

The Senior Storybook Project

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Introduction

Narrative medicine is the application of narrative ideas to the practice of medicine to interpret the stories of illness, enabling deeper empathy and more trustworthy therapeutic relationships. While the idea that narrative competence strengthens reflection, professionalism, and clinicians' capacity to build authentic trust with patients by engaging directly with their lived experiences, there are very little formal opportunities for medical students to engage in this skillset.

The **Senior Storybook Project** at the University of Colorado School of Medicine connects medical students with older adults to document and honor their life stories. Through interviews and collaborative storytelling, students transform patient narratives into an annual storybook shared with participants, families, and the medical community. What began at the University of Colorado Geriatric Clinic has expanded to Denver Health, the Rocky Mountain Regional VA Hospital, local senior communities, and students' own longitudinal integrated clerkships. The project's recent themes, *Gratitude*, *Sages*, *Pride*, and *Community*, highlight the transformative potential of storytelling to foster connection, meaning, and holistic care between students and patients.

Methods

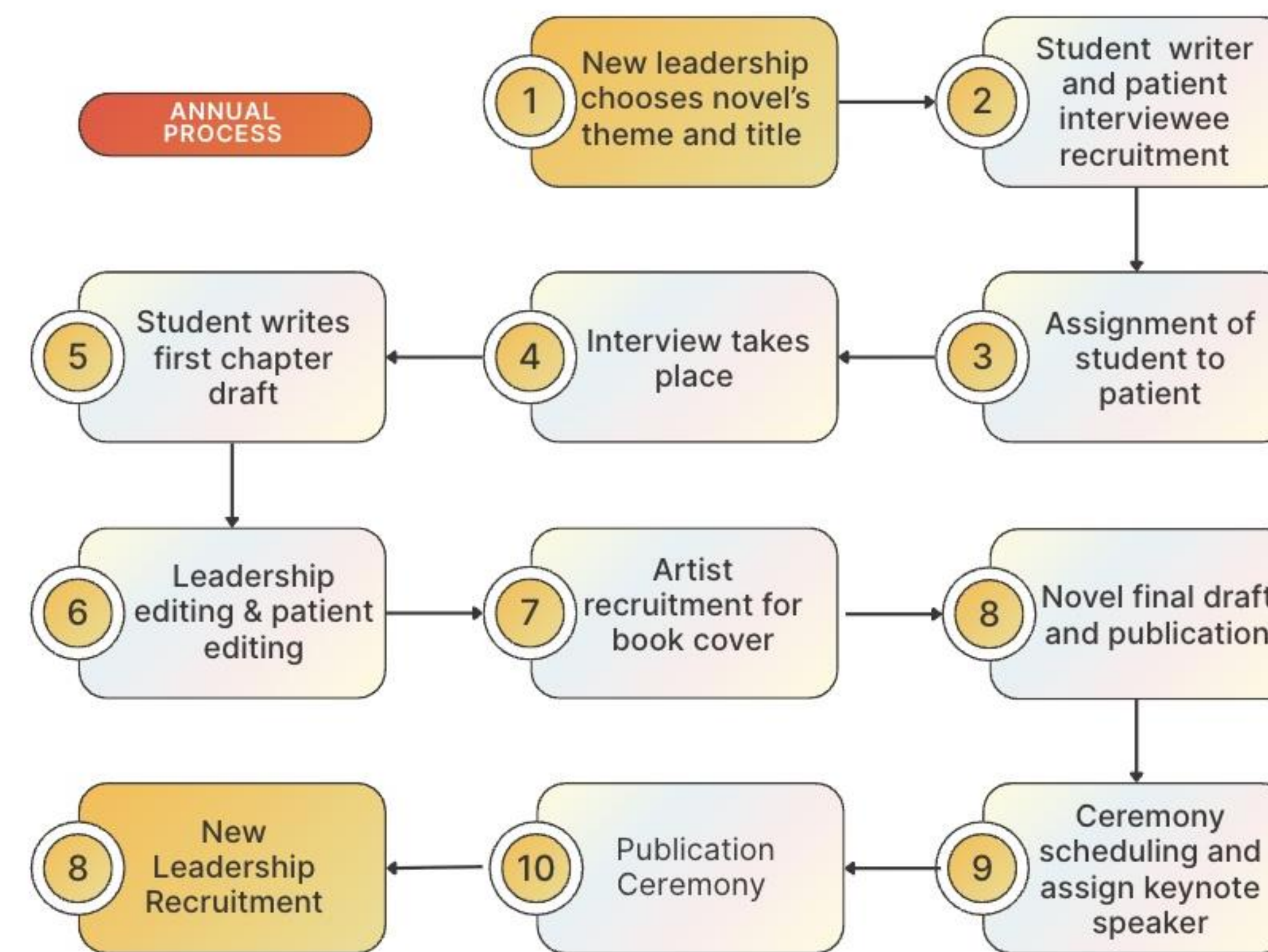


Figure 1. Annual workflow process for Senior Stories timeline

Leadership for the project includes 2 co-presidents, a treasurer, and a team of editors. President role includes overseeing the annual process (Figure 1), editing and printing the book, and organizing the ceremony. Faculty roles include patient recruitment, aid in funding, and trouble shooting. Treasurer role in finding grants for publication and funds for final ceremony.

Each annual cycle is guided by a unifying theme. The theme for 2025 was *"Community."* Storywriter recruitment occurs across all Anschutz students. Patient recruitment can be done through faculty mentors, LIC directors, or students. Students are then paired with participants and conduct approximately 1-hour, semi-structured interviews using theme-based prompts. They then create narrative chapters in flexible formats to reflect each participant's story.

Drafts undergo iterative editing by project leadership using a shared online platform to ensure clarity, accuracy, and respectful representation.

Participants review and approve final versions. Recruitment, interviews, and revisions are tracked through a centralized database. Organization of this process is done on OneDrive to make sure all steps are done timely (Figure 2). Final manuscripts (8–20 stories annually) are compiled, formatted, and printed. The project concludes with a community reading ceremony and book distribution. Total duration is approximately one year.

Interview date	Content upload	Completed	date first draft submitted	First edit	Second edit	PI/Family edits	Final edit submitted to folder
11/25 at UCH cafeteria	Yes	11/25	12/1/2024	Ellie edited 1/1	Tien edited 1/7	sent to family 1/8, she had no changes!	1/15/2025
interviewed 1/20/2025	Yes	1/20	2/28/2025	Ellie edited 3/2	Julia edited 3/2	done	3/1/2025
waiting second interview	Yes	3/27/2025	3/27/2025	Ellie edited 3/27	Julia edited 3/29	done	4/1/2025
12/16 and 1/12 planning 2nd interview	Yes	2/22/2025	3/18/2025	Ellie edited 3/2	Julia edited 3/2	family editing!	3/31/2025
1/25 at 10:00 AM	Yes	1/25	2/6/2025	Julia edited 2/8	Ellie edited 2/8	Read and sent to family 2/13, he had no changes!	2/13/2025
1/14/2025 at 1:30 pm phone call	Yes	1/14	1/14/2025	Ellie edited 1/16	Julia edited 2/2	sent to pt 2/9 - updated 2/11 from Frank	2/28/2025
1/25/2025	Yes	3/16	3/16/2025	Julia edited 3/18	Ellie edited 3/24	done	4/15/2025
first week of Feb	Yes	2/7	3/9/2025	Ekshika edited 3/11	Julia edited 3/18	family 4/21, updated and complete	4/23/2025
1/18/2025	Yes	1/16	2/7/2025	Ekshika edited 2/8	Tien edited 2/9	Sent to pt 3/2, received edit on 3/6, waiting on art?	3/6/2025
18-Apr	Yes	3/26	3/26/2025	Ellie edited 3/27	/	Sent to pt 4/2, received edits 4/21	4/26/2025

Figure 2. System for tracking process and timeline

Results and Discussion

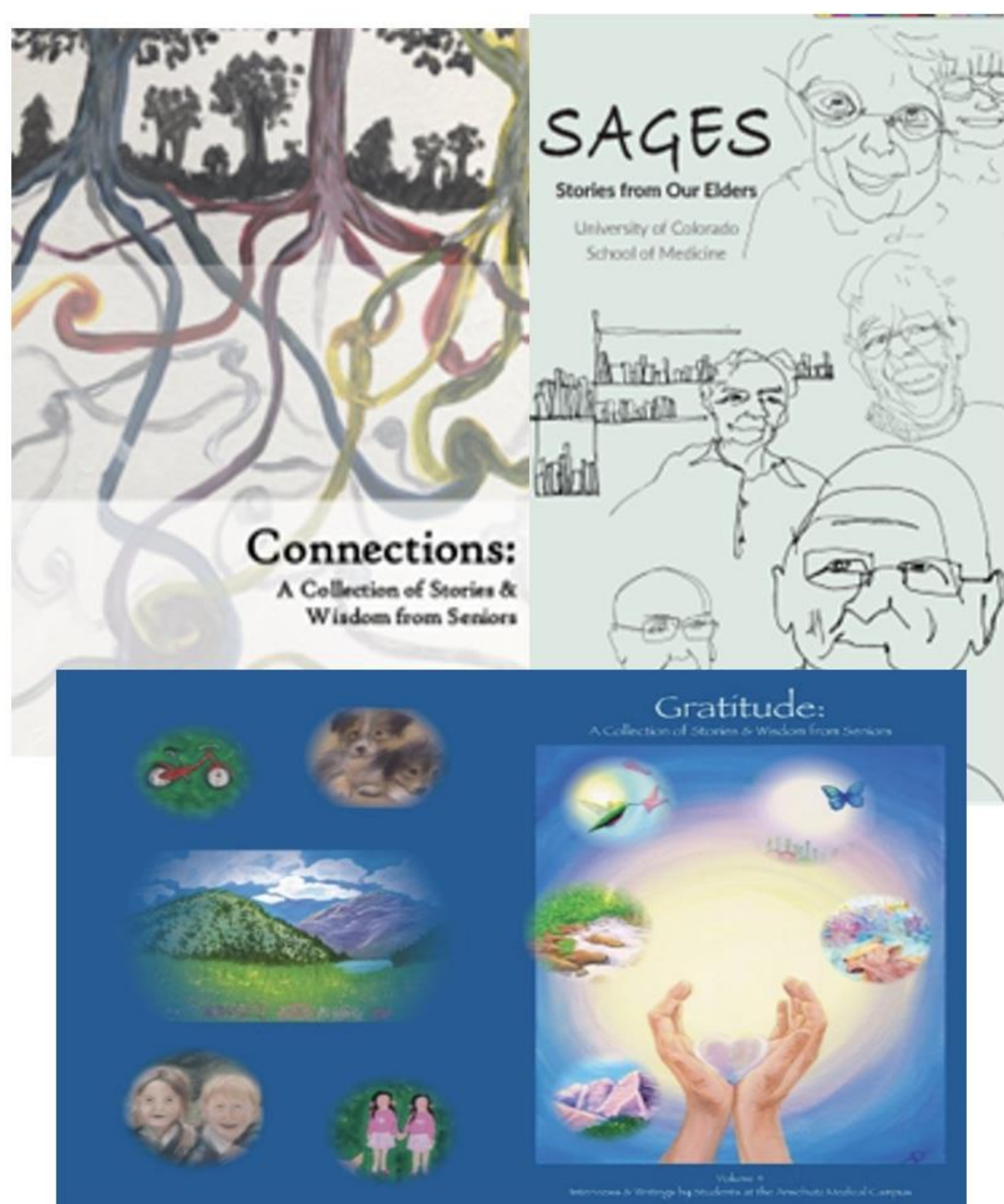


Figure 3. Preceding three iterations of the novel's theme and artwork



Figure 4. 2026 Senior Stories Publication cover and artwork

- ❖ The project's recent themes, *Gratitude*, *Sages*, and *Pride* (Figure 3), influenced 2025's theme: *Community*.
- ❖ *Surrounded by Stories: A Collection of Communities* was published in 2025 and consisted of 11 chapters: *Start With the End in Mind*, *A Dream to be Pursued*, *Navy Man*, *The Social Self*, *Accepting Love*, *Sharing Love*, *The Heart of a Marine*, *No Brag, Just Fact*, *The Ever Green*, *Create a World to Forget a World*, *A Storyteller's Tale*, and, *Where the Mountains Glow Orange*.
- ❖ The artwork for 2026's novel was done by student, Keiko Fox (Figure 4).
- ❖ The publication ceremony took place on November 4, 2025 where Dr. Hannah Schara was the keynote speaker and 5 chapters were read by students.
- ❖ The Ceremony was dedicated in loving memory to 5 story tellers, whose chapters were published in this year's novel.
- ❖ Physical book copies as well as an online flipbook was provided to family and participants (Figure 5).



Figure 5. QR code access to published online flipbook of "Surrounded by Stories: A Collection of Communities"

As medicine increasingly recognizes the importance of relationship-centered care, programs like Senior Stories offer a sustainable, experiential model for integrating narrative practices into training. While not a requirement for graduation, this project is an opportunity for students to add humanities and humanism into their practice in a way that impacts their sense of self and their future career paths. With more formalized assessment methods and continued school and student interest, this project has the potential not only to enhance student development but also to contribute to broader efforts to address loneliness, preserve patient voice, and anchor healthcare in human connection.

References

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