path is laid out for them to return with the experience needed to be successful. He has seen the fruits of his labor, and as more and more students return, it gets easier to sell the next generation of students to return.

Once you [students] start seeing a few of your friends go through that, you want to do it too. If I'm a sophomore and I'm watching juniors and seniors doing it, I'm already hooked and that's the path I want to go on also. It's really addicting and really easy once you get it going.

A Collective Story

Aaron understands that the seeds of bringing students back to work at CHHS are not planted just within their junior or senior years. He and his staff have deliberately dedicated time and effort to building this as part of the school culture. One of the foundations of CHHS is student involvement, which starts before students even step foot on campus.

Each year, Aaron and the assistant principals visit each of the five middle schools to share all the fantastic opportunities Cypress Heights offers. Whether it is an athletic team, a club, or an academy, the goal is to get students involved in two of the three. Using stories, the vibrant experiences students will have at CHHS are shared. Then the staff takes it a step further.

The week before school starts, all the incoming students are invited to "Freshman-palooza." The school's courtyard is set up for a big party with staff and current students promoting their clubs, teams, and academies. Food trucks and snow cone machines are

brought in, and the ag department brings out the animals. The incoming freshmen are immersed in the culture and opportunities that await them, and they can sign up for the groups to which they wish to belong.

Cypress Heights High School's positive culture has been established through the stories of strong student involvement. Students experience how extracurricular involvement can guide them to reaching whatever goal they have for themselves. This did not happen by accident or without the help of the entire school community. The students, staff, administration, and community collectively work together to make CHHS the best school possible and invite students to be a part of the legacy for many years.

Aaron's Story

Aaron is proud of the collective school community's work but sees his experiences, awards, and opportunities as a chance to add to the story. He proudly displays his National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) state principal of the year trophy and medal in his office. They serve as a story starter between him and his students. "I share those with my kids and show them how awesome education is."

Networking is a big part of who Aaron is as a professional. Being a great leader is important to him, but these experiences also are an avenue to exposing his students to larger opportunities. He serves as a member of the state principal's association board and attends many state and national conventions. Advocating for public education, he has visited Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., and built relationships with many elected officials.

I want them [students] to see more than just Cypress Heights. I want them to see how awesome education is outside of my school because they believe me. Let's leave Cypress Heights and visit some things that are going to make you even more powerful.

The state principals' conference is another event where Aaron can showcase the great things happening at CHHS. However, he does not just stop there. Each summer, all his assistant principals and a handful of aspiring administrators attend the conference to learn and grow from leaders across the state. The school's color guard presents the colors to open the conference while the chorus sings the National Anthem. Through these experiences, his students are exposed to how awesome the education profession is and gain experiences they can carry with them when making their career decisions.

One of the greatest experiences he shares is being an advocate for the profession with his elected officials. Through his advocacy efforts, he has built relationships with state and federal leaders on both sides of the aisle. He knows he has an outlet to talk about the issues impacting schools, and it is another opportunity to expose students to life outside of Cypress Heights. He also found a common shared experience with one lawmaker in particular.

Music brings people together and has been the common connection for Aaron and one of his congressional members. When Aaron travels to D.C., he will see his elected representative play in his band. When the congressman returns home, he and Aaron will set up and play at school. Students get to see them both outside of the critical roles they play. It is also an avenue to show the congressman what is really happening at CHHS when he visits campus.

Why Storytelling?

When it comes to storytelling, Aaron says it boils down to one thing, making students ask questions. His words say it best,

I share stories with my students because it brings a reality to what I'm sharing, and I remember thinking back as a student myself. You can teach me things, but once you put it into a story and get me involved in a story, it means more. It's more memorable. It's more real. It's more exciting. And I think students are still that way today. If I say, "Hey, sit down. I want to tell you a story about something. Guess what? I went to Washington, D.C., and I was the principal in the year I got to present on advocacy ..." Students will say, "Oh really? Did you go to the monuments?" Stories bring out questions that brings all this inquiry to their minds. And I love that piece, and that's why being out and about is so important. If I'm not out and about, I can't sit down and tell stories and answer questions. So to me, it's just that storytelling piece is what draws interest and questions and really makes it exciting.

Summary

Each participant owns their own truth, their story (Riessman, 1993). They decide the critical moments of the stories they share and the details they provide. While two people can share the same lived experience, no two people will have the same recollection of the events that took place.

The 12 narratives reflect the uniqueness each story holds. By sharing their stories, they invite others to share their experience. But the listener also plays a role as they get to

interpret stories through their own lens. The lessons gleaned, while similar, may have a different meaning for the teller and the listener.

Chapter 5 includes the themes derived from the narratives. The study's implications regarding the central question, "what are the stories secondary school administrators share with their students," will be addressed along with answers to the four sub-questions. Areas of future research are identified as well as links to current research on storytelling.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Storytelling is used in every industry, organization, school, community, and personal narrative to make meaning of the past, bring context to the present, and create a vision for the future (Boal & Schultz, 2007; McAdams, 1993; Takala & Auvinen, 2016; Taylor, 2001). Some of the most meaningful insights into a human's identity are found in stories (Cho, 2021). A good and well-told story is nearly impossible to look away from and will hold the listener's attention for hours (Miller, 2017).

This study adds to the nearly endless literature on storytelling but in a particular aspect that was previously limited—the stories secondary school administrators share with their students. The 12 narratives composed from participant interviews give insight and perspective (Gargiulo, 2002) to the stories that secondary school administrators share with their students and why. The stories are theirs, and they own them (Riessman, 1993). Participants throughout this study reflected on and made sense of their past, bringing context to the present, and inspiring a brighter future for their students.

Summary of the Study

Every human being lives a unique story that is their truth (Riessman, 1993) and is based on their individual lived experiences (Boje, 1991; Simmons, 2015). While each narrative and experience stands alone, the participants interviewed for this study have several shared lived experiences in common. Participants have all served as secondary school administrators for at least seven years. They have also been trained to effectively tell a story while attending at least one at the National Advocacy Conference hosted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Through this conference,

attendees are taught the ability to frame obstacles, issues, and challenges using storytelling as a tool (Miller, 2017).

Participants' stories have been told and retold throughout their careers, forming their identity and reality (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Cho, 2021). The constructive narratives in Chapter 4 give readers insight into the participants' lives but serve only as a snapshot of the "grand narrative" they have lived (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The participant's values and beliefs are evident through the stories they have lived and shared in this study (Hamon, 2020).

Without a written record, the details of a story can get lost over time as the author and teller share only the details that matter the most to them. The meaning placed upon a story "is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal" (Riessman, 1993, p. 15) and is also left up to the interpretation of the listener (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The author is always influenced by their current worldview and the situation in which the story is shared. Once the account is recorded, the researcher (listener) and author are responsible for its truths (Riessman, 1993).

Stories for this study were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C). Using a narrative methodology, the stories collected were told through the author's lens but retold through my own (Miles et al., 2020). Each of the 12 constructed narratives was member checked by the participant for accuracy, thus providing validity to the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Participants in the study were asked two primary interview prompts:

1. Take me through your journey to becoming a school administrator and the role you currently serve in today.

2. Will you please share a story you use frequently with students in your role as a secondary school administrator?

Sub-questions, also found in Appendix C, were used to explore the stories shared in greater detail and provide context and meaning when not initially evident. Participants were allowed to start their “journey” at the moment in time of their choosing, which provided the foundation of the semi-structured interview. Several participants provided significant detail and background about their journey to secondary school administration. Others chose to briefly share their journey and focus more on their experiences while serving as a secondary school administrator. Humans are the keepers of their stories, and only when one is willing to share can we gain a glimpse into their life. Without stories, humans remain an enigma to one another (Aidman & Long, 2017).

Stories are an indicator of behavior, success, or failure (Boje, 1991). Ten of the 12 participants began their narrative with a story from their childhood that either significantly impacted their direction in life or laid a foundation for who they are today. Each participant’s story was personal, exposing a certain level of vulnerability (Brown, 2018) and giving insight into who they are personally and how they lead as secondary school administrators.

The personal stories of struggle, success, triumph, and heartbreak are intertwined within each narrative included in Chapter 4. Through these narratives, the study’s central question, “what are the stories secondary school administrators share with their students,” was answered. Additionally, themes across the collection of narratives were identified.

Themes and Subthemes

Stories have the power to persuade and transform (Cron, 2021).

Each of the 12 participant interviews was coded and themed using the Dedoose (2023) software. Five themes and multiple subthemes found in Table 2 emerged from the participants' spoken words.

Table 2

Story Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Steve	Don	Chad	Holly	Brent	David	Mary	Rachel	Ron	Gary	Vince	Aaron
Stories Are Personal	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>One Adult</i>	X					X			X	X	X	
<i>Serving as a Trusting Adult</i>	X	X	X	X		X	X		X		X	
Stories Make Connections	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Connections with Students</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Traumatic Experiences</i>				X		X	X					
<i>Connections with Community</i>			X		X	X		X			X	
Stories Create a Vision	X			X	X	X		X		X	X	X
Stories Teach Lessons	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
COVID-19			X		X	X		X		X	X	X

Theme 1: Stories Are Personal

Humans, by nature, are storytellers, and one of the most meaningful ways of communicating is through story (Fisher, 1985). “Storytelling is who we are” (Gallo, 2017, p. xix). The stories secondary school administrators share with their students consist of their personal stories. They are used to spark change, illicit emotions, create action, transmit values, etc. (Denning, 2011), and often hold great power (Simmons, 2015).

Each participant interviewed shared their unique story, their truth (Riessman, 1993). “You get your story, and you hold onto it...” (Anderson, 2021, “A Story About Story” section). The stories shared were personally meaningful for the participant, which made them more memorable (Brown et al., 2008; Tesler et al., 2018). Every story shared throughout the study was a first-hand account and not the retelling of someone else’s story or narrative.

The direction of each interview was dictated by the personal stories the participants shared. They were allowed the freedom to share any story of value and the

moments they found most meaningful (Simmons, 2015) to share with their students. A level of vulnerability as a leader and human (Brown, 2018) is exposed within the stories shared. Turning points in the participants' lives were exposed, which created action and change. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following examples from each of the 12 participants were communicated through rich, descriptive stories (Cho, 2021) that support the theme that secondary school administrators share personal stories with their students.

Steve. Life on a dairy farm is a commitment not found in many other careers. Without some shared lived experience, it is difficult for others to relate to the early mornings, late nights, blistering cold winters, and cattle yards full of mud and manure. Adding to the complexities of Steve's childhood was living with a "hard-ass" father where the only way was his way. Nevertheless, Steve learned many lessons about the value of hard work and commitment during his formative years.

After graduating college, Steve took his first teaching job at a reservation school. It was a cultural experience he had never experienced but one where he gleaned many valuable lessons about finding connections and building relationships with all types of students from different backgrounds. As he advanced up the career ladder in the educational ranks, those experiences and lessons of his childhood and first job became even more valuable as he landed in schools of all sizes and with varying demographics.

Don. The product of an urban metropolis, Don's high school years consisted of scenarios many students never get or want to experience. While parts of his story were mundane, like taking public transportation to and from school each day, others, such as a gun being discharged during a pep rally, had a lasting impact on his life. He still vividly

recounts the minutes immediately following as he and a friend dashed out of the building and found safety beneath a car in the parking lot.

His upbringing also allowed him to experience diversity and cultures that others do not always get. Eleven languages were spoken among his high school soccer team, creating a challenge and opportunity. Finding a way to meld all of these languages and cultures was not only a challenge but provided him with a lesson that he still uses to this day in his role as a secondary school administrator.

Chad. Using the knowledge and lessons passed down from generation to generation through stories (Kowalski, 2015), Chad deeply appreciates his family and the area of the country he resides in. As the son of two educators, he grew up in a household dedicated to serving students and giving back to the community. These lessons have stuck with him as he returned home as the principal of his alma mater, the same school where his parents taught.

Holly. Forks in the road and less traveled paths have been a staple in Holly's journey to secondary school administration. Initially discouraged from entering education as a profession by her parents, who both happened to be educators, her mother's illness led her back home and to the classroom. Her deeply personal experiences have been a strength as she can relate to students going through traumatic experiences as a survivor of sexual assault herself.

Brent. The son of a single mother with four kids, Brent has overcome many obstacles and hurdles in his journey to the principalship. His passion for his students and school has built a positive school culture which he and his assistant principals continue to

build upon. Giving back to the school community is important to him, and these values are instilled in his students through the lived experiences and stories they share.

David. David's path to the principalship at his alma mater could have been derailed very early in life. The son of an alcoholic father, the challenges and obstacles he overcame during his teenage years were immense. Without the support of a handful of trusted adults who encouraged him to take advantage of opportunities through school, he does not know where he would be in life. The ultimate storyteller, he profoundly appreciates his high school experience as it "saved his life."

Mary. Very few issues in life are more personal than dealing with addiction. However, Mary is open and honest about her own lived experience. She uses her experiences dealing with a brother suffering from addiction to help her students and community through similar situations. Her brother's story, although tragic in many ways, can be used to support others and make sense of the world (Brown et al., 2009).

Rachel. A road full of "twists and turns" is how Rachel describes her path to the principalship in the far northwest part of the United States. Having grown up helping catch shoplifters at her family's business, she knew she could always return if needed. With a desire to serve people and help them grow, she decided to enter the education profession after serving as a white-water rapids guide. However, turbulent times awaited her during a rocky principalship that nearly derailed her entire career in education. In spite of it, though, she found solace in the relationships she built with her students and community and was able to persevere.

Ron. Biblical teachings have greatly influenced Ron and formed his understanding of the world (Armstrong, 1992; Gargiulo, 2002). His values and beliefs

have extended into his professional life as they provide the solid foundation on which he stands (Oltman & Bautista, 2021). A core group of individuals helped pave his path as an educator and secondary school administrator, and he uses his lived experiences as a teaching tool for his students.

Gary. Gary's narrative includes both stories of failure and success. As a sophomore in high school, he failed geometry class, where his teacher was also his basketball coach. As a senior, Gary was named "Student of the Year" because of his efforts to be the best student he could be. This experience taught him several valuable lessons, serving as the impetus for change.

Vince. Vince has a deep passion for his job, which is rooted in a conversation he had with his mother during college. She encouraged him to find a job he could do for the rest of his life for free if he had to. Taking her advice to heart, he envisioned himself in a classroom full of kids. However, that does not mean he slid right into education.

A tumultuous student-teaching experience led him to ponder other career fields, including entering the family business of chiropractic or enlisting in the Air Force. While waiting to enlist and attend officer training, he ran into a former assistant principal from middle school. This serendipitous moment convinced him that a career in education was where he needed to land.

Aaron. Professional organizations are essential to Aaron as they provide him with opportunities to grow professionally and get his students involved with activities and opportunities outside the school building. He loves to showcase their skills and talents at local and state conferences, such as the show choir performing and the JROTC presenting the colors at the state principals' conference. By giving them these

opportunities, he is building school culture and pride, which he hopes will translate into them returning to Cypress Heights High School to work once they graduate.

Subtheme: One Adult

A subtheme that emerged from the theme “Stories Are Personal” is one adult who impacted the storyteller’s life, either positively or negatively. “Lines of connection or disconnection—good, bad, relevant, or irrelevant” (Simmons, 2015, pp. 13-14) are drawn between individuals.

Five of the twelve participants shared a story of an adult who significantly impacted their story. These adults included church members, parents, coaches, and teachers. For many, these adults were the reason they went into education.

Steve. Steve’s high school track coach and shop teacher saw a talent in him; the ability to run long distances and around in circles as fast as possible. Steve struggled with math, and Coach D was able to explain problems or present them in a different manner that made sense to him. Coach D provided the support and encouragement he needed, which transferred into all aspects of school and athletics.

David. David had the richest and most detailed stories of individuals he could trust during a challenging period of life. Multiple teachers took him under their wing and pushed him to be involved in various sports and activities throughout high school. He expressed deep gratitude for these individuals, who provided the guidance and support he needed.

Growing up with an alcoholic father, he also needed safety and security beyond the school walls. Mr. Smith, an assistant principal at David’s high school, was one such trusting individual. Late one night, after David’s father had physically abused him, Mr.

Smith took him to the hospital for a few stitches to the head. Ultimately, he spent the night at the Smith's house under a roof that provided safety.

Time after time, David was given opportunities to escape his abusive household and take shelter in a safe location while still being a teenager involved in many school activities. Without families like the Smiths, David does not know what the trajectory of his life would have been. However, he does know that they saved his life.

Ron. Small towns can be challenging to grow up in. Everyone knows your business, and it is hard to escape the rumor mill. However, they are also extraordinarily supportive as they watch out for their own.

Influenced by the church elders he served on the board with, Ron had a circle of supportive adults in his life, beyond his parents, from a very early age. Ron is thankful for each of these individuals. "I grew up with a really good minister and a really good church board around me as a kid."

Gary. Influential adults are not always a positive influence on one's life. For Gary, this was the case. His sophomore geometry teacher also happened to be his basketball coach. While he enjoyed him as a coach, he was less than stellar as a teacher. While responsibility was one of his core philosophies as a teacher, it did not help Gary learn math. He now jokes with his students that he took two years of geometry. Not because he took Advanced Geometry but because he had to take Geometry I twice.

Vince. Vince credits two individuals for changing his trajectory in life: his mother and middle school principal. During a conversation with his mother after his sophomore year of college, she challenged him. "You should make a career doing something that you

love so much and with so much passion that if absolutely needed, you would do it for free.”

After that conversation, he changed his major to education and had a great last two years of college. However, he had an unpleasant student-teaching experience and looked outside the education profession to start his career when a chance encounter with a former assistant principal led him back. Vince would visit Mr. Grinnell at school, and he was offered a position as a long-term substitute. Vince followed Mr. Grinnell for the next two decades as he opened new schools or took various administrative positions. Vince would eventually take his seat as the principal of Desert Sands High School.

Subtheme: Being a Trusting Adult

Eight of the twelve participants conveyed a personal story of when they served as a trusting adult for an individual student. The participant’s ability to build a positive relationship with their student(s) was at the core of these stories. Many of these relationships were not formed overnight. It took many opportunities and shared stories and lived experiences to build trust. Even then, as seen in several examples below, it was not until after the student had graduated or moved on into adulthood that the power of the administrator’s story resonated with the student and themselves.

Steve. Jax needed someone to look after him. Shy and guarded, he did not let people into his world. As a freshman in high school, he experienced more heartache and trauma than most adults will experience in their entire lives. His mother committed suicide, and he moved in to live with his grandmother.

Knowing that Jax needed someone to talk to, Steve invited him to each lunch with him and his administrative assistant each day. The conversations were slow at first, but

something resonated with Jax as he continued to come back day after day. Steve would tell stories of his hunting adventures and love for documentaries. Eventually, Jax began to warm up, and a trusting relationship was established.

Jax was also interested in hunting and guns and expressed to Steve how he wanted to be a member of the school's trap team. Working out a deal with his grandmother, Jax secured the gun he needed to shoot trap. After some time, Steve said, "Jax was a way better shot than me."

Through conversation and stories, Steve built a relationship with Jax and found the one thing he enjoyed and connected him to school. He continued to look out for Jax during this journey through high school, checking in on him personally and academically. Jax opened up to people because of Steve's efforts to ensure he had a trusted adult in his life.

Don. Janae was an overly-involved student and athlete who struggled to meet her parents' demands and highly ambitious academic expectations. Needing someone to talk to and help her through these exciting yet extremely challenging times, she went to Don for advice. Together, they formulated a plan to approach her parents with her frustrations and desires.

At the core of her struggles was her academic course load. Her parents wanted her enrolled in as many Advance Placement (AP) courses as possible while still finding success on the playing field. She was ready to give up being an athlete, something she enjoyed, to appease her parents. With the skills and talking points Don and her formulated, she had a very tough conversation with her parents, but one that was productive.

While disappointed, her parents relented on the number of AP classes she would take. Janae now had the time to explore other opportunities that had been put on the back burner. What none of them expected is what happened next.

With time to focus on her true passions and talents, Janae flourished in areas she would never have gotten the opportunity to if she stayed on the same path. She became captain of her field hockey team and the lead in the school musical. When writing her college entrance essay, she used the story of Don helping her through this difficult and formative time and the person she became. That essay is pinned to Don's bulletin board in his office as a reminder of the impact one can have on a student's life if a positive relationship is established. He also has students read it who are experiencing similar difficulties as a starting point for difficult conversations.

Chad. Phil, one of Chad's students, became the man of the house at an early age. His mother was absent, and his father experienced a traumatic head injury falling off a ladder. Needing someone to support and guide him through his teenage years, Chad became that person for him.

Although Phil had many adult responsibilities at home, Chad wanted to ensure that he experienced some semblance of a childhood while being given the proper guidance in life. Chad, and many of the school staff, looked out for Phil providing him with money and other material resources. Having a passion for technical trades, Phil was enrolled in the local trade school. The two of them even traveled to Boston for a Red Sox game. Nevertheless, even with the support, Phil continued to slip further and further. Soon teachers and staff began to question Chad's commitment to Phil. Chad never

relented. “I’m not going to sleep at night if we don’t do this. We do it because it’s the right thing [to do].”

Unfortunately, Phil did not graduate and was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident a few years later. However, one of his teachers ran into Phil shortly before his death and shared his words with Chad. “Tell Mr. [Chad], if you see him, I really appreciate all the work he put into me.” Even from the great beyond, Phil acknowledged Chad’s commitment to him as his trusting adult.

Holly. Everyone faces some battle in life that is sometimes rarely seen. “[Life] gets really deep and dark in some places,” and as a survivor of sexual assault, Holly wants to ensure she provides the support her students need. Trauma is difficult to share, but Holly always has an open door and listening ear.

Having navigated life after a traumatic event, Holly works individually with students and their families, providing guidance and support. She is there for them, whether that is finding professional services or working with law enforcement. At the moment in life when students may feel like they have no one to reach out to, they know Ms. Holly is there for them.

David. Each year, David shares the personal story of his son’s failure to graduate high school on time with his classmates. On track to graduate for nearly his entire high school career, Ryan (David’s son) did not take the last two weeks of school seriously and paid the price. Failure to complete his government requirement cost him the opportunity to walk across the stage with his peers. While devastating at the moment, Ryan’s story has resonated with students at Eastern Palms High School. Denning (2011) stated that

people could be moved to enthusiastic action when appropriate stories are shared. For Alex, Ryan's story moved him to take unprecedented action he never thought possible.

After a tumultuous junior year that included both school and family issues, Alex had fallen behind pace to graduate on time. After hearing Ryan's story, he made a connection with his own lived experience and chose to buckle down. With the help and support of David and the school counselor, a plan was devised to make up for his deficient credits while earning those he needed during his senior year.

Alex trusted David and leaned on him when he needed him the most. Ultimately, he completed the necessary coursework and graduated with his class on time. As he walked across the stage, he hugged David and told him to turn around. There his mom waited with a camera, documenting a moment that may not have been possible if it was not for Ryan's story and the support David provided for Alex.

Mary. One never knows when a story will impact a student and when the lessons shared will resonate. Mary saw a lot of her brother Matt (who struggled with addiction) in Reid. As a frequent flier to her office, Mary had many conversations with him about doing the right thing and reaching out for help when needed. A connection had formed, and he trusted her. She constantly stressed to him the need to ask for help from a trusted adult instead of always taking matters into his own hands.

Living in a smaller town, Mary often runs into former students while running errands. One evening, she was in the local drugstore picking up a few items when she ran into Reid. He was working the checkout line.

Even though the line was backed up, Reid excitedly shared a story with Mary. His car was stolen, and he knew who had taken it. He wanted nothing more than to go to the

thief's house with a baseball bat. Instead, Mary's words ran through his head about reaching out to a trusting adult. He did just that and was proud of his restraint, and so was Mary. Even though he spent considerable time in Mary's office, her words stuck with him and helped him out in a difficult time when the situation could have ended much worse.

Ron. Callie, a junior volleyball player, was beaten out for a spot in the starting rotation by two freshmen. Wanting advice, she went to Ron for guidance on what to do next. Sharing his experience of sitting on the bench for a good portion of his senior year, Ron told her she needed to find a role on the team to contribute to whatever success they would have that year.

Teams consist of more than just the superstars the fans see on the floor. Callie dedicated herself to being the best practice player, pushing the starters daily. Even though her playing time was limited during games, her role was to be the best cheerleader from the bench. Callie accepted these roles and was integral to a state championship team. She trusted Ron and his words and accepted that everyone has a role in making teams successful.

Vince. Sam entered Desert Sands High School as a highly acclaimed and gifted athlete. Although he had all the skills to reach his dream of playing in the National Football League, he needed more discipline in the classroom. Vince knew Sam needed additional guidance and support and took him under his wing as a freshman. Vince quickly became Sam's trusted adult, and he soon realized how much he needed it.

The COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools and transitioned all learning to a virtual environment, a place that was not ideal for Sam. Without the daily face-to-face

contact and structures of a football program, Vince knew he needed to check in and tutor Sam when necessary. For nearly 18 months, Vince kept a virtual watch on Sam to ensure he would graduate and still have a football career when students returned to physical buildings.

As Sam's trusted adult, he accepted Vince's help and guidance, whether in person or virtually. Sam overcame the many obstacles he (and everyone else) faced during the pandemic to achieve his goal of playing NCAA Division I football.

Theme 2: Stories Build Connections

Riddled throughout storytelling literature is the ability for humans to connect through the use of story as we are a collection of all the stories ever lived, told, and shared (Taylor, 2001). Whether good, bad, or indifferent, lines of connection or disconnection are drawn through our shared stories (Simmons, 2015). A well-told story can draw a listener in and build a connection through shared lived experiences (Rose et al., 2015).

Stories also allow the teller and the listener to connect moments in time that may not have been evident. Reflection on past experiences can bring context to current circumstances (Cron, 2021). A bond is formed between the storyteller and the listener when a connection is made (Boal & Schultz, 2007). The complexities of life are more manageably navigated and make sense of the world (Cron, 2021) when stories are relatable and memorable (Tesler et al., 2018).

It is through personal stories that humans connect (Taylor, 2001). An overwhelming theme from the study was that secondary school administrators use stories to build connections with their students and their communities. Storytelling builds a

human connection from the teller to the audience (Gargiulo, 2002) which is evident throughout this study. All twelve participants used stories as a tool to make connections with students. The following are examples from each participant on how stories built connections with students and the community.

Subtheme: Connections with Students

Bolman & Deal (2017) stated that the human brain is wired for story. Throughout the participant narratives, connections were made with students using the varied stories shared with them. Each story had the power to make the listener roar with laughter, shed tears, express joy, endure pain, or feel sorrow or grief: all emotions that made a memorable and lasting impact on the listener or student in this study (Aidman & Long, 2017).

Steve. “The stories we tell are about finding that common shared interest, that common shared experience.” Knowing every student has that one thing that excites them, Steve works diligently to find out what it is. He uses stories to build relationships and open lines of communication, which often leads to students sharing their passions.

For Jax, his one thing was trap shooting. Steve was integral in getting him started as a member of the school’s trap team. Steve’s willingness to share stories of his hunting experiences made a connection with Jax. Being intentional and persistent, Steve dug deeper into Jax’s story, ultimately making a huge difference in his life.

Don. “This guy who’s now 5’ 11”, 230 pounds was once 5’ 11”, 165 pounds running a :50, 400. That was a long time ago [laughter].” Don shares stories of his days running track and playing soccer to connect instantly with his student-athletes. “It [stories] make us human.”

He often shares stories of his “glory days” as a starting point for deeper and more meaningful conversation. While his role is to serve as the principal at Elk Crossing High School, he wants his students to know that he is more than “just the guy in the tie who says hi to everyone.” The common shared experience of being a student-athlete leads to trusting and meaningful relationships, and they are all built around stories.

Chad. Living in one of the most beautiful parts of New England, Chad wants his students to appreciate all that Mother Nature has to offer. Sharing stories of hunting, he can connect with a certain demographic of the school’s population, one he affectionately refers to as the “Carhartt Mafia.” “[Stories] are a way to relate to people in a real way and bring some life relevance, a connection.”

David. David’s physical appearance would make him an outsider at Eastern Palms High School at first glance. With 94% of the student population identifying as Hispanic, even the former principal questioned whether David would be effective in his role. However, it is the shared lived experiences growing up in the community that connects with students. He also shares his story in both English and Spanish, which instantly brings him credibility. The struggles many students experience is the same that he had as a teenager. Very few secondary school administrators can replicate his experience of growing up and returning to his alma mater.

Within his stories of hardship and success lies the power to influence his students, but those stories must be authentic. As David shared, “The power of story will get you a lot further, but it has to be genuine. [It] has to be a real story.”

Rachel. Rachel’s ability to build connections with students through story came full circle. Connections are made with her students through the telling and retelling of

stories (Cho, 2021) to make sense of the current reality (Boal & Schultz, 2007). The power of stories through the connections she made was never more evident when she needed support the most.

A contentious contract negotiation created tremendous stress in Rachel's life. She lost considerable weight and was nearly broken. She failed to understand how she went from being honored as the principal of the year to being placed on an intensive improvement plan within a year.

The private nature of the struggles spilled over into the public one evening during a board meeting. Once public, students and parents failed to understand how Rachel was not being offered a contract when all of the other administrators had already received theirs. During Rachel's most trying time of her career, she relied on the connections and relationships she had established with her students. Her students had her back and staged a sit-in at the district office. As the sit-in came to a close, the words she often spoke to her students, "I love you in a school and friend appropriate way," were spoken back to her. Rachel and her students now share a lived experience and a story of loyalty and love.

Ron. A talented high school athlete, Ron often sat on the bench instead of seeing playing time on the court. As a senior, his basketball team comprised of nine seniors, when only five could be on the court at any given time. He got minutes occasionally, but he believed he deserved more. He knew he was better than that but learned he had to take advantage of the minutes he did get. Being a role player is something he had to embrace.

There are only so many starting positions on a team, but everyone has a role to play in a team's overall success. Ron often shares his story with students who are in similar situations. By relaying his sports struggles, he builds connections with student-

athletes and helps them navigate these frustrating times. He can connect dots with students to make situations more easily understood (Rose et al., 2015).

Gary. “If they [students] can see that I’ve gone through some of the similar things [struggles] that they have, that helps. I think they like to hear that they aren’t the only ones that have had struggles.” Failing geometry class as a sophomore was a turning point for Gary. During that year, he felt his high school basketball coach and math teacher did not do him any favors, and many valuable lessons were learned. His failure has turned into a story that resonates with his students. Because he had similar academic struggles, a connection is made with students dealing with similar struggles.

Vince. A meaningful conversation with his mother changed the entire trajectory of Vince’s life. Not knowing what he wanted to do with his life and career, his mother told him to find something he could do for free, a passion. It was at this moment that education became his passion.

Vince often uses this story to help students who are struggling to find what they want to do once they graduate high school. By knowing that Vince has been through similar struggles, students know they can turn to him for advice. “I feel comfortable sharing with them whatever I need to share story-wise to make that deeper connection and hopefully help them get on a path that's going to help them be more successful.”

Aaron. Actively involved in professional organizations himself, Aaron shares these experiences to build a connection with students. His story of involvement leads to discussions about where students’ interests and talents lie. They are also a precursor to what activities or clubs students may want to participate in and classes they may want to

take. Students can make connections between his story and the opportunities they have at Cypress Heights High School.

Subtheme: Traumatic Experiences

As mentioned in theme 1, stories are often deeply personal. Within the interviews, three participants shared traumatic experiences that serve as turning points in their story (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and that they use with their students to build connections. “Stories of others—real or imagined, in books or on a screen—help us to see from another perspective, to empathize, to imagine other ways to cope with disasters and trauma, and to expand our capacity to be human” (Findley & Neveu, 2021, p. 156). The participants used their lived experiences to help guide students in their struggles in similar circumstances.

Holly. As a victim of sexual abuse herself, she uses her traumatic, life-changing event to help her students. Students know she is a trusting adult they can rely on to navigate these tumultuous times. Holly provides the help, support, and guidance needed because she has lived this herself.

David. David grew up in a household with an abusive father in and out of his life, causing significant disruptions throughout his childhood. He knows students in his building experience similar situations with parents who struggle with addiction and may be abusive. Sharing his story provides an avenue for connection and building a relationship that may save their life, just like many of his teachers and assistant principal did for him.

Mary. Living in a community that struggles with addiction, her experiences have led to meaningful conversations and powerful connections with students. Mary shares her

experience of growing up with a brother who suffers from an addiction to relate to students who are struggling with it firsthand or family members that do.

Subtheme: Connections with Community

Five of the twelve participants in the study shared stories with students to connect to the greater school community and to instill or affirm cultural values and beliefs (Denning, 2011; Gargiulo, 2002; Hutchens, 2021; Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975). Stories connect with students and spur action based upon the foundation that has been laid (Brown et al., 2009). The listener is likelier to act if an emotional connection can be made (Kowalski, 2015; Simmons, 2015).

Chad. The history of a place is important to ensure that generational stories are passed down to be retold and reflected upon (Taylor, 2001) by the next set of students to walk through the doors. Using the story of his grandfather, Chad connected to the community he served, even if he was called out for an incorrect date by a longtime community member. Serving as the principal of his alma mater creates a shared lived experience few administrators can replicate. A foundation within the school and community, dating back decades, creates an understanding of a place's cultural values, norms, and beliefs (Feldman et al., 2004).

Brent. When a story resonates with the listener, it is easily retold as it also affirms the lessons and values embedded within (Godin, 2005). That lesson is about serving and giving for the River Bluff High School community. With these values and beliefs already instilled in its students, Brent and his staff want them to give back to the community that gives them so much. By volunteering their time, the values of the community are affirmed and recognized (Jacobs, 2018).

David. Permeating a culture of family and school pride, David uses childhood stories to reinforce communal values. When it came time for his daughter to select a high school, they chose Eastern Palms because of the family aspect, another story he often shares. Through telling and retelling his personal stories, David continually adds to the culture. Others reinforce this by sharing and living out the Eastern Palms story (Boal & Schultz, 2007).

Rachel. Conflict has a way of bringing people together through common shared experiences. Resiliency is built within the community as everyone must persevere to overcome the struggle. Rachel's contentious contract negotiations with her superintendent is one such example.

Rachel created a strong community foundation that benefited her most when she needed it. Positive and trusting relationships with her students, parents, and community members allowed them to back and support her when they felt she was not being treated fairly. Through the connections she built and then reinforced during this tumultuous time, deeper bonds were formed, and a better story was written among them all.

Gary. "One of the things that we want to show is our 'Lion ROAR': being Respectful, Optimistic, Active, and Responsible." Opening a new school building provides leaders with the unique opportunity to instill a culture where one did not exist before. However, that does not mean one has to start from scratch.

Building upon the tenants used at the elementary and middle schools, Gary carried these foundational aspects to the brand-new Lynnville High School (LHS). He utilized storytelling to reinforce the values established in students attending these primary buildings and to spread throughout the students (Gladwell, 2002) that would be attending

LHS for the first time. The larger school community encompassing all three buildings has shared values and belief systems reinforced by their “Lion ROAR” mantra.

Theme 3: Stories Create a Vision

Stories are a collection of who we are as humans. Past experiences provide the context and guidance for the future. (Soin & Scheytt, 2006). How humans envision our future and our decisions directly results from our current view and reality of the world (Godin, 2005). The lens used to view the world impacts the paths we take in life, our actions, and how we live our lives (Feldman et al., 2004).

As one of the oldest tools humans use to share our understanding of the world (Spagnoli, 1995), humans rely on storytelling to formulate a future vision for ourselves and those around us (Denning, 2011). Eight of the 12 participants in the study affirmed that they use stories as a tool to help students create a vision for their future selves. By sharing their lived experiences, secondary school administrators can shape the direction their students take in life and expand a student's view of the world (Boje, 1991; Godin, 2005).

Participants such as Steve and Vince used stories with individual students in a particular, narrowly focused manner. Others, such as Brent, Gary, and Aaron, used stories to lay a comprehensive foundation for students and to establish culture and relationships within the building and community. A good storyteller can make stories adaptable and relevant to the situation in which it is needed (Rose et al., 2015). “Organizational leadership is about inspiring others to make a story come true” (Rooney, 2020, p. 32).

Steve. Sometimes students have difficulty envisioning what life may look like in the near future, let alone as adults. Steve intentionally uses stories of his interests to help

find the one thing students may have a passion or curiosity for. Once a connection is made through their lived experiences, a deeper exploration of the students' talents and skills can be done with a focus on what the future may hold for them.

Through continued storytelling and conversations, Steve and his students can collectively establish a vision for the future. This was evident through the stories of Joey, Jax, and James that he shared. Working individually with each student allowed them to find something they each aspired to learn more about that was not dependent on the trauma they had endured.

Holly. Framing challenging situations through stories helps stakeholders understand the obstacles which lie ahead while envisioning a brighter future (Miller, 2017). Using her struggles and trauma, Holly framed her challenges to better serve the needs of her students who have experienced similar circumstances. By turning traumatic experiences into a strength, she is a personal example of not letting events define who her students are as individuals. She creates a better vision for her students through her story and actions.

Brent. "If it is important to the culture, you will find a story that tells what is important and why" (Simmons, 2015, p. 14). The collective story of River Bluff High School (RBHS) is a foundation to build upon the strong community support already present. Students are encouraged to envision an even brighter future for themselves and their school while giving back to their school and community. School spirit grew because of a vision embedded in the RBHS story, and an even bigger vision is created with every success. For example, the entire baseball team showed up to watch their classmates at a

choral concert. This story is told and retold to reinforce Brent and his assistant principals' vision for their students and school.

David. The stories David shares follow a “Hero’s Journey” framework brought to the mainstream by Joseph Campbell in the book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1975). Using himself as the protagonist, David shares stories of facing a problem (an abusive, alcoholic father), meeting a guide (the Andersons and Smiths), developing a plan (being involved in school activities), being called to action (participating in debate, swim team, and student government), and ultimately finding success (graduating from high school as valedictorian). David found transformation through the battles he faced and endured (Boal & Schultz, 2007).

The personal traumas and struggles David and his family faced while being a member of the Eastern Palms High School and community provides a vision to which students can aspire. Students know and understand they can overcome their challenges to aspire to a brighter future because they see firsthand how David did this for himself. One such example was David’s student Alex who used the story of Ryan to envision him completing the necessary coursework to graduate on time.

Rachel. Success stories are integral to Snow Fields Technical High School (SFTHS), exemplifying what students can become. Rachel uses stories with her students at SFTHS to prepare them for future career opportunities and instill a vision of what they may become. Stories of alums who have gone on to successful careers are shared to spur action and create a vision of what her students may pursue someday.

Gary. Opening a new 9-12 grade building during the pandemic brought many challenges. It was difficult to build a culture without the everyday routines of a school

day. While not ideal, a vision for the broader school community still needed to be established during this difficult time. Gary utilized stories, many already established within the middle school, to create the cultural foundation of Lynnville High School. Additionally, individual practices were established so all students could envision their post-high school life.

Vince. The words of Vince's mother served as the impetus for creating a brighter future for himself. Using her words and his personal story, students are guided in their journey to finding a career path in an area they are interested in or passionate about. Whether wanting to be a skateboarder, photographer, football player, etc. Vince builds students' narratives, including envisioning themselves having a career doing something they may choose to do for free.

Aaron. Employee shortages impact nearly every school district in the United States. However, Aaron has found a way to minimize these shortages at Cypress Heights High School (CHHS). Sharing the story of what his students can have if they come back to live and work at CHHS has provided a vision for students early in their career selection process.

Aaron has ingrained a vision that is easy for students to follow because he provides the necessary support to make it a reality. By having this vision while still in high school, educational plans are developed, allowing students to gain valuable experience. Opportunities abound for students because Aaron has made it a priority to instill a vision of returning to work at Cypress Heights for his students.

Theme 4: Stories Teach Lessons

The human brain learns and communicates through stories (McKinney, 2019). By bringing context and imagery to a conversation, stories can turn complex concepts into memorable experiences that have the power to stick (Rooney, 2020). Stories and the lessons shared reverberate within the human consciousness long after they have been told (Harris & Barnes, 2005; Kowalski, 2015).

The participants in the study have made sense of their lived experiences and reframed them as stories to share with their students. Their understanding of the world has been shaped by the lessons learned (Feldman et al., 2004), creating order in their lives (Boal & Schultz, 2007) through the meaning assigned to these experiences (Rappaport, 1993). “An appropriately told story [has] the power to do what rigorous analysis [can’t]; to communicate a strange new idea and move people to enthusiastic action” (Denning, 2011, p. 2).

Using what Kaye and Jacobson (1999) refer to as “wisdom shared forward” (p. 46), 10 of the 12 participants shared a story of a lesson they learned through their own lived experiences. Many of the lessons learned came from the participants’ childhoods. Some stories retell shared lived experiences with students that pass certain lessons forward. While the lessons may have been similar, each story is unique to the individual participant.

Steve. Steve’s foundation and values are attributed to the lessons he learned while working and growing up on his family’s dairy farm. Lessons about hard work, commitment, and perseverance are just a few a person learns when working with cattle. As a secondary school administrator, Steve shares these stories to provide context and

reinforce these lessons with his students, especially those that can relate to what farm life is like.

Don. The world is a big place, and Don's experiences growing up in an urban school are much different from those of his current students. The lessons he learned attending a diverse high school are shared with students, providing context to what else lies outside of the walls of Elk Crossing High School. While he does not want his students to personally experience traumatic events, such as a gun being discharged at a pep rally, he wants them to understand "that there's a big, big world out there."

Chad. Living in a beautiful corner of New England, Chad wants his students to appreciate what Mother Nature provides. Stories from his past, passed down from generation to generation, reinforce lessons (Kowalski, 2015; Taylor, 2001) about the uniqueness of your surroundings when one is willing to pause and notice.

Holly. "[Life] gets really deep and dark in some places." Holly's life experiences have taught her many lessons about navigating the days, weeks, and months following a sexual assault. She helps victims and their families receive advice, guidance, and support. The lessons she learned during her "dark days" greatly benefit other victims.

David. Lessons of trust and the power of relationships are a significant part of David's story. He relied on many other caring and loving adults growing up in a household with an alcoholic and abusive father. The unfortunate lessons he learned during these moments are why he entered the profession and returned to his alma mater as the principal. He shares his stories as lessons in perseverance and overcoming the obstacles many face. His story resonates with students because of the relationship he has

built with them and the shared lived experiences growing up at Eastern Palms High School.

Mary. The stories Mary shares and lessons learned center around growing up with a brother suffering from addiction. She uses her brother's story to help students and families in similar situations. “You can’t give up on a kid because they’re 14 and a hot mess,” as some of those same students may also become your neighbor someday.

Rachel. Rachel has many varied lived experiences throughout her life. From catching shoplifters as a five-year-old at her family’s business to navigating a contentious contract negotiation with a demeaning superintendent, she has a vast repertoire of lessons learned. She gained insight at each stop in her journey and at each job she held that prepares students for life after graduating from Snow Fields Technical High School.

Gary. Failing geometry class as a sophomore was not something Gary intended to do. Having insight into the struggles that even the best student can experience academically is a lived experience only some secondary school administrators have. Having his basketball coach as the teacher added an additional layer to the story bringing more context, connections, and lessons he can share with his current students.

Ron. Ron knew he was one of the best players on the basketball team during his senior year. He had the skills and abilities to be a difference-maker for his team. Nevertheless, with nine seniors on the team, he had to learn his role, mainly consisting of a few minutes of playing then sitting on the bench.

Reflecting upon his high school basketball experiences, Ron understands the many lessons he learned that winter. He uses his personal story to help students in a

similar situation. They may not be the starter or player getting all the press, but they can help their team win by being a role player, making everyone better.

Vince. Having found his passion in life, Vince was eager to start his career in education. A less-than-ideal student teaching experience would sidetrack these plans for some time. He pursued other ventures, including joining the military. A chance encounter with his former assistant principal ultimately provided the path back to the classroom.

This experience and his mother's words have provided Vince with a myriad of lessons he uses with his students. He shares the lessons he learned to help guide them in pursuing a career they can see themselves doing for the next 30 years.

Theme 5: COVID-19

While not intending to collect stories of the participants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, it became a common theme. The interview questions were not specifically targeted to evoke memories of the pandemic. However, six of the 12 participants shared some story of their COVID-19 experience. The lived experiences varied in depth and breadth, from a simple mention of a dislike for the spring 2020 term and the 2020-2021 school year (Chad) to an in-depth story of the pandemic's direct impact on David's building.

The pandemic is an aspect of each participant's shared lived experience that elicited deep emotions and memories (Aidman & Long, 2017). After deep and thoughtful reflection, the participants who spoke about their COVID-19 experience relayed many lessons learned during this time. The stories they shared will forever be a piece of their larger narrative and will be told and retold over the coming years. These stories are their

truths, and they will forever get to own them (Riessman, 1993). We, the listeners, gained entry to the teller's experience (Godin, 2005).

The following two stories are shared as examples of the pandemic's impact on leaders, students, and schools. As Riessman (1993) stated, both the teller and listener get to provide meaning to a story based on their lived experiences and worldviews. The listener gains insight and understanding into the teller's experience (Denning, 2011) and gets "to sit in someone else's chair or to walk a mile in his shoes" (Simmons, 2015, p. 170). These are their experiences retold through my lens and experiences of the pandemic.

Brent. Brent recalls his first staff meeting as principal at River Bluff High School. It was fall 2020, amid some of the most contentious months of the pandemic. During that meeting, he reintroduced himself to the staff he had previously served as an assistant principal. He also informed them that instruction would be in person and virtually during the 2020-2021 school year, which was not a popular choice.

All educators faced similar challenges during the 2020-2021 school year. Teachers taught virtually and in person simultaneously. Student schedules were adjusted to account for social distancing and other mandates from local health departments. Masks were a point of contention nationwide, while the task of contact tracing fell upon administrative assistants, school nurses, and designated administrators. So much time and energy was spent on pandemic-related tasks that everyday routines and procedures were overlooked. As Brent recounts, "I think for the past two years, and probably in all American schools, we probably turned our eye to a lot of things that we didn't think were serious."

“We [had] to make sure we're doing X, we're gonna make sure we [were] doing Y, and we're gonna make sure we're doing Z. We lost sight of some things that were really important, to be completely honest.” Simple tasks were put on the back burner while the all-consuming tasks of managing and leading during a pandemic enveloped everyone’s time.

While not completely free of all the constraints COVID-19 placed on schools, Brent knew that things needed to return to some form of normalcy. Students, staff, and administration reestablished norms they had lost over the past year. Choosing a theme everyone could rally around brought back a focus on those little things that may have slid by during the height of the pandemic.

David. “[The] power of story does make a huge difference.”

Any administrator who led during summer and fall 2020 has similar shared lived experiences dealing with issues not taught in any master’s program. Instead of preparing to welcome staff and students back into buildings, administrators were tasked with ensuring social distancing in classrooms and hallways, implementing unpopular mask mandates, and securing enough masks, hand sanitizer, and other personal protective equipment and supplies.

David was not immune to these issues. However, a tragic story shared with his student body became the connection that led to smoother waters. When one of their own lost his mother to the pandemic, everyone rallied around his grief and decided to wear their masks appropriately.

Frankie’s mother was an early victim of the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon returning to school in the fall, he wanted to take every precaution necessary to ensure he did not

also become a victim of the virus or bring it home to his family. Proper mask-wearing was essential to him; he wanted others to understand why.

On the first day of school, Frankie saw a group of students with their masks pulled down below their noses, and he immediately had a meltdown. Knowing his story, David intervened and helped those students understand why Frankie felt this way.

“Whether you like or agree with the mask mandate, whether your families like it or agree or disagree, do you understand how he feels?”

Frankie’s story rippled across campus with a positive impact. “The power of story will get you a lot further.” David never had to say a word about masks. While administrators and school officials struggled with the mask mandates during the 2020-2021 school year, David did not, as his students respected Frankie and his lived experience.

Discussion of Research Questions

Four research questions were included as part of the study. These questions were answered using the participants’ lived experiences shared with the researcher through interviews conducted in fall 2022.

What stories do secondary school leaders share with their students?

Secondary school administrators shared their own unique lived experiences with their students. As veteran educators, the participants in this study had a deep repertoire of stories from which to draw. The stories shared in the study were as wide and varied as the location and demographics which the participants served and were unique to each participant (Rappaport, 1993).

The stories shared within this study are found in the 12 distinct narratives found in Chapter 4. Each participant was allowed to share whatever story they deemed appropriate for this study from their worldview and lens (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Stories from the participants' own school experience as a student were a common theme. Additionally, shared experiences with students were common as they provided context and a connection to the secondary school administrator's current students.

It is important to note that many participants stated they share endless stories with their students depending on the circumstances, the students, and the administrator's current lens. There is a time and place for specific stories (Simmons, 2015), and secondary school administrators use their professional expertise to determine when specific stories are apropos. An administrator's relationship with the student(s) also factors into what stories are shared.

How do the stories secondary school leaders share with their students relate to the leaders' own lived experiences?

The stories secondary school leaders shared with their students were all their lived experiences and were personal in nature (Simmons, 2015). Whether a story about their childhood, life during their formative years, shared lived experiences with staff or students, or personal struggles or successes, each story told was their own. Opposed to what the literature stated about using fables and myths as a tool to frame the current reality, affirm individual or organizational values, provide context to the present, and inspire a vision for change (Armstrong, 1992; Green, 2004; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Salicru, 2018), the 12 participants did not use grandiose myths and fables, as many felt

these stories were less powerful. Participants pull from their deep buckets of personal stories to convey messages and lessons (Simmons, 2015). As David stated, “The power of story will get you a lot further, but it has to be genuine. [It] has to be a real story. Fables don’t work. Kids will see through that in a heartbeat.”

Why do secondary school leaders share stories with students?

The data indicate secondary school administrators share stories with their students to build connections (Godin, 2005), teach and/or share lessons (Kowalski, 2015), and create a better vision (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Kaye & Jacobson, 1999) for their students. “Lines of connection or disconnection—good, bad, relevant, or irrelevant” (Simmons, 2015, pp. 13-14) are formed between the secondary school administrators’ stories and their students.

Stories break down complex concepts and provide vivid and memorable imagery (Harris & Barnes, 2005). Through stories, connections are made, and relationships can be formed. At the core of nearly every participant in the study was their desire to build positive relationships with students. Stories are a powerful tool (Aidman & Long, 2017; Barker & Gower, 2010; Guber, 2011; Rappaport, 1993) for establishing and growing those relationships. Once a relationship has been established, trust can be built (Caminotti & Gray, 2012) with the students, creating a better vision for their future.

What are the perceived outcomes secondary school administrators have when they share stories about their lived experiences with their students?

Secondary school administrators use stories to give students context to their current circumstances (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020) and incite action (Denning, 2011; Guber, 2011) using the administrator’s lived experiences. The stories

they share are personal, have meaning, and create order from this knowledge, often involving lessons learned (Boal & Schultz, 2007). Through sharing stories, trusting relationships can be built between administrators and students to move in the desired direction (Simmons, 2015).

Another perceived outcome of sharing stories is to build connections. Once a relationship has been established, students are more likely to share their experiences, and help, guidance, and support can be provided to enhance their future endeavors (Taylor, 2001). Administrators are trying to find the one thing students are interested in and guide them in exploring their passions. Once connections are made, students ask questions leading to more meaningful and impactful conversations that can change the trajectory of a student's life.

Aaron sums up his perceived outcomes of telling stories to students best.

I share stories with my students because it brings a reality to what I'm sharing, and I remember thinking back as a student myself. You can teach me things, but once you put it into a story and get me involved in a story, it means more. It's more memorable. It's more real. It's more exciting. And I think students are still that way today. If I say, "Hey, sit down. I want to tell you a story about something. Guess what? I went to Washington, D.C., and I was the principal of the year I got to present on advocacy. ..." Students will say, "Oh really? Did you go to the monuments?" Stories bring out questions that brings all this inquiry to their minds. And I love that piece, and that's why being out and about is so important. If I'm not out and about, I can't sit down and tell stories and answer

questions. So to me, it's just that storytelling piece is what draws interest and questions and really makes it exciting.

Limitations of the Study

The limitation of a narrative study is the methodology itself. Stories are endless. A researcher must limit the scope and focus of a narrative study to gather valuable data that provides meaning (Senffner, 2015; Simmons, 2015). Narrative studies also are driven by the stories shared with the researcher, which opens doors and may take the researcher down paths never intended.

Each narrative was member checked for accuracy, as the stories were told through the participant's lens and retold through my own in this document. Stories are never concrete and are left to interpretation (Riessman, 1993). Each time it is retold, my truths smooth the story (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018) and remove it one step further from the author and original storyteller's truth (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Simmons, 2015). A little more is forgotten every time a story is told (Anderson, 2021).

A researcher cannot collect every story a secondary school principal shares with students. The researcher can only analyze the stories participants are willing to share (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants share stories that resonate at the moment and with the particular situation told through their current worldview (Hoepfl, 1997). While possible to reach saturation with common themes throughout stories, everyone has their own story to tell, which is unique. The collection process could be endless as new stories, with new vantage points, will always be at the storyteller's discretion.

Implications

Storytelling is a tool that can be developed within school leaders and used in daily tasks. By gathering the stories secondary school administrators share with their students, storytelling literature is expanded to include a specific demographic that could have been more abundantly present. The 12 narratives can stand alone as reflection pieces upon which current and aspiring school administrators can connect with their own lived experiences.

The art of storytelling can be taught in formal school leader preparation programs as stories have the power to influence (Simmons, 2015) both individuals and school culture. An intentional repertoire of stories can be collected that helps administrators build connections with students and spark recollections of similar events in their lives. Through the themes identified and the stories shared in this study, future school-building administrators could draw stories from their own experiences to identify when stories made connections, created a vision, or taught a lesson.

Lastly, stories can change lives, as seen throughout the 12 narratives. Every secondary school administrator has a Jax, James, Sam, et al. who may only need one trusted adult with a story that resonates within them to change their life forever. The most significant implication for storytelling for secondary school administrators is that a single student's entire trajectory in life is altered because of a common connection found through a similar shared lived experience, which creates a better vision for their future.

Suggestions for Future Research

Storytelling research, especially regarding students, administrators, and schools, can be expanded to enhance the overall school experience by providing meaning to the

past, context to the present, and a vision for the future. Throughout the 12 narratives, participants shared life experiences that have impacted their path in life, journey to secondary school administration, and influence on students. However, the scope of the study was limited to only those stories that secondary school administrators shared as participants in this study. Suggestions for future research regarding stories secondary school administrators share with students are as follows:

1. A case study exploring a particular school administrator's story can be conducted to learn more intimate details of their lived experiences and the impact they may or may not have on their students.
2. Current or former students could be interviewed to conclude if the stories shared by their secondary school administrator impacted their lives. Do they remember the stories shared with them? If they did, what aspect of these stories resonated with them long after graduation?
3. The scope of a storytelling study could be expanded to include stories of one particular school from the perspective of students, staff, and community members. The culture and history of a school could be explored to unveil the stories that are most impactful on the school culture and community.
4. The study's premise could be replicated with the participant pool fitting a specific demographic or population to collect their individual stories. Such examples would include secondary school administrators who: serve a specific population of students, lead in rural or urban schools, serve areas of poverty or wealth, are from a particular region or state, or have unique personal experiences or backgrounds (e.g., trauma, single-parent households, etc.) to name a few.

5. A particular story could be explored from all players' viewpoints to gauge the impact on each individual. Even with a shared lived experience, no two individuals will have the same recollection of events as everyone provides their own meaning using their worldview (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
6. Do certain types of stories resonate more with students than others? Do stories about sports, academics, personal struggles or trauma, etc., impact students more than other types?
7. A researcher could select a topic of particular interest and collect stories school administrators share about a specific topic and why. For example, stories about academic successes, athletic failures, drug abuse, educational opportunities, passions outside of school, and so on, could be collected and analyzed as to why they are used and the extent of their impact on students.

Conclusion

“Humans are essentially storytellers” (Fisher, 1985, p. 7), and it is through storytelling that humans provide meaning to the past, context to the present, and shape our vision for the future (Boal & Schultz, 2007; McAdams, 1993; Takala & Auvinen, 2014; Taylor, 2001). Stories connect all humans, and this holds true when secondary school administrators share stories with their students. Very few tools in a principal's bag have the power to resonate and influence like stories (Simmons, 2015).

An individual's grand narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is often built upon a foundation that is reinforced through the stories they live and share (Riessman, 1993). Throughout this study, the stories shared provided insight into the participants' lives

(Gargiulo, 2002). The worldviews, values, and beliefs were evident in the themes of the stories they shared as each participant placed value on them (Hamon, 2020).

Stories can last long after the original author or teller has passed, only if someone is willing to retell them (Taylor, 2001). Having a written record solidifies stories at that moment in time; however, they are still subject to change and interpretation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993). The storyteller constantly gleans different aspects of a story based on their lens and worldview. Only the details which resonate the most with the listener will be included and retold.

Everyone has a story, and they matter. Stories provide the foundation and guide along the many paths traversed in life. An innocuous story from childhood may be the spark that excites and inspires a student in a manner never intended (Denning, 2011). “A story well and properly told opens up possibilities of action for me, rather than foreclosing them; it broadens and deepens my world” (Hummel, 1991, p. 38). The power of stories is the words which bring context and create meaning for the listener.

The topic of storytelling for secondary school administrators did not just fall into my lap. One of the darkest moments of my high school sports career serves as a story I share selectively with my students. Retelling the story helps build a connection and reinforces a lesson I had to learn the hard way. A moment that, even a quarter century later, often resonates within the confines of my mind and serves as an opportunity for others not to make the same mistakes. It is through our stories that humans connect. “All meaningful human communication is in the form of storytelling” (*The Narrative Paradigm*, 2014, “Introduction” section).

CHAPTER 6: MY STORY

“It ain’t the six minutes. It’s what happens in that six minutes.” (Becker, 1985, 1:27:59)

Stories Matter

It has been over a quarter century—9,864 days to be exact—since I walked through the doors of the Plainview High School gym. On a below-zero day at the end of January, I wanted to be in the space that shaped a large part of who I am. A moment that I have lived over and over again in my head for the past 27 years. A couple of times a month, I stop for a second, minute, or hour to reflect on a fateful moment and how life could have been different. My head races as I ponder how one wrestling match would change the trajectory of my life.

January 29, 2023

Wanting to relive the experience, my initial plan was to attend the Plainview High School wrestling invite and watch as athletes from the same small towns I competed for and against squared off. For decades the Plainview Invite has been held on the last weekend of January and probably will be until the end of time. However, Mother Nature had different plans.

A winter storm blew in the night before the tournament and dropped 8” of snow on top of a foot or more that was already on the ground. Disappointed I could not attend the wrestling invite, I began to scour the Plainview social media accounts and website, looking for a date I could make the 2 ½ hour drive and attend a different event. If that was not going to work, I contemplated calling the Plainview elementary principal with whom I have a connection. She was a year younger than me in school and married one of

my classmates. I just wanted the opportunity to sit in the space that I think about way too often, even after all these years. As my brain raced about how I would accomplish this, fate was working in my favor.

Scrolling through Twitter, a post came across that even though the high school tournament had been canceled, the youth wrestling tournament scheduled for the following day was still going to be held. Although not the same as the high school tournament, I knew I had to go. I wanted, no, *needed*, to walk through the same doors. Sit in the same corner. Cry in the same locker room. So early Sunday morning, I made the 2 ½ hour trek north to sit in this space.

Plainview, the “Klown Kapital of Nebraska,” is a quick 10-minute trip down Highway 20 from my hometown of Osmond. Growing up, they were our rivals, but I fail to remember many victories against the Plainview Pirates during my high school athletic career. My last football game was a 30-plus point loss where the ice pellets coming from the sky burned your eyes, and one of our coaches broke out a window trying to get in the locker room at halftime.

As I turned off Highway 20, the pit in my stomach grew, and my mind began to race. Whom would I see? Would anyone recognize me? How would I explain that I drove over five hours (round trip) on a Sunday to sit in a gym? All questions I would soon have answers to.

I found a parking spot near a snow drift higher than my truck and made my way into the building. Walking up to the building was like entering a time machine and being transported back to 1996. I could see Coach Stogdill carrying me through the gym doors while dragging my coach, who happened to be my dad, by the belt loops. I remember the

corner he sat me down in and told me to refocus. Memories I had stored away for nearly three decades came back to life. I was also reminded of what artist Laurie Anderson (2021) said about stories, “You try to get to the point you’re making, usually about yourself or something you learned. You get your story and you hold onto it, and every time you tell it you forget it more.” I realized I had “forgotten” many pieces of the story that were only reawakened by walking back into that gym.

January 27, 1996

There is a cliché in sports that you take one game, one match at a time. Do not overlook your next opponent; you may get tripped up by lesser competition. But talk to any player or coach, and you know this is far from the truth. When the pressure starts to mount, you peek ahead and formulate plans to beat your biggest foes, even if others are standing between you and them.

Nearing the end of a successful sophomore wrestling season, my confidence was at an all-time high, but so was my ego. During the week leading up to the annual Plainview Wrestling Invite, my coaches and I were doing just that, looking ahead. My dad happened to be the head wrestling coach, and Mr. Stogdill was a first-year teacher and assistant coach.

We were confident that I would qualify for my first state tournament but wanted to be sure I was prepared for the biggest opponents standing in my way. As a freshman, I lost a hard-fought match in overtime during the heart-break round at districts, narrowly missing out on a trip to the state tournament. While devastating at the moment, it motivated me during the off-season. A couple of victories at the Plainview Invite would

set me up for a coveted top-two seed at districts only two weeks away. But standing between me and that goal was Ralphie, a foe from Pender.

All week in practice, my coaches and I prepared for Ralphie even though there was no guarantee we would eventually meet up in the tournament. A game plan was devised, and I drilled both physically and mentally for the big matchup. In retrospect, focusing on a singular match would lead to an explosion of emotion, unsportsmanlike actions, and a lifetime of regret.

The moment we had been preparing for over the past week was coming to fruition. The day would play out just as expected. With a pin over a lesser opponent in the first round, the overhyped match of the weekend awaited. I would face Ralphie next in the semifinals.

I do not recall a single moment of the first 5 min 59 sec of the semifinal match. As the towel boy hit the ref to mark the end of the third period, I claimed victory and headed back to the center circle to drop my ankle bands and have the referee raise my hand. But upon returning back to the center of the mat, Ralphie's coach had called over the ref and began discussing the score. Utterly confused about what they could be discussing, I looked at my coaches in the corner for an explanation. They seemed just as confused--and perturbed--as I.

My dad headed to the scorer's table to join in the discussion. After what seemed like an eternity, the ref awarded phantom points to my opponent, which set off a series of events that play vividly in my mind to this day. We were heading to overtime to decide the match, and nobody in my corner was pleased. I was furious.

A sudden death situation awaited. The first person to score a takedown would be declared the winner. With my dad still arguing his case at the scorer's table, I looked toward Coach Stogdill for advice. "Just take him down and end it," he yelled across the already loud gym. Having already done that earlier in the match, I was confident I would do it again and in a quick fashion. I was too amped up. Drilling these situations in practice and doing it in real life are two very different beasts.

The referee returned to center and blew his whistle to start the overtime period. I shot and missed setting off a scramble situation. Somehow Ralphie ended up behind me, but I was in a tripod position. He was nowhere near securing the takedown. "Two, takedown," the ref screamed as he blew his whistle, and I blew my top! The match was over, but the fireworks were only beginning.

Astonished and furious, I began to shout at the referee, with my dad chiming in with his displeasure as well. Coach Stogdill came out on the mat to grab me, but I had already gone too far. A gentle giant, Coach Stogdill was an impressive presence. Having played on the line for the Minnesota Golden Gopher football team, he easily had the size and ability to throw me over his shoulder while grabbing my father by the waist to escort us out of the gym.

He carried me, kicking and screaming like a petulant child, to a side hallway where we were out of sight from the gym. Putting me down, he told me to sit in the corner and cool off, just like a parent scolding their child. Angry as a disturbed hive of bees, I sat, throwing my headgear against the far wall and pounding my fist against the floor. Feeling screwed out of winning the match, I blamed everybody except myself.

After a half hour, Stogdill came back, knelt next to me, and said to pull it together quickly. I still had one more match.

Much of the next hour between my match with Ralphie and the next opponent in the consolation semifinals has been lost in the ether of time. I am sure my dad had some words of wisdom for me, but I do not remember. Knowing I had to put the previous match behind me, I knew I had to clear my mind of what unfolded in the last match. I wanted to forget the entire set of unfortunate events. Nobody else in that gym had.

With the small confines of the gym, I warmed up in the hallway for my match with Coach Stogdill by my side. As my name was called, I threw off my warm-ups, ran into the gym, and was met by a chorus of boos that still ring through my head. At that moment, I realized I was not taking on just one opponent but an entire gym full. I grabbed my leg band from the scorer's table and went to the corner with my coaches for advice. "Just go out and take care of business," my dad shouted through the deafening roar enveloping the gym.

The opponent across the circle from me was one I usually would have taken care of quickly, but the opponent inside my head was getting the best of me. My concentration and focus were anywhere but on that mat. I began perusing the gym to see where the hostilities were coming from. Unfortunately, it was every corner of the gym.

Early in the first period, my opponent got a bloody nose, and I retreated to the confines of the corner with my coaches. The boos continued to stream down from the stands, and as I looked around, I saw Ralphie's coaches sitting there laughing. I lost my composure and yelled at them, only making matters worse. I do not remember how the rest of the match unfolded, except for the state-title-like cheers for my opponent as his

hand was raised in victory. Having been defeated by an inferior opponent, I retreated to the locker room, trying to escape the tsunami of self-inflicted criticism only to receive more from a familiar face.

Sitting on the locker room bench, I yelled, cried, and felt sorry for myself. I sat there for what felt like days trying to console myself. Trying to make sense of my complete failure on the mat that day, one of my teammates entered to get changed for his finals match. “You’re an embarrassment,” he sternly yelled as I sat with my head down. I tried to defend my actions with excuse after excuse but to no avail. He was right, but it would take me nearly 15 years to accept this reality.

The Aftermath

In the days and weeks that followed, I had many conversations with Coach Stogdill and my dad about my behavior on the mat. As I wrote apology letters to the referee and other coaches, I tried to make sense of the entire situation. But my 16-year-old brain could not comprehend the magnitude of what had happened. I was an embarrassment, and for the rest of my high school career, I would be reminded of it nearly every time I stepped on the mat.

Two weeks later, I qualified for the state tournament with a dramatic pin in the final seconds at districts. Packed into another tiny northeast Nebraska gym, I smiled at my girlfriend (and now wife) but was still greeted by a small chorus of boos. I was now the villain: a label I would never be able to shake.

During my final two years of high school, I would find my fair share of success on the wrestling mat, but everywhere I went, the memory of that day in Plainview’s gym followed me. Feeling I had no other option, I accepted my villain status and played into

the crowd's hand. After a big win, I would stare or gesture to the crowd, only accentuating the roar, which I appeared to enjoy on the outside but was tearing me up inside. Even as I notched my 100th career victory as a senior, coincidentally in Plainview's gym, I was met by boos. I could not help but wonder what I could have achieved on the mat if it was not for those six minutes as a sophomore when I lost myself in anger.

For the next decade, I rarely spoke of what happened. It was part of my story but one I desperately wished away. After my sophomore season, my dad and I never talked about it, and with a fresh start in college, I was not freely going to share about the worst moment of high school. It was not until a chance encounter over a decade later that I decided to accept the blame in my story and use the lessons learned to deter others from making the same mistake as I did.

Lessons Learned

After graduating from high school, I went to college at the university, married my high school sweetheart, had my first child, and started a career as a teacher and wrestling coach. Relying on my mentors, Coach Stogdill and my dad, I taught and coached in a similar fashion as them. But I kept the story of what happened on that fateful January day in 1996 to myself, not once sharing it with any of the wrestlers I coached. It was not until 2009 that would change.

In 2008, I got my first administrative position as the assistant principal at Milford Jr/Sr High School, the same school I taught and coached at. New opportunities to learn and grow professionally came with my new role, including attending the annual Administrator Days Conference in Kearney. This annual event brings administrators from across the state together to kick off a new school year and reconnect.

One afternoon between sessions, I ran into Mr. Stogdill, who had since moved on to a principalship, and Mr. Kubicek, a classmate from grad school. As we caught up on life in the conference hall lobby, Mr. Kubicek's superintendent joined the group. As he was introduced to me, I froze. "I know who you are. I coached at Pender," he said. I did not know how to react as I was immediately transported back to that January day in Plainview. How could the three of us, all with the same lived experience, be standing together at an administrator conference 13 years later?

After a few minutes of friendly small talk, our group parted ways, and I stayed and talked with Stogdill. I had embarrassed myself, my team, and my school, and people still remembered, even if I wished they would forget. It was then that I knew I needed to own my story and take responsibility for my actions that day.

Storytelling

A year later, my life would forever be changed by one conversation and a book. With another school year right around the corner, TJ Meyer, my principal, gave me a book to read in hopes that a theme for the school could be devised by the book's message. After reading *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* by Donald Miller, the Milford Public Schools' motto of "Everyone has a story ... make yours worth telling" was born.

For the past decade, the staff at Milford Public Schools has used this motto as our northern star and lighthouse on the horizon. Using the story premise, the staff frames conversations with students around writing better stories for themselves. It is also a reminder that not all stories are pretty and often involve conflict, disappointment, or

struggle to get to where we are today. Part of my story, who I am, and how I lead can be traced back to one fateful afternoon in Plainview, Nebraska.

As an educator, I have seen how stories can impact students and communities. While reluctant to even own this part of my story for years, I now embrace the lessons it taught me. Still emotionally difficult, I am still selective about when and with whom I share it. In sharing, I hope that a student or coach will not be defined by their choices during a few minutes on the court, field, or mat. Nobody should have to regret the actions of their 16-year-old self for years or decades to come.

Epilogue

Upon returning to Plainview's gym, I walked through the same doors, sat in the same side hallway, and cried in the old locker room. I also sat in the bleachers and watched for an hour as first and second graders competed in the same corner of the gym with their mom and dad on the edge of the mat, recording every moment. I smiled. I cried. I was thankful that social media was not a thing 27 years ago.

One thing about small-town life is that you know *everyone* from the surrounding communities. Looking around the crowd, I recognized former opponents and coaches, and I wondered if they remember anything about that day or if it was just me. Lost in my thoughts, I felt a tap on my shoulder, "I thought that was you. What the heck are you doing here?"

A classmate from high school was there to watch his son. After catching up on where we were in life, he asked again what I was doing sitting in the stands at a random youth wrestling tournament writing in a journal (Appendix E). I told him I was writing my dissertation about storytelling, and this place played a significant role in my story. I

told him about Coach Stogdill, the booing, and the regret I have felt for nearly three decades. He nodded his head, listening intently. Even with only 28 students in our graduating class, I realized he did not know the story.

They say time heals all wounds, but sometimes so does sharing our stories as “no one diary entry is our life story” (Rubin & Strauss, 2023, p. 202). Maybe enough time had passed that he forgot? Or perhaps it is just a story, my story, that I hold onto too tightly? After 27 years, I can let go. Yet, I am who I am because of this story, as sometimes “the six minutes” turn into a lifetime.

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APPENDIX A: NASSP STATE COORDINATOR EMAIL

Subject: Storytelling Dissertation Study

Dear NASSP State Coordinator,

My name is Brandon Mowinkel. I am the current NASSP State Coordinator from Nebraska and principal at Milford Jr/Sr High School in Milford, NE. I am currently conducting my dissertation research, examining the stories secondary school administrators share with their students. This study has been approved through Doane University's Institutional Review Board.

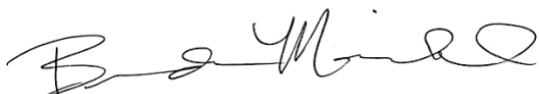
The purpose of this study is to explore the stories secondary school administrators share with their students. I invite you to participate in this study because you are a current or former NASSP State Coordinator and use stories to shape advocacy efforts. Thus, stories become ingrained as a tool administrators may use in their everyday roles.

Participation in this study will require one 45-60 minute conversation about the stories you share with students in your role as a secondary school administrator. Additional follow-up conversations may be conducted to provide clarity, give context to the stories shared, and ensure the accuracy of the data collected.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please email me to set up a time for an initial conversation. If you have questions before volunteering for this study, please feel free to reach out to me via email or phone.

Thanks for your consideration in volunteering for this study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Brandon Mowinkel
Principal, Milford Jr/Sr High School
Nebraska NASSP State Coordinator
Doctoral Candidate, Doane University
brandon.mowinkel@doane.edu
Phone: 402-841-1435

APPENDIX B: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Title of the Study:

The Power of Storytelling Amongst Secondary School Administrators

Principal Investigator:

Brandon Mowinkel, student, Doane University

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to explore the stories secondary school administrators share with their students. The research will use a narrative inquiry approach to explore the stories secondary school administrators use with their students as they relate to their own lived experiences. This study intends to collect stories secondary school administrators use with their students and explore those stories to look for themes across the stories being shared. You are invited to participate in this study because you have attended a NASSP National Advocacy Conference and serve/have served as a secondary school administrator with multiple years of leadership experience.

Anticipated Interview Format and Time Commitment:

For this study, each participant will participate in one semi-structured interview conducted by Brandon Mowinkel. This semi-structured interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes and will take place in person or via Zoom, depending on availability and location. With your permission, the semi-structured interview will be recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. If necessary, a follow-up or series of follow-up interview(s) may be conducted to provide clarity, give context to the stories shared, and ensure the accuracy of the data collected. Any follow-up interviews and dialog with the researcher will be optional.

Risks and/or Discomforts:

There are no known risks to the participants associated with this study. Participants will be asked to share stories used within their role as a secondary school administrator. Thus, participants may share personal information from their lived experiences that have impacted their leadership style used with students

Benefits and/or Compensation:

This research is intended to impact secondary school administrators' leadership abilities positively. In addition, this work will contribute to the lacking body of literature on this topic. Secondary school administrators may gain insight into how storytelling can be used effectively with students. Secondary School Administrators may find hope in the realization that the principal investigator aims to understand better and improve how personal stories can be used to have a more significant impact on their students. Participants will not be financially compensated for their time but will help contribute to a lacking repository of stories secondary school administrators share with their students. Participants' time and insight are greatly appreciated.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

Any information obtained during this study that could identify the participant will be kept strictly confidential. Interview recordings and transcripts will be kept for five years upon completion of the study. All data collected during this study will be stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and a backup external hard drive that is also password-protected. The information obtained through this study will be published in the principal investigator's dissertation, may be published in educational journals, or presented to the public. Unless the participants agree to have their names published in any form in the future, their identities will be kept anonymous. Agreed-upon pseudonyms will be used in all publications to ensure the anonymity of participants.

Institutional Review Board:

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects at Doane University (F22 004 DC IRB HS). Doane University is committed to ensuring research involving human subjects is conducted with the highest possible ethical standards. You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered during or before agreeing to participate in this study. You may contact Brandon Mowinkel, Doane University doctoral student/principal investigator, at 402-841-1435 or by emailing brandon.mowinkel@doane.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the principal investigator or to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the Doane University Institutional Review Board by emailing irb@doane.edu.

Name and Contact of Principal Investigator:

Brandon Mowinkel, Doctorate of Education, Doctoral Student at Doane University
402-841-1435
brandon.mowinkel@doane.edu

Name and Contact of Principal Investigator's Advisor:

Dr. Lyn Forester, Ed.D., Retired Dean of the Doane University College of Education
402-826-8214
lyn.forester@doane.edu

Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw:

I also currently serve as a secondary school administrator and the State Coordinator for the state of Nebraska. Please be aware that participation in this study is voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate in this study and can withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the principal investigator, NASSP, or Doane University.

Electronic Consent

Your signature grants voluntary consent to participate in this study and indicates that you understand your rights and the researcher's responsibilities. A copy of this consent form will be sent electronically via the email address you provide.

Clicking the radio button next to “I agree/consent to give my voluntary informed consent to participate in this study” indicates that you are at least 19 years of age; you have read this consent document or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction, and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. Before leaving this page, we encourage you to print a copy of this consent form for your records.

If you agree to participate, please click the button next to “I give my voluntary informed consent to participate in this study.” If you do not agree to participate, please click the button next to “I withhold my voluntary informed consent to participate in this study.”

- I give my voluntary informed consent to participate in this study.
 I withhold my voluntary informed consent to participate in this study.

If you agree/consent to be audio recorded, please click the button next to “I agree/consent to give my voluntary informed consent to be audio recorded.” If you do not agree to be audio recorded, please click the button next to “I withhold my voluntary informed consent to be audio recorded.”

- I give my voluntary informed consent to be audio recorded for this study.
 I withhold my voluntary informed consent to be audio recorded for this study.

Name

Date

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Time of Interview:

Date:

Location:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Hello, my name is Brandon Mowinkel, and I serve as the principal at Milford Jr/Sr High School in Milford, Nebraska. I am currently an Ed.D. candidate at Doane University. The purpose of my study is to explore the stories secondary school administrators share with their students. I will not share the data collected within this pilot study beyond this class and will refer to your identity with a pseudonym. Are you comfortable sharing your story with me? Do you mind if I record the interview? Would you like to choose a pseudonym for yourself?

What questions do you have for me before we begin?

Questions

1. Take me through your journey to becoming a school administrator and the role you currently serve in today.
2. Will you please share a story you use frequently with students in your role as a secondary school administrator?

As a semi-structured interview any or all of the following questions will be used to explore the intricacies and details of the story in which the interviewee shared.

3. How does this story relate to your own lived experience(s)?

4. In what context/setting do you find yourself using this story in your role as a secondary school principal?
 - a. How often do you share this story with your students?
5. What are your students' reactions to the story?
6. What message, take away, or benefit will your students gain from this story?
7. How do you see this story leaving an impact on the students you serve?
8. Why do you share stories with your students?

General Probes

What happened then?

Tell me more about _____?

How did you feel when _____?

Script: Thank you again for your time. Once again, this information will not be shared with anyone outside of the class, and you will not be able to be identified as the interviewee who provided this information. If you have any questions, please feel free to email or call me. I appreciate your time! Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX D: MEMBER CHECK FORM

Title of Study:

The Power of Storytelling Amongst Secondary School Administrators.

Dear Research Participant,

Please review the attached narrative, retold and restoried from the researcher's lens, of our interview about the stories you share with students as a secondary school administrator. Feel free to note any errors or misconceptions which need to be corrected before publishing.

Once you have reviewed the attached document, please check the appropriate box to indicate your level of approval for your part in this study. Should you return your narrative with suggested changes, your approval will again be needed after corrections are made. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants, schools, and students.

I appreciate your willingness to have your story told through my study.

Please indicate your level of approval:

I approve of the narrative without reviewing it.

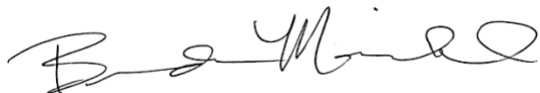
I approve of the narrative without changes.

I approve of the narrative with noted changes.

I do not approve of the narrative.

Signature of Participant

Date



Brandon Mowinkel - Researcher

APPENDIX E: JOURNAL ENTRY (1/28/23)

JANUARY 28, 2023 PLAINVIEW

SAME BLEACHERS W/ BACKRESTS

BRANDON - BEN
WINSIDE - SAME PINSTRIPPED UNIFORMS
ARE YOU EVER ~~BEING~~ DEFINED BY YOUR WORST
MOMENT. EVERYONE HAS ONE. WHAT DID
YOU LEARN.

I REALIZE IN THAT MOMENT I MADE IT
ABOUT ME.

ALL THE SCREAMING & COACHING WAS
DIRECTED AT ME INSTEAD OF EVERYONE
ELSE.

RUNNING INTO A CLASSMATE & SHARING
MY STORY.

GLAD THERE WAS NO SOCIAL MEDIA.

WOULD HAVE MADE THE SOCIAL FEEDS
HAVING

CHEN ME OUT IN THE LOCKER ROOM

"I WAS AN EMBARRASSMENT TO THE TEAM"
WE NEVER FEEL WE ARE WRONG IN THE MOMENT
TOOK YEARS TO REALIZE MY ERROR COULD BE

A LEARNING LESSONS FOR OTHERS
LETTER TO THE REP

BUILD BACK TRUST AND RESPECT
- NEVER DID

TIME HAD TO PASS

ADMIN DAYS W/ ... &

I KNOW WHO YOU ARE - I WAS IN
THE CORNER

ALL OF THESE LITTLE KIDS... SOME WILL
MAKE THE SAME MISTAKE BUT HOPEFULLY
NOT

LEAD UP TO THE WEEK WAS ALL ABOUT ONE
MATCH.

POINTS CHANGE AT THE END OF REGULATION.

LOSS IN OT AFTER A NON TAKE DOWN. LOST MY
MIND. CARRIED OUT BY STODDILL.
SAT IN CORNER.

REGULAR HIT
SCHOOL MEET. COOLERS
PARENTS CHATTER.

APPENDIX F: RESEARCH LOG

DATE	TIME	PEOPLE INVOLVED (Participant Pseudonym when necessary)	ACTIVITY
11/15/21	10:00 am	Dr. Forester	Met with chair to introduce myself and my initial thoughts for my dissertation study
12/15/21	--	Dr. Forester	Feedback on Chapter 2—Literature Review
1/24/22	--	Dr. Forester	Sent an updated purpose statement and research questions
3/15/22	9:50 am	Greg Waples	Permission from NASSP to use the State Coordinator email group to email potential participants in my study.
4/3/22	--	Dr. Forester	Feedback on Chapter 3—Methodology
5/30/22	--	Dr. Forester, Dr. Johnston, Dr. Rath	Sent Chapters 1, 2, and 3 for initial review
July 2022	--	Dr. Forester, Dr. Johnston, Dr. Rath	Feedback and changes on Chapters 1, 2 and 3 and set proposal defense for August 2, 2022
7/14/22	--	Greg Waples	Gained permission and confirmed with Greg the ability to send out requests for participants using the NASSP email group once the proposal has been approved.
8/2/22	10:00 am	Dr. Forester, Dr. Johnston, Dr. Rath	Proposal Defense and approval
8/30/22	--	NASSP State Coordinator Email Group	Emails were sent to potential participants in the study.
Sept 1-9	--	Potential Interviewees	I exchanged emails with eight potential interviewees to schedule a time to meet via zoom. Four were able to meet within the next two weeks. I informed the other four I would follow up with them later in the month to schedule a time.
9/12/22	3:15 pm	Steve	Interview #1 and memo
9/12/22	5:45 pm	Don	Interview #2 and memo

9/14/22	3:15 pm	Chad	Interview #3 and memo
9/14/22	7:15 pm	Holly	Interview #4 and memo
Sept 25-20	--	Potential Interviewees	I exchanged emails with two interviewees to schedule a time to meet via Zoom.
10/5/22	2:00 pm	Brent	Interview #5 and memo
10/6/22	7:00 pm	David	Interview #6 and memo
10/7/22	--	Dr. Forester, Dr. Johnston, Dr. Rath	Sent an email update to my committee on my progress.
Oct 3-7	--	Potential Interviewees	Followed up with individuals who had expressed interest in participating in the study.
10/16/22	--	Mary	Set up an interview time via Zoom with interviewee.
10/19/22	5:00 pm	Mary	Interview #7 and memo
10/19/22	--	Ron	Set up an interview time via Zoom with interviewee.
10/24/22	--	Rachel	Set up an interview time via Zoom with interviewee.
10/27/22	--	NASSP State Coordinator Email Group	A follow-up email was sent to the NASSP State Coordinator email list seeking potential participants in the study. I sent the same email that was initially sent on 8/30/22.
10/27/22	4:00 pm	Rachel	Interview #8 and memo
10/28/22	--	Gary	Set up an interview time via Zoom with interviewee.
10/31/22	--	Vince	Set up an interview time via Zoom with interviewee.
10/31/22	2:00 pm	Ron	Interview #9 and memo
10/31/22	4:00 pm	Gary	Interview #10 and memo
11/4/22	2:00 pm	Vince	Interview #11 and memo
11/17/22	--	Dr. Forester, Dr. Johnston, Dr. Rath	Sent an email to my committee to update them on my progress as I had eleven interviews completed or scheduled.

11/4/22-12/5/22	--	--	Transcribed interviews using Otter.AI
12/1-12/27	--	--	Coded interviews using Dedoose (2023) coding software
12/4/22	--	Aaron	Set up an interview time via Zoom with interviewee
12/4/22	--	Dr. Forester, Dr. Johnston, Dr. Rath	End of the semester email to committee to update them on my progress. Currently have all 12 interviews completed or scheduled and have begun the coding process.
12/5/22	9:00 am	Aaron	Interview #12 and memo
11/23/22-12/27/22	--	--	Coded all 12 interviews using Dedoose (2023)
11/23/22-1/4/23	--	--	Pieced together narratives for all 12 interviewees using a spreadsheet and word. Outlined demographic information for each participant and major stories lines from interviews. Also, collected important narrative shifts and moments which influenced the stories they share with students.
12/27/22-1/3/22	--	--	Arranged codes into themes
12/27/22	--	--	Began writing Chapter 4
1/1-2/7/23	--	--	Wrote 12 participant narratives
1/28/23	--	--	Took trip to Plainview for the youth wrestling tournament to sit in same gym as Chapter 6 took place. I journaled about the experience while in the gym. I stopped on the way home and wrote chapter 6 while my thoughts and reflection was still fresh in my mind.
1/29/23	--	Dr. Forester	Email update on progress since December.
2/14/23	1:00 pm	Dr. Forester	Phone conversation with Dr. Forester to discuss progress on Chapters 4 and 5 and answer a few questions about narrative member checks.
2/8-2/12	--	Interview Participants	Member checked each of the 12 narratives. Received favorable feedback and approval from each of the participants.
2/5/23	--	--	Began writing Chapter 5
2/19/23	--	Dr. Forester	Submitted Chapter 6 for review

2/19/23	--	Dr. Forester	Submitted Chapter 4 for review
2/21/23	--	Dr. Forester	Received feedback on Chapters 4 and 6
2/23/23	--	Dr. Forester, Dr. Johnston, Dr. Rath	Submitted Chapters 4 and 6 to entire committee for review
3/10/23	--	Dr. Forester	Submitted Chapter 5 for review
3/10/23	--	Dr. Forester	Received feedback on Chapter 5
3/15/23	--	Dr. Forester	Resubmitted Chapter 5 with changes for review
3/20/23	--	Dr. Forester	Sent completed dissertation to Dr. Forester for approval
3/20/23	--	Dr. Forester, Dr. Johnston, Dr. Rath	Sent completed dissertation to secure a defense date
3/21/23	--	Jayne Germer	Secured Jayne to edit the entire dissertation
3/22/23	--	Dr. Forester, Dr. Johnston, Dr. Rath	Set defense date of 4/12/23
3/35/23	--	--	Began defense presentation
4/6/23	--	Jayne Germer	Received suggested edits
4/7-4/8/23	--	--	Made suggested edits to dissertation
4/12/23	--	Dr. Forester, Dr. Johnston, Dr. Rath	Defended Dissertation

APPENDIX G: CENSUS REGIONS AND DIVISIONS MAP

