



## SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT DOCUMENT

### Contents

- What is Socially Engaged Storytelling?
- Social Engagement In the Cassandra Project
- Preparing YSTs For Community Engagement
- The Role Of The Mentors
- What Themes Did The YST Choose and Why?
- How Was The Research Carried out?
- Were There Challenges To Engagement And Research?
- Changes In The Project's Placement of Social Engagement
- From The Young Storytellers
  - Winter De Cock (BE)
  - Seimen Tobias (NO)
  - Samora de Boer (NL)
  - Hanna Asefaw (NO/ER)
  - Meja Ohlsson Rodriguez (SE)
  - Dawid Pigut (PL)
- Conclusion

The Cassandra Project represents a coordinated effort to develop Europe's socially engaged storytelling. This report documents the social engagement methodologies of fifteen young storytellers (YSTs) across five European countries between April and December 2024. It examines their research approaches, community engagement methods, chosen themes, and the challenges encountered while developing performances that connect personal narratives with broader societal issues. The material contained in the document was gathered through evaluations, one-to-one interviews, and questionnaires with the projects YSTs and mentors.

### What is Socially Engaged Storytelling?

*"Socially engaged storytelling focuses on artistic performance that connects personal experiences to broader social movements and cultural change through the immediacy of live performance."* FEST

For the Cassandra team, socially engaged storytelling is a performance art form in which stories are created and told that matter personally to the teller on topics that matter on a global level; it's staging stories that are deeply researched, created in conversation with others and which address

and promote awareness of social issues, encouraging further conversation and positive change. It goes beyond entertainment, aiming to inspire action and create a more inclusive and just society.

*Socially engaged storytelling* differs from *applied storytelling*, which uses narrative techniques for specific practical outcomes (like education, therapy, inclusion, or organisational development) and where performance may be an outcome but is not the overall goal. For more on applied storytelling, please see our sister program, [The Aurus Project](#).

### **Social Engagement in the Cassandra Project**

In line with the Cassandra Project's mission of supporting the next generation of socially engaged storytelling, between April and November 2024, the young performers crafted deeply resonant and well-researched storytelling works that bridged personal experiences with broader societal themes. Each of their 20-minute solo performances tackled pressing contemporary issues designed to spark dialogue and inspire change. These were performed to international audiences in Amsterdam during the Cassandra Showcase on the 4th, 5th and 6th of November 2024 and will go on to be performed at the international festivals of the performers' home countries as well as the FEST Annual conference in Rome in June 2025.

### **Preparing YSTs For Community Engagement**

The initial in-person training in Alden Biesen laid crucial groundwork for the young storytellers' community engagement work. Through structured masterclasses and facilitated discussions, mentors shared practical methodologies whilst creating space for peer learning. The training focused on essential aspects of ethical community research, from practical approaches to accessing groups to the complexities of representing others' stories.

A key element was helping YSTs understand their own positioning and potential biases before entering communities. The program introduced discussion around ethics and explored various story-gathering methodologies, from direct community narratives to metaphorical approaches. Particular attention was paid to handling sensitive material, with mentors sharing case studies from their own practice to illuminate potential challenges and solutions.

Many of the approaches introduced during this initial training became foundational to the YSTs' subsequent research practice.

### **The Role of the Mentors**

The guidance of experienced national mentors significantly enhanced the young storytellers' community engagement. These mentors served as cultural bridges, helping YSTs navigate local networks and institutional structures whilst offering practical advice on accessing sensitive communities. Their expertise helped develop appropriate engagement strategies and maintain ethical boundaries. Beyond technical support, mentors provided essential emotional scaffolding as young researchers tackled challenging themes, helping to process difficult encounters and overcome

setbacks. The mentors' established professional networks opened doors to community organisations and specialist groups that might otherwise have yet to be inaccessible to young researchers.

**Navigating Local Networks:** Mentors played a pivotal role in helping young storytellers (YSTs) connect with experts, local community organisations and cultural institutions using their networks to set up interviews with relevant contributors, from hairdressers to national ambassadors.

In Sweden, for instance, the mentor facilitated introductions between a YST and local organisations that support children and families affected by domestic violence. Initially, the YST aimed to engage directly with young survivors, but due to ethical concerns, the inexperience of the young storyteller and the need to protect the anonymity of minors, this approach was not feasible. Understanding the sensitivities involved, the mentor guided the YST to pivot her focus toward working with adult professionals who were expert child psychologists. The mentor supported the YST in preparing for the interviews and structuring her questions, fostering a safe and respectful environment for all involved.

This collaboration allowed for the gathering of valuable insights and ensured that the YST's own experiences with the theme were considered and processed thoughtfully, but beyond this, it transformed the piece into not just a creative exploration of the theme, but a work with therapeutic mechanisms that could aid in the healing of affected audience members, supporting their recovery from related traumatic experiences.

**Emotional Support and Resilience Building:** The emotional aspects of storytelling can be challenging, especially when addressing complex social issues to which the artists have a personal connection. All mentors offered one-on-one support sessions for YSTs, focused on debriefing and helping them navigate the emotional landscape of their stories, encouraging resilience in the face of setbacks and providing a creative approach to moving beyond them.

**Expanding Professional Networks:** Mentors also leveraged their established connections to open storytelling doors for YSTs. In most countries, they organise showcase events with other local artists and community leaders, helping YSTs gain visibility and support for their projects.

### What Themes Did the YST Choose and Why?

The themes exclusively emerged from a desire to understand personal experiences within broader social contexts, while many used creative approaches and metaphor to make complex subjects more accessible. As one YST demonstrates with a stork metaphor for exploring family relationships and parental autism: "*Delve into a tale that explores the stretchability of unconditional love between mother and child.*" YST

Easy access to primary research sources through existing relationships and networks, such as family and friends, proved particularly powerful and influenced decisions to choose a theme.

Mental health emerged as a central theme, with storytellers examining intergenerational trauma, family dynamics, neurodiversity and the struggle for well-being in an increasingly complex world.

*"I chose the theme of depression because it is a subject I have always wanted to explore in my creative work. Normally, I gravitate towards stories inspired by myths, legends, or fairy tales rather than deeply personal narratives. Taking on such a personal topic felt like a challenge, but this project provided a safe and supportive environment with a mentor who encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone. Depression has been a significant part of my life, and I wanted to express my experience in a way that felt authentic and imaginative." YST*

Coming of age and youth identity formed another key focus, with performances exploring sexuality, gender, and cultural belonging in a modern European context.

*"It is a story about the transformation from a girl into a woman... a story about coming to terms with one's own history and identity" YST*

*"There are the innocent years before you realise you are being watched and sexualised, and there are the years after that" YST*

The intersection of technology and society is featured, with works examining online spaces, sexuality and digital ethics.

*"It's about a journey for love where nothing seems to be about love, the expectations, trials and the people you come across." YST*

The heaviest of contemporary issues were tackled - with some performers exploring intergenerational trauma resulting from genocide, torture, the oil industry's role in climate collapse and the lasting impact of pornography. These weighty themes emerged from personal connections to the themes and the damage inflicted by them. As a YST mentions as she reflects on her family's traumatic experiences during Chilean political unrest,

*"I learned things about my grandmother and started to understand why she had never talked about Chile before. So it was really hard to find the courage and the right way to speak to her about this."*

Each storyteller's research approach was distinctly shaped by their personal connection to their chosen theme, whether through family history, lived experience, or passionate concern for societal issues. This personal investment meant they each came to the project with experience and research to draw on; this coloured not just their research methods but also how they interpreted and presented their findings through performance. More broadly, the themes that were explored were:

#### **Identity & Transformation**

- Personal/Self-discovery
- Gender & Sexuality
- Religious & Cultural belonging
- Body image & Autonomy
- Coming of age

#### **Family**

- Parent-child relationships
- Intergenerational patterns
- Cultural inheritance
- Family trauma & healing

#### **Violence and War**

- The Impacts of War
- Domestic/Sexual violence
- Historical/Political trauma
- Mental health effects

### **Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing**

- Anxiety & Depression
- PTSD
- Generational trauma
- Emotional resilience
- Neurodiversity

### **Power & Rights**

- Immigration & Diaspora
- Cultural assimilation
- Religious freedom
- LGBTQ+ experiences
- Environmental concerns
- Rights of indigenous people

### **How Was the Research Carried out?**

Social engagement methods across these storytelling projects demonstrated diverse and effective approaches to community research. Direct interviews yielded compelling results, particularly when exploring family histories and established community groups. One of the YST's conversations about generational trauma unveiled patterns of trauma-responsive behaviour that had never been verbally acknowledged within their family. Another exploration of political exile demonstrated how displacement has rippled through generations, affecting the identity formation and cultural belonging of their family.

Professional consultations enriched personal narratives with broader contexts, too. A YST worked with children's rights organisations and expert psychologists to develop their metaphorical approach after learning how young people process trauma.

Group discussions and workshops employed dynamic participatory techniques. Some storytellers used object-based storytelling, where participants shared narratives through meaningful personal items, which proved particularly effective in breaking initial barriers. Timeline mapping helped another group visualise collective histories. Story circles, structured with clear guidelines and rotating speaking rights, created safe spaces for sharing sensitive experiences. Simple prompts like "Tell me about a time when..." or "If this story were a landscape..." opened up metaphorical thinking and deeper reflection. Workshop facilitators used mapping exercises to help groups identify shared themes across individual stories.

The most successful projects used a mix of different methods, enabling storytellers to capture diverse viewpoints while staying aware of their own positions within the communities they engaged with. Throughout the process, they carefully considered ethical issues alongside their creative methods, leading to a richer understanding of the social groups they focused on.

### **Were There Challenges to Engagement and Research?**

Without a doubt, the Young Storytellers were exploring highly sensitive social issues and inevitably encountered several logistical and social barriers while conducting their research. Access to vulnerable or protected communities was difficult at times as institutional and social barriers

emerged when approaching protected groups; most research required careful navigation to engage with community gatekeepers or a change in approach.

Additionally, some personal topics - such as religious identity, sexual identity, experiences of displacement or mental health - required building careful trust relationships before meaningful dialogue could begin; this was one of the reasons that many of the YST turned to existing relationships with family and friends.

While the young storytellers demonstrated a remarkable ability to engage with these complex subjects, they didn't have the extended time frame useful for relationship building, particularly when working with vulnerable groups or addressing historically unspoken experiences.

This observation suggests future iterations of such projects might benefit from more extended timelines that better reflect the rhythms of community engagement and the sensitivity required when working with personal narratives of trauma, transformation, and resilience whilst allowing time for the YST to build skills and trust in new communities.

### Changes in the Project's Placement of Social Engagement

Initially, the plan was for young storytellers to create their pieces by researching within and engaging directly with the communities they were representing in a more immersive way. However, it became clear that because of the timescales and the importance of the YST's personal relationship to their theme, a more self-reflective approach was necessary for many. As one young storyteller said,

*"The biggest restriction turned out to be the specific time frame that we had to do research, create and perform in try-outs. My initial idea was to interview a refugee amateur football team in [my home city] that I support, but I quickly realised that it would take great care and time to reach out to people I have never met before and to form such a bond that they would trust me and support me in creating a story around them. Above that, I also realised that their story was probably not mine to tell, as I don't have a refugee background." YST*

The YSTs had to learn more about their subjects from different angles while recognising their own biases and emotions related to those topics. This process involved establishing their own boundaries. For some, it involved creating small, controlled "circles" of trusted participants before expanding their reach. Some YSTs focused on personal and family histories to develop their narratives.

With this groundwork laid, they can now approach broader social engagement with their own ethical framework and clarity about their themes and strategies for creating safe spaces for difficult conversations. The 20-minute performance they created is now a tool, in its own right, for building trust and creating dialogue spaces, particularly when approaching vulnerable groups. While some YSTs have already made significant contributions to their communities, for others, the most impactful social engagement lies ahead.

## From The Young Storytellers

The following section presents a selection of interview responses, showcasing various approaches from the five country groups participating in the project. These responses highlight the perspectives and methodologies employed by the YST, reflecting their individual experiences and insights.



### Winter De Cock (BE)

Winter was born in 2002, and she became fascinated by storytelling after high school, where she learned all about stories like Ovid's metamorphoses. These stories trigger her for several reasons: on the one hand, there is the imagination, the beauty and the poetry; on the other hand, there is the patriarchal hierarchy they reflect.

After writing media and performance studies at the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp, she discovers the power of telling a story herself. She reinvents and reshapes the ancient stories, combining and associating them with new and other stories with female main characters today through a labyrinth, a puzzle, and a journey. She starts with subjects that affect her personally and searches for the ideal medium for this specific story. What does the story need? Whether she's performing, acting, podcasting or telling a story, she always invites you to listen well. If you do so, you will hear the soul of the story, the heartbeat of humanity.

#### 1. What was your theme?

My story was about the silencing of women (being silenced as a woman). It was a personal story combined with true stories and the ancient story of Apollo and Daphne from Ovid.

#### 2. Why did you choose it?

I have always loved the story of Apollo and Daphne, but I needed to dwell more on its actual meaning. It is a gruesome story where a woman sees no other option but to run away from a man who continues to follow her and does not seem to give up. Daphne seems to be "saved" by turning into a tree, but it is a punishment rather than a rescue. Growing up as a woman, I experienced many recognisable situations: moments when I felt petrified, just like Daphne.

I started the process by working out my own experiences and personal stories. Based on these, I started talking to women around me: girlfriends, friends of my younger sisters, older women, etc. Unfortunately, it's a theme that every woman I talked to could relate to.

**4. Can you describe any challenges or barriers you had to your research and engagement with others?**

Because they are very personal stories, often with specific details/places/events, I had to remain vigilant that the story remains universal. Above all, I wanted to convey a feeling. A feeling that many could recognise and find themselves in. In addition, I felt I had to be careful not to come across as "pedantic" or generalise the men and portray them all as "bad".

**5. What about success? What are you pleased about regarding your research and outreach engagement?**

I'm glad I listened to many women: these events seem so normalised that no one really listens to each other anymore or continues to see the seriousness of the situation. The story of Apollo and Daphne is over 2.000 years old, and yet it is still relevant today.

**6. What advice would you give to future people doing a CASSANDRA-like programme concerning research and community engagement?**

Very clearly communicate and state exactly what socially engaged means. It seems like there were many different opinions and perceptions about it: some felt that storytelling in itself was socially engaged, while others wanted us to reach out to communities. I think there should be some kind of general "definition" for this so that everyone knows exactly what is meant by it.

## Seimen Tobias (NO)

Seimen lives in a cabin in rural northern Norway. A key goal of his artistic interest and work is to explore the extremes to which humans may go in search of connection. He thinks it's important to dare to ask difficult questions, though they might be difficult to both reflect on and try to answer. As he says, *"It's not up to me to answer all questions, but I sincerely believe in the importance of sharing, talking about and getting to the core of all aspects of what it means to be human."*



As both an actor, a teacher and a facilitator, he has witnessed many moments of transformation erupting from physical presence and deep interhuman connection. This is what he seeks, above all, to platform on stages through storytelling -to be present with others and to let our collective presence move us and change us.

### 1. What was your theme?

Pornography. Porn addiction and how porn affects our brain, our heart and our understanding of sexuality.

### 2. Why did you choose it?

Throughout my life, I have been using pornography as a means of both sexual education and pleasure. This use has affected me in ways that I have now started to notice, and thereby, the question arose in me: "How many others may have similar issues?" I wanted to dig to the bottom of my own compulsive behaviour and thereby understood that it is a topic that is seldom talked about and has a lot of shame and embarrassment connected to it. I really think it is important to lift taboo topics and little-debated issues to the surface for my own sake, as well as for the whole society.

### 3. Did you engage with any groups, individuals, or specialists? If yes, how did you engage with them? What did you discover? If not, how did you carry out your research?

I have held several groups or circles with a variety of people. Firstly, I invited a group of young male friends to an evening where we shared our own experiences and thoughts about pornography; then, it was from the "male" perspective. I do not think that pornography only affects men, but being a young man, I was eager to investigate the topic seen from the eyes of men. It was also a decision to have only men based on the knowledge that some of the invited would not feel comfortable opening up around women in the same way they could open up around men. This is also an interesting topic

that could affect and form the project, this “difference” between the “man” and the “woman”, the masculine and the feminine when it comes to sexuality and especially porn and prostitution industries.

Thereafter, I continued to hold more conversations, both in smaller groups of two/three and in bigger constellations of both and all genders. The question I always held as my own guideline was, “How does porn affect the consumer” as I have a feeling that perspective is less talked about than the common political issues like trafficking, human trade, freedom of expression, and personal sexuality...

I have also engaged a sexologist, two different therapists and the world wide web of researchers and experts. This is to make sure that I am always speaking truthfully and that I am able to take care of my own boundaries and health when working through stuff that also implies in my own life.

#### **4. Can you describe any challenges or barriers you had to your research and engagement with others.**

A barrier is obviously that my own experiences colour me. I speak from a place where I really want to be honest and open. I talk about an issue that I find personally engaging, and I have my own beliefs and thoughts about the matter. To be able to speak from a place where I then know that I have seen more sides of a cause than just my own and not only invite in conversation partners who agree with me is the most difficult, I think. I really want to keep expanding this idea to be able to talk to an ever-growing group of people, not only from my own social connections and environments but also meet people with far different viewpoints and meanings, to be able to not only talk about what porn has done to me personally but to ask the question of what porn has done and does to our culture and society.

To work from the inside of self-growth, one's own experience and sexual healing is obviously also a challenge. Some say that trauma needs to be healed for years before you take it to the stage, but I feel that there is a strength and a great opportunity to work artistically from the inside of your own life. Here, the challenge becomes to feel safe and emotionally capable and always to know that you are listening to what is alright for yourself. This has been challenging yet extremely rewarding work, with hours of consultations, mentoring, emotional work, and finding the right direction in artistic performance.

#### **5. What about success? What are you pleased about regarding your research and outreach engagement?**

I am pleased that I have dared to dive so deeply into my topic. I am really proud of what I have been able to create and that it is only the beginning of a project that I can wholeheartedly engage in and find deeply important. Most of all, I am really pleased with all the deep, honest and open meetings I have had. There have been a lot of emotional stories, and some participants have encountered me afterwards and shared a deep gratitude that we have created a room where it is allowed, even encouraged to go into a conversation they have not felt possible in any other place. I am not pleased

that a lot of people struggle with their use of pornography and their sexual health, but I am really proud that I have started to be a voice and a space for meaningful conversations and investigations.

**6. What advice would you give to future people doing a CASSANDRA-like programme concerning research and community engagement?**

Find what REALLY INTERESTS YOU. Don't do anything because someone else tells you it is essential; do it because YOU think it is important. Because the importance of any artistic project has to be alive in the artist. Try to research as widely as possible. It is a lot of work, and it is not always easy to find people and communities, but I sincerely believe that we need to seek out the truths that lie in every dark corner.



**Samora de Boer (NL)**

Samora(1995) is a storyteller living in Amsterdam with a great passion for her work. After finishing her theatre studies in 2018, she has been developing her skills at the Storytelling Centre. Samora creates magical worlds that draw her audience in, inspired by nature, books, folktales, myths, fables and her own experiences. Her storytelling is known for its vivid details, helping listeners picture the characters and scenes as if they were right there. In addition to storytelling, Samora enjoys sewing, acting, illustrating and making videos, often blending these skills into her storytelling to make it even richer. One of her dreams is to travel the world, gathering stories from different cultures and sharing them with people she meets. Her creative flair and love for exploring different cultures infuse her stories with a special magic that captivates and delights audiences.

**1. What was your theme?**

Depression and mental illness

**2. Why did you choose it?**

I chose the theme of depression because it is a subject I have always wanted to explore in my creative work. Normally, I gravitate towards stories inspired by myths, legends, or fairy tales rather

than deeply personal narratives. Taking on such a personal topic felt challenging, but this project provided a safe and supportive environment with a mentor who encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone.

Depression has been a significant part of my life, and I wanted to express my experience in a way that felt authentic and imaginative. Inspired by the movie *A Monster Calls*, I decided to use a blend of fantasy and reality to communicate how depression feels rather than describing it in a conventional way. This project allowed me to combine my interest in fantasy storytelling with the challenge of sharing something personal, making it a meaningful experience.

**3. Did you engage with any groups, individuals, or specialists? If yes, how did you engage with them? What did you discover? If not, how did you carry out your research?**

Yes, I engaged with several individuals and groups during my research. I connected with people through Facebook groups focused on mental health and had personal conversations with them online. Additionally, I spoke with family members to gain their perspectives and insights. However, as I progressed, I realised that the core of my project was primarily about my own experience with depression rather than trying to represent others' experiences.

Beyond these conversations, I carried out extensive research through books, films, and documentaries. These resources helped me deepen my understanding of how depression is represented in different mediums and gave me ideas for how I could creatively convey my own perspective. Combining these external insights with my personal journey allowed me to shape a story that felt both authentic and informed.

**4. Can you describe any challenges or barriers you had to your research and engagement with others?**

When I started, I noticed that my theme was still too broad, which made it difficult to know exactly what kind of answers I was looking for from the community. This is an important lesson I've learned for the future: to prepare clear and specific questions about what I want to explore or discover. I also found that because I wasn't entirely sure what I wanted to know, some of the input I received from others didn't feel right or relevant to my project. This led to some confusion and made me realise that my story was primarily a personal solo project at this stage. While this created challenges, it also helped me refocus and clarify my own perspective.

If I decide to expand my solo project in the future, I would like to revisit engagement with others and conduct further research, but in a more focused and targeted way.

**5. What about success? What are you pleased about regarding your research and outreach engagement?**

I find this question difficult to answer, as there is still so much to explore. However, one thing I am pleased about is the sense of recognition I found through the contacts I engaged with. These conversations helped me feel more confident in discussing my theme and reinforced my decision to focus on this topic.

At the same time, I made this project very much my own story, which I think was the right choice for this stage of the process. However, saying it again, moving forward, I would like to explore how I can expand the project by conducting more research and finding ways to incorporate the voices and experiences of others. This could make the story more multifaceted and relatable for a wider audience.

**6. What advice would you give to future people doing a CASSANDRA-like programme concerning research and community engagement?**

My advice would be to approach the community with clear and targeted questions. It's important to know exactly which theme you want to explore and what kind of experiences you're seeking.

Ask yourself, "What am I looking for?" and then structure your questions accordingly. I would also suggest starting your research in a space where you feel safe and comfortable discussing your topic. It's crucial that the conversation is a two-way exchange where both sides can share and listen openly. This will help you engage more meaningfully and gain valuable insights.

**Hanna Asefaw (NO/ER)**

Hanna is a human geographer, writer, and performing artist based in Oslo.

Through play, research and investigation of themes related to identity, liberation, and the memories that are stuck in our bodies, Hanna's work seeks to unravel, understand, and reconstruct - to convey the relationship between the personal and political, as well as the individual and structural dimensions of experience.

Her artistic practice is influenced by interdisciplinary exploration and experimentation, drawing on diverse traditions of poetry, movement, and music. Hanna's performances and writings often blend these elements in an attempt to create a language and dialogue that reflect the intricate connections between the inner and outer worlds. Her work invites audiences to engage with and reflect on the complex narratives that shape our lives, searching and fostering a deeper understanding of both personal and collective stories.



### **1. What was your theme?**

Diaspora, war & genocide, indigenous peoples care for nature and ecosystems, longing and belonging.

### **2. Why did you choose it?**

In addition to being a part of my life, these themes are unfortunately quite prevalent. In all corners of the world, we will find communities affected by war and colonisation, and the traces are still visible in the surroundings.

### **3. Did you engage with any groups, individuals, or specialists? If yes, how did you engage with them? What did you discover? If not, how did you carry out your research?**

Yes. I talked with people belonging to diasporic or indigenous communities in Oslo, as well as refugees and activists. I had access to many of these to start off due to my own belonging to some of the groups. My background in human geography was also helpful (academic perspectives on the themes).

### **4. Can you describe any challenges or barriers you had to your research and engagement with others?**

To be honest, this was relatively easy, mainly because the groups and people I had to interact with were groups and people I already had access to. I can imagine, though, that if I had chosen a theme I wasn't as connected to, I would have found it harder to interact as openly and comfortably in the time frame we had.

### **5. What about success? What are you pleased about regarding your research and outreach engagement?**

I am! Of course, I could have tried to be better at reaching out a bit more outside my own circles, but it honestly felt like making it harder for no reason!

### **6. What advice would you give to future people doing a CASSANDRA-like programme concerning research and community engagement?**

It was very helpful to enter the programme with an idea of what theme(s) I wanted the story to cover.



### Meja Ohlsson Rodriguez (SE)

Meja is a young storyteller born and raised in Ljungby, the Land of Legends in Sweden. Growing up in this rich storytelling environment, she has been surrounded by stories from a very young age. However, it was not until she was 15 that she realised storytelling could be a profession for her.

Although she is not yet a full-time storyteller, Meja has had the opportunity to share her stories with a variety of audiences on different occasions. Her experiences range from leading guided tours at the Museum of Legends to performing by the fire during the storytelling festival in Ljungby. She has even competed in the Swedish storytelling championship. Opportunities continue to arise, and now she is creating a performance about her own journey for the first time. This performance will explore her family's journey to Sweden and the stories and memories they lost along the way.

#### **1. What was your theme?**

My theme was identity, heartache, and searching, which relate to my family's fleeing from their home country due to massive political unrest.

#### **2. Why did you choose it?**

I got a feeling during our visit to Alden Biesen that one of my memories needed to be told. After talking to some mentors, I found that this was something that was connected to my family's history.

#### **3. Did you engage with any groups, individuals, or specialists? If yes, how did you engage with them? What did you discover? If not, how did you carry out your research?**

I have been interviewing some of my family members. What is their story and perspective on this time of their life? The main people that I have interviewed (in the right order) are 2 of my older cousins, my aunt, my biological grandfather, his wife, my grandmother and my father. In between interviews, I have also been doing some other research. I have been to a museum exhibit about people who fled to Sweden. I also read a book on the same topic. I have watched five documentaries about Chile and the military coup.

#### **4. Can you describe any challenges or barriers you had to your research and engagement with others?**

The biggest challenge was my own fear of talking to my grandmother. Because of the information I was able to find or collect, I learned things about my grandmother and started to understand why she never talked about Chile before. So it was really hard to find the courage and the right way to speak to her about this. I was not able to ask her about everything I originally wanted. But some things might be better forgotten.

#### **5. What about success? What are you pleased about regarding your research and outreach engagement?**

I am really pleased with what I have learned about my family and the relationships I have had over time. It has given me a greater understanding of why things turned out the way they did. I feel like my cousins, and I now get an opportunity to get some of the answers that we always wanted.

#### **6. What advice would you give to future people doing a CASSANDRA-like programme concerning research and community engagement?**

The words socially engaged storytelling does not necessarily mean that you really have to dig deep and take on a really tough and heavy theme. A chess club or football team is also a community. So choose something that makes you interested and that you will be able to work with for a long time. Because even though it might not be a big world question that everyone can relate to, they can still enjoy the story and your performance as long as you are interested and enjoying it on stage.

When interviewing people, look at the person and try to give them space to breathe and to answer freely. Yes, you might want a specific answer, but there are a million different ways to get that answer. And sometimes, it is better to take the longer path that is smoother cause then you will get more information. Throw in some more relaxed questions about food, colours or perhaps music. "What food did you eat the most at that time?" "What colour was the house?" "Did you hear a lot of stories when you were younger?" "What is your child's favourite story/movie?" And remember, the conversation often evolves into stories, so just talk.

### **Dawid Pigut (PL)**

Dawid is an 18-year-old Polish artist who combines his roles as a student and apprentice hairdresser. His passion lies in bringing joy through creative expression - whether styling hair or crafting stories. Though new to storytelling through the Cassandra project, Dawid approaches this art form with the same enthusiasm he brings to his other creative pursuits, seeing words as his paintbrush for



creating vivid narratives.

### **1. What was your theme?**

Identity and self-discovery are explored through the story of Orthodox Jewish women's relationship with hair, particularly focusing on the tradition of haircutting after marriage.

### **2. Did you engage with any groups, individuals, or specialists? If yes, How did you engage with them? What did you discover? If not, how did you carry out your research?**

As well as drawing from personal experience, I worked with two key specialists - A hairdresser who performs "golden cuts" - transformative haircuts with symbolic meaning and a wigmaker who works with Orthodox Jewish women. These interactions revealed deep connections between hair, identity, cultural traditions, and the complex relationship between personal choice and religious customs.

### **3. Can you describe any challenges or barriers you had to your research and engagement with others?**

While the research process went smoothly with willing participants, the main challenges came in the performance. Language barriers, as English is my second language, presented some difficulties. I was also initially hesitant to use the full stage in my physical performance. I overcame these challenges by using bilingual storytelling with English-subtitled projections and using exercises with my mentor we learned in Alden Biesen.

### **5. What about success? What are you pleased about regarding your research and outreach engagement?**

I successfully gained deep insights into Jewish cultural traditions and created an interactive performance incorporating both languages. I developed a multi-layered narrative using different perspectives, including first-person, observer, and character voice. I'm pleased that I built meaningful connections with specialists in the field and was able to address sensitive topics like marriage traditions and abuse in a thoughtful way.

### **6. What advice would you give to future people doing a CASSANDRA-like programme concerning research and community engagement?**

Don't shy away from difficult conversations or challenging topics. Being open to discussing sensitive subjects can lead to meaningful discoveries and connections. If you face technical challenges (like language), find creative solutions to overcome them.



## Ynys Convents (BE)

Ynys is a young storyteller based in Antwerp. She is finishing her master's degree in Dutch literature and loves to fill the gaps in her day by writing poetry. Last year, she appeared on stage as a film festival host, and this summer, she was particularly active as a social justice activist in Antwerp.

Ynys's love for connecting with an audience and her strong sense of community is reflected in her personal story, 'The Stork That Raised Me: The Antipelargy of a Family'.

### 1. What was your theme?

This story is rooted in the concept of **antipelargy**. In ancient Greek, "antipelargos" (ἀντιπελαργός) refers to the concept of **reciprocal care**, specifically between parents and children. That's why you can read the word 'pelargos' in it, which is Greek for 'stork'.

### 2. Why did you choose it?

The Cassandra Project's description highlights that socially engaged storytelling shares personal narratives addressing global issues. This prompted me to reflect on my community and how I can amplify its values. Growing up in a close-knit family, I developed a strong sense of community. After my mother's autism diagnosis in 2014 (followed by my sister's), her struggles with depression and burnout intensified, impacting her self-image as a mother. Despite her challenges, she never gave up—nor did my sister or I. We learned to adapt, communicate, and support each other. I aim to challenge the idea that caregiving flows only from parent to child. A family is a community where everyone contributes according to their abilities. This is the value I want to share.

### 3. Did you engage with any groups, individuals, or specialists? If yes, how did you engage with them? What did you discover? If not, how did you carry out your research?

I consulted my mother and sister to talk about memories they felt comfortable with that I would incorporate into my story. Aside from that, I also reached out to a storyteller living in Germany and one in Poland because I knew the historical region of Pomerania, now divided over Germany and Poland, housed a lot of stork folklore. The first one was Kathleen Rapolt from Germany. She helped me access the *Enzyklopädie der märchen encyclopaedia* of fairy tales, which was a good starting point for conducting further research on storks. Classical sources, such as [Ovid](#) and Isidor von Sevilla, were the ones I wanted to look at. Ovid did not end up inspiring my story, but Isidor von Sevilla did. Through my research on his *Bestiarum*, I stumbled upon an interesting entry on storks in the

[Mittelalter Lexicon](#). Here I discovered the association between storks and reciprocal care, the fact that they build big nests near towns and villages and that they're considered to be lucky charms.

Secondly, I corresponded with Agnieszka A. Kaim, who was one of the project mentors. She reached out to an academic contact and friend of hers who is an expert on the German cultural heritage in the Pomeranian district. She referred me to The Project Gutenberg eBook of [The Child and Childhood in Folk-Thought](#). Something that truly inspired me was this: 'In North Germany generally, the storks are believed to be human beings in magical metamorphosis, and hence no harm must be done to them' (Chapt. XII, *Stork*.)/ Finally, I somehow found the word *antipelargy*, but I sadly don't exactly remember how I found it. The *Oxford English Dictionary* does have a very explanatory entry on [the etymology of the word antipelargy](#) that finally served as the central theme of my story.

#### **4. Can you describe any challenges or barriers you had to your research and engagement with others?**

The biggest restriction was the specific time frame that we had to do research, create and perform in try-outs. Another barrier was the fact that my story is derived from personal memories. I have worked through painful events in my childhood, but I underestimated how external circumstances would influence my mental capacity to work on a personal story, which is very intense. I went through something personal - that did not have anything to do with my mother, sister or general childhood, but that took a lot of emotional energy. The energy that I was eager to put into my story. My mother and sister were always happy to help and listen, although I felt sometimes my mother had the same struggle as I did with mental 'availability' to creatively brainstorm on something so personal. So, sometimes, this was a barrier to reaching out to my mother or putting myself behind my laptop and conducting research.

Lastly, I found it particularly hard to find clear stork tales that would match my intention with the symbolic value of the animal. Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Stork' and the Middle Eastern Caliph Stork stories have a clear and full narrative, but they did not prove useful for the message I wanted to convey. If it had not been for the help of the experts, I might not have found the reference works that were so useful. They helped me incorporate more general associations and symbolic charge of the stork into my story. I am planning to continue diving deeper into stork research to refine the way I portray the animal in my story.

#### **5. What about success? What are you pleased about regarding your research and outreach engagement?**

In terms of research and outreach successes, I had a few. During my research period, contact with experts helped me extend my network and get in touch with people I hadn't met before. Also, it was interesting that my particular story got me in touch with academics and storytellers abroad who are geographically or academically connected to the topic my story was about. This gave me a feeling of shedding light on the stork folklore that is somewhat forgotten. By that, I mean digging up symbolism and connotations to the animal that stretch further than the classic

view of storks that bring babies. Finding the stork metaphor through research was a rewarding moment, born from a small insight I read about social behaviour and nurtured into something deeply personal. The story I chose—a metaphor about a stork and the strengths and limits of close family bonds—held personal significance. It allowed me to express insights shaped by growing up with a parent who sometimes felt restricted by an invisible disability.

The outreach aspect still has to grow. I have had audiences saying they recognised themselves in my story. In the story I performed, the mother gets stork-like features (white wings with black tips and an orange beak) whenever she is having a hard time and feels she cannot be the mother she wants to be for her children. The background is, as I wrote above, that my mother has autism. The interesting thing is that everyone can have their own definition of what it means when the mom turns into a stork. One person, for example, was a single parent and felt very touched by my story. Nevertheless, I think in terms of outreach, I can refine my story and make it fit for schools or places where parents and children are in particular situations (e.g., meeting spots for neurodivergent parents). So, in that aspect, there is still a path open for me.

Finally, performing this to my mother and sister was a special moment of outreach as well, although very personal. I also want to perform it again because they attended my second try-out, where I was still shy.

## **6. What advice would you give to future people doing a CASSANDRA-like programme concerning research and community engagement?**

To enhance the impact of future CASSANDRA-like programmes, allocating more time for community research and outreach is essential. Building meaningful connections and understanding community needs requires patience and continuous engagement. Because I felt I had not enough time, I decided to look for my first story in the community that is closest to me: my family. Although I am happy I did it; I am curious about what communities and inspiring connections I might have stumbled upon if I had more time. I was part of the student's occupation of my university in Antwerp to demand an academic boycott of Israel. If I had more time, I might have started interviewing my friends there and created something out of that. It is important to note that this occupation only happened a month or so after the official kick-off of the Cassandra project in Alden Biesen.

So, extending the research phase will ensure deeper insights and more authentic collaborations. To support this, consider introducing idea development and preliminary community research during the first workshop week. The example I gave above on my own personal activism does not really count because this only happened after the start of the project, but I still feel participants might benefit from it. Starting early allows participants to refine their focus and align their goals with community interests right from the beginning. This approach not only sets a clear direction but also fosters purposeful engagement, ensuring that research outcomes are both relevant and impactful.

## Conclusion

The social engagement phase of the Cassandra Project provides insights into how young storytellers can effectively research and develop work around complex social themes. This document has outlined their research methodologies, workshop approaches, and the various barriers they encountered. It has detailed the range of themes explored, from mental health, climate responsibility and gender identity, and demonstrated how different engagement techniques yielded varying results across different communities. The findings offer practical considerations for future projects involving young artists in socially engaged performance work.



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