

StorySlam Podcast Transcript

Tom Snarsky: The podcast you are about to hear is a celebration of StorySlam, an event that has become a keystone of the Knowles Teacher Initiative's Summer Conference. If you are a Knowles Fellow, part of the Knowles staff, or another member of the Knowles community, lots of what you hear will probably be familiar to you: Summer Conference, Ignite Talks, etc. In case you might be listening in as someone newer to Knowles, here's some quick context: the Knowles Teacher Initiative is an organization that supports a national network of math and science teachers. The Knowles Summer Conference is a once-yearly gathering of all current Teaching Fellows, Knowles staff, and other presenters to collaborate and think together about teaching and learning. The StorySlam, named after the format that you may be familiar with via *The Moth* and their Community StorySLAMs, is just one of many events that transpires over the course of the Knowles Summer Conference; but, as you'll hear, it's a bit of a special one.

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Tom Snarsky: If you've been to a Knowles Summer Conference, you know the rhythm: arrive midweek, get checked into the hotel, have a day or two of stimulating sessions and time to bond, learn, and inquire with your cohort, and then head into the weekend, culminating in a Branching Out ceremony for the year's newly-minted Senior Fellows. But before that—sometime after dinner on Friday night—an event takes place, an event that is somehow simultaneously unlike anything else at Summer Conference and yet central to what Knowles is, who we are. That event is StorySlam.

Welcome to Teacher Voice, the podcast dedicated to bringing you stories by teachers, about teaching. My name is Tom Snarsky; I am a 2016 Fellow, an Associate Editor for *Kaleidoscope*, and for the past few years it has been my distinct honor and privilege to host StorySlam, along with my wonderful co-host Anthony Stetzenmeyer. StorySlam is an event held at Summer Conference each year, during which members of the Knowles Community step up in front of an audience—half in chairs, half on the floor or against the back wall, standing-room-only—and tell a story. Each story is 5 minutes long but those 5 minutes contain the whole cosmos: family histories, harrowing moments, and hilarious kid stories. Unlike this podcast, the stories are not recorded: they exist ephemerally in the context of the shared space and then dissolve into collective memory. You have to be there.

When I was a new Fellow feeling out Summer Conference and getting a sense of what Knowles was all about, I remember two prominent feelings. First, I was totally in awe at how accomplished all the other Fellows were—where they had already gotten in their professional lives in just a few short years of teaching. Second, I remember what it was like to be in that borrowed chair in a conference room, listening to storytellers take risks and be vulnerable—sharing their stories with as much of the Knowles community as could safely fit in the room. I think if I had only ever seen Knowles in that first, more professionalized light, I would only have gotten half the picture. From that moment forward I've understood StorySlam to be a place where Knowles folks come together to share aspects of their lives and work that go beyond what might fit in a meeting or an inquiry cycle: the stuff that makes us laugh, makes us

cry, makes us a little afraid, makes us understand ourselves and our place in the world better. Stuff that makes us human.

For this episode I had the privilege of speaking with folks who have contributed to StorySlam since its inception, whether as emcees, storytellers, or audience members (or most likely a combination of these!) Although it won't be the same as being at an *actual* StorySlam, we are excited to share with you this rich mix of voices and perspectives reflecting on an event we have all come to know and love.

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Tom Snarsky: Becky Van Tassell is a former Editor-in-Chief of *Kaleidoscope*, and Dwaina Sookhoo is a former *Kaleidoscope* Associate Editor and former Senior Fellow Representative on the Knowles Teacher Initiative Board of Trustees. I had the pleasure of talking with them about their experiences as organizers and emcees of StorySlam. The first thing I wanted to ask them was, "What motivated you to bring StorySlam to Knowles and support it?"

Becky Van Tassell: Yeah, so the StorySlam idea came out of... I was new to the *Kaleidoscope* staff and I was at a cohort meeting. I think it was a Year-Five cohort meeting. And I had been talking with Katie Waddle and Nick Chan about stories and they were telling their Year-Five stories. It was early in the days of asking Year-Five Fellows to write their inquiry stories. And I was chatting with Roseanne, who was a TD for Team Two at the time, and we were just talking about stories and things we love to listen to. And she was like, "Do you ever listen to *The Moth*?" And I was like, "Nope, I've never listened to *Moth Radio*, I don't know what that is." And she's like, "There are five minute stories told with no notes. And they're about all these different things and the audience votes for their favorite story."

And she was just talking about how it was just such a cool thing to listen to, all the different stories that come up are inspiring and they're sad and they're motivating. And we were like, "Whoa, what if we did this with teachers? What could that look like?" So that's where the first StorySlam came from.

Dwaina Sookhoo: I think the first time I did it was post-pandemic. And she was like, "There are not a lot of Senior Fellows here. You're here because you're on the Board. Do you mind just helping me out, because I don't want to do this by myself," kind of thing. And it was, I had a great time.

Becky Van Tassell: And we decided on a structure that took away the competitive aspect. It was just about celebrating our stories and celebrating the unique and multifaceted identities that teachers have. And I wanted to facilitate it because I wanted to try to, at the time we were thinking about, "How do we cultivate a storytelling culture within Knowles? How do we get teachers to think of themselves as writers or storytellers? And how do we nurture that identity within the community? And so we thought this structure would be an informal way to invite in storytelling into a Knowles space. And so we took away the competitive aspect of it, stuck with the five minute stories with no notes, and decided to add—I think this was Nick and Katie's

idea—to add those palette cleanser strips that we use: the “*tell your funniest kid story.*” And what’s the other one? I can’t remember.

Tom Snarsky: Oh, silliest teacher, silliest kid story and maybe funniest teacher moment.

Becky Van Tassell: Yeah, yeah. So those two prompts, we decided to add those in as like palette cleansers before the stories like we do and decided on the no tech, ephemeral nature of it. So that initial structure sort of came about working with Katie and Kirstin, who was on staff at the time and we weren’t really, obviously, sure what would happen. And we really played it up with the Year-Five cohort because that’s who I was interacting with a bunch and Katie and Nick were in that cohort and it was a hit, right? We did this thing and we were...invited it in as this a vulnerable place where we held space for each other to tell these stories of any type. And it turned out how we had hoped and then just kept growing in popularity. And we tried to keep good data about who came. And I think I really love facilitating it because it’s a gift to each other. And watching the storytellers actually go from like—I try to get people to sign up—that process of making a connection with someone and being like, “Hey, do you have a story to tell?” And they’re like, “Well, maybe...” We’ll be like, “Well, what could it be about? And why don’t you think about it?” And you check in with them and they’re like, “Okay, I have two ideas. What do you think of these ideas?” So it’s almost like a very miniature peer advising relationship to buoy this person up and be like, “You could definitely do this.” And then to see people who are hesitant to take the stage and do this thing, it’s just delightful.

Tom Snarsky: I was curious to hear from Becky and Dwaina what it has been like for them to witness StorySlam’s growth and its popularity with Fellows, especially as the Knowles community reconnected after 2020.

Dwaina Sookhoo: I love it. I think when I was a Teaching Fellow, I don’t think there was a StorySlam initially. And if it was, I don’t think, it definitely wasn’t what it is now, which is something that people look forward to every Summer Meeting and talk about and get excited about. Almost like the Ignites, it’s taken on its own life as a, you know, a chosen but highly popular activity people engage in. Yeah. So, and then I think the culture of the actual event has been really helpful for the Knowles space. I think this feels the most accessible for everyone because you can either participate or you can just be an observer. But in any case, being in the room is really special. I love also that it’s like, you can’t take anything out of the room. So it makes you want to go because there’s no recording, there’s no sharing, you can’t watch it later. So it kind of presses upon the importance of being there. It makes it more special. So I think it’s just really cool to see that now it’s like, oh, like we’re all going and it’s like a bigger deal. And we, you know, we need more room because there’s this overflow and people are like sitting on the floor, like on top of each other, trying to be able to just be in the space because it’s so like, it’s just so special to be there.

Becky Van Tassell: It’s so much fun. It’s just been really fun. I love hearing Fellows talk about how it’s their favorite part of Summer Conference. I love trying to get people to tell stories. I love that people know what it is. When we started with, when I started on staff people didn’t know what *Kaleidoscope* was. They didn’t even know what the Journal was, nevermind being excited about an event that we run. I think it’s accomplished the thing that we wanted, which was creating a storyteller space. I’ve had Fellows tell me that they’ve been literally thinking all year about what story they’re gonna tell at StorySlam. The idea that an event that we have occupies people’s thoughts, even when they’re not with us, it’s so powerful and it speaks to the power of the people when they sit in that room and they sit with each other’s stories; the actual thing that we’re doing is very meaningful and impactful for people, even just sitting in the audience. And

we've done, you know, we've done data collection, we've gotten testimonials from people and we've kept records of who's told stories and all that, but the thing that we, it's really hard to measure, are those sort of intangibles, like the intangible affective experiences and that feeling of connectivity that we have with each other that's created by being vulnerable in a space with each other and being human. So yeah, it's just, it's one of my very favorite things that we've done with *Kaleidoscope* and I think one of the most powerful things we've done to nurture storytelling in the Fellowship, for sure.

Tom Snarsky: Lastly, I wanted to ask Dwaina and Becky about the future of StorySlam: What are some elements of StorySlam that they hope continue to be present in its future iterations, and what are some ways they might envision it growing and changing for the better?

Dwaina Sookhoo: I think the element of “what happens in the room stays in the room” needs to stay. I like the, like I said, the audience participation piece also with the little palette cleansers, I think is great. I've wondered always about who gets to share a story. I think it was—at least I've witnessed it being—kind of solicited by Becky...finding people and being like, “Do you want to share?” and having a literal sign up, but I don't know if there's more of a public facing submit—wider net to cast because I do feel like sometimes it gets curated in a way because of whoever is having that opportunity to say they want to do it. Yeah, so I think it would be nice to get a more diverse set of people to share out their stories. I think it would be interesting to have different mediums of sharing a story because storytelling doesn't have to literally be “I stand up and talk to a room full of people.” So I don't know how, but something to think about that could look a little different. And I think there may, maybe there should be an element of like passing it on like I know *Kaleidoscope* editors tend to be the ones to host it and push it but maybe it can also be—like my opportunity to like co-lead it—I think should be something that like gets a little bit more of rotation just so everyone has a chance to see someone maybe from their cohort there at the front or you know just a little bit more representation.

Becky Van Tassell: I hope that the sort of informal nature of the storytelling remains the same, that these aren't necessarily—people prepare and they practice, as maybe they should to be effective—but I love that it's told with no notes. I love that there's like a loose time element and I would hope that that would stay the same. We always say a five minute limit, but we also, as facilitators, read the room and we've had stories that have gone on much longer than that, but people have been sobbing and we're not gonna interrupt that, right? So I hope that that sort of facilitation will still allow for those things to exist in the space and I hope that the stories continue to have that raw authenticity, geez a word I don't really love, to have that raw authenticity of who the people are in their storytelling, right? It's not an Ignite Talk and it shouldn't ever be an Ignite Talk, it's a different thing. So I hope it keeps that sort of feeling. Definitely needs to stay low tech, right? I think the reason that it works is because people aren't being recorded and it is an ephemeral space. And so as it gets bigger, it's harder to police that. It feels awkward to do that, but maintaining that I think is an important part of what makes it what it is.

Becky Van Tassell: How can we make it better? More capes. I think that inviting people in; I think it's great that other people have stepped in to facilitate and that other people have done so in their own way while still cultivating that same feeling in the room. So I love that there's other people taking ownership of it and letting it continue to exist and having different feelings for the emceeing. So I'm happy to see that evolve in its own way. I don't know about it getting bigger. I wonder about what it would look like to have it happen more frequently, right? During the pandemic, we hosted a couple of virtual StorySlams and I was really nervous about what they would feel like in a virtual space. But we decided to do it because we were lacking connections with each other being locked in behind our screens and I was doubtful that people would want to

log in for something that's just another sit-at-your-screen type of thing. But even I left—I mean, I already love StorySlam, but I left those, I think we did two or three sort of spaced throughout the year—I left those virtual StorySlams feeling similarly buoyed as I would as if I had been in person with those people. And the stories that we heard were similarly vulnerable and funny and heartbreaking and serious. And it filled my bucket in a way I wasn't expecting to, even though it was in a virtual space. So I've often wondered about “what could that look like?”, to do an October-is-so-hard, October-is-a-terrible-month-to-teach, let's have a StorySlam. Or February, we're-all-experiencing-seasonal-depression, let's have a StorySlam, right? What could it look like to continue to cultivate that or replicate it more frequently? Or would that dilute the magic of this one chance a year to sit in the StorySlam space? So yeah, maybe the adage, “if it's not broke, don't fix it”, applies here that we really nailed and fine tuned a structure that works with our community. But this is what happens, you put something out in the world and other people take it on and it will grow and change and that's okay too.

Tom Snarsky: It was so great to hear Dwaina's and Becky's perspectives on the evolution and impact of StorySlam. I loved the way they spoke to the experience of organizing and emceeding the event, and I knew that the next group of folks I wanted to chat with would be the people who make StorySlam what it is: the storytellers! I got to sit down with Jason Garver (a 2019 Fellow), Jeff Rozelle (President and CEO of Knowles), Jamie Melton (a 2016 Fellow), and talk about their experiences telling stories at StorySlam. The first thing I wanted to know was, “What is it like to share your story?”

Jason Garver: I think it's really fun because we don't often get to share stories that can be anything, or they can be a mixture of topics. As teachers, I think we share teaching-stories. As people, we share people-stories. But, I really like being able to share teaching-stories about the people that we interact with.

Jamie Melton: The reflection that I had during the StorySlam that I hadn't really thought through before was: when we're teaching, we're also telling stories. And it's important to question whose narrative are we sharing? Where did this version of the story come from? And that was the question I ended with, “Whose story we're telling and why?” And so it's stuff that had been sort of simmering in my mind for a long time, but being able to articulate it out loud and so being able to like, clarify my thing.

Jeff Rozelle: The story I told was a different kind of story than what I might share as somebody who is thinking about teacher learning. I shared a story that was, maybe didn't even, it's just not, it was a story that was unrelated to good instruction. It was a story that was unrelated to the parts of my teaching that I was most proud of. Instead, it was a story that was something that made me remember my students really fondly, and remember the sort of fun and craziness of what it was like to be a high school teacher. And it felt really good for that reason, to be able to think back on something that I told a lot of people when it happened. And that I, still brings a smile to my face when I tell that story, but it's not a story that is in the reservoir of stories I would tell for the last 15 years as I've been working to prepare teachers.

Tom Snarsky: It was so great to hear how rewarding storytelling was for these four storytellers once they decided to brave the stage, but I wanted to know what advice they might offer for someone out there who might be thinking about telling a story.

Jamie Melton: So to have a whole five minutes that I have to fill is a little intimidating, but I actually came to really enjoy not planning it, if that makes sense. The first time I didn't have the option; I signed up an hour before it was happening. And that, that served me really well. I didn't

plan it. I've told three stories at StorySlam. I didn't plan any of them. And then I signed up for the writing retreat and I didn't have a story. I didn't have an idea. I didn't have anything. I just signed up and what came out of it was really beautiful and meaningful. And so I think that's, that's the "after" in like the "longer-term after," I've learned to just start the thing, just put your name on the list and the story will happen. Not easily. With the writing retreat, it was hard. I worked hard on that piece and it was very personal in a way that I will never publish it. And Rick, who was my group leader, got to listen to me cry over it multiple times, but, that's been, I guess, my biggest "after" is just, just sign up. The story will happen.

Jason Garver: I would recommend actually not thinking about it too much. Not, get an idea, think about what that story is in your head, but then just get up and tell it however it is. If you're awkward, and you have to stand there for a second, it will be really funny for everyone. So, like, don't worry about your proficiency at this thing that you've maybe never done. It's gonna be good. We all support every storyteller, not just "good ones" and I'm doing air quotes right now.

Jeff Rozelle: Everyone I've talked to, in my experience, was that you will be buoyed along by the audience. They will carry you to the finish of your story, regardless of how you go. And that is a, it's quite a lovely feeling of being in a community that is going to do that for you in some really generous ways. That, I think, feels like a reason to do it. It feels good to be part of something like that. The real practical advice for me was, I did think it through. It's okay to plan a little bit. I know you're not going to use notes, but, you know, for me, knowing what my end was, where I wanted to go in the story, yeah, that was useful to kind of think through what the beginning, middle, and end, even if I wasn't going to script it, know what my, the beats were of the story that I wanted to hit. That feels important. And keep your eye on the clock.

Tom Snarsky: After listening to all these reflections and words of wisdom, it's crystal-clear that there are as many ways to approach telling a story as there are storytellers! In a similar way, I think every audience member takes away something different from StorySlam—the feelings and memories are what keep them coming back year after year.

Dwaina Sookhoo: How creative and vulnerable people are, especially in a room full of people that I'm sure they don't know the majority of them or don't have that, maybe that necessary connection with the people in the room, but they're just willing to share really intimate things about themselves or really well-thought moments. Or I just love that the stories are almost unexpected from the person who's telling them. I'm learning something very different about you that I don't know if in any other space I would have learned about you.

Jason Garver: But also, I really like that it can be as personal and deep as you want. So, we've had really deep stories that were very hard to share. And there has been crying and processing after StorySlam. And then there are stories that were just hilarious, like about animals and weird crazy rain storms that happen while teaching. So, it can be in this range or you can compress them all into a single story.

Jamie Melton: But I think that's the thing about StorySlam for me that's made it special, and different than writing, is your audience is right there. And it's so in relationship. It's the people—I'm kind of making up a story on the spot and I'm weaving these people into it who are in the room with me. That's the thing I remember most about telling a story of StorySlam is making eye contact with people. And they're, they become present in the story in that way.

Jeff Rozelle: The vibe of it is just encouragement. That is, I think, one of the things that I loved about both attending and being there is the audience, for me, it felt expectant and happy and

wanting me to tell a good story. Were gonna laugh where they needed to, or to sort of encourage me and push me along. And that's a good feeling. That's a good way to tell it. So the nerves disappeared pretty quickly.

Jamie Melton: The only purpose of StorySlam is to be there in whatever self you want to be there to tell your story, and to listen to others' stories. And so that's incredibly freeing and allows different kinds of stories than you would hear in cohort time. And you know, like I named for you, you know, Bev and Brittany and Rick and all these people that I've worked on stories with or told stories with, in a way that I can't name people whose presentations I went to or I shared—there are people that I know I sat on benches outside of the lunchroom and shared my anatomy curriculum and we talked about it and those were awesome conversations. I'm glad they happened. But I couldn't tell you who it was anymore. And so there's something very unique about I think the purpose of StorySlam is just being there.

Jeff Rozelle: I think we see it in—I think StorySlam is a part of this and I think that it's part of other things that have been true in *Kaleidoscope*, or in our teacher stories, or in the whole act of storytelling—is that more exposure around vulnerability, more exposure around weakness, exposure around imperfection, has been a lot of the kinds of stories that get told at StorySlam. They're, they are funny, or they're sad, or they're vulnerable, or they're, and I think that has helped us with one of the things that, one of the challenges that our community has, given who's in it, and who comes, and that we are working really hard to be really good at our work. And so it's a, we're not apologizing for that, but it is also comes with some risks, and one of those risks is that people can't be honest about what they're doing. And so StorySlam, in this very light-hearted, fun way, just helps push against that, I think, for teachers, for us. And so, yeah, I think it has a, it ripples, you know, in that, in that way, into the kinds of stuff that we do.

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Tom Snarsky: And that's a wrap! As you heard from this delightful group of contributors, StorySlam continues to be a vital part, not just of Knowles Summer Conference, but of the Knowles community and mission as a whole. I'd like to close with thanks to Becky Van Tassell, Dwaina Sookhoo, Jamie Melton, Jeff Rozelle, and Jason Garver for sharing their StorySlam experiences with us. I'd also like to thank Kirstin Milks, Katie Waddle, Nick Chan, Roseanne Rostock, Michelle Vanhala, and anyone else who has supported Story Slam over the years. Many personal thanks as well to *Kaleidoscope* Editor-in-Chief Erin Oakley and Associate Editor Jim Han for their invaluable help and support envisioning this podcast episode and helping immensely with the work of editing it all together. Lastly, thank *you*, for listening and for (I hope!) continuing to participate in StorySlam! We hope we'll see you at the next one, and if you have a story you'd like to tell, please contact [Kaleidoscope](#)—we are always excited to support storytellers, and StorySlam wouldn't be what it is without you.

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Jamie Melton: I'll tell you a story. The two of the stories that I remember the most vividly were the stories that ran wildly over time...