

# CINCY STORIES

it just has to be true

words | photography  
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We've been telling stories for a long time. A really, really long time.

Recently discovered paintings in an Indonesian cave on the island of Sulawesi suggest our distant cousins were telling tales over forty thousand years ago. Today, we may not chronicle an epic hunt in a subterranean chamber or retell the day's adventures huddled around flickering firelight, but we do tell stories to instruct, inspire, and entertain.

And the founding partners of Cincy Stories, Shawn Braley and Chris Ashwell, wholeheartedly encourage it. While working at Fireside Pizza, the two bonded over their shared interest in the purposeful telling of and listening to stories. Together they put on an experimental, one-time event that unfolded into much more. During their five-year anniversary celebration this past January, Braley and Ashwell recalled that first show, looked back at how far they had come, and pointed to where they are going.

As a teen, Braley was keenly aware of the risk of being trapped within the geographical and cultural confines of his hometown. To counter the pull, he interacted with people who had life experiences different than his own. The more he interacted, the more he wanted to hear about their lives. Informed by his faith and with a history of working in various ministry capacities, he was drawn to stories for their ability to heal and unify. But more than to the stories themselves, he was drawn to the connections and communities that formed around those shared moments.

Ashwell fell in love with documentaries and his mom's true-crime books early on. The first documentary he watched, *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills*, left a lasting impression. Always eager to entertain and tell stories, he embraced the drama department in high school and later pursued an acting career in Chicago. Over time, he realized he was heading in a direction that left him feeling displaced and discouraged.

"I had this epiphany on the train one day. I was very depressed—didn't think I wanted to be an actor but didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. And then I had this moment when an overwhelming sense of joy came over me, and it was like, 'That's what I wanna do. I am more passionate about real stories than I am about fictional ones. So how do I tell real stories?' And that's how I landed on documentary films."

Though their paths were dissimilar, Braley and Ashwell shared the same desire. They both wanted to empower people to present and receive real stories that could transform themselves and their communities. Through Cincy Stories, they employ several venues and vehicles as platforms for presentation, including live shows, neighborhood Story Galleries, podcasts, and Emmy-winning short films.

"The live events have their own purpose, and they're really amazing. But we knew that there were different means of telling stories, different avenues. It wasn't good enough for us to just be a live event or to just do video production," Ashwell shares.

Braley agrees. "It was the community focus first, and the storytelling was the means to building empathy and understanding. At a live event, you're doing that in a space with one, two, three hundred people. With a video, you're doing that online with potentially thousands, hundreds of thousands of people who might see that video."

Ashwell and Braley foster environments where an atypical mix of participants attracts diverse audiences. They also prompt people to reveal things about who they are in unexpected and disarming ways.

"We are storytelling animals. Stories equal relationships, and relationships equal community. You can't have one without the other."

"And you can't skip a step," Braley adds.

They have partnered with neighborhoods to cultivate greater awareness about their residents—their successes as well as ongoing needs—and to bring the residents closer to one another. The first of these events, called Story Galleries, was held in Walnut Hills. It was a combination art gallery, coffee shop, and living room. Ashwell recalls how powerful it became.

"There were people from the neighborhood telling stories on the TVs, there was a story-telling booth where people could share stories, and just a really comfortable sitting area where people could come and share stories. It was incredible. It was a whole new level. Whatever the documentaries offered, whatever the live shows offered, this was completely separate. It was this intimate space where over time people would see each other, over time get to know each other, and over time get to share stories that were much deeper."

Five years in, the two have their sights set on expanding their scope and their impact by telling regional stories and crafting a feature-length documentary.

"We're not trying to say this could fix everything, but we think it could," Braley says. "We have that strong of a belief in it."

