

CASE STUDY: UNITED COMMUNITY SERVICES OF JOHNSON COUNTY - A COMMUNITY-LED PODCAST PILOT



Overview

United Community Services of Johnson County (UCS) partnered with Resurrection, A United Methodist Church, and Overflow Companies to pilot *JoCo's One Small Step*, a locally produced podcast series focused on civil conversation across political differences. Drawing

inspiration from the StoryCorps One Small Step (OSS) framework, the project tested whether structured, listening-centered conversations could be planned, facilitated, recorded, and shared entirely at the community level.

UCS entered the project with a broader goal of strengthening local capacity for civil discourse. Rather than hosting a one-time dialogue event, the organization wanted to explore whether OSS-inspired conversations could support longer-term community collaboration and trust-building. UCS staff participated in a StoryCorps One Small Step DIY workshop, which introduced the core conversation framework and informed the design of the pilot.

Approach

UCS developed a locally run adaptation of the One Small Step model, emphasizing community recruitment, intentional pairing, and in-house production.

Participants were recruited through an online questionnaire designed to understand background, values, and political identity. Using this information, UCS matched conversation partners with support from Bess Ser, the OSS Wichita Field Manager, who offered guidance on pairing and alignment with OSS principles.

UCS managed nearly every aspect of the project, including outreach, scheduling, facilitation, recording, and editing. Conversations were recorded and produced as podcast episodes in collaboration with Resurrection and Overflow Companies, allowing the OSS conversation structure to be adapted to an episodic audio format. Throughout the process, UCS prioritized a conversation-first environment, emphasizing listening and reflection rather than debate or persuasion.

Key Insights & Lessons Learned

UCS found that a DIY OSS model is feasible when an organization has sufficient staff capacity, technical resources, and trusted partners. The combination of local leadership and external guidance helped maintain consistency with OSS principles while allowing flexibility in execution.

Intentional matching mattered. The questionnaire-based process created pairings where real differences were present, but participants felt prepared to engage respectfully. Several participants reported entering conversations expecting disagreement and leaving with a clearer understanding of the other person's perspective.

Producing the conversations as a local podcast increased relevance. Hearing neighbors and familiar voices made the conversations feel grounded in Johnson County rather than abstract or national in scope.

Partnerships also played a key role. Collaboration with a church and a production company expanded access to facilities, networks, and technical expertise that UCS alone might not have had.

Notable Outcomes and Key Takeaways

The pilot resulted in three recorded podcast episodes, including:

- A conversation between two women on opposite sides of the political spectrum who identified shared values despite differing views.

- A pairing between participants from different political parties who entered expecting conflict and instead experienced a constructive exchange.
- A conversation between a self-described “Eisenhower Republican” and a participant reassessing his political views following a major life event.

UCS successfully led recruitment, facilitation, and production, demonstrating a replicable model for OSS-inspired community dialogue. Guidance from StoryCorps supported quality and alignment, while local ownership kept the project grounded in community relationships.

Overall, the project showed that structured conversation tools can support meaningful dialogue at the local level, and that sharing those conversations publicly can help normalize respectful exchange across difference.

Project Links:

- [UCS One Small Step: Teaser](#)
- [UCS One Small Step Episode 1: Melissa and Lisa](#)
- [UCS One Small Step Episode 2: Missy and Tom](#)
- [UCS One Small Step Episode 3: Tom and Jon](#)
- [2022 Annual Report](#)
- Production Partner: [Overflow](#)