William Jacobs had a private conversation with his grandson which was overheard by millions of people. Their conversation was recorded and it ran on this program a couple of years ago as part of the StoryCorps project, which has been capturing the stories of everyday Americans across the country. We're going to talk about that project now. Mr. Jacobs is in our New York studio.

Welcome to the program again.

Mr. WILLIAM JACOBS (StoryCorps Contributor): Thank you very much.

INSKEEP: And I know that you're sitting next to another person that'll be familiar to some of our listeners. Mary Caplan told a story about nursing her brother through AIDS. And that story also came to us through StoryCorps.

Welcome to the program again.

Ms. MARY CAPLAN (StoryCorps Contributor): Thank you.

INSKEEP: These two are featured in a new StoryCorps book called "Listening Is an Act of Love." And we're going to have a conversation about this with them and with Dave Isay, who founded StoryCorps, who's also in the studios in New York.

David, welcome.

Mr. DAVE ISAY (Founder, StoryCorps; Author, "Listening Is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project"): Hi, Steve.

INSKEEP: Do you know how many thousands of conversations have been recorded now?
Mr. ISAY: We do. We've recorded about 15,000 conversations so far, with about 29,000 participants. And we're growing kind of geometrically every year.

INSKEEP: Okay. Why listen to 15,000 Americans?

Mr. ISAY: Well, what StoryCorps is really about is the experience in the booth. And as you know, the way StoryCorps works is two people who care about each other come to the booths and are met by a facilitator, who works for us, and walks into this booth and closes the door. And for us, StoryCorps is all about that experience. It's about the 40 minutes in the booth. It's about families taking the time to kind of turn off the computer screens and turn off their BlackBerrys, and look each other in the eyes and tell them that they love them by listening.

INSKEEP: Well now, William Jacobs, how did you end up in that StoryCorps booth?

Mr. JACOBS: My daughter apparently heard about it. My daughter, being Seth's mother and she said how would you like to be interviewed by Seth, dad? And we met Seth there and sat down across from each other at the table, and recorded our little interview.

INSKEEP: Your grandson Seth was how old then?

Mr. JACOBS: He was then about 26.

INSKEEP: And you are how old?

Mr. JACOBS: I am 85 this year, yes.

INSKEEP: And you go into this booth in a busy railroad terminal in New York City. You're telling stories about your youth from times before Seth would — have even been born. And we've got a little bit of that interview. You say that your future mother-in-law has just informed you that your fiancée cannot have children.

(Soundbite of archived StoryCorps recording)
Mr. JACOBS: And she said, I have to tell you some things. She said I heard Claire on the telephone last night saying how happy she was, and she's talking about we're going to have babies and so on and so forth. And I have to tell you something, Claire cannot have children.

INSKEEP: How did things work out? You ended up with grandchildren?

Mr. JACOBS: Oh, they worked out great. One of the questions that Mrs. Gropper asked me that very same day was, would I willing to adopt children? And I was just a kid, you might say, I was only 21 at the time, and I said yes. And we had the opportunity to do so after we were married - 1947, and the second about three years later in 1950.

INSKEEP: Well, let's talk now with Mary Caplan, who's been listening in. How did you end up in a StoryCorps booth?

Ms. CAPLAN: A very good friend of mine told me one day she have a surprise for me. She had a gift for me, but she wouldn't tell me what it was. I knew nothing of StoryCorps. She told me that I had to go to Grand Central to get my gift. And I was very busy working and I was a little put out that she couldn't bring my gift to me, but off we went on the subway to Grand Central. And as we were approaching the booth, she started telling me a little bit about what she knew of StoryCorps. But I thought it was going to be kind of a whimsical chat.

And while I'm very outgoing, and I love laughter and fun, I'm a very private person. But something happened in that booth, and I found myself telling her things that I had not told anyone, and that I had not planned to speak of. And I remembered some things that were very sad. But I also remembered something that I had totally forgotten that in the midst of a very, very sad time in my life, a stranger gave me an act of love and kindness. And the renewal of that memory had a profound effect. And I left that booth, perhaps not understanding it intellectually and — from my mind, but I understood it from my heart.

INSKEEP: Well, because you are a private person, I hope you will forgive us for replaying again a little bit of what you had to say here about your brother's death.

(Soundbite of archived StoryCorps recording)
Ms. CAPLAN: I felt so alone at that time in my grief because I never knew how people were going to respond when I said Tom died - already died of AIDS. Oh, maybe he should have died or maybe that's God's way. And one day I went into a card shop and there was gay young man, and I was buying a sympathy card, yet another sympathy card. Then I said my brother died of AIDS, and I said it in a whisper. He said you don't have to whisper to me. And he came around the counter and he hugged me. And I didn't know him, but I loved him.

INSKEEP: Mary Caplan, I have to ask you - it was very moving to hear that, but I wonder if when you heard it on the radio, did you have that moment of cringing that you'd said that in public, in effect?

Ms. CAPLAN: No, not at all. And that really surprised me. That part of the story became more about that young man whose name I don't know and who I hope maybe heard the story, and would know what his act of kindness meant to me. So it was really more in my mind about him.

INSKEEP: David Isay, the founder of StoryCorps, you must have listened to thousands of those 15,000 sessions that have been recorded. And I wonder - because so many people end up talking about extremely personal issues, if sometimes you almost wonder if they'd got a little too public with their privacy.

Mr. ISAY: Well, we - you know, for us, we always go back to the people who have participated and check with them to make sure that it's okay to broadcast the story and play it for them. And - actually, no one's ever said no. And I think when you hear these stories - first of all, you recognize that you're doing something authentic, that's the power of StoryCorps and that's what's going on in the booth.

Ms. CAPLAN: I did have one family member who was not happy with it.

INSKEEP: Who's that?

Ms. CAPLAN: That was my sister. Her objection was that it was private and certain things should be kept private within the family. And I no longer - well, I never believed that, especially now after sharing and hearing stories - definitely do not believe it.
INSKEEP: Mary Caplan, William Jacobs, David Isay, thanks very much.

Mr. ISAY: Thanks, Steve.

Ms. CAPLAN: Thank you.

Mr. JACOBS: Thank you, Steve.


(Soundbite of music)

INSKEEP: And you can hear more tales from StoryCorps at npr.org. You hear it on MORNING EDITION from NPR News.