

November 15, 2021
Hannah Hargrove
Makenzie Eddy
Port Allen Elementary
To share the story of an Early Childhood Educator

Oral History Project

Hargrove: [00:00:00] Thank you so much for meeting with me today and offering to share your story and perspective. Let me begin the recording by stating our names and the dates. I am Hannah Hargrove, and will take the role of interviewer today. I am joined by Makenzie Eddy, who will be our narrator. Today is Monday, November 15th, 2021 and we are conducting this interview at Port Allen Elementary in Ms. Eddy's classroom. The purpose of the interview today is to talk about Ms. Eddy's experience as an early childhood teacher in Louisiana. Let's begin. Tell me what I need to know to understand the person sitting in front of me today.

Ms. Eddy: I am a graduate from LSU in, from the dual cert program.

I am 24 years old. This is my second year teaching and I'm expecting my first child.

Hargrove: So, you are a graduate from LSU. Tell me a little bit about your experience in the dual cert program.

Ms. Eddy: So, the dual cert program was great. I originally did not go to LSU, actually went to school out of state for two years before coming down here and at that time, I was a... I was a major in regular education and minoring in special education, but the dual cert program allowed me to get fully certified in both. So that was great. A lot of my field experience though, was strictly just taking data, which unfortunately, as a teacher, your whole day does not just pertain to data.

Um, but for the most part, the dual cert program was pretty good. I know that they are fixing the kinks of the dual cert program. Um, so it was pretty good. I was in the West Baton Rouge Parish for majority of my student teaching placement, which is how I ended up getting a job in West Baton Rouge Parish, because I knew some of the principals. Of course, getting a job in teaching, a lot of it is word of mouth and what people say about you. So, it was good that I had multiple years in the West Baton Rouge Parish so I could get a job here.

Hargrove: Okay, can you tell me how you think the dual cert program prepared you to be a classroom teacher in an inclusion classroom?

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Ms. Eddy: So, it prepared me to be the Gen-Ed side of an inclusion classroom because I know both angles so I can help of course, the kids that are general education, but I can also come alongside the students that do have disabilities or special needs and really know how to modify their assignments. And also, it's nice because when I'm talking to the special education teacher, that primarily will decide what needs to be modified, make sure we're following the accommodations, I have some background knowledge of what that terminology means, or if they say, "We need to do this", I already understand kind of what's going on, which also helps when we are in the IEP meetings. I'm not just sitting there lost because I know both sides of the, of the spectrum. I know the general education portion and the special education portion.

Hargrove: Is there anything that sticks out to you that you have learned from a past mentor teacher when student teaching?

Ms. Eddy: So, for the dual cert program, the year that I student taught, I had two mentor teachers. I had a general education teacher and a special education teacher. So, it was great because I got to be with them for a complete year.

So honestly, I learned some things that I really liked, and then I also saw some things that I did not like, that I knew, okay, that does not work. I need to stay away from that. And the reason I could see that is because the dual cert program, instead of putting us in all these multiple placements where we're only there for a semester, we're able to see the school year start to finish.

So, I could see the progression of the teacher kind of releasing the kids for some independence versus how they started, where everything was very structured. So, I think one of my biggest takeaways from a general education teacher was how she portrayed herself in general to everyone throughout the school.

Uh, most people enjoyed being around her. She was also very data-driven, which I feel is important. Data's one of the ways that I know if my teaching is effective or ineffective, because you can see and that also shows you the areas where you need growth. Um, so she was very data-driven when it comes from a special education teacher, I learned a lot of things to do.

She was great at modifying assignments, but in ways that kept the assignments still on grade level, rather than giving them an assignment to complete, that was below grade level.

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Hargrove: Okay. So, you said that you moved here from where was it?

Ms. Eddy: Missouri

Hargrove: Missouri. So, let's do a little bit of backtracking to your child.

What are some of your earliest childhood memories?

Ms. Eddy: Um, my earliest childhood memories are kind of all scattered throughout because I did move around a lot as a child. So, I went to many different schools. Um, so I have seen a lot of different teaching practices as well as just different teaching personalities.

So, some of my first, uh, earliest childhood memories is probably starts in about fourth grade and my favorite subject was reading because we were able, she had a reading corner in her room and that was when we really started reading chapter books. And we would all have a portion to read, like we would read for a certain character.

So that's something that I've really implemented into my reading class as the year progresses. Since I'm only a second-grade teacher, we don't get to do it very often, but towards the end of the year, the kids are mature enough to be able to handle that. And then on the other side, as seeing a lot of different schools and just different personalities in general, there were teachers that I did not like that also really influenced who I am as a teacher.

I had one teacher that absolutely would never get up out of her chair. And that really influenced me because sometimes I know I would not want to ask a question because then everyone knew you were struggling because you had to get up to go to her because she would not come to you.

So that has made it important for me to see that I need to be walking throughout the classroom. That way in case a child is silently struggling, I can attend to them without calling attention to them.

Hargrove: Okay. And how would you say moving around a lot affected you just in general as a person?

Ms. Eddy: Just in general, as a person...

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Since I have moved around a lot, it's harder for me to get deeper connections with people, um, because I am used to moving. So, I might know you for six months to a year and not know when I'm leaving, since it's not dependent upon me, it was dependent upon, uh, my parents. So, that has kind of been a struggle in my life, which I've also seen kind of reflect into who I am as a teacher, because it was very difficult for me to bond on a different level to these children, because ultimately the goal is for these children to move on and leave your classroom and go onto the next grade.

So, at the beginning it was definitely a struggle for me to really kind of get to know them past just a teacher-student relationship for me to get to see what motivates them. What is their home life like? Because all throughout my life, I never really connected with people on a deeper level. So, it took me a little bit of time to move past that as a teacher, to realize that my job as a teacher is to connect to these students in on a deeper level as well.

Hargrove: Can you explain a little bit to our listeners who may not know why it's so important to have those close relationships with each student?

Ms. Eddy: So, it's really close to have a close relationship or it's really important to have a close relationship with each student because...

If you don't have close relationships to that student, you have no idea why one day they might be a great student answering all your questions, participating and then the next day they are putting their head down, they're unresponsive, they might come across as rude. Um, so it's important to know that because you have to know their personalities, but you also have to know kind of what's going on at home.

You need to know, okay. This student lives with mom and she's great when she lives with mom. But when she lives with dad, she's taking care of three other siblings, and she doesn't have her own bed to sleep in at night. So, it's really important to know your student because just like adults, sometimes these tiny humans have a lot going on that they don't know how to process.

So, it's also the teacher's job to, of course, teach them all these standards and skills to move on to the third grade or whatever is the prior grade, but you also have to teach them how to just survive and to live and to get these coping mechanisms where, you know, when they do get angry, they aren't throwing their chair across the room.

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They're able to cope and breathe and use their words rather than just shutting down, or becoming violent, which a lot of people, it seems that we forget that kids have all these feelings, but they're not necessarily always taught at home how to talk it out, how to feel your emotions. So, a lot of that goes on at school.

Hargrove: How important is it for these children to learn how to self-regulate and take care of these emotions and cope in early childhood?

Ms. Eddy: It is very important how to do that because especially teaching at Port Allen Elementary, where it is a lower socioeconomic school. These children, if they don't know how to cope and some of the behaviors that they see that they are modeling after I have kids where their parents are in jail, or they know someone that has been to jail.

So, they don't always see the best examples. And if we don't teach them how to cope, then they're going to say, oh, well, they did, they were upset and they did this and that landed them in jail. So, if we don't teach these children how to cope, then, uh, I feel like they could turn to violence, which we of course do not want.

And as children also get older, they get stronger and more...there are harsher consequences as they get older. So, it's very important that we take the time when they are in lower elementary to teach them how to properly cope and use their words rather than any other alternative.

Hargrove: Right. Do you want to talk a little bit about discipline handled here at the elementary school, as opposed to Cohn which is the feeder school for third grade? Do you want to talk a little bit about how they differ and how discipline gets a little bit stricter?

Ms. Eddy: Yeah. So here at Port Allen Elementary, we are a head start through second grade school. So, you have to realize these kids range anywhere from three to eight years old. And so, it's, it's hard to kind of picture it because of what we're trying to teach these children.

Well, what I'm teaching these children right now is probably what I did not learn even as a 24-year-old until I was in fifth grade. So, we are putting a lot more expectations on these children when their maturity level is not necessarily there. So, at Port Allen Elementary and at Cohn Elementary, we use the same structure of discipline called Social Shape Up.

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And so Social Shape Up there are five specific rules. One is follow directions for task, raise your hand, stay in your assigned area, keep hands, feet and objects to yourself and keep unkind comments to yourself. So very basic rules that need to be followed.

But here at Port Allen Elementary, we have a larger scale, meaning the scale ranges, zero rule violations to 15 rule violations before you do not earn Fun Friday or parent contact. And typically, at this age, there are more warnings given, um, before a rule violation is put into place, but this is also dependent upon the timeframe of the year as well.

Whereas Cohn, when that is at third through fifth grade school, when they get to third grade, they expect them to be prepared and able to follow these rules without the warnings. Um, another example is if we do not have a student finish work within the class period, the allotted amount of time, typically what happens here is we just try to find other times during the day for the student to complete the assignment, depending upon their behavior, as well, as long as they're trying, they're giving it their best. They're not being a disruption to the class. We will find the time for them to do it.

Whereas at Cohn Elementary, if you do not finish your work in the allotted amount of time, that is provided, then you will miss either your recess or you will miss, uh, specials and you will be put in the clinic room typically, maybe not always, but that's typically what was ha-will happen is that. Fun extra time will be taken away and you will complete your assignment during that time.

So, it's not necessarily bad. I do believe that as kids get older, they can handle more. Second grade is a big adjustment period. When it comes to discipline because in pre-K and kinder, and first grade, we, they still incorporate a lot of rug time and movement. Whereas in second grade they really are kind of confined to their chair.

And at that point, getting up and sitting in special seating, that is a reward, which they will also see at Cohn Elementary when they move forward.

Another big thing that differs is kind of what qualifies for a suspension or how many things have to happen before a suspension has put in place. Here, I believe the students get three to five, um, I'll just call them warnings. Whereas at Cohn, it is one warning, and if it happens again, you're suspended. But again, that just also goes based upon the maturity level of the students and what they

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are prepared for, which we here at Port Allen Elementary, really try to prepare them for Cohn Elementary, uh, for the upcoming fall.

Hargrove: Okay, and you mentioned that second grade is a huge transition period related to, um, behavior and everything. What about the curriculum? How do you think curriculum increases from first grade from just now and even when you were younger? How has it advanced?

Ms. Eddy: So, curriculum, uh, speaking of present day of what I teach, the curriculum really jumps from first to second grade.

So, I can only speak for reading and math as well as science because those are the three primary... um, primary sections that I teach. So, for reading in first grade, they're teaching them how to read. They're teaching them how to sound out words. They're talking about vowel sounds and consonant sounds and blending.

All that stuff and yes, they do read. But then when we jump to second grade, we automatically start working on comprehension. So, they read in first grade, "The dog is chasing a blue ball." And then in second grade, they're going to read narrative texts, expository texts, a lot of different types. And then we expect them to be able to comprehend what they just read and then tell us, well, why is the dog chasing the blue ball?

Why is he doing this? Even if it is an inference, it may not be necessarily in the text, but they have to infer about, okay, well, a dog likes activity. A dog likes to do this. So, it's a very big jump from strictly let's sound out some words, **blend them together**, read very small texts to, by the end of second grade, we will have some students reading a chapter book such as Charlotte's Web.

And there are some students in second grade that excel in reading and do great at this stuff and comprehension included. But majority of the students in second grade, are **not prepared to jump from first grade reading to second grade comprehension.**

And it takes quite a bit of time to get them to be ready to comprehend. So, we spend a lot of the year just trying to get them there. Um, for math, it is also quite **a big jump** because you're teaching them kind of simplified strategies and they don't go past the number 200. Whereas in second grade we go all the way up to 1000.

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So, a **big gap** that I saw this year when I got my new second graders is they don't know how to write a number in standard form. So, I went to the first-grade teachers and asked, "Hey, why can none of your kids write the number 211? They're all writing all this crazy stuff, what's going on?" And it's because in the curriculum, that is not a skill that they, they don't have to write numbers past 100.

So of course, they don't know how to do that, but we expect them to go from just knowing 200 all the way to 1000 in a very short amount of time. So, the curriculum really jumps. And again, when it comes to the maturity level of the students, sometimes it can be very frustrating as a teacher, because you're trying to teach the student how to be a student, how to cope. And then also trying to teach them skills that are just at the time, way above their level. Now that doesn't mean that they will never understand it, but it means right then and there, they're not ready to understand that yet.

I know when I was, um, in grade school, again, my experience was very different because I went to so many different schools. Now the original school that I went to was on a military base, so it was very rigorous. You were expected to behave a certain way and you did not act out because if you acted out, it was embarrassing for your parents.

So, you made sure that you are very respectful. If you did not understand something, you made sure the following day that you understood it because you did not want to fall behind. Um, but even then, the stuff that we worked on at a very rigorous school still is not up to what we are working on now, just within that short amount of time.

And then also I've lived in the North and I've also lived in the South going to school and seeing the difference between the North and the South and what is expected of the kids in the curriculum is also very different. I have a seven-year-old sister that went to kindergarten and first grade in Texas, which is a great school system.

A lot of people, uh, in my dual cert cohort actually moved to Texas to teach because they heard so many good things about the school system in Texas. But just my sister moving from Texas to Illinois, you know, Texas is a great school system, but Illinois was leaps and bounds ahead of them that my sister had to be pulled out for almost all main curricular activities because she was behind.

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So, it just shows to how the entire United States is that such a split when it comes to curriculum expectations and how we manage that.

Hargrove: Speaking, just for the South and Louisiana in general, do you think it will become a continuous issue if expectations are raised year after year for these students?

Ms. Eddy: I believe, yes, it will.

Because we have to remember that they are children. We are a lot of the time, I feel like when all this curriculum is put in place and the pacing that we choose and all of that, it's adults that create the curriculum. It's adults that choose how fast we map it out. And yes, we test the kids and if the kids do horrible, we go back and we, and we teach it again and we keep trying and we keep trying.

But if we continue to make the curriculum harder and the expectations are wonderful, I have very high expectations for my students. I do not have low expectations, but if we continue to have such high, extreme expectations of these kids and we don't take into account that they are children, then we are setting ourselves up for failure in general.

Um, because we have to remember that school might start, let's say August 10th, but they have not been in school for the whole summer. So, I can speak for this year. This year, we really jumped into curriculum. We had three days and then we were rocking and rolling. We were pushing through, we were going, but we have to remember that these kids also have had very different schooling due to COVID.

And so, since we pushed in so quickly, I've seen a lot more behavior this year than I ever have before. I've seen a lot of these kids too. The, the curriculum that we teach is so rigorous. And if you don't teach them how to be a student and also just to teach them how to take a second to think about what they're going to say before they answer a question.

We did not take that time this year. And I am seeing negative, negative repercussions from us, not taking the time, and also not teaching these children why we come to school? Why do we have to learn? Not just because your mom says you have to go to school or your teacher says you have to learn to move on to the next grade, but why do we actually need to know this information?

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And if we don't take the time to teach these kids, why we need to learn, then we will always be at a disadvantage. We will always see behavior issues. And we'll always just have kids that don't think before they talk.

Hargrove: So, you said that this is your second year as a teacher. What have you learned from your first year as a teacher from your first children to your second year, as a teacher and the difference between the kids you have now?

Ms. Eddy: This year, my second year is much more challenging than my first year. I will say my first year was very different. I did come in, um, I started the year after COVID. They COVID shut down in March. I got hired in April, so I did not start until August of 2020. Um, but that year was not as difficult, but again, I was not at the time I was not an inclusion teacher.

I was strictly a Gen-Ed teacher. But I did, I only started with eight children and by the end I did have 18, but since I had such a small group of kids, I was able to really bond with them and understand what motivates them. Where do they struggle? What areas do I really need to come in behaviorally and academically to set them up for success?

And then since that bond was so strong, as more students would come in and come in and come in, those kids could take them under their wing and get them situated into our classroom. Now, I think that that took place because at the beginning of last year, my first year we did a lot of remediation teaching.

So instead of jumping into the second-grade curriculum, three days after getting these students in my classroom, where half of them still did not know my name if my back was turned. My first year, we took the time we taught them first grade information again. We did remediation, which I saw, comparing last year to this year, that really boosted their confidence.

So, they were able to work on the first-grade material that they had forgotten over the summer because every kid forgets stuff over the summer, but that boosted their confidence where they're like, oh, I have this. Instead of jumping straight into reading where **we're throwing comprehension questions at them**, we were able to do a first-grade story first where yes, we asked them comprehension questions, but it was on, it was a book that they were able to read fluently without teacher assistance.

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So, I really think my first year was easier than my second, just because we took the first week and a half and some subjects, we took a whole month to remediate.

So I was also at the time, since they weren't struggling as much in the content area, one, I was able to boost their confidence. But two, I was able to teach them how to be students. So, I did not have nearly as many behavior issues because they had no reason to act out. They weren't struggling in a certain area.

And at that time too, if they were struggling, they knew it was okay to ask questions. It was just a much more positive timeframe because we did not jump into curriculum nearly as quickly as we did this year, my second-year teaching.

Hargrove: Okay. So, what do you think you can do?

Because obviously now you got your kids in August, all 20, something of them, and many have been added throughout the year. What can you, what do you think you can do now to kind of get that behavior under control starting now?

Ms. Eddy: Okay, well, starting now is a very crazy timeframe. We are a couple, we are a week away from Thanksgiving break, which every teacher, beginning teachers, senior teachers, lead teachers, every teacher will tell you that this week is going to be the craziest week ever because it is right before a break.

Um, but what I believe I will do after Christmas break, right? We've all had two weeks away from one another, the first week that we come back, I'm going to treat it as if they are new students. We are going to do the activities, the getting to know each other activities where yes, we already know each other, but instead I can spice it up.

Did you go anywhere for Christmas break? Did what was your favorite part of the holiday?

So, we can take that time to do those bonding activities that first week where yes, curriculum will be taking place because unfortunately we just don't have enough time in the day or the year to get through everything, to prepare these kids for the next grade level.

But I'm going to take that time to teach them also how to be a student, how to follow our five Social Shape Up rules again. So that'll be a great time for me to

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remediate as well as really boost up the positive reinforcements because everyone, maybe not everyone, but it tends to be the kids come back much more refreshed after that two-week break.

And it's also nice because they know this is my classroom, these are my classmates, this is my teacher. So, it will be good to have kind of that remediation period and the fun activities as well. And I'm hoping at that time also because they are becoming more mature that's halfway through the year that the behavior that I see now will decrease.

Hargrove: In your opinion, how has COVID or the time spent out of the classroom, or just the different instruction because of COVID, how has that affected their reading level or things like their ability to sit in a chair and follow simple directions in your opinion?

Ms. Eddy: In my opinion, it has, it has really affected them, um, especially seeing, and me being the Gen Ed side of an inclusion classroom, so I have students with disabilities. I have some kids where last year they had the option of coming back to school or staying virtual and they stayed virtual for an entire year. So, they had moms sitting next to them, or they were able to lay on the ground and halfway watch the zoom that the teacher was providing.

So, I've, I feel like it has made a big impact overall on how the kids behave within the classroom. How the kids think as well. I feel like now the kids just like to shout out just anything that pops in their brain. So that's been a big skill that we are working on. And I also just feel like it's kind of taken away some of how they interact socially with one another, with their classmates, classmates to classmates, I've seen some that, they don't know how to, uh, interact with one another.

They don't know how to ask, oh, "do you want to play on the playground?" Because depending upon their parents and if they came back to school last year, some of these kids may not have had very much interaction with peers their own age. Um, they may have only interacted also with their siblings.

So that may be why they're coming across as unkind because they're not used to talking to their peers. They are used to talking to people that they are related to. I've also seen that some of these kids are disrespectful, and I feel like that's because they're not used to being around adults anymore. And if they are, they're only used to being around their immediate family.

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So, there's been a lot of. Just a lot of little things that I have noticed that I feel like do play a part because they were out of school for so long, some more than others, since some decided not to come back.

Hargrove: Does this worry you, or do you feel the pressure to catch these kids back up and get them under control?

Ms. Eddy: The pressure is insane. Uh, last year as a first-year teacher, I did not overly feel that pressure that these kids had to be, uh, that they had to be caught up. But this year also I'm in a different classroom. I'm in an inclusion classroom and the gap that I'm seeing is so much larger. I don't know if last year I was just super lucky.

Uh, but this year, the pressure to catch these kids up is insane. I had, I just had to reteach for two days because I had an entire class fail a test and no one feels good after an entire class fails a test because that is not a child problem. That is a you problem. That means in some way you did not present that information where they are able to understand it.

Now, granted, did I have bad behaviors mixed in with that? And did I have to stop a lot of the time to redirect these students? Yes, I did. But not every single student. So, when every single student performs poorly, that comes back on you. So, I had an "oh crap" moment. This went terrible. And I had to go back and reteach, and no one feels good when you have to reteach, especially when you're trying to figure out, okay, what is another way I can present this information?

And if they don't understand it again, what can I do then? Because you also have pressure of finishing the whole curriculum before they moved to the next grade, because if they don't finish all the missions before they end second grade, then you have the third-grade teachers asking you, well, what were you doing?

Why did you not get through the curriculum? Since you didn't get through the curriculum, they don't have this background knowledge. Now we have to do this. So, there is quite a bit of pressure from all around that comes from parents, it comes from your coaches, it comes from, um, the, the grade level above you.

I feel like this year, there has been a lot more pressure placed upon teachers than there was my first-year teaching. Um, I can't necessarily speak for why it feels that way. I know, as a grade level, as a second grade, we all feel much more

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pressure to catch these kids up and to try to close the gap that was created either due to COVID or whatever in the world happened to close this gap.

Hargrove: Now, in an effort to kind of summarize, and you can take a second to think about this if you need to, what is something you wish others understood about being an early childhood educator?

Ms. Eddy: I guess, overall, I just kind of wish that people understood how demanding and difficult this job truly is. I know you see all the memes and the tweets about, oh, "I see this person cutting out gingerbread men around the holidays, their job is so hard, you know, they're going to do crafts with the kids," but that is such a small, tiny portion of what we actually do. How I spoke earlier about how we don't only teach these kids, the curriculum, we teach them how to grow up. How to continue to be good citizens and good, a good person in general, and how to manage their feelings as well as a boatload of other stuff that administration wants us to do, that the district wants us to do. You have to teach the kids, oh, get certified in this, get trained in this.

There is a lot, a lot of stuff that goes into it that people do not understand. That I myself did not understand even in my student teaching portion of it, that I did not understand until I was the main teacher of 22 small children that I am responsible for. That there's just so much that goes on behind the scenes that people don't see.

So, it's easy to say, oh, your job is seven to three. That's not bad. Your job is way past three o'clock your job is not Monday through Friday. It is, it can be Sunday through Friday because some things you have to do so much prep for. And then if you have children and a family, you have so much time management that you have to do to make sure that everyone gets their needs met. Your needs, your family's needs, your kids' needs, uh, your students' needs everyone you're trying to almost please, in order for them to succeed. There is a lot of pressure on teachers, and I am hoping that at some point in this career, that will get taken off or something will change.

But this job is not meant for everyone. I've heard that this job people switch to a teaching degree because something else was too hard.

No, the degree may not be the hardest thing to achieve but working this job every day is not just for anyone. So that is what I wish people would understand.

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Hargrove: Well, Ms. Eddy, this has been great. Thank you so much for sharing your story. [00:42:22]