Greetings to Everyone from Carole Bos
Founder and Chief Creative Officer at AwesomeStories

In January of 1999, while flying back from Washington where I'd been Special Attorney to the United States Attorney General, I had an idea at 35,000 feet.

Earlier that week, while flying along the Potomac, my eyes were fixed on the Supreme Court building. Now, reflecting on my time in the District, I thought how interesting it would be to tell the stories of the people whose cases changed the law.

Who was Ernesto Miranda (giving rise to "Miranda Rights")? Who was Clarence Earl Gideon (the chap who insisted defendants in criminal cases have a right to counsel)?

And ... going a step further ... who were the Justices whose constitutional decisions changed things in America? Not just the names of the Justices ... who were they, as human beings?

Despite my busy schedule, those thoughts would not leave me. Over the next few months, I began to write stories. I started with Joan of Arc.

Why, I wondered, was she really burned at the stake? I know what books say about it, but what if I could find her trial transcript, after so many centuries, to answer that question for myself?

It was during that process—of finding out what had really happened to this French heroine—that I had another idea.

I wanted to find her trial record online, but who would guide my efforts? At the time I was working-up Joan of Arc, the folks at Google had eight employees and had just left their garage workspace for an office in Palo Alto.

The concept of an Internet "Search Engine"—at that time—was not what it is now!

Slogging through hundreds of potential matches, before finding what I actually needed for each aspect of my Joan-of-Arc story, I realized something very significant.

It was unrealistic for me to think I could quickly find the web's most-reliable information by merely depending on a search engine, whatever its name. Even the best search engine in the world doesn't operate with a thinking brain. It runs on algorithms, created by really smart people, but those really smart people aren't personally sitting next to me, helping me—in real time—to answer my questions or aid me in my searches.

Search engines aren't the librarians I was used to calling, regularly, whenever I needed to know something important about a particular topic. Search engines still aren't the librarians whom we now know as media specialists. They are the people who always point us in the right direction.

Instead of being pointed in the right direction, I had to personally sort-through hundreds of search-engine returns to determine which potential match was a primary source that reliably provided what I needed for each Joan-of-Arc issue. And that process took a lot of time!

It was at that moment when AwesomeStories took the direction it did.

We—like the librarians on whom I rely—would help the public to find reliable, primary-source information.

We—human beings—would weed-through all the irrelevant matches which might fit within a search-engine's algorithm but don't fit within the parameters of primary-source information.

We—in the process—would tell interesting stories which feature primary sources.

When I try a case, for example, that case relies on primary-source evidence. Facts are evidence. Pictures are evidence. Documents are evidence. Eyewitness testimony is evidence. Videos of events are evidence.

I also rely on secondary evidence. How does an expert interpret skid marks on a highway? What opinions can one render about the cause-and-origin of a fire? Why did the doctor think certain symptoms led to a particular diagnosis?

I thought it would be good to use that systematic, evidence-based approach to build a website of stories. Because ... when you think about it ... pretty much any story in life could be told in a trial setting.

Just like in a trial, we (at AwesomeStories) heavily rely on primary sources (and supportive secondary sources)

to create stories about a host of topics. Just like in a trial, we include differing viewpoints. The stories are the glue holding the sources together.

When I looked for something like this online, I realized there was no such thing. AwesomeStories would have to lead the way.

How do we pick our topics? We try to think about what's interesting to a wide range of people across a wide range of subjects. If it's also interesting to us, and we think the topic will have more than a flash-in-the-pan existence, it's fair-game to consider. We also focus-on subjects which are part of the school curriculum.

Our first step is to determine whether we can find the necessary primary sources to support the story. If we cannot, we'll hold the topic in abeyance for awhile.

The key, to make the topics interesting, is to treat non-fiction with a story-telling approach. That's what happens in a trial. Jurors are like students—they're easily bored. The jury needs to hear a story, told in its various sub-parts, about something which happened in real life.

What about fictional topics? Is it possible to find primary sources about fictional topics?

Actually ... it's surprising how many "fictional" stories have real-life connections.

Take "Charlotte's Web," for example. Charlotte might be a fictional spider who is able to talk with her friend Wilbur, the fictional pig, but Charlotte is based on a real spider. We even know what type of spider she is because E.B. White gave her a reality-based name. Check it out at our story behind the book and film.

Take "The Hunger Games," for another example. Do you know the basis of Katniss Everdeen's name? There's a connection to real life. Also ... Katniss is from District 12. What is the real-life connection between that District and coal-mining?

By emulating the AwesomeStories' approach to research and writing, students and teachers can create their own primary-source stories based on both fictional and non-fictional topics. We now have the tools and platform, on-site, for publishing and sharing teacher-and-student-produced stories.

Among other things, our goal at AwesomeStories is to help students learn how to conduct effective online research, use primary (and secondary) sources and write narrative nonfiction. In today's world, literacy skills lead to successful jobs. We also envision online classes where students (and educators) learn how to do these things.

The Internet presents us with a new kind of learning world, and students must be able to work within it. They know how to play online games, but do they know how to conduct online research? Do they know how to distinguish inaccuracy-plagued web sites from reliable ones?

Our team at AwesomeStories is looking forward to working with all of you as we each do our part to educate students for productive, 21st-century lives and jobs.

Oh ... about that answer to Joan of Arc's demise? She was burned at the stake, as a relapsed heretic, for wearing men's clothes! I actually found the transcript online, translated into English.

Credits:

Recording by Carole Bos, Founder and Chief Creative Officer at AwesomeStories.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Primary-Sources-at-AwesomeStories-0

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Primary-Sources-at-AwesomeStories-0