

Evaluation of Community Storytelling Events

Prepared for Telling Queer History

Author: Julia Miller, Jennifer McCleary, and Christina Munoz-Pinon



J U N E 2 0 2 3

451 Lexington Parkway North | Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

**Wilder
Research**
Information. Insight. Impact.

Contents

Background.....	1
Evaluation methods.....	1
Key findings.....	4
Motivation to participate or connect.....	4
Key community impacts	5
Suggestions from community members.....	11
Final thoughts.....	13



TQH storytelling event on food and economic justice in June 2022

Background

Telling Queer History was established in 2013 to connect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer+ people across generations and identities through oral storytelling. Their mission is to bring communities together to foster compassion, empathy, belonging, and healing. Their goals are to serve queer communities as a space for intergenerational and intersectional connection. Telling Queer History was founded as a response to the erasure of LGBTQ+ history in public spaces and uses storytelling as a way to foster belonging, healing, creativity, and remembering rooted in a collective history.

Telling Queer History is a recipient of the 2023 Wilder Research pro bono project award and received comprehensive evaluation services from Wilder Research staff. This report details the evaluation methods used, findings from the data collection, and recommendations based on the findings.

Evaluation methods

This mixed-methods evaluation included a brief survey of storytelling event participants and in-depth interviews with event participants and storytellers. Wilder Research staff worked with Telling Queer History staff to develop the following questions to guide the focus of the evaluation.

1. How do Telling Queer History storytelling events impact attendees' sense of community and belonging, especially within queer communities?
2. How do Telling Queer History storytelling events impact the queer community as a whole, beyond individual participants and one-time events?
3. Specifically, does attending Telling Queer History events impact an individual long-term and does that individual share that impact with others in their community?
4. What is the level of satisfaction with Telling Queer History events and what are some suggestions for future events?

Participant survey

Wilder Research staff began by reviewing the previous survey used by Telling Queer History at storytelling events. This survey is intended to gauge participant satisfaction, interest in future events, and suggestions or recommendations for future events in particular and Telling Queer History in general. Wilder Research staff made suggestions to update the questions, increase the rigor, and facilitate data collection and analysis. These updates were made and the new survey was piloted at two events. Complications in the piloting process limited the utility of resulting data for the purposes of this report (6 completes), but the survey is now ready for future use by Telling Queer History.

The new survey is an online survey with a mix of open- and closed-ended questions such as “How did this event make you feel?” “During the event, what caused you to feel more or less connected?” and “I felt safe and comfortable during this event” (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Event attendees are emailed the survey after their attendance and complete the survey via Google Forms.

Individual interviews

In order to understand more in-depth how Telling Queer History is living up to its mission to foster compassion, empathy, belonging, and healing in the queer community through storytelling, Wilder Research completed 19 individual interviews with storytellers (N=7) and attendees (N=12). Participants were recruited by the executive director of Telling Queer History via email invitations. Participants were included if they were 18 or older and had either attended a Telling Queer History event any time in the past or told a story at an event. Semi-structured interview guides were tailored to the target participant group (attendees or storytellers). Some examples of interview questions include: How did the event impact you personally? Over time, what has stuck with you the most from this event? After attending this event, did you share anything that stood out to you with anyone else? What impact does storytelling have in this community?

Interested participants were connected to Wilder Research staff to schedule a time to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted primarily over the telephone or virtually via video. Interviews were recorded with permission of the interviewee to support notes taken during the interviews. Prior to beginning the interview, interviewees were given the following information: their responses would be kept confidential and their names or identifying information would not be shared with anyone or in a report, their responses would be analyzed with other interviewees and compiled in a report for Telling Queer History, and that all of the questions were optional and they could skip questions or stop the interview at any time. All interviewees were offered a \$20 gift card for their time.



TQH 10 year anniversary event in June 2023

Data analysis

Notes from the interviews were analyzed using simple content analysis in Atlas.ti. Three Wilder Research staff split the interviews and coded them using a shared codebook developed by one of the project staff. The three coders met to discuss and negotiate differences in coding. Codes were then grouped by themes and developed into the findings reported below. Interview quotes have been included in this report and may be edited for clarity or to protect respondent confidentiality.

Limited data from the updated survey were available in time for reporting, meaning survey results are limited in this report. However, survey data from the updated survey (n=6) and the previous Telling Queer History survey (n=10) are included here where applicable or supportive of the interview themes.

Survey results support this theme from the interviews. Both the updated survey and the previous TQH survey asked respondents about their motivations for attending TQH events, though in different question formats. Nonetheless, both surveys showed that participants attended to meet other LGBTQ+ people, because the topic sounded fun/interesting, and to learn or share with others.

For the storytellers interviewed, most shared that TQH directly invited them to tell their story at an event, though a few noted they were also motivated by the chance to create visibility or representation for others like themselves in the community.

Well, sharing these stories is important to me because invisibility is a major tool of oppression of queer people. And telling these stories is a way of pushing back against that, the dominant culture's desire to, at the very least have us be invisible. And so for me, creating that visibility happens one story at a time. – TQH Storyteller

Key community impacts

Telling Queer History offers opportunities to find and build community

Interview respondents shared multiple ways that TQH helps build a sense of community, on both an individual and community level.

Participants have opportunities to be together, share together, and learn from one another

On an individual level, respondents shared they were able to connect with others and find community during TQH events. Over half of those we talked to shared they could relate to or felt represented by the storytellers or attendees at the events. For example, interviewees said they felt seen or heard in the stories that were shared or in the identities of storytellers or attendees present. A few noted they appreciated having the queer-centered space to gather.

I just feel like it makes me feel more connected to people and more, everybody has gone through so many different things, things that I have never gone through. But even so, I feel like hearing these stories like, oh, I understand, I understand that. And I have empathy toward that, and I care. I care about these people and their stories, even though I don't know them. It's still a little bit of me in everybody's story, even though it's not at all. So yeah, I guess it just makes me feel more connected and less lonely in the world. – TQH event attendee

So much of my life is pretty visually and explicitly hetero, to be in a space where it feels queer and it feels like that is the normal thing... I don't feel like an outsider. [That] just feels really refreshing given how much of the world is so hetero-focused that I'm in a group of folks where being queer is the norm and that feels like a breath out. – TQH event attendee

A few people also noted the breakout rooms after the main storytelling event as an accessible way to connect further with a smaller group of people and exchange stories with one another, though some also expressed anxiety around having small group sessions.

And then at the end of the events, the online events, there's always some time to have small groups, which of course can be kind of nerve-wracking, but it's also nice to just check in with some other people and see, oh, how is this landing with you? What do you think? What's a little bit of your story? So I both like that, and I feel like, oh, that's a little bit hard to do, but I think it's also good. – TQH event attendee

The breakout rooms afterwards, I think, are really nice because then everyone gets to share a little bit of their own story as much as they feel comfortable with, even if they aren't willing to be in front of everyone all at once. – TQH event attendee

Important to connecting and being in community with others, a few respondents shared feeling welcome and safe at TQH events. They mentioned a few components that help create feelings of welcome and safety:

- The people in attendance are generally friendly and welcoming
- Multiple TQH board members are visible and actively participate in events, including breakout rooms
- The diversity of storytellers and attendees participating
- Breakout rooms offer additional chances to connect with others
- Accessibility efforts, such as having ASL interpreters and offering virtual options

Over half of those we spoke to also mentioned simply enjoying or appreciating the events, noting that the events are fun and the stories shared are engaging. The survey data further supports this, with nearly all respondents from both the previous and updated survey versions reporting satisfaction with the events they attended, though again in different question formats.

I felt like I could relate to the stories, and then the storytellers themselves were really great. I felt like they did a good job conveying information and keeping everyone engaged. Again, I can't remember specific topics, but I just remember how I felt, and I really enjoyed listening to everyone's stories. – TQH event attendee

The most recent [event] was just fun and very sexy, and that's not something you get in your usual Zoom meetings. – TQH event attendee

TQH provides a multigenerational environment

Many of those we spoke with also mentioned that TQH offers a multigenerational environment and opportunities to learn or connect across age groups. Respondents shared appreciation for being able to hear from folks older and younger than themselves. This multigenerational component was a key value of storytelling as a whole in recording queer history. Participants said storytelling naturally lends itself to passing history down through the generations, and a few noted this kind of storytelling provides support for future generations.

I think this type of project allows for folks to tap into a family tree history that we might not have access to otherwise. – TQH event attendee

I have a stereotype in my head that younger people don't care about history as much, but I don't think that that's necessarily true. And so it's really interesting for me to see, it's like, "Oh, the people who are really involved in Telling Queer History, a lot of them are younger than me." And that's great. That's really great. – TQH Storyteller

You have people now 60, 70, 80, even 90 years old, and their stories need to be told because they're survivors and they're thrivers. And for younger people, they need to know that you are not alone in your journey. Your journey may differ because of age and circumstance, but it doesn't differ in the questions. The general questions, the core questions that come up, and here are ways that people actually answered those questions in their own words. – TQH Storyteller

TQH provides space for community to gather

When asked how Telling Queer History impacts the broader LGBTQ+ community as a whole, building community was again the prevailing theme. Many mentioned TQH provides space to gather and offers a queer-centered space. This space offers opportunities to build community and share community history.

I mean, in terms of the wider Twin Cities queer community, I think that it helps me feel more connected that there are other people in this city who are also queer, also doing the thing...because belonging is so important and so essential to human beings, and it's kind of hard to find that particular kind of belonging, I think the fact that this space and this organization offers that is really healing and really meaningful. – TQH event attendee

It's a way for us to come together, and share our stories, and find some connection with other people. To know that we're not alone. – TQH event attendee

A few respondents also noted how TQH offers a slightly different queer-centered space than other similar community organizations or events, giving people options. For example, TQH events are explicitly substance-free, which may be important for some or may be a barrier for them participating elsewhere. Events have been virtual or hybrid since the pandemic, which allows people to join from where they are. One person also noted events like Pride may be overwhelming, overstimulating, or triggering for some folks and therefore not an accessible event.

Building community beyond TQH storytelling events

This study explored whether attendees shared learnings or impacts from TQH events with others in their personal communities. A few people did report they have shared Telling Queer History with their broader networks. Some shared they had been invited to a TQH event by a loved one, or invited a loved one with them, as a bonding experience or quality time with that person. A few shared they have passed on what they have heard from TQH or otherwise told people in their networks about it, contributing to spreading awareness through word of mouth.

I did bring along [a younger relative] who identifies as lesbian...and she doesn't get out too much to many events. And she normally is not somebody that I would socialize with too much. But it was strengthening for our relationship, and we just had a wonderful time, and we both did our own thing. – TQH event attendee

Storytelling personalizes the nuance and multidimensionality of the queer community

When discussing the value of storytelling as a whole and of the storytelling events TQH provides specifically, many people shared how storytelling highlights the variety of human experience.

Some participants reported that storytelling is a way to capture everyday people with everyday lives, or stories that might not otherwise be shared, particularly within the context that queer history has largely been erased or too unsafe to share. These stories can highlight the nuance or complexity of queer lives and identities, and may challenge the dominant narratives in the mainstream or in media. Many talked about how stories naturally personalize experiences and identities in ways that other forms of learning may not.

I think one of the things that I love about a lot of what Telling Queer History puts on is that it is so focused on personal experience and sharing our histories because for so long, nothing was documented, nothing was archived, people couldn't be safe telling their histories. And a lot of that is still really true. And it's not that Telling Queer History is an archival project or anything, but the fact that you get to bear witness to people's stories that you wouldn't ordinarily have the opportunity to hear is super powerful and exciting. – TQH event attendee

We care about what the higher up, more important people in the community have to say, and also these things in our everyday life matter. There's so much more to being queer than do my parents still love me. Obviously, it's a pretty big one. I just think [storytelling] brings a holistic look to the community that I feel like our cultural narrative is lacking. – TQH event attendee

A few also spoke on how storytelling is a more accessible way to share and learn with each other, as opposed to academic classes or other “traditional” forms of sharing history.

I think one of the things about history to me is that it feels so kind of stuffy and elitist... There's something about history that feels stale in a lot of ways. But storytelling, I can get behind. – TQH Storyteller

[Storytelling is] a conversation. And because it's very accessible too. It doesn't have to be academics. It doesn't have to be withheld in terms of class or anything like that. It's an accessible communication, and that's what we need. And access can provide more opportunity for history to live on, and for history to mold itself and lend itself better. – TQH Storyteller

When asked how TQH may impact those who do not identify as LGBTQ+, many respondents mentioned this same idea: these storytelling events offer opportunities for allies to “continue the work” of doing their own learning. A few respondents also noted these events may offer opportunities for those who are questioning their identity or not out yet to learn from and explore with others in the community. A couple of those we spoke with noted they came out later in life and that TQH events have been an important piece of their journey in connecting to their identity and the broader queer community.

So it was a baptism by fire coming out as an adult and having all these resources available to me, being able to have some groundedness in Telling Queer History was helpful. [It] was nice to have that sort of organization because there's a lot of unofficial community too, and that's extremely important, but I think this kind of stuff is so nice, especially for people who are not connected to the community. – TQH event attendee

Storytelling highlights the diversity and intersectionality of the queer community

Some participants shared how TQH events have helped them learn about identities different than their own. This may be related to age or generation, ethnic or cultural background, gender identity, sexuality, ability, or many other pieces of identity. Others shared how events like these can impact the broader queer community by highlighting this diversity; i.e., “the queer community is not a monolith.” As mentioned previously, some of this intersectionality is highlighted because of the diversity and range of storytellers that share at TQH events.

It's that combination of similarity and difference that's very striking to me, so that when people say things, I think, “Yeah, right, right, me too.” And I think, “Wait, no, that hasn't been my experience.” So that combination is pretty powerful, as I say, because I think it's maybe a human tendency to try to universalize from our own experience and/or simultaneously try to... Or not try, but kind of innately end up putting people in boxes, based on many things. And so that's what sticks with me mostly, is that combination of similarity and difference. – TQH event attendee

It was very intriguing to see the variety of experience. So for example, I remember some artists. I remember people from immigrant communities, many different ages, socioeconomic situations, employment and otherwise. So it simply gave me an enriched and I hope more informed view of what other people go through, even though we share a lot. There's a lot that is very specific, individual to people's lives. – TQH event attendee

Of course, everybody's different and all these different identities, we all have different challenges and joys, and I guess to be able to see all of that and see the nuance and see like, "Oh, LGBTQ+, a monolith? No, not really. Not at all." So just to see the little stories, but also, to look back at it and see the bigger picture and oh, look how we share a lot of things in common. – TQH event attendee

Storytelling and documenting history provides strength and power

As mentioned previously, when speaking on the value of storytelling, some of those we talked to highlighted the lack of available queer history, due to erasure or lack of safety. Many of those we talked to shared how efforts to document and tell this history offer strength and power in many different varieties.

For example, some spoke on how storytelling can offer resiliency and hope, and others said telling these stories are acts of resistance or rebellion against the dominant culture. Some people expressed this with the idea that “we’ve always been here and we’ll always be here,” particularly within the current cultural context of increasing anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and policy. This strength and power offers support for moving forward. Similarly, a few attendees were able to speak on how they drew power from these events for their personal lives.

[Storytelling is] empowering. Helps us stay together, helps us find each other and to move forward. There are a lot of people out there in very difficult circumstances in rural communities and states now that are taking rights away who have not come out. For them to see the possibilities, I think can be lifesaving. – TQH Storyteller

*I wasn't attending those [TQH] events and making a bunch of new best friends or something like that, but feeling grounded in my place as a queer person, especially when there were different people of a lot of different ages, for instance, on the [call], that was really meaningful to me because queer elders are limited. And being able to tap in and be like, oh yeah, folks have been through so much and we're still here. And seeing, while this pandemic wasn't specifically targeting folks, tapping into a sense of resilience and survival to creativity and tender storytelling.
– TQH event attendee*

A few also spoke on the healing power of storytelling, particularly for those who have historically been unable to tell their stories.

Talking about all the folks who came before us who didn't have the opportunity to tell their stories in public. And I think that there's some reconciliation, some healing that can come along with that too, and some gratitude, quite frankly, to remember and make space for those people who may not be here any longer, and carry them with us, and give them the chance to heal through the work that we are able to do now. – TQH event attendee

Storytellers share professional and personal impacts

Many of the impacts covered incorporate themes from attendees and storytellers jointly. There are a few impacts specific to storytellers, though given the small number of storytellers interviewed (n=7), these should be interpreted with caution. A few storytellers each shared the following impacts from TQH storytelling events:

- Access to an eager and supportive audience to share their stories with through TQH
- A sense of “giving back” or contributing to their communities through sharing their personal stories
- Financial compensation for their time and expertise
- Opportunity to stretch and further develop their professional skills

Many of the storytellers we spoke with shared they felt supported by TQH in crafting and sharing their stories. It is worth noting those we spoke with ranged from professional storytellers or artists to less experienced community members.

Suggestions from community members

In the interviews and surveys, participants were asked for any suggestions or recommendations to improve programming. The most common suggestions included:

- **Continue offering virtual or hybrid event options.** This is an accessible option for many people and allows further reach. Some people also noted the importance of in-person events to create community and connection, so hybrid was often mentioned as an in-between option.
- **Find additional methods to spread awareness and increase outreach,** including increased marketing in local newspapers and magazines. A few respondents noted more outreach to the older generations in particular, though one person also mentioned events for high school students.
- **Offer a broader variety of events.** For example, offering a variety of times may allow different people to attend. Other types of events included: less formal “pop-up” events, open-mic nights, and more formal theater-type events.
- **Offer storytelling coaching or mentorship.** This was mentioned both for storytellers as a way to offer further support and professional growth, as well as for attendees as a workshop event.
- **Continue and increase focus on the multigenerational environment.** This was found to be a strength of TQH, and a few people noted they would like TQH to continue to grow in this arena.

- **Continue and increase focus on partnerships with other organizations.** A few of those we talked to mentioned getting connected with TQH through a partner or similar organization. Some noted there may be opportunities for continued or deeper partnership with organizations that share a similar mission and goals. Two organizations mentioned specifically included Quatrefoil Library and Tretter Collection, which TQH may already be collaborating with.
- **Continue and increase responsiveness and collaboration between TQH and community members.** A few interviewees spoke about more opportunities for community members to collaborate and direct event ideas, with one person noting the fluidity of the community in particular and a need to be responsive. Another idea was having a direct “Contact Us” place for people to reach out and share as needed.
- **Explore specific event or topic suggestions (in alphabetical order):**
 - Allyship in action
 - Erasure
 - Increased history focus
 - Queerness and neuro-divergence
 - Queer erotic stories
 - Queers in trade careers
 - Queer youth
 - Queer zines
 - Rural queer experience



TQH 10 year anniversary event in June 2023

Final thoughts

The findings from these interviews highlight the community-building efforts of TQH. Finding community and sharing with one another was the most common motivator to attend a TQH event and a key impact from participation. Interview respondents spoke on the value of being with others like themselves in a queer-centered space, having a multi-generational environment, and immersing themselves in the multidimensionality and diversity of the queer community. Storytelling itself was reported to be an effective method to learn and share together, learn across generations and identities, personalize narratives, and share strength.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Telling Queer History staff, stakeholders, interviewees, and storytellers for sharing their time, experience, and stories with us.

Telling Queer History would also like to acknowledge and thank the many LGBTQ+ people that came before us, bravely living their lives so that we could be out and proud today. We are also grateful for all of our donors and funders that have supported this life-giving work.

The following Wilder Research staff contributed to this project and report:

Anna Alba
Jen Collins
Dan Swanson
Kerry Walsh

Wilder Research, a division of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, is a nationally respected nonprofit research and evaluation group. For more than 100 years, Wilder Research has gathered and interpreted facts and trends to help families and communities thrive, get at the core of community concerns, and uncover issues that are overlooked or poorly understood.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

Wilder Research®

Information. Insight. Impact.

Telling Queer History's mission is to connect Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and queer people across generations and identities through oral storytelling, bringing communities together to foster compassion, empathy, belonging, and healing. Our goals are to serve our queer communities as a space for intergenerational and intersectional connection.

