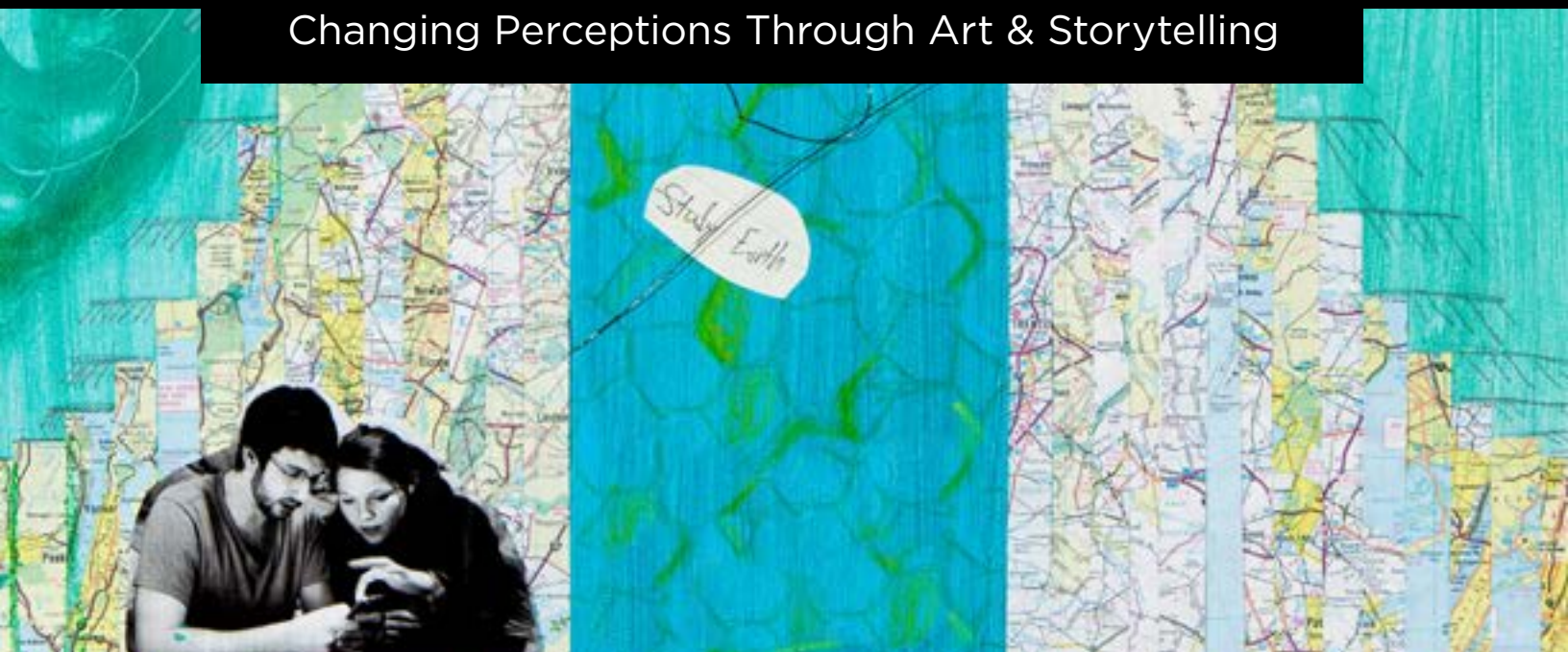




THE OPIOID PROJECT

Changing Perceptions Through Art & Storytelling





Challenging Stigma

Promoting Public Health, Advancing Social Change

From 1999 to 2023 nearly 645,000 people died of an opioid overdose, from either prescription or illicit drugs. More than 80,000 of these overdose deaths occurred in 2021 alone, which was 10 times the number of opioid overdose deaths in 1999. The numbers continue to climb. **The Opioid Project: Changing Perceptions through Art & Storytelling** ([The Opioid Project](https://www.healthstorycollaborative.org/the-opioid-project)) is a response to this escalating epidemic. Started in 2016, the project is a collaboration between visual artist Nancy Marks and physician and Health Story Collaborative founder Annie Brewster.

The Opioid Project provides a safe place for those affected by the opioid epidemic to explore and process their personal experiences. Through artmaking and storytelling, and in collaboration with community partners, we strive to decrease stigma and promote positive social change through dialogue, education, and advocacy.

Decreasing stigma is critical to the health of a community and its members.

Most people want to believe that the Opioid epidemic is happening 'out there,' not connected to those who they love, work with, or befriend in their communities. The dominant narrative is that those who use drugs are bad people and criminals, who come from dysfunctional families. This stigma, grounded in fear, misinformation, and lack of empathy separates and silences us as human beings.

<https://www.healthstorycollaborative.org/the-opioid-project>

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The personal accounts and the stories from the art project are so moving and so incredibly honest.

Stories like these really drive home the fact that we are not talking about addicts. We are grieving sons, brothers, daughter, mothers, fathers with a terrible disease.

— S.

I witnessed the powerful healing impact of The Opioid Project on patients, family members, and therapists. Communities appreciate the opportunity for candid self-expression and a safe space to share personal journeys, and amidst a rising need for attention to preventing opioid-related deaths, The Opioid Project is serving an important community care gap.

— Hilary S. Connery, MD, PhD, Clinical Director, Division of Alcohol, Drugs, and Addiction, McLean Hospital, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

In fact, we are all touched by, and vulnerable to, this public health crisis. The human costs of the epidemic involve not just individuals living with substance use disorder, but also the family members and friends, the first responders and frontline workers, co-workers and neighbors, business owners and teachers. All of us. No community is spared.

The Opioid Project is grounded in research demonstrating that:

- Sharing personal stories can improve individual and collective health;
- Sharing personal stories in community can decrease stigma and promote positive social change;
- Decreasing stigma can save lives.

How The Opioid Project works

Workshops

The Opioid Project consists of 4-hour art making and audio storytelling workshops where participants create collages and share personal stories. The art and recorded stories contextualize and bring to life the human costs of the epidemic. The finished work is hung in community multimedia exhibitions where each artwork is paired with its audio story.

The Opioid Project partners with community organizations to identify local participants and to disseminate the created art and audio stories. Participants — those in recovery, individuals who have lost a loved one, first-responders and frontline workers — continue to share the enduring benefit from participating in the workshops.



[Rebecca, on recovery](#)



[Carol in honor of her son, Will](#)



[Charlie, surviving an overdose](#)

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Art Leads to Dialogue

Using cell phones, visitors listen to Opioid Project participants share their stories while visually viewing the artwork. Community partners lead discussions with the goal of increasing public understanding about stigma and supporting advocacy efforts around addiction and access to mental health services.

The Opioid Project, based in Boston, has worked with over 10 communities in Massachusetts and has partners as far away as Fairbanks, Alaska. The art and audio have been displayed in hospitals, places of worship, libraries, museums, schools, and town halls. Thousands of individuals — from young people to senior citizens — have visited the exhibitions, taken part in community discussions and/or have viewed the art and listened to the stories online

Funding

The project has received funding from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council and The Suffolk DA Community Reinvestment Fund. Additionally, partners have received multiple local grants and private funding to bring The Opioid Project to their communities.

Sample Presentations, Educational Events & Webinars

- Tufts University School of Medicine and Dental Medicine
- UMass Chan Medical School
- Interdisciplinary Pain and Headache Rounds, MGH
- Fairbanks Alaska Dept. of Public Health
- Hudson Dept of Public Health MA
- City Council of Framingham MA
- Charleston Coalition
- East Boston Coalition
- Fitchburg Art Museum MA
- Nave Gallery, Medford MA
- Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) Watershed
- Boston University



[Listen to Erica's story](#)

FRONT-LINE WORKER

Erica

The background of my painting represents the pain, isolation, anger, and shame experienced in addiction, conveying the heavy darkness of this disease. By contrast, the heart in the middle represents love. To me, compassion is an act of love.

After every experience of caring for someone struggling with addiction, whether through a professional interaction in the hospital or in my personal life, I hope that I have been able to show them kindness and love.

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Partnering with The Opioid Project has been invaluable to our efforts to address the entrenched stigma in our community. People don't want to accept that opioid use is real in a suburban community. The Opioid Project has pushed our community members to have some very real and difficult conversations and it brought it closer to home.

— Bea Duncan, SOAR (Supporting Outreach and Addiction Recovery, Natick MA)

Selected Press

The Washington Post, June 14, 2023

How a new generation has changed Grief

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2023/06/14/grief-changing-generations/>

KFAR, 660AM-97.5FM, May 13, 2023

Nancy Marks and The Opioid Project

<https://kfarradio.com/audioarchives/MAY%2010%202023%20%20NANCY%20MARKS%20THE%20OPIOD%20PROJECT.mp3>

East Boston Times-Free Press, October 18, 2019

The Opioid Project Comes to East Boston

<http://eastietimes.com/2019/10/18/the-opioid-project-comes-to-east-boston/>

Framingham FORCE, Video: The Opioid Project:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehs6grn6m4E&t=4s>, Framingham Access TV, April 2019

Boston Globe, August 9, 2018

Fighting the Opioid Crisis, One Story at a Time

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2018/08/09/fighting-opioid-crisis-one-story-time/jkkWYkpyvL11FPjBNtrEIO/story.html>

Deborah Becker, Turning Grief into Art after Losing a Loved one to Opioid Overdose, 90.9 WBUR

<http://www.wbur.org/artery/2016/11/18/art-opioid-overdose>

Annie Brewster, Art, Stories that Honor those who died by Drug Overdose – And Help Survivors, Too

<http://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2016/06/30/overdose-art-healing>

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About the Creators/Facilitators



Dr. Annie Brewster is an Assistant Professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, a practicing physician at Massachusetts General Hospital, in Boston, a writer and a storyteller. She is also a patient, diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 2001. In response to the disconnection she experienced in healthcare, both as a patient and a provider, and motivated by her belief in the power of stories, she started recording patient narratives in 2010. Integrating her personal experiences with the research supporting the health benefits of narrative, she founded Health Story Collaborative (HSC) in 2013. HSC is dedicated to helping individuals navigating health challenges find meaning,

and ultimately heal, through storytelling. She is excited by interdisciplinary, cross-institutional collaborations that break through resistance to change.

www.healthstorycollaborative.org

Nancy Marks, MS is a public health advocate, community organizer, and visual artist with extensive experience using art to advance advocacy and educational objectives addressing an array of issues. In 2014, she launched The Intimacy of Memory, an initiative exploring grief and loss through art. In 2016, she co-founded with Annie Brewster, The Opioid Project: Changing Perceptions through Art and Storytelling. Nancy also leads art-making sessions (Memory Cafes) for people living with dementia, as well as works with communities on public engagement projects which utilize the arts. As a painter/mixed-media artist, her current work falls under the moniker, “Urban Abstraction”. Her enduring interest in the power of place can be traced back to her childhood days roaming the streets of New York. Nancy currently lives in Boston, Massachusetts. nancymarksartist.com

Partner with us

The Opioid Project: Changing Perceptions Through Art & Storytelling

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The Opioid Project Packages and Pricing*

Bring The Opioid Project to your community. Combat stigma, engage and educate the public, and support those most impacted by the opioid crisis.

The Opioid Project's Workshop and Exhibition Package (\$4,500)

Annie Brewster and Nancy Marks will lead a community workshop, providing space for art making and storytelling. Participants do not need any prior art experience and the storytelling is facilitated, with no preparation required. Following the workshop, the art and edited audio clips are packaged and returned to you as an art and audio exhibition "in a box," which can be displayed throughout your community for years to come. The exhibit can be hung in schools, hospitals, town halls, colleges, local businesses, and community institutions.

The art comes labelled and ready to hang, and the audio is paired to each piece, made easily accessible through a QR code. The show can be used to educate the public, promote discussion, and combat stigma. Some communities have even used these first-person accounts to advance public policy and advocacy goals.

Package includes:

- Community-based art and audio-recording workshop for 4 - 10 participants (those who have lost a loved one, frontline/ first responder, those who have survived an overdose, etc.)
- All supplies
- Edited audio recordings for each participant
- Planning and support for community engagement and outreach
- Curatorial support for your first public exhibition
- Curator and/or educational presentation by co-founders Nancy Marks and Dr. Annie Brewster
- Potential for book talk and signing by Dr. Annie Brewster, author of *The Healing Powers of Stories: Using Personal Narrative to Navigate Illness, Trauma and Loss*.
- A digital print (16" x 16") of each participant's original art
- 24-hour access to your stories and art via our online portal for use in classrooms, community settings, etc.

*Note: Prices do not include travel related expenses for out of state workshops/events.

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This is what we need more. When we delve into the actual people and personalities in addiction, it really demonstrates how much addiction impacts the community.

Statistics and data are beneficial and useful, as well, but there's something about knowing the faces, names, memories, that really brings it home.

— L. Pimentel



The Opioid Project's Education/Engagement Package (\$500+ depending on distance)

The Opioid Project will bring its own traveling multi-media exhibition into your community to support your goals. The Opioid Project has a set of 10 framed prints of original artwork/audio stories that can be hung in venues such as high schools, libraries, community centers, cafes, etc., allowing communities to host events and discussions based on their own experiences with stigma and their prevention and education goals.

Package includes:

- Drop off/pick up and hanging of the show
- All labeling with QR codes, etc.
- Potential for book talk and signing by Dr. Annie Brewster, author of *The Healing Powers of Stories: Using Personal Narrative to Navigate Illness, Trauma and Loss*.
- Potential for Annie Brewster and/or Nancy Marks to speak at your event
- A show that hangs for one to two months in the location of your choice



Additional Offerings

Presentation and teaching by Opioid Project creators

Harvard Medical School Professor and internist Dr. Annie Brewster and artist and public health professional Nancy Marks are available to lead online or in-person discussions and classes, attend community events and advocacy meetings, and share stories via the Opioid Project website. Additionally, Nancy is available to lead community art making in response to the Opioid Project exhibitions and Annie is available for book signings and talks connected to her book, *The Healing Powers of Stories: Using Personal Narrative to Navigate Illness, Trauma and Loss*.

Purchase a Set of Opioid Project Art Prints for Ongoing Display in Your Community

Curate your own permanent show for ongoing display in schools, hospitals, public health centers, etc. The Opioid Project will send you digital files of the art, or the actual prints, with corresponding QR codes for accessing the accompanying audio stories. Please contact us for pricing.

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