



Humans of City as Lab

Foreword



City as Lab's story project this year was built around personal narratives, with the aim of fostering empathy and connection.

Through a semester-long inquiry process, eighty-four middle and high school students identified and interviewed individuals in their communities who *they*

believe are engaged in 'unconventional' professions. They submitted a total of thirty-six stories for review to City as Lab.

Drawing inspiration from Brandon Stanton's powerful *Humans of New York*, these twelve stories invite us to step into the lives of their protagonists. They offer a chance to see the world through their eyes, break down barriers, and open our minds to new perspectives, reminding both authors and readers alike of the shared humanity that binds us all.

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Entrepreneur

Author: Kumar Rathod

Mentor: Prabhu Rathod

School: Zameer Foundation

I belong to a joint family and my husband drank alcohol frequently. This caused a lot of problems for us and our family split.

A neighbour suggested that I should learn to make roti (flatbread) and sell it. I decided to give it a try. I learnt to make roti. With their help, I began making and selling roti. Initially, I would make the roti and another person would sell them. They would give me 200 rupees for a day's work.

This extra income really helped our family. Gradually, with the money I was earning

from the roti business, I was able to save 15,000 rupees. With these savings, I was able to start my own small business.

Now, I am earning my own money and am able to provide for my children. My children are in grades 7, 5 and 3. I take care of all the household responsibilities, and I am also able to educate my children. I am saving money for their future.



Dhol Player

Author: Kumar Rathod

Mentor: Prabhu Rathod

School: Zameer Foundation

My family's connection to music is more than just a profession; it is a calling passed down through generations. Each member of the family learned the art of playing the Dhol, making it our primary occupation.

Our performances are not mere entertainment but a form of prayer. Before any celebration, we sing traditional invocations - calling upon divine blessings with our melodic chants. "Allama" and "Dindo" are not just words, but sacred utterances that purify the event.

The Dhol isn't just an instrument for us; it is our identity, our connection to our ancestors, our way of contributing to the community. When we play, we aren't just creating music - we are keeping a tradition alive and preserving a cultural heritage.



Dog Trainer

Authors: Ishika Doshi and Swara Rao

Mentor: Monisha Abhyankar

School: Dr. Kalmadi Shamarao High School, Ganeshnagar

It started with a sound—a low, frightened whimper that stopped me in my tracks.

We had hired a professional trainer, hoping he would help my German Shepherd, Rocky, with his behavior. But something about that sound felt wrong, so I went to check on them. What I saw shattered me; Rocky, usually brave and bright-eyed, was cowering, terrified, and too scared to even look at me. The trainer stood over him, his face cold as he held a lit cigarette menacingly close to Rocky's face. He was using the threat of pain to force my dog into submission.

In that moment, anger and horror surged through

me. I burst into the room, yelling, "Stop!" I threw myself between Rocky and the trainer, vowing right then that I would become a dog trainer myself, one who would show respect, kindness, and love.

With every dog I help flourish, I recall Rocky and the silent vow I made that day. When people ask, "Why do dogs respond to you so well?" I smile and say, "Dogs are intuitive; they can sense when they're safe. They can perceive trust, just like we do."



Jeweler

Author: Burhanuddin Kagazwala

Mentor: Tasneem Shakir

School: Rawdat al-Quran al-Kareem

A client named Mr. M had commissioned a ring for his wife on their wedding anniversary. He seemed like an army man for having specified every detail with precision for how he wanted it to be designed.

As time passed, he found fault in everything. “The setting of the stone is not right enough,” he said one day, his voice as sharp as a chisel. “Ruby is a shade too dark,” he complained another time.

One afternoon, as I stared at the ring, I remembered my father’s words. “A ruby’s brilliance lies in its facets, find the right light adjusting the angle, and it will sparkle.” Soon, I realized that handling my client was like handling a raw gemstone, rough, misunderstood, but full of potential. Instead of resisting his critique, I decided to adapt my approach. The next day, when he entered my office, I greeted him with a smile and said, “Your eye for detail is remarkable and

I truly want this piece to reflect your vision. Let’s work on it together.” His stern face softened. Together, we revised the design, each idea flowing like molten gold into the next.

As we collaborated, I noticed that Mr. M wasn’t difficult. He was passionate. His criticism was not aimed at my work but at achieving perfection. By listening to him as a craftsman, I could turn a conflict into a collaboration. When the ring was finally complete, it was a marvel which Mr. M held with reverence; his stern demeanor replaced with gratitude. “You have created more than a piece of jewelry,” he said. You have turned my vision into reality.



Fisherman

Authors: Alpana Prasad, Gautam Dodmani, Mounika Chappidi
and Riya Yadav

Mentor: Nirmayee Sanghui

Organization: Down to Earth

Our group of 15+ fishermen set out on karja (10 -15 days excursion to catch fish).

As we ventured into the deep waters to get Masa and Tuna (highly demanded), the sea got rough and the waves were choppy. Our boat rocked. Thump! Thump!! I could hear my heartbeat. As my hands and legs went numb with cold and fear. I had never experienced anything like this before.

“IN THE CABIN!” Panic struck like lightning. Everyone ran here and there gathering things like nets, torches, mobiles, etc. Inside the cabin we sat in silence praying. A giant wave hit our boat and the boat overturned.

I was in the water going
Down.....
Down.....

I moved my hands and legs and as soon as my neck was above the water I gasped for breath. The sound of the wind crashed against my ears. My body was heavy. I could not swim against the tide. Suddenly, images of my wife and children flashed in front of my eyes. I swam with all the power left in my body to save myself.

This incident made me think, “We put our lives in danger to satisfy people’s demand. But when we sit next to people in a bus or walk past them after returning from work, they hold their breath. People love the fragrance of the fish they eat but cannot stand the stink of us fishermen.”



Traffic Policewoman

Authors: Husaina Jhabuawala and Batul Patrawala

Mentors: Mrs. Khadija Jamali, Mrs. Sakina Jawadwala and
Mrs. Sakina Tinwala

School: Taiyebiyah High School

There are still people who believe that girls are only meant for household work or the kitchen, but I strongly disagree. I want to challenge these outdated beliefs and show that girls can take on tough responsibilities and excel in fields traditionally dominated by men.

Watching my seniors work with such dedication and confidence motivated me even further. They proved that women can excel in any field, no matter how challenging it may seem.

My dream is not just to wear the uniform but to serve my country with pride, discipline, and integrity while setting an example for others like me.



Crematorium Worker

Authors: Anushka Kher, Avantika Deshpande, Nivedita Deshpande

Mentor: Monisha Abhyankar

School: Dr Kalmadi Shamarao High School, Ganeshnagar

One day, the body of a little girl, around 10, was brought in. I understood their loss and pain; it felt like every other family that came to the smashanbhumi. रोज कितित्तारी मेलेले बघतोय त्यामुळे आता माझ्यावर मरणाचा परिणाम होते नाह.

I began the usual preparations; a panditji had come by to lead the prayers.

After a while, the sickly smell of burning flesh and agarbattis spread out as the father performed the last rites of his daughter. I looked at him and was surprised by what I saw. त्यांच्या मनातली दडपण नाहीशी झाली, असे मला जाणवले. I mean, his face was full of sadness, of course, but it also had peace.

The cremation had helped him to let go of his daughter... जेणेकरून ती तिच्या पुढच्या आयुष्याचा प्रवास सुरू करू शकेल. And that was when I found that my job was much larger than burning bodies. If I could help in the journey of a soul out of this life, a journey of mourning families into recovering ones, then I was content in my work, even proud of it.



Jockey

Authors: Anushka Kher, Avantika Deshpande, Nivedita Deshpande

Mentor: Monisha Abhyankar

School: Dr Kalmadi Shamarao High School, Ganeshnagar

Often I think of my first days here, when I was still struggling to fit within a handicap, when I got here before the sun rose, and the many days it took for Scotch, my horse, to trust me.

I still remember how uneasy he was, to let me even touch him. My first ever race here (Pune Race Course), with Scotch, was embarrassing. But failures are a part and parcel of life. That is my motto. And so, I practiced hard every day.

The first three races, I couldn't place. But for the fourth race, I felt like I was confident enough, capable enough, to win. When I lined up for the race, I felt different. I had worked

so hard with Scotch, and we were ready. The gates opened, and we took off. I could feel the power in every leap as we raced ahead. As we approached the finish line, I knew we had a chance. We pushed past the other horses, and we crossed the finish line first. The crowd cheered, but all I could think about was Scotch and how far we had come together.

And that was it, my first win, and with it, the Pune Derby Cup.



Cobbler

Authors: Anant Dadhich, Panau Pujara, Ved Singh, Viivaan Tharval

Mentors: Ms. Yamini Seth, Dr Sapna Mahajan, Ms. Radhika Bhatia,
Ms. Alisha Siddiqui

School: Jbcn International School Borivali

My father, also a cobbler, worked tirelessly to support our family, and it was from him that I learned the craft. He didn't just teach me how to mend leather and hammer nails; he taught me the value of precision, care, and the quiet dignity of honest work.

At first, I followed in his footsteps out of necessity, but over time, I realized my work was much more than a means to survive.

Shoes, I've learned, carry more than feet; they carry stories. A pair I repair might take someone to a job interview that could change their life or walk a child to school where dreams begin. Every sole I mend feels like stitching together hope and possibility, and that keeps me going.

Still, I carry a quiet fear every day: that my craft may one day become obsolete. As machines take over more of the world, I wonder if people will forget the value of skilled hands and the stories behind each repair. The world often overlooks cobblers, dismissing us as part of a forgotten craft.

But I've seen the pride in someone's eyes when their favorite shoes are brought back to life or the gratitude of a worker holding sturdy, repaired boots.



Chaiwala

Authors: Husaina Arsiwala and Sakina Lokat

Mentors: Mrs. Khadija Jamali, Mrs. Batul Gittham and Mrs. Jamila Ghasletwala

School: Taiyebiyah High School

I worked as an accountant in the metal market. The job was okay, but I didn't love it. Every day felt boring. I wanted to do something different, something I could call my own.

One day, I saw an empty spot near the station. It was small, but I imagined a tea stall there. I always wanted to do business, and this seemed like the perfect idea. I spoke to my brother about it. He liked the idea too, and we decided to start together.

I make my tea special by adding masala, cardamom, and ginger. People love it!

The busiest time is in the morning, between 9:00 and 11:00. Office workers come for a quick cup of tea before starting their day. The best part of my work is when customers say, "Your tea is amazing." It makes me feel proud and happy. I think tea is not just a drink; it's a way to make people smile.



Bus conductor

Author: Gautam Dodmani

Mentor: Nirmayee Sanghui

Organization: Down to Earth

“Please give change,” I repeat for the nth time.

It is 6:30pm. I maneuver in the overcrowded bus requesting for change. Everyone is in a rush to catch the train and reach home. You can see, it has been a long day and the journey back is tiring.

All kinds of emotions fill the bus.

A young man hands me a 100 rupee note. “Please give me change,” I request. “I don’t have change of 100 rupees.”

“Why should I keep change? It’s your job to provide change,” the man replies angrily.

I notice the person. His eyebrows get closer as he frowns and speaks. He clenches his things and speaks in a high pitch. I know this is going to be a difficult conversation. I keep my cool and try to explain that I do

not have change. “I have been giving change to everyone. Now, I don’t have change.”

The man is furious. He is yelling. Unfortunately, I lose my cool too. “If you don’t have change, get off the bus!” I retort, frustrated. *How is it possible for a bus conductor to keep change for every single passenger?* I reason in my mind. “How dare you speak to me like that. Tere baap ki bus hai kya.”

“Bus Thambava. The bus will not move, till you get down.”

“I will not get down. Do what you want.”

A lady all the way from the back comes to the front with change. She gives me the change. I give the man the ticket.

The bus moves on.



‘Ghanta’ Paanwala

Authors: Aaryan Laddha, Aarush Mehta, Ridhaan Kataria,
Shivan Magni, Darsh Shah

Mentor: Ms. Yamini Seth, Dr Sapna Mahajan, Ms. Radhika Bhatia,
Ms. Alisha Siddiqui

School: JBCN International School, Borivali

I often spent my childhood time with my grandfather in his small paan shop in Borivali, Mumbai.

As a young lad, my grandfather had gone to the temple of Lord Shiva where he sought blessings and ran into a Brahmin who asked him to sound a bell before every paan for the deity. This act, as told by the Brahmin, would bring prosperity and divine blessings to our family business. This story inspired my grandfather to start the tradition of ringing a bell before handing over each paan. Years went by, and with them, the tradition continued on, and we became known as Ghanta Paanwala.

I thought that the story of my grandfather can make this tradition rise to a point that it can be loved even more by many.

Bells from around the globe are unique for me and each bell carries the essence of its culture and tells a special story. Once there was a handmade bell, from France that I rang, it served as an inspiration to the customer to experience the essence of traveling. The vibrant bells have turned our shop into a rich tapestry of sounds and stories around the world.

The eccentric collection has not only helped us make Guinness World Records, but most importantly it has kept my grandfather's legacy alive.

Student Reflections on the CaL Story Project:

“This journey deepened my curiosity about people’s lives and taught me the value of empathy. It showed me how diverse experiences can inspire and connect us, and it encouraged me to appreciate the dedication and passion that drive others.”

“Writing their stories was both an honour and a responsibility, wanting to do justice to their life struggles and portraying their personalities precisely. We had to ensure that we write the stories with utmost sensitivity and authenticity.”

“We should be able to frame follow up questions as we conduct the interview. I didn’t do it the first time. So I had to go back and redo the interview.”

“Taking the interviews repeatedly (to get the right story) was very frustrating and irritating. But I didn’t give up and continued to take interviews till I got the story.”

“No one in the world would think someone working from the streets would hold a Guinness book world record.”

“I struggled with speaking some hard Hindi words and couldn’t speak properly during the Interview.”

“She spoke about the challenges of working long hours in all kinds of weather and balancing her job with her family responsibilities. This project made us appreciate the hard work and sacrifices of traffic police officers, especially women in such demanding roles.”

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