

**ADVANCING EQUITY  
THROUGH THE STORIES WE  
TELL**

**Jene Shepherd, M.A.**



# Humans are hardwired for story

We think in stories, remember in stories, and turn just about everything we experience into a story.



# Stories are a nonprofit's best friend

- Grab our attention and engage our curiosity, emotions, and imagination
- Provide new perspectives
- Challenge our preexisting assumptions
- Trigger empathy and healing
- Create memorable moments that are likely to be retold
- Inspire and incite change

Stories matter

# Ask yourself...

- Have you gotten consent and is that consent informed?
- Are you prioritizing the voice of the person whose story and experience is being shared over that of the audience or funder?
- Are you perpetuating existing narratives about vulnerable or historically marginalized people and communities?
- Are you showing your organization, the audience, or funder as a savior?

**...are your stories ethical?**



## Story framing

Replace the "fix the individual stories" with  
"fix the system stories"

# Individualized Stories

A story about a person and how an organization's support has shifted who that person is or how they were able to succeed.



# In practice

- This narrative relies on describing deficits in the communities being served and frame negative outcomes as inevitables without intervention, and uses that framing to justify organizational services.
- This framework is rooted in racism and undermines the power of communities and grassroots movements to impact change for themselves.

# Collective Stories

Highlight how the community has come together to create systems change



# Best practices

- Pivot to focusing on telling the story of the systems that your nonprofit or protagonist is engaged in and how your organization is helping to change the system
- Shift to talking about the reasons behind disparities in outcomes
- Change up the protagonist of your story



# Additional storytellers

- **Enlightened insider** - someone who has spent time within the system that you want to change, recognized its faults, and is willing to speak about this
- **Affected change agent** - someone directly affected by the flawed system and who took action to change it.
- **Expert** - someone to provide the big picture, the statistics, and studies that show how this issue affects the whole community and who can make the point that the issue must be solved at the policy, not individual, level.



# Collecting and sharing stories ethically

# Deep Consent

Ensure that the storyteller understands their rights and the potential impact of telling their story



# Best Practices

- Storytellers are told how, where, and why their story will be told
- Partner with storytellers in the creation of the narrative
- Change story details, names, etc. to protect a storyteller's privacy
- Provide aftercare support, if needed
- Compensate storytellers for their time
- Operationalize this work with a Storyteller Bill of Rights



# Inclusive Language

Not only should the narrative of the story be collected and framed ethically, but the words we use should be inclusive.

Words Have Power



# Best Practices

- Use people-first language, but prioritize self-identification
- Do your research and see what language progressive organizations or activist groups in your space are using
- Avoid deficit language
- Keep writing under 8th grade reading level
- Operationalize this work by creating an inclusive language guide



# Visuals

If a picture is worth a thousand words, we have to make sure that the words they're communicating are ethical.



# Best Practices

- Use photos that represent the diversity of your community
- Be mindful that photos are not perpetuating negative stereotypes or are othering
- Get consent to take and share photos



# Key takeaways

- Obtain deep consent when collecting stories
- Move from individualized stories to collective stories that highlight systems change
- Create tools or operating procedures to ensure that this work becomes part of your department's DNA



# Immigrants Rising

Video featuring an Immigrants Rise staff member talking about a giving fund.



**Utilize the voice of an affected change agent & enlightened insider**



**Highlights an individual, but still pushes for systems change**



**Not your typical "success story"**

# YWCA Seattle | King | Snohomish

A guest blog by two Seattle-based doctors that discusses racial disparities in health outcomes.



**Utilizes the voice of experts**



**Talks about the systemic inequities behind disparities**



**How we as a collective can create systems change**

*"WE MUST MOVE BEYOND A MISPLACED EMPHASIS ON RACE TOWARD A FOCUS ON THE ACTUAL RISK FACTORS THAT DIFFERENTIALLY IMPACT HEALTH IN THIS COUNTRY."*

"We all have a role to play in dismantling harmful narratives. Words have power. When we center misleading statistics and sound bites about disparate health outcomes, and fail to mention the inherently racist structures that directly yielded those results, we obfuscate the real problems. This not only hinders our ability to effectively address them, it also prevents recognition of the fact that communities most impacted by inherently racist systems have solutions for improvements in health and wellbeing."

# Resources

[Navigating the Ethical Maze: Storytelling for Organizations Working With Vulnerable Populations - Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership](#)

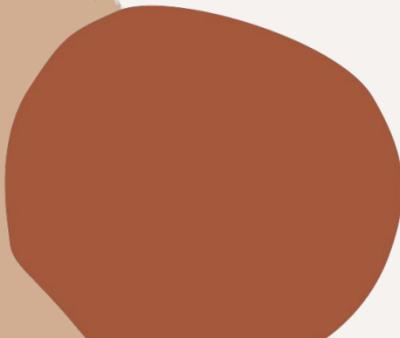
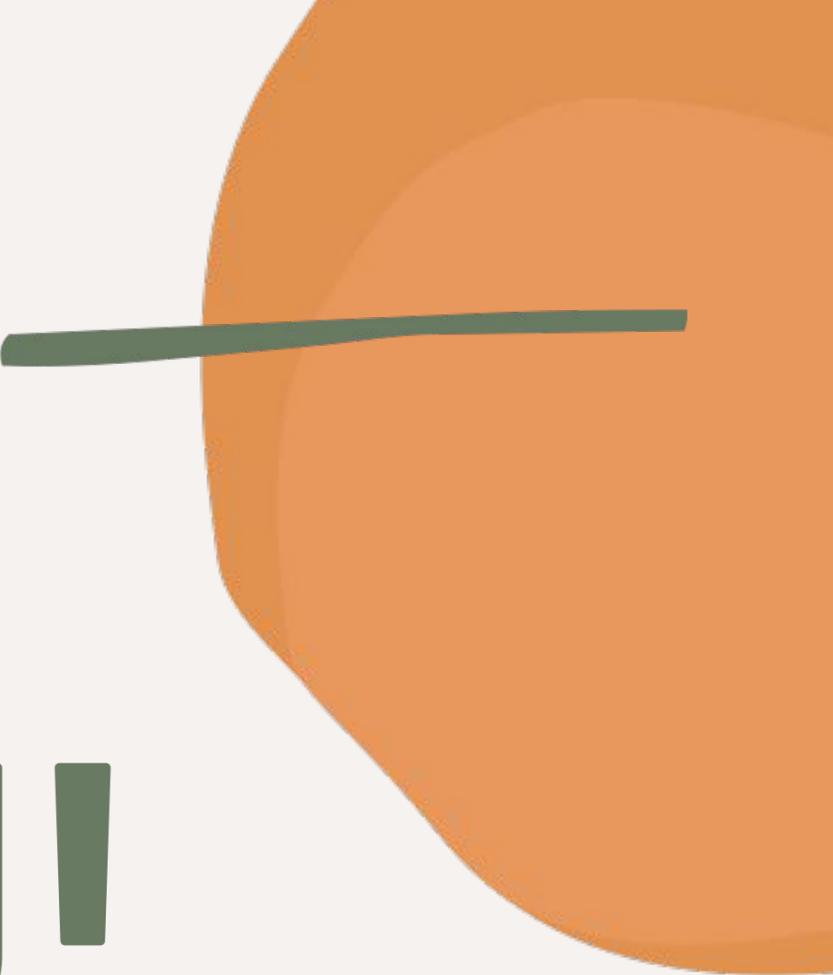
[Storyteller Bill of Rights - Immigrants Rising](#)

[A Progressive Style Guide - Hanna Thomas & Anna Hirsch](#)

[YWCA Seattle | King | Snohomish - Strengths-Based Storytelling: Focusing on Power](#)

[NTEN - How to tell compelling stories while avoiding exploitation](#)

[Nel Taylor - 7 Ways to Tell Stories Ethically: The Journey From Exploited Program Participant to Empowered Storyteller](#)



# THANK YOU!

**Jené Shepherd, M.A.**

**Email: [jeneshepherd@gmail.com](mailto:jeneshepherd@gmail.com)**

**LinkedIn: [/jeneshepherd](https://www.linkedin.com/company/jeneshepherd)**