

## Building Community through the Power of Storytelling

*“The project has magnetism, strength – this is why it is successful”*

Last August, I was driving my 15-year-old daughter home after she spent the day filming interviews at the Thompson Senior Center in Woodstock, VT as part of the Stories project *Take Another Look* Exhibit. She shared something really insightful: “I never knew how similar teenagers’ lives were to those of seniors – challenges with transportation, yearning for more independence . . . .”



*Take Another Look* transforms the Stories project to a multigenerational level, with high school students – coached by staff at Community Action Television (CATV) – filming interviews and then selecting themes for mini-documentaries.

In December, I sat down with Sophie Bodnar, Production Coordinator & Educational Outreach Assistant at CATV, to get her perspective on the *Take Another Look* exhibit and to hear more about her experience with the Stories project. She told me that building community through storytelling is what CATV has always been about, and that’s also what United Valley Interfaith Project (UVIP) and the Stories project is all about – so what might seem as an unusual partnership is really a natural fit.

While Sophie admitted to being initially surprised by the level of enthusiasm from CATV students, she has seen how much the project means to the students involved, as they take responsibility for listening to these stories and making documentaries that are true to the storytellers. She highlighted how amazing it is that so many seniors have trusted us to do this work, which has helped make a close-knit community even stronger. Parallels that wouldn’t have been visible otherwise are coming to the surface, and Sophie remarked on how incredible it is to see strangers interacting through storytelling.

I knew that Sophie had been inspired by the documentary side of the project to train as a Listener. When I asked her why she’d gone to that next step, she told me she “wanted to be part of it more wholly. The project has magnetism, strength – this is why it is successful.” Sophie said that the “experience as a Listener is really powerful – making connections with people you wouldn’t usually meet,” and that each time she interviews someone she’s surprised by what she learns. People want to tell their stories and the Listeners happen to be there. “The power of telling and power of listening – you need both.” She sees the Stories project and *Take Another Look* as empowering everyone involved – the storytellers, the listeners, the students – because they have the power to change lives.

Sophie’s enthusiastic about how this project is telling the aging community that their stories matter. As she put it, “it’s a joy to listen and help make change from their experience.” She’s hoping to help UVIP extend the project in CATV’s own neighborhood by bringing it to the Bugbee Senior Center, and possibly tie that to a *Take Another Look* video camp this summer, giving more area students a chance to be part of the incredible change that the Stories project is bringing to our region.

CATV is hoping to showcase some of the student documentaries at the First Friday event in White River Junction on April 1<sup>st</sup>. Keep your eye on our events calendar for more info.