



# WHO TELLS THE STORY?

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*A Guide to Empathetic  
Social Change Storytelling  
Where Nonprofit  
Organizations, Clients, &  
Communities are Partners  
in Shaping Narratives*

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The biggest thank you is to my dear friend Rebekah for her willingness to share her story in this guide, and for sharing it with me in the first place. This conversation is one I've been wrestling with in different ways for a couple of years, but her experience made it feel urgent in a way it sometimes only can when something affects your family. Her perspective and insights as someone who has been both staff and a client at nonprofit organizations, as well as her compassion, intelligence, and humor have taught me so much.

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## A NOTE ABOUT THIS GUIDE FROM THE AUTHOR

My life is split between my communications work with nonprofit organizations and my work as a documentary playwright, interviewing people and turning their verbatim words into audio and stage dramas. I love telling true stories about real people and important topics.

Over the years, these jobs have raised difficult questions about who has the right to tell any given story, and about how best to use story as a tool to breed empathy. They have also led to much research and soul searching about whether or not the same stories that help achieve short-term priorities, including raising money for critical programs, can also advance long-term goals, such as dismantling a range of negative stereotypes that contribute to unjust policies.

There is growing support inside the social sector for the idea that telling personal, deeply human stories is an essential part of creating change. Over the last two decades, countless resources have focused on helping organizations tell those stories more effectively. At the same time, storytelling can be resisted as a practice by staff and advocates who often view it as exploiting and potentially victimizing to already marginalized communities.

To me, there is nothing inherently harmful about organizations telling stories that examine the human effects of unequal and unjust circumstances and policies, and that share what organizations are doing to help; in fact, I think it's essential that they do this. But I believe the problems start when stories paint people as nothing more than their problems, ignoring their humanity and reinforcing a false sense of "us" and "them." Stories become harmful when they are framed solely from an organization's perspective, raising its voice over the top of someone who has experienced inequality and injustice, and whose perspective most needs to be heard and considered. And story is silencing when organizations don't ask someone if they want to tell their story or find other ways to invite their perspective into the organization's narratives about its work and the issues that work addresses. In other words, storytelling can become a tool for harm when people aren't part of shaping their own personal and community narratives or the broader frame of the issue at hand.

Just as the social sector's services and advocacy need to be deeply informed by their community members' needs and goals, the same approach should underscore the storytelling that organizations engage in. People most affected by an issue need to play a significant role in framing and telling their stories. In pursuit of social change, we sometimes focus on storytelling merely as a tool for public education and persuasion, forgetting it is an equally important act of asking, listening, learning, and informing the argument. Some organizations already do this incredibly well, particularly advocacy groups that are led and largely staffed by members of a community whom are directly affected by that issue. Many of us, myself included, can do so much better.

This guide is intended as a tool for nonprofit organizations. After examining the roles that sympathy and empathy play in social change storytelling, it suggests some practices nonprofit organizations can use to partner with clients and communities to tell their own stories. These strategies are not meant to be definitive or comprehensive; there are certainly limitations to my perspective. For years, I've been looking for resources to help me do this work better, and it's the conversation I most want to have with people in communities and people who work in this field. My hope is merely that this guide sparks deeper conversations inside organizations and with each other about how we are telling stories for social good. I'm eager to hear from you about how you are approaching this work.

# SYMPATHY LEADS TO CHARITY, EMPATHY LEADS TO CHANGE

## Rebekah and Max

The amazing humans pictured below are Rebekah and Max. Rebekah is one of my very best friends; she is my family. Max is her son, and my nephew. Rebekah is the kind of friend I hope everyone has in their life. She is present and creative. She finds humor in everything, and she has never lost her sense of play, which is one of the things that I think makes her such a good parent. It is also probably why when I asked what picture to include with this story, she sent me this one of them from Halloween. And she does little things to let you know she is always there for you. When I was overwhelmed writing my graduate thesis, she came over and, unbeknownst to me, hid cards of encouragement all over my apartment. I found them for weeks—in my freezer, under chair cushions, and in my mitten box.

Max is a total light; he is a deeply compassionate kid whom, at ten years-old, is completely obsessed with the musical *Hamilton*. When I asked him what he wanted for his birthday last year, he said, “I want George Washington and Alexander Hamilton to come back to life so that I can be their right hand man.” I try to be a good aunt, but I couldn’t make that wish happen.

A couple of years ago, Rebekah adopted Max from foster care, or as they like to say, they adopted each other. Soon after the adoption, Rebekah reached out to a nonprofit organization that provides play therapy to get Max help with trauma he had experienced early in his life, and to help them both transition to

their forever family. For two years, a wonderful play therapist taught Rebekah tools to help Max, and taught Max tools to self-soothe and “use his words,” helping their family grow stronger.

Afterward, the organization reached out to Rebekah and asked if she would be the client speaker at the organization’s annual fundraising gala. She was really excited. She was and is incredibly proud of her family, and she was grateful for the help she had received. And Rebekah, who has worked in public service her



*Rebekah (Joker) and  
Max (Batman) on Halloween.*

entire adult life, also thought it was an opportunity to give something back.

So she wrote a draft of her speech. In it, she shared the first day she and Max met and some of the adventures they have had together since. She talked about the challenges every new parent faces, and she talked honestly about some of the challenges that Max faced because of his difficult first couple of years. She wrote about how she had sought out help, about his play therapist, and about how this organization had come into her life at a moment her family needed them. And she reminded the donors in the audience that when they support the organization, they were supporting her son and her family, and families like them.

I, of course, am biased, but I thought it was a beautiful speech. As her friend, I was so proud, both of what she wrote and that she was willing to stand up in a ballroom full of strangers and offer it to others. As a communications professional who has worked with client speakers for these types of events, I thought the organization could not ask for more.

When she got the draft back a couple of days later, it had been gutted. The event staff had cut out significant chunks of the speech, in particular, the humorous anecdotes about her family, until little remained except Max's traumatic background in foster care and their interactions with the play therapist. They had also changed certain phrases; instead of, "This organization helped my family," it now read, "This organization *saved* my family."

Rebekah was really upset. She called me to say she didn't want to give that version of the speech. She said, "If I do, people will pity me, and I do not want to be pitied. I want to celebrate my family and remind people that we all need help sometimes."

She asked if I thought she could or should pull out of the event. I told her that of course she could, but if she was up for it, she should tell the organization what she told me, and give them a chance

to understand why she was upset and a chance to do better. Then, if they did not let her tell the story from her perspective, she should cancel.

She did tell them, and the organization felt horrible, and they let her go back to her original speech. I should mention that neither she nor I think that the organization made their edits maliciously. I think they were probably trying to find the shortest, most direct route from A to B that highlighted their work and showed their value. Perhaps they were even trying to save time on a night with multiple speakers.

*But in the process, the organization lost sight of the bigger story, which was not just about convincing donors that the services they provide positively impact families. Rather it was that there are systems and circumstances, often unjust and unequal, that are bigger than any of us can navigate on our own, that services need to exist to build on the great work families are already doing to help themselves, and that our collective success and well-being requires that we all be in this together.*

I did not survey the room after her speech, but I think what Rebekah did that night was paint a picture of her family that the donors, even those with very different backgrounds from her own, could connect with. Through the funny stories she told, I think they saw their own kids in Max. And I think by recognizing the work she did for her own family, not just the work the organization did, the people in the room could see themselves in her. It was not "us" and "them"; it was all of us.

This is the crux of storytelling for social good: stories can create connection and open minds if the pictures they paint evoke understanding and empathy, not distance and sympathy. So why is sympathy such a tempting tool?

## The Role of Sympathy in Fundraising

Sympathy, which is often the bi-product of telling tragic stories focused solely on the details of a problem and depicting images of sad people in terrible conditions, can absolutely raise money; there is a direct correlation between sympathy and charity. Researchers Caroline Eayers and Nick Ellis examined fundraising campaigns for disability organizations and found that

The public are more likely to respond to advertisements that demean sufferers than those in which charitable beneficiaries are shown in a more positive light, with the same rights and capabilities as everyone else.<sup>1</sup>

Similar conclusions were reached by researchers from the University of Pennsylvania who examined the response of potential donors to the facial expressions of individuals in fundraising advertisements. They found that when the viewer was provided with additional information that offered deeper context for the issues involved, the images generated less sympathy and potential funds.<sup>2</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that using story to evoke sympathy is a fairly common practice; the Meyer Foundation's recent audit of 147 nonprofits' online stories found that 40 percent of stories examined used a pity lens rather than dignity lens.<sup>3</sup>

The ability of sympathy to raise money is a point acknowledged by people who use nonprofit organizations' services. A 2012 study from the Center for Charitable Giving in the United Kingdom was one of the first to interview beneficiaries of services about their opinions on fundraising language and imagery. Thirty-eight individuals experiencing homelessness were asked to provide feedback on dozens of advertisements used to raise money for shelter services. On a whole, these individuals reported feeling like they had to choose between their desire for honest depictions of homelessness that considered the complex factors that contribute to it, and portraying it in a pity-inducing way that could successfully raise money for services they needed and used.<sup>4</sup>

## The Harm in Reducing People to Their Problems

In my experience, what happened to Rebekah happens in different ways at nonprofits and social services organizations every day. Stories are often told where people are reduced to their problems—where nothing more is said about them than some biographical information and a detailed description of the problem for which they sought help. It can happen for all sorts of reasons, most of which are rooted in good intentions. Organizations do this to:

1. **Evoke sympathy in order to raise funds** for the reasons described above.
2. **Focus on the part of a story that demonstrates the organization's greatest impact.** In this scenario, it is common for the helper to be made the hero, where the organization is portrayed as the protagonist of the story rather than as a celebrated supporting player, taking the place of the person who actually lived the experience. Researchers in the Meyer Foundation study found this happened in 45 percent of the stories they examined.<sup>5</sup>
3. **Draw attention to the severity of need.** In trying to convey urgency, an individual's circumstances often becomes the focus, neglecting the person's feelings, the broader narrative of how they got there, and/or the societal factors at play.
4. **Protect the anonymity of clients.** Many organizations opt to share case studies instead of telling stories. Case studies are nameless, faceless, factual recitations of a problem and an intervention, and sound like this:

*Mary (not her real name) came to our program because the trash in her apartment building was attracting mice and violating several housing codes. The trash made her daughter's asthma worse and caused her to go to the emergency room repeatedly. Our lawyers reached out to Mary's landlord and reminded him that he was obligated by law to keep the building clean, and got the trash*

*cleared out. Mary's daughter has not been back to the hospital since.*

Setting aside the fact that case studies do not contain or evoke the human emotion that stories do, they create added problems because staff can think that not using someone's name means they do not need permission to share the information. I would argue otherwise, that removing someone's name is still using their story, but doing so without recognizing their humanity or sharing their perspective. And I do not believe it frees us from having to ask their permission.

What all of these scenarios have in common is that by reducing someone to their problems and eliminating both their perspective and context, there is considerable risk of perpetuating harmful stereotypes that can make the very problems that nonprofit organizations often exist to address, even more intractable. One of the main findings from the Center for Charitable Giving study was that the users of shelter services who were interviewed wished that depictions of homelessness focused more on the reasons behind homelessness and less on the con-

ditions of *being* homeless. They expressed frustration that focusing on the latter only deepened people's negative assumptions and opinions about them, while creating a false sense that people experiencing homelessness are all the same, and not individuals with very different stories.<sup>6</sup> This is another way that, when framed poorly, stories can end up denying a person's humanity.

## The Power of Seeing Ourselves in Others

When we look to what has been successful in advocacy communications—campaigns and efforts to reduce stigma and promote human rights—we see a different pattern. Unlike in fundraising campaigns, efforts to change minds and subsequently change policies, particularly to be more just and more equitable, require that people instead feel *empathy*—that they understand more about people, not just their problems, and that they recognize themselves and their loved ones' experiences in others.

While yet to be enacted into law, empathy has played a role in changing public opinion of The DREAM Act. First introduced in Congress in 2001, the bill originally

*Efforts to change minds and subsequently change policies, particularly to be more just and more equitable, **require that people instead feel empathy**—that they understand more about people, not just their problems, and that they recognize themselves and their loved ones' experiences in others.*

proposed to cancel deportation proceedings for individuals who are undocumented and were brought to the United States as children; recent versions of the bill have expanded to include a pathway to citizenship for these individuals. Between 2001 and early 2012, public support for the bill hovered between 50 and 60 percent. However, since mid-2013, support has increased to upwards of 74 percent.<sup>7</sup>

One of the things that changed in 2013 was a significant increase in stories that painted Dreamers in an empathetic frame. In his doctoral dissertation, Chris Stephan Haynes examined speeches made by President Obama that year about The DREAM Act. These speeches highlighted the personal stories of people in college and the military who were overcoming adversity and contributing to communities—stories about every day experiences that people listening could easily see themselves in. Haynes also found that the percentage of media stories with an empathetic frame about Dreamers increased from 25 percent in 2009 through 2011, to 40 percent in 2013.<sup>8</sup>

In 1996, public support for the right of same-sex couples to marry was at 27 percent; when same-sex marriage was legalized nationally in 2015, public support had reached 60 percent. In large part, this shift is attributed to legislative efforts and campaigns that argued couples wanted to “join” marriage, not “change” the institution.<sup>9</sup> Advocates framed the issue

by using the values their opponents championed—love and commitment—and argued that those things are the same for everyone: *love is love*. Over and over again, in living rooms and at dinner tables, on television and in ad campaigns, same-sex couples told their personal stories that reiterated these values—stories about first dates, parenthood, making medical decisions, and every day life. Over time, more people came to see the relationships of gay and lesbian family members and neighbors as being similar to their own.

Telling stories that help people see themselves in others, and over time, help change public opinion and policy, involves much more than describing problems that evoke pity. It means focusing more on who someone is, and capturing authentic experiences and human moments—sometimes devastating, sometimes joyful—that underscore the things that are true about all of us.

# TRANSFORMING SOCIAL CHANGE STORYTELLING TO ENSURE PEOPLE ARE TRUE PARTNERS IN SHAPING THEIR STORIES

The tension between how to cultivate stories that achieve both short-term fundraising goals and larger social change is real and not easily reconciled, but it may be one of the most important conversations we need to have in the social sector. Considerably more research is needed on the ways imagery and various storytelling practices affect audience attitudes and behaviors. The social sector also needs to keep experimenting with new ways of telling stories, and engage in difficult conversations about the potential consequences—intended and unintended—of how we tell them.

But there is one simple, although not easy, step every nonprofit organization can take now to start: they can more fully engage clients and communities as true partners in their organization's storytelling practices at every stage of the process.

Perhaps the most important finding from the study of users of shelter services in the United Kingdom was that almost every person interviewed wanted to be part of the discussion about what images and stories are used to depict homelessness.<sup>10</sup> Rebekah was reacting to something similar when she got the edits to her speech; the organization's version of her story did not represent her perspective or lived experience, and it painted an image that was disconnected from how she saw herself, the organization's services, and the larger social issues of trauma, family, and community.

This seems obvious—that the people living an experience and who are most affected by it should

play a significant role in shaping how it is discussed and what form resulting advocacy takes. As Gloria Steinem so beautifully noted, "A person who has experienced something is almost always far more expert on it than are the experts."<sup>11</sup>

Community organizers have long understood this imperative, again, in part, because they tend to be part of the community they serve. And yet, far too often, it isn't a *lived* value inside nonprofit organizations. Consider the extensive research that exists on what messaging techniques are most persuasive to audiences and donors, and how almost no research exists about how the users of services view those same messages. Think about it in your own organization. How often do you focus group messaging with clients or ask them to review materials before they are shared publicly? The last time you were working on a public awareness campaign, were users of services or members of the community the first people you asked for input? Were they part of the initial brainstorm and framing conversation?

This is a big topic, and there is vital work to be done in a number of areas, including getting client and community input in systemic narratives and issue framing, which can also speak to much broader issues of how clients inform an organization's strategic planning and programs. The tangible strategies offered in the remainder of this guide focus specifically on one facet of storytelling—the challenge of gathering and telling stories about individuals and services, and helping organizations partner with clients to shape and tell those narratives.

*"A person who has experienced something is almost always far more expert on it than are the experts."*

Gloria Steinem

# STRATEGIES FOR PARTNERED, EMPATHETIC STORYTELLING

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR PARTNERSHIP

**Involve clients and staff in the storytelling process from the beginning**



## ESTABLISHING GOALS & BOUNDARIES

**Engage in an empowering, nuanced conversation about intent and consent**



## TELLING THE STORY

**Focus on empathetic, human narratives that center on the people they're really about**



## GATHERING THE STORY

**Foster authentic sharing and invite perspective on the story and how to frame it**



## Setting the Stage for Partnership:



**Involve clients and staff in the storytelling process from the beginning**

*Work with clients and staff to create a proactive, intentional, and empowering storytelling culture that approaches story gathering as an internal learning opportunity.*

01

**Meet with staff and clients to create a process that addresses everyone's concerns.**

There are a lot of different types of stories an organization can tell and a lot of different ways and reasons to tell them. Clients and front-line staff should be involved from the beginning in figuring out the stories you want to tell and the process for how you'll gather them. It can be really helpful to have group conversations with staff and clients (whether through focus groups or with client members of your Board of Directors) to discuss goals and air concerns. Developing guidelines together for who to approach, how to approach them, and some ethical guideposts to adhere to, can not only create a stronger, more transparent process, but will likely also result in more widespread participation in the story gathering process itself.

02

**Gather stories before you need them.**

Most organizations don't look for stories until they need one for a specific reason—a reporter calls or a fundraising event is around the corner. By that point, the frame of the message and story is largely set. This can lead to

trying to fit someone into a story box—like a bad game of client MadLibs—and can cause organizations to focus only on the facts of a situation, and not on a person's perspective.

If organizations instead seek out stories *before* there is any specific need for them to be told, it allows for a different dynamic. Story gathering becomes a listening tool that can educate and inform an organization's work. Everyone feels less pressure. There is also time for the client's perspective to help frame the message of the story specifically, and the initiative it's supporting more broadly. Later, when a reporter does call or an event comes up, the organization has someone they already know wants to tell their story and whose story is naturally a good fit for the opportunity.

03

**Look for the right person, not the right story.**

Sometimes there is pressure—internal and external—to prioritize stories with the most dire situation or the most positive outcome. A reporter once told me that the family I suggested she speak with was, “no longer in active enough crisis” for the story she wanted to write on housing code regulations. But this approach of searching for the perfect story ignores the fact that the messenger is as important as the story. Not only should we be respecting and elevating voices of people who want to speak out, but the most authentic and compelling stories tend to come from people who want to share them and who are comfortable telling them. Engaging people who have their own reasons for wanting to share their story also reduces the chance that someone is participating out of gratitude or a sense of obligation to the organization.

04

**Consider building a speakers' bureau or another type of ongoing storytelling community.**

It may be beneficial to have a semi-formal group of clients who are ready and able to speak at outreach events, to the media, etc., and whose stories are ready to go. Having a speakers' bureau or a similar group may also make it easier to recruit participants. Unlike with a one-off request, a group is something you can advertise—with posters at your office, in client closing letters, and on your website. If you promote it well enough and often enough, it's something that clients may start to organically opt into. It also may make it easier for staff to initially approach clients by letting them know generally that this group exists, rather than putting someone on the spot with a specific storytelling ask.

## Establishing Goals and Boundaries:



**Engage in an empowering, nuanced conversation about intent and consent**

*Most organizations are good about obtaining general consent and signed releases from clients before they share their stories. But often these releases are designed more to protect the organization legally than they are about eliciting informed, empowered consent. In the initial conversation about any storytelling opportunity, engage clients in a nuanced conversation about their goals for sharing their story and their boundaries about how, when, and where it can be shared. Doing this in advance gives someone a chance to digest information without pressure, and it maximizes their ability to contribute to the shape and frame of the narrative.*

05

**Ask about someone's perspective on the issue and their goals for sharing their story.**

When organizations ask clients to share stories, they often focus on the "what," not the "why". They might tell a client that a reporter called or they are having a fundraising event, and they need someone to share their experience with an issue. It can be a really one-sided request, and the parameters of the ask are often already set.

What if instead the initial conversation was an exchange of goals, where the organization explained the big picture of what it hopes to change or accomplish by sharing the story? And what if the organization asked the client about their perspective on the larger issue and what they hoped people would understand and learn from hearing their story? What if organizations and clients built the message together? When delivering services, organizations tend to ask clients about their goals and align services to match them; why should storytelling be any different?

06

**Discuss the potential consequences (positive and negative) of sharing one's story.**

The benefits and risks—legal, practical, and emotional—of sharing one's story publicly are different for every person, every issue, and every scenario. Someone from the organization who is qualified to speak to those risks should walk through them with the client. Are there legal implications to their immigration status if their story becomes known? Are their family and friends aware of the story being shared? If not, how will it feel if those people learn about it? If their behavioral health history becomes known, will it affect their employment? These are important consequences that someone should be informed about and consider before making the decision to share their story.

Telling stories that feature people in behavioral health treatment, immigrants who are undocumented, and trauma survivors raise special concerns about how to do so in safe and ethical ways. There is no definitive or simple answer to these questions, and people trained in these fields should play a role in shaping specific practices. But we should all be aware that storytelling carries greater risks for certain issues and clients, and consider that in how we approach the conversation.

In most scenarios, I operate under a couple of general guidelines: (1) I don't ask people who are in active crisis or who face potential physical danger to share their story. (2) If someone is being asked to talk about a traumatic experience or sensitive mental health issue, I try to make sure they are one year into (or out of) receiving counseling services, and that they and their care provider agree it's appropriate. (3) If possible, I try not to ask people still receiving services from the organization to share, reducing the risk that they'll agree out of a sense of obligation. (4) The greater the risk of negative consequences, the more detailed and careful the consent conversation becomes.

07

### Ask how and where someone wants to share their story.

A client told me that he would be happy to share his story, but only if he got to speak directly with a reporter; he did not want to be talked about. I hadn't asked him how he wanted to share his story, but this was important enough to him that he made a point of mentioning it. It got me thinking that these initial conversations should be about understanding a client's goals and boundaries, and that just like we shouldn't assume someone doesn't want to share their story, we shouldn't assume either that if someone wants to share it, that they are up for sharing it any time, in any way. There should be options. Do they want to use their name and likeness? In what mediums can it be shared? Written? Online? Do they only want to share it when they can be present to tell it themselves?

## Sample Interview / Story Release

Releases can be powerful tools that guide a thoughtful, nuanced, and empowering conversation about if and how someone wants to share their story.

See page 20 for sample questions that can be used in a consent conversation. See pages 21-22 for a sample interview /story release.

## Getting Consent a Second Time Once The Story is Finished

While not possible for media stories, I believe clients should be able to review other video, audio, and written stories about them before they are shared to offer feedback and ensure the final story is accurate and representative of their experience. I also believe that this provides an important, second checkpoint for consent. It's a great opportunity to ask, not only if someone is comfortable with the final story, but if they are still okay with it being shared. Sometimes the act of compiling one's story can bring up big, unexpected feelings. If the person and the organization cannot agree on the frame or message of the story, or if someone has changed their mind about sharing it for any reason, it's not a story that should be told regardless of the time invested or potential lost opportunity. Partnering with people to tell stories means truly considering their input at every stage.

08

### Ask what activities someone wants to support with their story.

Someone who is happy to share their story to advance a specific policy effort may not want it included in a fundraising appeal. Interview / story release forms often include a single paragraph with a lot of language right above the signature line that essentially says, by signing below, the organization can do whatever it wants with the story. Releases should instead have checklists and ask specifically if someone has any restrictions on how it can be shared; consent should not have to be all or nothing.

## Gathering the Story:



Foster authentic sharing and invite perspective on the story and how to frame it

*Once someone has fully consented to participate, gathering their story may take on a variety of forms. You may video or audio record someone, or take notes for a story that you will write up later. You may also work with someone to write their own story for a speech they will deliver. Regardless, it is important to create conditions where people feel comfortable sharing authentically and expressing clear boundaries.*

09

### Create a conducive environment.

Consider different factors that contribute to a person's comfort level, including:

- **INTERVIEWER/FACILITATOR:** If you were asked to tell a personal story about your life, with whom would you feel most comfortable sharing? Most likely, it's someone with whom you have established trust and rapport. An effective

interviewer/facilitator is someone who the interviewee/storyteller feels comfortable talking to. This might be a staff member the person has a relationship with. Depending on the issue and various dynamics, it might be another client or community member. If the interviewer and interviewee don't know each other and there is time, spend some time together beforehand building rapport and confidence that the organization is invested in understanding and conveying their perspective.

- **LOCATION:** Inquire where someone feels most comfortable meeting—at the organization's office, in their home, or somewhere else entirely.
- **GROUPS:** Depending on the group and the subject, some people may be more relaxed and comfortable sharing if interviewed as part of a group. During a video story series I worked on with doctors, I found that many of them were great storytellers, but also very shy ones. So I filmed four of them together telling their stories to each other. They loved this because they felt like they were learning from their colleagues and forgot about the camera; it took the pressure off. The same may be true for clients in certain scenarios. For the story you're working on, can several clients, family members, or neighbors be interviewed together?

10

### Ask simple, open-ended questions designed to elicit perspective.

The goal should be to get someone to tell their story in their own words. Overly specific questions produce shorter answers and can prevent someone from sharing the most distinct and specific parts of their story, as well as the parts that they find most significant. Open-ended questions also tend to elicit more feelings. This is not only more human and compelling than just recounting facts, but centers the story on that person's perspective rather than just on what the organization is trying to convey.

Open-ended questions can be particularly difficult to ask if the interviewer already knows elements of a person's story from working with them. Interviewers should resist the urge to fill in the gaps, and challenge themselves to stay silent without following up as long as is comfortable. Listening is learning, and sometimes people are just thinking and will keep going on their own.

11

### Ask questions that go beyond a person's problem.

Empathy is generated through relatable moments of human life and behavior, not the details of circumstance. To tell stories where people are more than their problems, organizations need to consciously gather other information too. It can be helpful to ask questions like: "What are you most proud of?" "What do you love (to do)?" Or simply ask someone to tell you about their family.

## Telling the story:



**Focus on empathetic, human narratives that center on the people they're really about**

*Think carefully about how the story is framed, the details you're choosing to include, and the voice of the piece.*

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### Introduce who someone is first.

Begin stories by highlighting a character or personality trait—something that makes them human and uniquely them *before* introducing a problem, disease, or circumstance. This is critical to representing a whole person who is an individual rather than a statistic, and in helping others invest emotionally in their story.

I told the story about Rebekah and Max recently at a conference. I was nervous about sharing it because I want Rebekah to be seen as she is—a strong person who helps herself and others, and who speaks out when she feels it's important. So I intentionally talked about specific things she and her son love before I introduced the idea that they had sought help from an organization. My hope was that the audience would invest in her as a person before they heard she needed help. My favorite moment at the conference was right after the talk when a woman in the audience came running up to me and said, "You know, I just have to tell you, I have a best friend like that, and she is the *best!* Aren't we lucky?" Yes, we are.

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### Ensure people are the "protagonists" of their own stories.

Stories do not have to be explicitly about the organization in order to convey its value. A person's story should always be centered on them and their experience and perspective; the organization is, at most, a supporting player, which doesn't even need to be mentioned until well after the "lead character" has been established.

For example, if an organization is raising funds for an after-school music program, they might create a mini documentary that follows Kevin, one of its young students, practicing his trumpet and preparing for his recital. Through it, the viewer will observe who Kevin is and how he feels about music. If the viewer connects with Kevin, they will associate value with the organization, too; it doesn't need to be spelled out or feature staff that explicitly explain the program's value. It's more important in a story like this for people to understand why Kevin loves music than to hear talking heads explain what they view as the benefits of music for Kevin. And those talking heads can be replaced with a simple tag about the organization at the end of the story.

It is also critical that stories convey the work people do to help themselves and their communities, not just what the organization is doing to help.

When that information is left out, it becomes easier to associate negative stereotypes with the individual and for the reader to distance themselves from the person; it reinforces savior narratives.

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**Think carefully and with the client about the story's frame and "antagonist".**

If you are telling a story about someone who was wrongly evicted from their home, is the problem a specific landlord, a lack of affordable housing in the community, or a broader discriminatory policy? What are the stakes—moving farther from one's job, the effect regular moves have on a child's education, or potential homelessness? And what is the larger issue—unrealized potential, the dismantling of communities, or something else? Stories can reinforce or challenge beliefs, and it's essential that we consider whether the message of the individual story we are telling helps or harms the larger issue we are working to address. And it's critical to ask the person at the center of the story their answers to these questions so that they can help shape the stakes. Telling individual stories with the right frame helps ensure they are not contributing to harmful perceptions of people or interfering with long-term policy change.

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**Wherever possible, tell the story in a person's own words.**

The Meyer Foundation report found that 60 percent of stories they reviewed were told in the third person; in other words, by someone other than the person the story is about.<sup>12</sup> There is greater risk in third person stories that the organization's perspective will be inserted over the top of the individual's perspective. This is something that is fairly easy to change, either by recording more video and audio stories, by incorporating more quotes into written stories, or by posting stories written entirely in the first person.

When I interview someone for a documentary play, I always, with consent, audio record the conversation. Afterward, I transcribe the entire conversation verbatim, and then move excerpts around to tell a story without ever adding my own words so that, to the best of my ability, the interviewee's perspective is preserved. This practice takes considerable time, but organizations could record the conversation with a client and transcribe the relevant parts to see if an entire story can be crafted only from the client's words. This also preserves someone's language choices and phrasing that help the story to sound like a specific, real person.

Telling a story in someone's own words also means being judicious about if and when staff and "expert" opinions are included in stories. Indeed, there are many times when these people are also critical messengers. However, in storytelling, it's important to consider when someone is adding a different and important perspective to a narrative, versus when they are telling someone else's story or centering the wrong perspective.

## **GUT CHECK**

### **Questions to Ask Before You Share a Story Publicly**

Does this story:

1. Paint a picture of a person or community who is more than a disease, a problem, or a circumstance?
2. Highlight the role the person or group played in helping themselves? Is that person or group, not the organization, at the center of the narrative?
3. Offer human details that help readers or listeners see themselves in this story?

Did I ask the person or group:

4. To tell me their story in their own words, from their perspective, and what they want people to know? Did they help frame the narrative?
5. If they want to deliver the story themselves (on video, in person, etc.)?
6. In what context and to what end it is okay to share their story? Are they okay with it being used for fundraising, for advocacy, to train staff and partners, and/or for community outreach?

# ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

## Client Storytelling as It Relates to Donor Empowerment

One topic that comes up regularly is about how to empower and motivate donors without evoking the hero mentality that so often happens—intentionally or unintentionally—when we are trying to convince someone to give and that their contribution matters. Beyond the general research referenced earlier about sympathy and fundraising, I'm not aware of any studies that specifically examine the amount of money raised in campaigns that portray donors as heroes to ones that remained more focused on clients as the protagonists of their own stories. But I think the problem here is when efforts to empower donors link them to a particular family's story, and in doing so, evoke those uncomfortable, unhelpful savior sentiments. For example,

*Thanks to your donation, the Martins and families like them are not sleeping on the streets tonight.*

It is important to empower donors, volunteers, and other supporters, but I think there is another way to do it. We can celebrate them as partners in the fight for the broader, systemic value—things like equality, justice, and safer communities—rather than as someone who is saving another individual. One way to experiment with this is to tell stories that are actually *about* donors.

People commonly donate to and volunteer with causes that they have a personal connection to. For example, if you're raising funds for behavioral health services, can you tell a story about a donor's personal experience with a family member that made them want to connect with the organization? By sharing a personal story of why that donor gave, the organization doesn't introduce the donor as a distant "savior," but as someone affected by the

issue too. In the process, a picture is painted of how everyone's lives are connected, which in turn builds empathy. In doing this, the donor is at the center of their own story, not someone else's.

Of course, there are many times where this approach won't be appropriate, where potential donors don't share a similar life experience, or where telling stories about donors would amount to centering the narrative on them instead of on affected communities, which is especially problematic when important issues of race, gender, and sexuality are involved. For me, there are two important takeaways: (1) We shouldn't use personal client narratives to tell donors they can save others; we should reach for more empathetic framing that acknowledges the systemic issues at hand and links donors to shared values. (2) Whether the situation calls for narrative about a client, one about a staff member, or one that's actually about a donor, a person's story should always be centered on them.

## A Different Approach: Client and Community-driven Storytelling

My favorite approach to social change storytelling is to enlist people at the heart of an issue to pro-actively shape and share their narratives and steer story campaigns. Here are two ways to do that:

- **OPEN SUBMISSIONS:** Some organizations build story banks with testimonials and videos collected through an open submission process. These collections usually start with a prompt—perhaps on an organization's website or social media account, or in its newsletter—such as, "Share what having health insurance means to you." This is a particularly useful and effective method

for gathering stories when it relates to a popular public policy issue, like healthcare reform, marriage equality, or reproductive justice. To be successful, there needs to be enough awareness and interest in the issue for people to respond. The organization must also be well known or in good communication with its clients or constituents and be able to dedicate significant staff time to review submissions and follow up.

- **CLIENTS AND COMMUNITIES AS DOCUMENTARIANS:** Perhaps my favorite practice is when organizations fund projects where people serve as documentarians. In these scenarios, clients and community members are given tools, resources, and training where necessary, to cultivate stories. They craft questions about an issue, conduct interviews (with each other and with stakeholders), write narratives, take photos, and/or create videos. When this is possible, it allows people to fully own and frame the narrative from start-to-finish, while still supporting the organization's larger goals. These kinds of projects can also eliminate some of the filters that stories naturally go through when staff members conduct interviews, write stories, or edit videos.

I recently helped set up a project where teens in recovery from substance use disorders will share their stories with policymakers via a traveling art exhibit. The goal is to bring their experiences and perspectives into conversations with state legislators who make decisions about mental health policies and funding without asking these teens from the western half of the state to travel

multiple times for hearings at the State House. In a series of workshops, the students were given prompts and sent out with cameras to document what those questions evoked for them. At the end, they will put their photos and words together into an art exhibit that will be displayed at the State House.

In another example of this strategy, Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, Children's Hospital of New Jersey, and RWJBarnabas Health's Social Impact and Community Investment Practice funded a documentary about hunger called, "Food for Thought: The Path to Food Security in Newark." The film explores food insecurity and its effects on individual and community health. It's being used, in part, as a jumping off point for community conversations about how to pursue sustainable policy and bring true food security to Newark. While paid for by these organizations, the filming was led by dozens of local student citizen journalists who interviewed community members and stakeholders, and brought their perspective to the issue.<sup>13</sup>


**TOOL  
1**

# Sample Questions for a Consent Conversation

GOAL	SAMPLE STATEMENTS / QUESTIONS
<p><b>1. Share your organization's goals for seeking stories.</b></p> <p>Don't just say what you need; explain why you need it.</p>	<p>Example 1: If the state budget passes in its current form, 10,000 children will lose their mental health coverage. We are looking for people to talk about the importance of this insurance—in person or on video—with legislators to try and get that funding back in the budget.</p> <p><u>OR</u></p> <p>Example 2: All of our after-school programs like the one your son attends are funded by donations from individuals. At our upcoming fundraising gala, we want people to share stories in their own words about how these programs help our community.</p>
<p><b>2. Understand the person's goal(s) for sharing their story.</b></p>	<p>What do you most want people to know about your experience? What is the most important thing you want people to understand about this issue? What do you hope will change?</p>
<p><b>3. Ensure the person is aware of any potential legal, practical, and emotional consequences of sharing their story.</b></p>	<p>Are your family and friends aware of the story you are sharing? If not, how will you feel if they hear it? Is your school / employer aware of you [mental health history/other issue]? Will it have any effect on your employment?</p>
<p><b>4. Determine if/how the person wants to be identified in the story.</b></p>	<p>Are you okay sharing your name publicly? What about the names of your children? Are you okay with having your picture shared?</p>
<p><b>5. Determine if the person wants to be the storyteller.</b></p>	<p>Do you prefer to share your story directly, such as to a reporter, in a video, or to an audience at an event? Or would you prefer we work to put your story in written form?</p>
<p><b>6. Learn in what mediums a person wants to share their story.</b></p>	<p>Can your story be shared in print materials (e.g brochures, mailings)? Online materials (e.g website, emails)? Social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)? Live events (e.g. meetings with legislators, fundraisers, trainings)?</p>
<p><b>7. Understand to what end your organization can share their story.</b></p>	<p>We commonly use client stories to (1) raise money to fund our services; (2) advocate for policy changes related to [insert issue]; (3) to train our staff and volunteers to be more effective at their jobs; and (4) to conduct community outreach about our services and/or in peer support settings with people going through a similar experience. Are you okay with your story being shared to support some or all of these goals?</p> <p>Do you have any restrictions on how this story can be shared?</p>



## Sample Interview / Story Release

### About Our Organization

*[Insert a brief description of your organization.]*

### Your rights

1. Taking part in this interview, picture, or video is voluntary.

Your participation is completely up to you. You do not have to agree to do an interview or let us take pictures or video of you. Your decision (yes or no) will not affect your being able to receive services at *[insert name of organization]*.

2. You have the right to stop the interview, picture, or film making at any time.

During the interview or while we are taking pictures or video, you can ask us to stop. You do not need to give us a reason for stopping.

3. You have the right to take back your authorization.

To take back your permission, please write to: *[Insert name, email, and mailing address of where client can write to revoke permission.]*

### About this Project

We are asking you to let us interview you and share your story in our materials. During the interview, you may share personal information. This interview is not part of the services you receive with *[insert name of organization]*, and we ask your permission to use and disclose the information you share for other purposes, primarily to raise awareness and support for the importance of *[insert purpose of organization or campaign]*. As part of the interview, we will:

- Take pictures of you
- Audio record your voice
- Video record you

### How Can Your Story Be Shared?

1. For what purposes are you comfortable with your story being shared? (Check all that apply)

- Fundraising: to raise money to fund our organization's services.
- Outreach: to help other people learn about and connect with our services.
- Policy Advocacy: to advocate for laws and policies that *[insert organization's focus.]*
- Training: to help our staff and partners in the community do their jobs better.

2. In what places are you comfortable sharing this story? (Check all that apply)

- Print materials (e.g brochures, mailings)
- Online materials (e.g website, emails)
- Social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
- Live events (e.g. meetings with legislators, fundraisers, trainings)

3. Can we use your name? (circle one)

YES      or      NO

4. Can we use the name of your child/children? (circle one)

YES      or      NO      or      N/A

5. Are there any restrictions on how your story can be shared? (Please write your comments in the space below.)

## Signature

By signing this form, you agree to let *[insert name of organization]* use and share your information as described above.

<b>CLIENT NAME</b>	<b>SIGNATURE (client or authorized representative)</b>
<b>DATE</b>	<b>NAME OF ORGANIZATION</b>
<b>AUTHORIZED REPRESENTATIVE NAME</b>	<b>DESCRIBE AUTHORITY (e.g. parent, guardian)</b>
<b>WITNESS</b>	

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Note: Your organization may want to add additional language if the story involves protected health or legal information. This sample release does not constitute legal advice; you should always run releases past your organization's counsel.

## Endnotes

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## **CONTACT**

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