

# **Telling Stories to Reduce Stigma: Comics and Harm Reduction**

## **Foreword**

A few years back, I (Randy Williams) was at a doctor's visit with my step-mother. The nurse taking her vitals commented on her medications, which included suboxone use after years of prescribed oxycodone, noting that my step-mother was a "good drug addict." I was stunned, but said nothing. At that time, I wasn't sure how to talk about the stigma placed on people who use drugs and ways to rethink and reduce harmful words and attitudes. Today, after hearing many stories of drug use and recovery and work with colleagues engaged in harm reduction research, I have the words *and* skills to address this disquieting concern. This series of ethnographic comics was produced by Utah State University's Tribal and Rural Opioid Initiative team. It is our hope that the volumes in the series will aid people who use drugs, their families and friends, neighbors, health professionals, educators, first responders, legislators, and people involved in the justice system in their journey regarding substance use disorder and stigma and harm reduction.

This project was developed in 2018 at a coffee shop in Logan, Utah by Randy Williams and Sandra Sulzer, and was executed across four funded awards, with many joint partnerships, allies, colleagues, mentors, mentees, artists, collaborators, and advocates. The voices in this unique series of ethnographic comics come from oral history interviews conducted for the "Informing the National Narrative: Stories of Utah's Opioid Crisis Project, 2019-21." The project aimed to give voice to the lived experiences and best practices around drug use, recovery, and stigma and harm reduction. The project team used people-first language and ethical ethnographic protocols. The comics were produced in tandem with the storyteller, based on their oral history, and an ethnographic artist. We are thrilled that a project we conceived and nurtured, with an outstanding team of community partners, Utah State University (USU) Extension and Library faculty and staff, and harm reduction scholars has come to beautiful fruition. This outstanding and dedicated team includes Melissa Arrien, Reshma Arrington, Kandice Atismé, Andrea Baxter, Jess Bigler, Alise Williams Condie, Paul Daybell, Hilary Disch, Savannah Eley, Kellianne Gammill, Destiny Garcia, Felicia Fabris, Susan Gross, Emily Hamilton, Jay Hymas, Luran Hymas, Tim Keady, Shay Larsen, Lana Lichfield, Ashley Lund, Erin Fanning Madden, Christian (Cris) Meier, Andrea Payant, Annabelle Potvin, Heidi Prestwich, Suzanne Prevedel, Darcy Pumphrey, Sandra Sulzer, April Robinson, Lisa Thompson, Maren Wright Voss, Claire Warnick, Shirley Wayman, Randy Williams, Ashley Yeager, and Katie Zaman. We thank them all!

The project received generous support from Sandra Sulzer's Department of Kinesiology and Health Sciences startup funds in the College of Education and Human Services, the NIFA award 2018-4610028782 (Project Directors Suzanne Prevedel and Sandra Sulzer) where April's story was first featured as part of a professional education harm reduction strategy, a USU Extension Seed Grant Award (Project Directors Kandice Atismé and Randy Williams), which replicated a National Endowment for Humanities grant application (Project Directors Randy Williams and Sandra Sulzer), and SAMHSA Rural Opioid Technical Assistance 2018 and 2020 Grants TI-1H79TI081890-01 and TI-C96N607 (Project Directors, Sandra Sulzer, Randy Williams, Suzanne Prevedel, and Christian Meier), which sought to provide the final funding needed for execution of the volumes you're holding/or reading online today.

To hear or read all the interviews from "Informing the National Narrative: Stories of Utah's Opioid Crisis Project, 2019-2021," visit USU Libraries' Digital Collection at

<https://digital.lib.usu.edu/digital/collection/p16944coll134>. To see an earlier oral history collection that partially inspired this endeavor, check out “Voices from Drug Court: Cache Valley Drug Court Oral History Project, 2016-17,” conceived by Andrew Dupree and directed by Randy Williams for USU Libraries, visit <https://digital.lib.usu.edu/digital/collection/p16944coll32>.

Randy Williams and Sandra Sulzer, June 2022

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