

# *Not Too Far Distant*

**Championing Community Connections Through the Shared Stories of  
Veterans, Liberators, and Survivors**

Original play by Becky Boesen, Commissioned by History Nebraska  
in collaboration with BLIXT, History Nebraska Foundation, Humanities Nebraska,  
Lied Center for Performing Arts, Civic Nebraska, Institute for Holocaust Education,  
Nebraska Stories of Humanity, Greater Nebraska Communities  
and Nebraskan Veterans

*Inspired the Life and Letters of Staff Sergeant Clarence Williams*



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EMPOWERING COMMUNITY THROUGH ART



## PROJECT INTRODUCTION

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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

We know that generations of Nebraskans have made sacrifices to help protect democracy and freedom. One such resident was Staff Sergeant Clarence Williams, a member of the 42nd Infantry who during WWII, helped liberate Dachau. Sgt. Williams wrote a letter almost daily to his wife Gretchen, and through the extraordinary work of Dr. Beth Dotan in collaboration with History Nebraska and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and other stakeholders, those letters (and other assets) have been preserved and are available through an online educational portal: *Nebraska Stories of Humanity: Holocaust Survivors & WWII Veterans, Network Portal & Educational Website*

*The Nebraska Stories of Humanity* aims to centralize access to the history of Nebraska Holocaust survivors and WWII liberators of Nazi camps in a collection of searchable stories in aggregate. The site includes testimony, geographical and primary historical resources, documentation, and photos collected or harvested from local and disparate sources. Various tools enhance these stories through technologies such as digital story maps, access to testimonies, and network analysis of these individuals who were connected to and involved in their Nebraska communities. The project engages individual contributors, local stakeholder organizations, and national and international repositories.

In 2021, Dr. Dotan and representatives from History Nebraska began a conversation with BLIXT about a desire to bring Sgt. Williams' letters to life. At that time, BLIXT Co-Founder and playwright Becky Boesen was commissioned to write a new play connecting the letters from the past to the present while emphasizing the value of creating safe spaces in which veterans, or any participant, feels safe to share their own

stories. As we have found in the early steps of our project, the story and environment created by performances of *Not Too Far Distant* is accomplishing that goal for people from all experiences and backgrounds.

*"I walked in with the perspective of a Jewish community member and left feeling entirely attached to Sgt. Williams. I related to him, though we are worlds apart. I left feeling deeply connected to everyone in the room - friends and strangers alike. It touched my soul. That is the power of Not Too Far Distant."*

- Audience Member, JCC Omaha



## **About the Play:**

*“It’s almost unbelievable that anyone could be hardened to the point of doing the brutal things they did...”* A young man from the midwest is sent to war, carrying with him the hopes of the free world. What Staff Sergeant Clarence Williams encounters there challenges and changes humanity forever. History touches the present when a new generation takes a journey through time to experience World War II alongside Clarence himself. Centered around his personal letters home, we learn that sometimes what seems so far away is much closer than we think. Filled with hope and heart, *Not Too Far Distant* honors the experience of the American soldier and reminds us that we all have the power - and the responsibility - to help create a brighter future.

In the fall of 2022, *Not Too Far Distant* premiered to an audience of 120 people at the Jewish Community Center in Omaha, Nebraska, followed by subsequent performances at History Nebraska, a student matinee at Mickle Middle School, and special Veteran’s Day performances for students and the public at The Golden Husk in Ord, Nebraska. A majority of the 140 students at the matinee had never been to a live production. Each performance was followed by a community conversation.

Along with the production, History Nebraska, BLIXT, the Institute for Holocaust Education, and Dr. Dotan’s team collaborated to create a compelling curriculum for teachers in advance of student matinees.

## **COMPONENTS**

### **Performance**

*Not Too Far Distant* is a 75 minute play (no intermission) that takes a contemporary audience on a journey to the past and back again. Centered around correspondence from Sgt. Clarence Williams, *Not Too Far Distant* creates a deeply personal experience for participants. All production components were designed to tour, and *Not Too Far Distant* can be presented in nearly any venue - from traditional prosceniums to high school gyms, to libraries. BLIXT provides all technical elements, including set, sound, lighting equipment and design.

*Not Too Far Distant* is built to engage audiences with the following themes:

- Holocaust history
- Sense of place

- Welcoming and belonging
- Intergenerational engagement
- Loneliness
- Grief
- Cultural misunderstanding, rectified
- Personal and societal freedoms
- War experiences/PTSD
- Deep friendships
- Democracy
- Sacrifice

### Education and Engagement

BLIXT, History Nebraska, Nebraska Stories of Humanity, Humanities Nebraska, and Civic Nebraska have teamed up to offer one of the following experience to participating communities:

#### **Option One - Nebraska Warrior Writers Program**

Created by Humanities Nebraska in 2014, this program is facilitated by professional writing instructors over the course of 6 to 8 weeks, and focuses on helping veterans develop strategies and skills to find their own voices and accomplish their own experiences-based writings. The range of works include fiction, poetry, and memoir. Writers develop a strong bond as they encourage each other. The workshop culminates in a voluntary public reading

Please visit this link for examples of participating veterans' work:

<https://humanitiesnebraska.org/programs/nebraska-warrior-writers/works/>

#### **Option Two - Intergenerational Asset Mapping**

Led by BLIXT teaching artists, local community veterans will work alongside middle and high schools students in a guided storytelling and connection workshop, designed to build greater understanding and appreciation of both generations' unique experiences.

#### **Option Three - A Soldier's Journey**

Students are introduced to the online Nebraska Stories of Humanity Portal, led by a History Nebraska Teaching Artist, in collaboration with the Institute for Holocaust Education. This extraordinary site includes Sgt. Clarence Williams' journey from the US to Europe, over 400 historical assets, and interactive materials for hands-on learning for people of all ages.

## Option Four - A Community Conversation with Civic Nebraska

Civic Nebraska will offer participation-focused, interactive activities that center around civic health and democracy.

*"It's almost unbelievable that anyone can be hardened to the point of doing the brutal things that those nazis did."*  
*- Sergeant Clarence Williams*

## COMMUNITY EXPENSE BUDGET

**Performance Fee                      \$2,000**

Other expenses covered by the community:

- Performance space\*
- A working sound system in the performance space
- 5 over-the-ear wireless microphones that connect to the sound system (in good condition)
- A knowledgeable tech/staff person from the performance space to be present at the load in, tech rehearsal, and performances
- Print costs for marketing materials, including posters and programs (electronic programs are also acceptable).
- Other marketing costs, as determined by the community
- A hot meal for the BLIXT team on performance day (if the shows take place on two separate days, two meals will be required)
- If two nights of hotel rooms are needed due to travel and performance scheduling, the community would need to cover the second night (5-6 double rooms).

*\*Please note that the two performances must take place in the same performance space. The BLIXT team needs access to the space one day prior to the first performance.*

## WHAT BLIXT PROVIDES

- Two performances (a student matinee and a public performance) with 5 actors on the same day or on two consecutive days.
- Lights (we will bring our own programmed lights for the show)
- Marketing materials in digital format (including social media assets, poster design and program book information)

- Artist and set travel
- One night of hotel for the BLIXT team
- One community engagement activity per community at no added cost
- Brief post-show conversations, if requested, following each show

**Becky Boesen - BLIXT Executive Director**

**Playwright and Director, *Not Too Far Distant***

Becky Boesen is a Nebraska-based theatre artist, arts and cultural consultant, asset mapper, and advocate for creative enterprise. She helps organizations throughout Nebraska and the United States discover the powerful link between arts and entrepreneurship. Becky also serves as an adjunct professor at Nebraska Wesleyan University, specializing in playwriting and community engagement. As a working playwright, Becky has penned several commissioned works including *Puddin' and the Grumble* and *What the Wind Taught Me*, both of which debuted at the Lied Center for Performing Arts and continue to see statewide and national productions. Becky was featured as a "top 20 under 40" by the Lincoln Journal Star for her business leadership in the arts and is the recipient of 3 Mayor's Arts Awards. She has been honored nationally as a Chime Changemaker, is an NEA award recipient, and is a member of ASCAP and the Dramatists Guild of America.

**Petra Wahlqvist - BLIXT Managing Director**

**Tour Director, *Not Too Far Distant***

Petra Wahlqvist is the Managing Director for BLIXT Locally Grown, and one of the Co-founders of the organization. Originally from Sweden, Petra lived in Paris and London before moving to Lincoln in 2008, and finding her creative home in the state of Nebraska, alongside her best friend and BLIXT Co-founder Becky Boesen. Petra has over 20 years of experience as a project creator, educator, and producer. She previously served as the Education Director at the Lied Center for Performing Arts, and currently also works for Nebraskans for the Arts, the state's arts advocacy organization. Petra has a passion for new works, especially works for young audiences, and is excited to lead classes for children and young adults in the BLIXT Storefront Theater.

**Dr. Beth Dotan Ph.D**

Beth S. Dotan has a Ph.D. in Teaching, Learning, & Teacher Education from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her research considers how critical inquiry and methodologies can be effective in the continued relevance of Holocaust studies and memory by using these tools to guide Holocaust education in the Digital Humanities. Beth earned her MA in Jewish Education, Curriculum and Instruction from the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, Hebrew Union College, Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Los Angeles and received an Honorary Doctor of Education from HUC-JIR in 2014. Her BA is from the University of Wisconsin, Madison in History and

Hebrew with a Certificate in Women's Studies. She holds a certificate in Museum Studies from Haifa University.

Beth was formerly the Director of the International Department at the Ghetto Fighters' House Holocaust and Jewish Resistance Heritage Museum in the Western Galilee, Israel, and was the Founding Executive Director of the Institute for Holocaust Education (IHE) in Omaha, Nebraska, serving for 13 years.

## **PARTNER COLLABORATORS**

### **BLIXT**

Founded in 2015, BLIXT is an innovative arts organization that strengthens community, sparks curiosity, and celebrates creativity through the development of new works, unique collaborations, and project-based education. In 2022 BLIXT transformed a 100 year-old building on Lincoln's north side into the community's first true storefront theater, a place where all creatives are welcome and wanted.

[www.blixt.info](http://www.blixt.info)

### **History Nebraska**

History Nebraska was founded in 1878 as the Nebraska State Historical Society by citizens who recognized Nebraska was going through great changes and they sought to record the stories of both indigenous and immigrant peoples. History Nebraska collects, preserves, and opens to all the histories we share.

<https://history.nebraska.gov>

### **Nebraska Stories of Humanity**

*The Nebraska Stories of Humanity: Holocaust Survivors & WWII Veterans, Network Portal & Educational Website* aims to centralize access to the history of Nebraska Holocaust survivors and WWII liberators of Nazi camps in a collection of searchable stories in aggregate. The site includes testimony, geographical and primary historical resources, documentation, and photos collected or harvested from local and disparate sources. Various tools enhance these stories through technologies such as digital story maps, access to testimonies, and network analysis of these individuals who were connected to and involved in their Nebraska communities. The project engages individual contributors, local stakeholder organizations, and national and international repositories.

<https://nestoriesofhumanity.unl.edu>

### **Humanities Nebraska**

Humanities Nebraska was established as a state-based affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1973. The mission of Humanities Nebraska is to help people explore what connects us and makes us human.

<https://humanitiesnebraska.org>

### **Institute for Holocaust Education**

The Institute for Holocaust Education strives to provide quality Holocaust education programming across Nebraska and beyond. We offer resources and training for educators, as well as events for students and the general public.

<https://www.ihene.org>

### **Lied Center for Performing Arts**

The mission of the Lied Center is to educate, inspire and entertain the people of Nebraska through the performing arts.

<https://www.liedcenter.org>

### **Civic Nebraska**

America is an audacious idea: equal parts competition and consensus, conflict and compromise, individual virtue and common good. CIVIC NEBRASKA emboldens Nebraskans to take powerful action to strengthen our democracy – because America is not for the meek. It's for those who dare mighty things. <https://www.civicnebraska.org>

## **CONTACTS**

For more information about this project, please contact:

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402-817-8176 or [petra@blix.info](mailto:petra@blix.info)