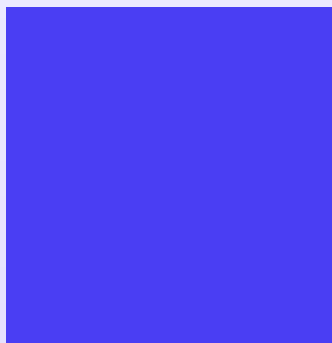


2023 ETHICAL STORYTELLING REPORT



CREATED BY  **memoryfox**® WITH CONTRIBUTIONS
FROM 20+ STORYTELLING EXPERTS &
BOOTS-ON-THE-GROUND NONPROFIT PROFESSIONALS

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WELCOME

Bruce Springsteen said, “**everybody’s got a hungry heart**,” and I believe ties like that bind us together within a shared story of the human experience. Within that tapestry, each person has a unique story to tell that is infinitely valuable. These stories have the tremendous power to inspire great social change, but also bring nations to war and extend hatreds dating back centuries. It is our obligation to future generations to, as best we can, *do no harm* in our storytelling. A commitment to ethical storytelling is the keystone of that endeavor.

A story unethically told without regard for the storyteller is not just exploitative to that individual, but it is **a violation of our collective shared human story**. As an Army Veteran, I am very familiar with the experience of having your story told unethically and exploitatively, and I’m sure each one of us have felt the same way. A commitment to ethical storytelling is not just to provide legal cover or prevent bad PR, it’s a commitment to the idea that everyone’s story is valuable.

There are, however, practical matters at hand. Nonprofits have been given the impossible task of competing in the attention economy with not only smaller budgets, but also unique ethical requirements that are constantly in motion. Our hope in assembling this report is to elevate this conversation by providing a platform for practitioners and thought leaders to act as a lighthouse for nonprofit professionals negotiating these murky ethical waters.

I would like to extend enormous gratitude to everyone who contributed to this book. A simple “thank you” could never be enough for the time and effort you took to craft your insightful answers. Finally, I’d like to thank Carly Euler, and the rest of the MemoryFox team, for putting this resource together and for their continued dedication to learning alongside our community.

We hope you’ll join us as we continue to elevate this important conversation!



CHRIS MIANO
Founder & CEO



STATE OF THE SECTOR

In 2023, the MemoryFox team identified a prominent pattern. At every speaking engagement, no matter the topic, style or audience, our team received a version of this thoughtful question:

What do I do if the people I serve have sensitive stories that they might not want to share?

And - truth be told - we didn't have an answer we felt certain about. We knew we had a lot to learn. So, we embarked on a learning journey.

MemoryFox invited four exceptional storytelling experts, who have dedicated their careers to answering tough questions like these, to join us for a virtual panel which took place in December of 2023. It was of the utmost importance to us to answer the questions that nonprofit professionals *actually* wanted to know. Therefore, we prompted registrants to submit their questions up-front about ethical storytelling, trauma-informed language, consent & privacy.

Our team was floored when **400+ individuals registered, submitting 150+ multi-faceted, tough questions**. It became *abundantly clear* to us that the nonprofit community, as a whole, is yearning for answers. Our hour-long panel was a wildly successful event, but only skimmed the surface. We knew we needed to continue the conversation. We made a plan to do exactly that.

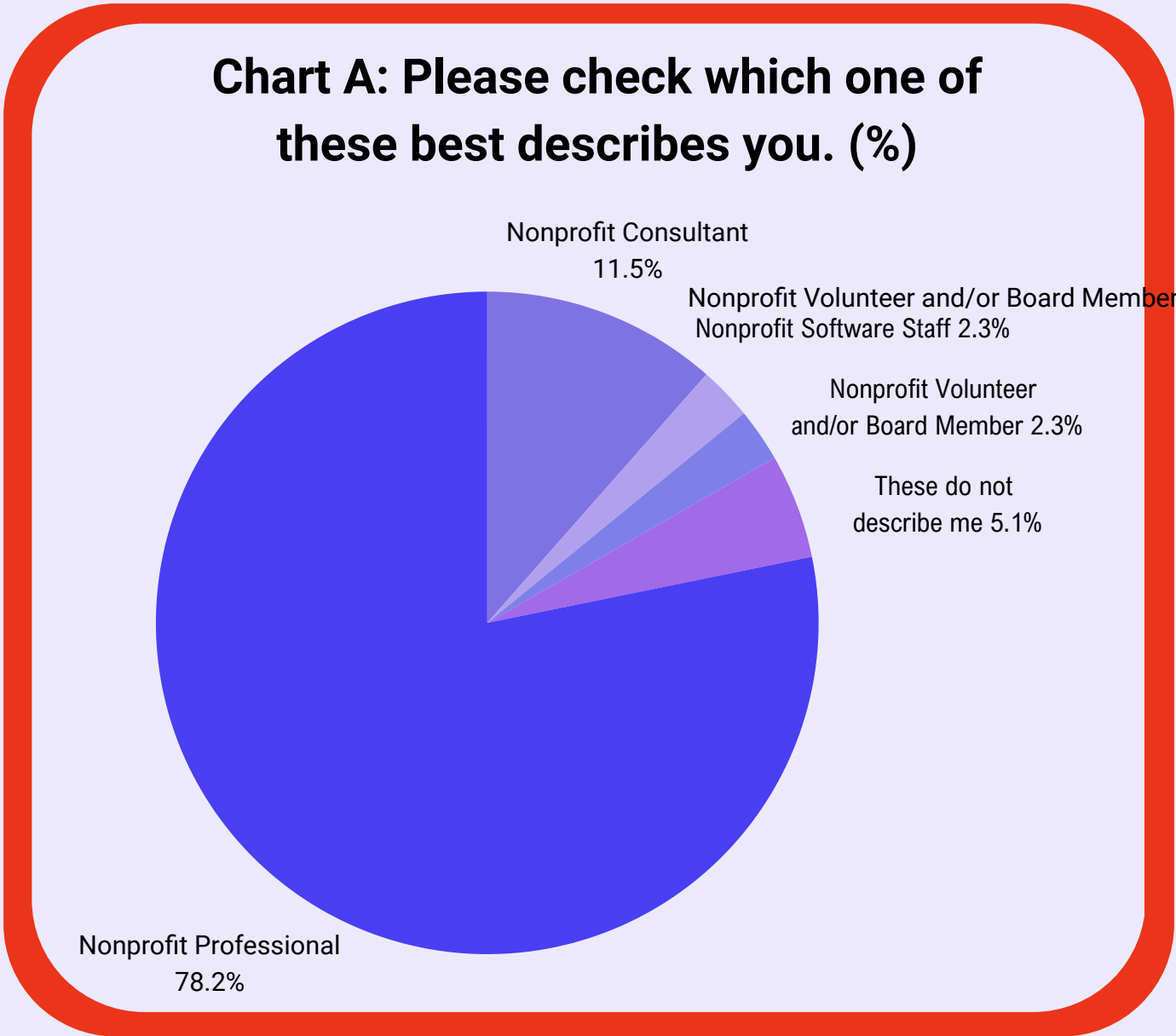
First, we brought these thoughtful questions directly to **20+ storytelling experts & boots-on-the-ground nonprofit professionals**. In the coming pages, you'll see a plethora of strategies, suggestions, & first-hand experiences from decades of hardwork & dedication from trusted changemakers. It is an honor to share our learnings with you.

Next, we crafted the 2023 “Ethical Storytelling Survey”, where MemoryFox sought to gauge how the nonprofit community feels about their *current relationship* with ethical storytelling & its surrounding topics: trauma-informed language, consent & privacy. We know that in order to drive real change, that it is essential to establish a baseline.

In 2024 & beyond, MemoryFox is whole-heartedly committed to incorporating ethical storytelling practices into all aspects of our work. Thank you for joining us on this journey to a more ethical world.

ETHICAL STORYTELLING SURVEY RESULTS

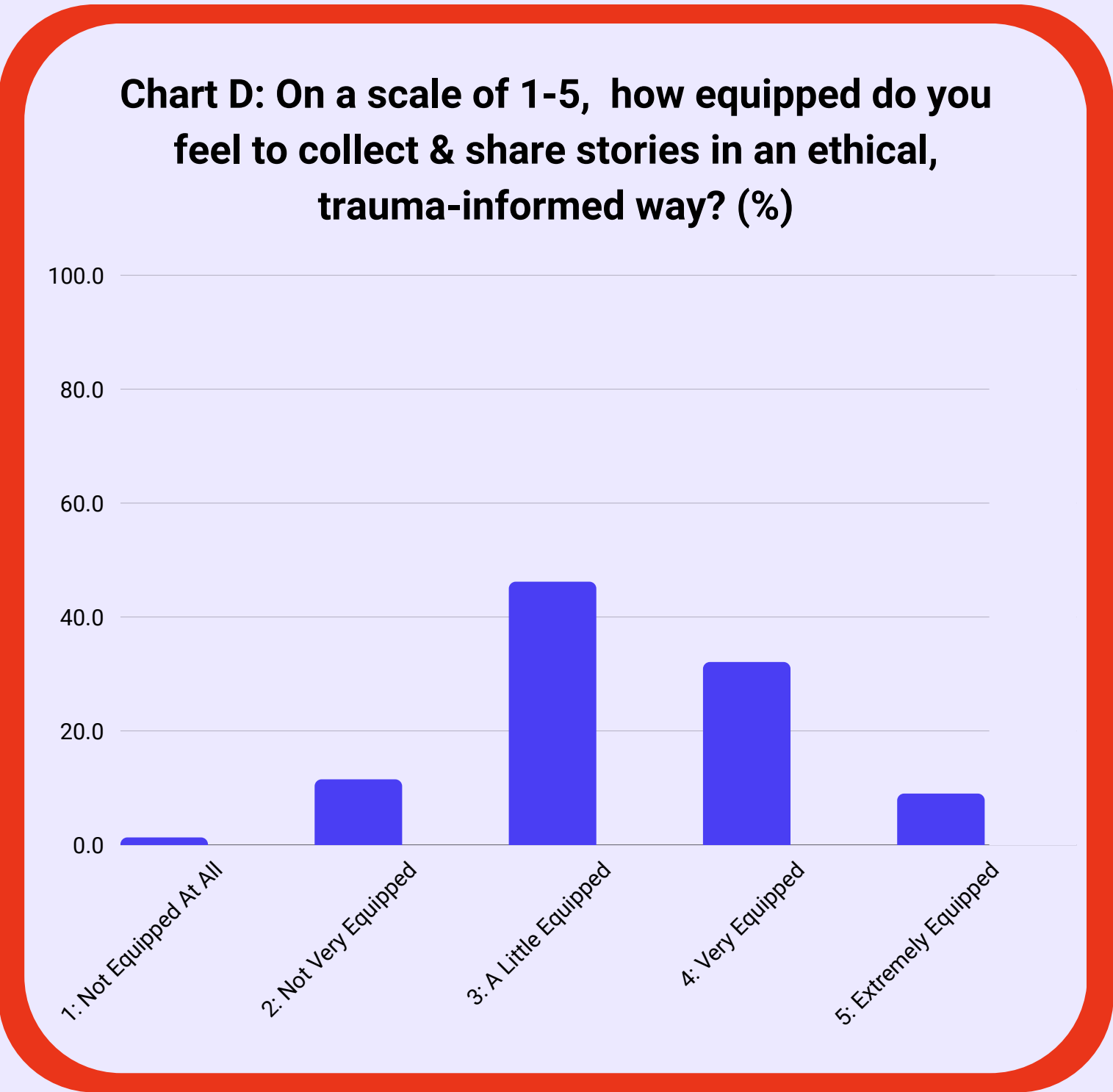
The 2023 Ethical Storytelling Survey was answered by 78 respondents. When asked to identify their relationship to the nonprofit sector, the majority are nonprofit professionals (78.2%), followed by consultants at 11.5% & nonprofit software staff, volunteers or board members at 2.3%, each. 5.1% did not feel these categories described them.



First, we asked respondents to rate how important ethical storytelling is to them **as an individual**. We are proud to report (Chart B) that every single person surveyed rated ethical storytelling as a 3 (*a little important*) or greater. The vast majority, 88.5% of the community, views ethical storytelling as *extremely important*, while 10.3% believes it is *very important*.

Next, we sought to understand how one’s individual values may differ from what they perceive the values of their organization to be. We asked respondents to rate how important they believe ethical storytelling is their **organization**.

Notably, the answers skewed lower on the scale (Chart C), with only 73.1% reporting that they believe their organization finds ethical storytelling to be *extremely important*, while 20.5% think their organization finds it *very important*. 3.8% and 2.6% reported that their nonprofit views this topic as a *little important* or *not very important*, respectively.



Ethical storytelling begins during the story collection process. When considering the methods nonprofits use to collect stories, the answers widely varied, with no one category capturing the majority.

As shown (Chart D), a mere 9% of respondents feel their story collection is *extremely ethical*, while 32.1% feel it is *very ethical*. Respondents were

most likely to answer that their process is *a little equipped*, with 46.2% surveyed. 11.9% admitted that they feel *not very equipped*, and 1.3% said they feel *not equipped at all* to collect stories ethically.

Chart E: On a scale of 1-5, how important is consent when it comes to sharing stories from my community? (%)

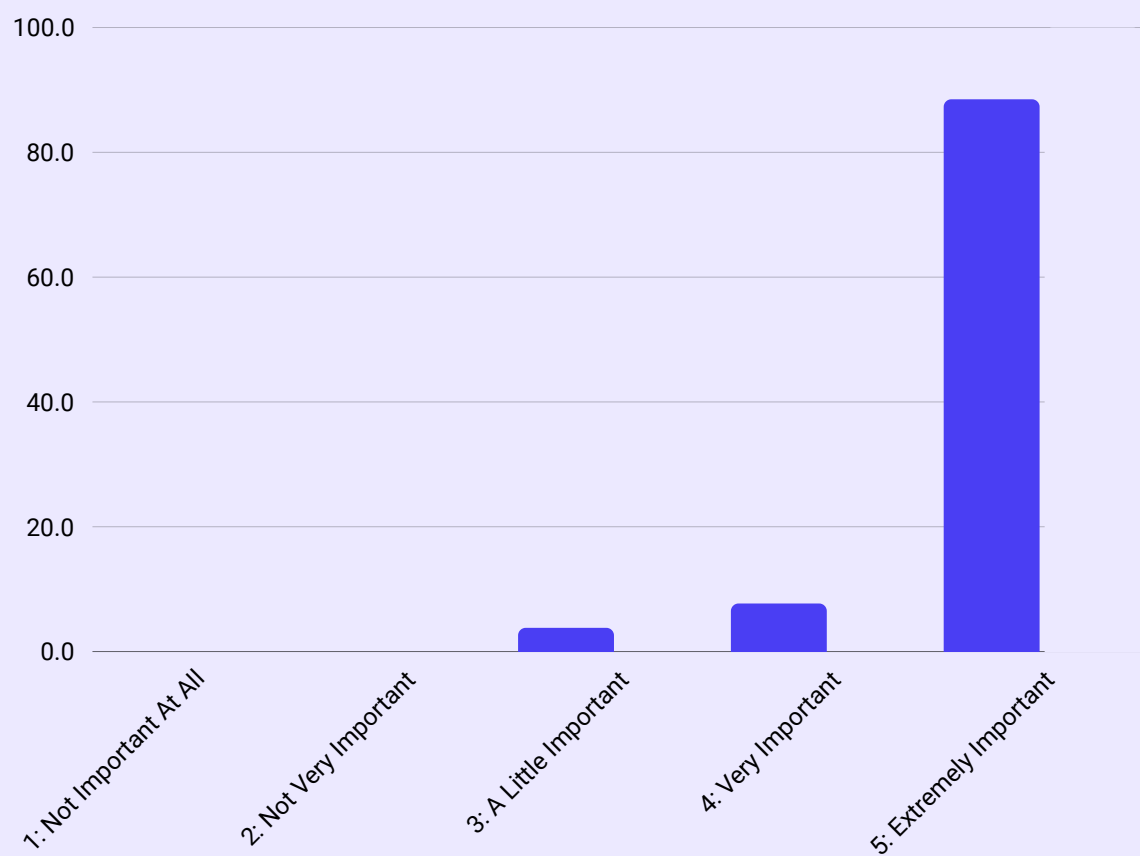
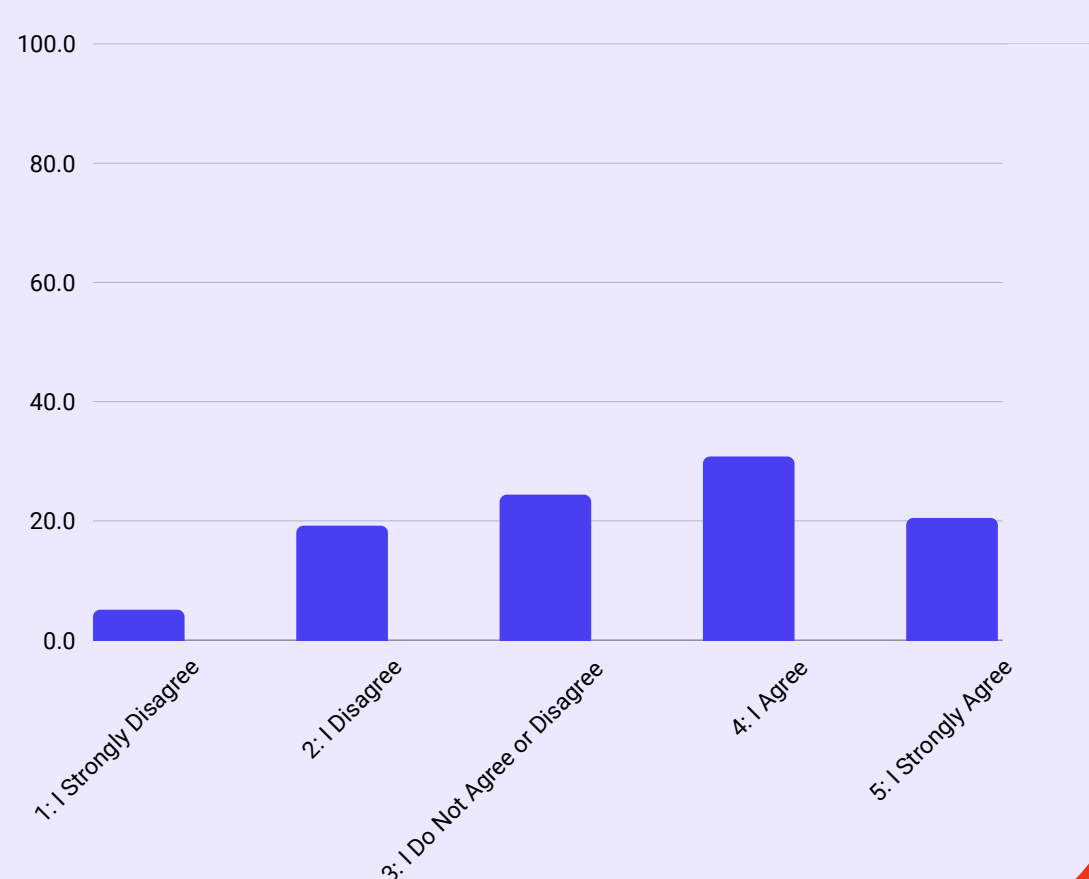


Chart F: On a scale of 1-5, I feel my organization has a solid system in place when it comes to collecting consent for stories. (%)



The most important part of story collection is capturing consent. As shown in Chart E, 88.5% of survey respondents agree that consent is *extremely important*. Quite simply, there is no story to share without the explicit consent from the storyteller.

Despite having the overwhelming majority in agreement about the importance, many feel their organization has not taken the necessary steps surrounding consent collection. Respondents were most likely to *agree* (30.8%) or *neither agree or disagree* (24.4%) when asked if they felt their organization had a solid consent collection system in place (Chart F). A mere 20.5% felt *strongly* about in their current method. The contrast displayed in Charts E & F are staggering, but, thankfully, this report will explore the multi-faceted aspects of consent in coming pages.

There is no single way to tell stories ethically, & **new strategies & language are emerging everyday**. Thus, willingness to learn is an essential aspect of ethical storytelling.

As reported (Chart G), a strong majority, 75.6%, of those surveyed, are *extremely interested* in learning how to tell stories in an ethical, trauma-informed way, followed by 17.9% recognizing that they are *very interested*.

Chart G: On a scale of 1-5, how interested are you in learning HOW to tell stories in an ethical, trauma-informed way? (%)

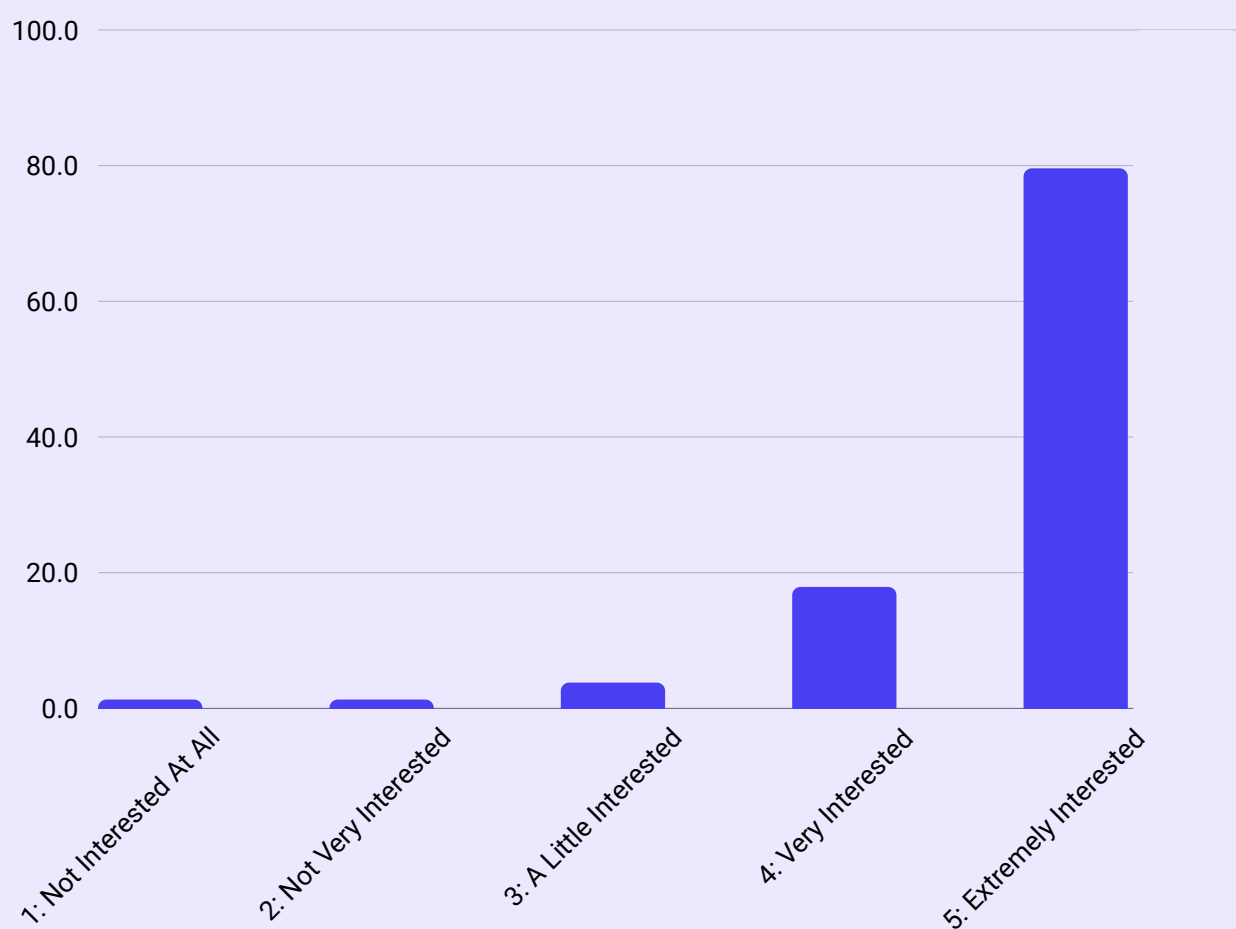
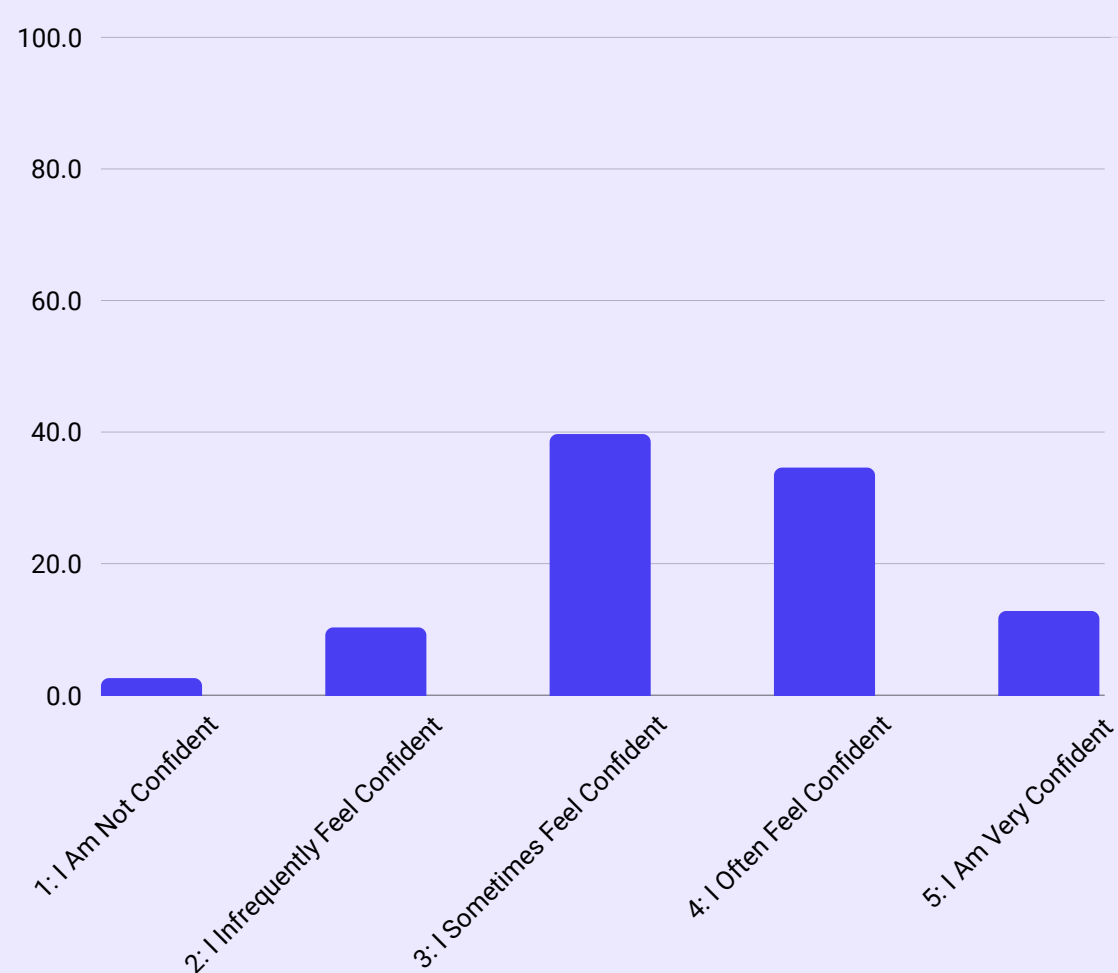


Chart H: On a scale of 1-5, I understand & use trauma-informed language... (%)



However, even if someone is *very interested* to learn about a topic, that does not mean there are adequate, equitable educational resources available. To determine if educational gaps exist, we asked respondents to gauge their understanding & usage of **trauma-informed language**.

The respondents’ answers (Chart H) were widespread, with 12.5% feeling *very confident*, 34.6% *often*

feeling confident, & 39.7% feeling confident *sometimes*. Some respondents admitted to feeling unconfident in themselves, with 10.3% and 2.6% reporting that they are *infrequently* or *not confident at all*, respectively.

We concluded our survey with 10 statements, asking respondents to choose what they felt applied to them. We are delighted to report that more than half of respondents *do not feel pressured* to collect traumatizing stories & have time allotted for educational growth.

However, the **#1 reported feeling was that our sector is struggling** to collect stories while doing *no harm*.

TOP 5 FEELINGS OF 2023:

- 58%:** I struggle with wanting to collect stories from my community while doing no harm.
- 56%:** I do *not* feel pressured to collect sad, traumatic stories to raise more funds.
- 55%:** I have set time aside to educate myself about trauma-informed, ethical storytelling.
- 46%:** I feel the culture of storytelling at my organization is trauma-informed.
- 41%:** I *know* the way we collect stories from our community is ethical.

How do we, as a sector, overcome the feeling that nonprofit story collection might be doing harm to the very communities we seek to support? You’ve come to the right place. In the following pages, **20+ storytelling experts and boots-on-the-ground nonprofit professionals** answer your toughest questions about ethical storytelling, trauma-informed language, consent & privacy.

MEET THE CONTRIBUTORS

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TOPIC #1

ETHICAL STORYTELLING

“

It is our responsibility to do everything we
can to avoid re-activating trauma, &
instead to honor & uplift the community
through their stories.”

FRANK VELÁSQUEZ JR.

WHAT DO I DO IF THE PEOPLE WE SERVE HAVE SENSITIVE STORIES THAT THEY MIGHT NOT WANT TO SHARE?

I love to give my people the opportunity to share their story on their terms. Sometimes it is the way they can give back. I explain the ways that their story could be shared: video, print, meetings with donors. I ask them if I can share them in those environments. I also won't use their name or photo unless they approve. I tell them they have every right at any point to tell me no. Even when I work with children, I ask their permission, even after their guardians have said yes. **We always give our key story family the final yes or no. Even if it is the day before an event.** It is their story & they have every right to share it on their own terms. - **Beth McGorry**

Consider other stories to share that indirectly share the experience of your beneficiaries. For example, frontline **employee & volunteer stories** can imply beneficiary experiences in a personal & beautiful way while also keeping the identities of

those beneficiaries anonymous. - **Chris Miano**

Start by building relationships & letting people know that they *can* share their story, but it's not a requirement of their continued care. Sharing a story is a generous & vulnerable act, so don't let it go unacknowledged.

Update your storyteller on how their story is speaking to the community & making a bigger impact. How well you steward someone's story sets an example that can encourage more people to share their stories, too!

Remind your storytellers that they have ultimate control of their narrative, so underscore their options – anonymity, using pseudonyms, providing their own photos, or limiting the timeframe for their story to be featured. The clearer you are about the story's purpose, placement & why you're sharing it – the more educated someone's decision to share will be. - **Lauren Atherton**

TOPIC #1

ETHICAL STORY TELLING

CONTINUED: WHAT DO I DO IF THE PEOPLE WE SERVE HAVE SENSITIVE STORIES THAT THEY MIGHT NOT WANT TO SHARE?

Having agency & ownership to your story is always important. While some of the people served may not want to share their stories, others may find sharing to be helpful as part of the healing process or they may find strength in how their stories can make an impact for the change. The most important thing is to **respect the wishes of the client & ask**. If you feel their story is powerful & can help others, let them know that but give them the opportunity to make the choice & decision. Don't pre-decide for someone either way. - **Geng Wang**

I approach every interview or conversation with kindness. Listen to what people are saying (& not saying). **Body language speaks louder than words** about whether someone is comfortable sharing their experience. - **Erika Spence**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Camp Ao-Wa-Kiya

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO SHARE STORIES WHILE STILL BEING SENSITIVE TOWARD TRIGGERING OTHERS?

When sharing painful content, it's important to provide **content warnings upfront** so audiences can make informed choices about engaging. Content warnings allow us to share lived experiences while supporting the individual agency & the well-being of our audiences. By clearly labeling distressing material & describing its contents, we enable readers to protect their mental health if needed. Content warnings uphold both the value of sharing one's truth & the value of personal boundaries. - **Maria Bryan**



TOPIC #1
ETHICAL
STORY
TELLING

CONTINUED: WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO SHARE STORIES WHILE STILL BEING SENSITIVE TOWARD TRIGGERING OTHERS?

It is a safe bet is to assume ALL stories are sensitive, either to the person who is sharing them or to the stakeholders reading, sometimes both — and this might not always be made clear for us. We can be good stewards of our stakeholders' stories by being collaborative, honest & communicative.

Especially with collateral like brochures or videos, **we must ensure we have actual consent to use stories — not simply implied consent** — and try like heck to feature people in a dignified, human way; your organization should not portray stakeholders at their lowest, worst-possible moments. And while this isn't widely practiced, if your nonprofit has the means, financial or otherwise, consider providing some support for those whose stories you plan on telling. It will be an incredible demonstration of trust. -

Evan Wildstein

Frame the issue before responding. Kindly state that before you answer, it is our responsibility to do everything we can to avoid re-activating trauma, & instead to honor & uplift the community through their stories. Share how using asset-based language keeps the focus on the aspirations of the community & distinguishes between their resilience versus the systemic inequities that exist. **Words matter; actions speak.**

When we change the formula, we get a different result. A better result.

- Frank Velásquez Jr.



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Wreaths Across America, 2023 Foxie Award Winner, "Campaign of the Year"

TOPIC #1

**ETHICAL
STORY
TELLING**

HOW DO YOU SHARE STORIES WITHOUT BEING EXPLOITATIVE, SINCE WE SUPPORT CLIENTS THROUGH A VERY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE?

I have been sharing my own story for over 10 years & I am an expert on finding ways to share pieces of my life without exploiting myself. The way I have to view it is as a performance. That might sound strange but it protects my mental health.

I've learned I can captivate an audience with the truth & still protect myself also by weaving other people's stories in. I carefully choose what I share & I practice what I am going to say over & over again until I know I can control my emotions. **I have learned that there is absolutely no need to share every single detail of the trauma I have endured.**

When it comes to sharing other people's stories, I ask permission & always, always, always leave them anonymous. While someone may feel good about sharing their story in the moment, there may be a moment of regret or fear after. The same way I pick & choose what specific details I share about my story, I do the same for others. I see how I can get the point across & connect with my community through sharing this story, but not sharing every single detail. It feels more protected this way & still remains effective. - **Jordan Corcoran**

In the past, it was common to perpetuate harmful narratives where our client communities are the "deserving poor" & the org is the "savior." Today, there is a much broader understanding that the work we do to support people exists within a complex framework of intersecting systemic oppression that MUST be named.

It is not an accident that black & brown communities are disproportionately affected by pollution, racism, poverty & public health risks. The systems that caused these impacts were designed that way & any story we tell needs to be positioned with that context. When we tell these stories in an authentic way, it repositions our own mission & understanding of the work not as saviors, but as allies & instigators who truly serve the community & uplift their brilliance & power. - **Elisabeth Noble**



TOPIC #1

**ETHICAL
STORY
TELLING**

CONTINUED: HOW DO YOU SHARE STORIES WITHOUT BEING EXPLOITATIVE, SINCE WE SUPPORT CLIENTS THROUGH A VERY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE?

It requires a delicate balance between advocacy & sensitivity. Here are some strategies:

1. Focus on the Positive:
Emphasize the transformation & positive outcomes your clients experience through your org's support. Highlight the journey from struggle to success without dwelling on the hardships.

2. Client as Ambassador:
Engage with clients who are willing to share their experiences voluntarily. Empower them to tell their stories in their own words, ensuring authenticity & respect. This allows for genuine narratives while maintaining the client's voice & dignity.

3. Prioritize Safety & Confidentiality: Obtain explicit consent & be mindful of any sensitive info that could compromise their well-being or confidentiality.
- **Sabrina Walker Hernandez**

First, be very transparent & upfront with your storyteller on exactly how & where you plan to share their story. Second, allow them to share as many or as few personal details with which they are comfortable. Acknowledge that there may be pieces of their story they want to keep private and let them know that's understandable & okay. Give them ownership of their own story, empower them to have control over what they do & do not share with you. - **Natalie Monroe**

I've found the best way to share stories is to speak directly to the person whose story is being shared. To have a personal, authentic conversation, & then ideally, to share their story in their own words, sharing only what they feel comfortable sharing, in the way they feel comfortable sharing it. - **Rachel Zant**

WHAT DO YOU RECOMMEND TO SAY TO STAKEHOLDERS WHO REQUEST "POVERTY PORN"-STYLE STORIES?

Education & boundary-setting. Stakeholders need a **Brand and Story Standards Guide** from leadership. This may include clear changes in content & messaging from previous years. This should define what poverty-porn is, why it doesn't align with the org's values, and a more effective, ethical way to tell stories that captivate. From there, it may require 1-on-1 conversations with stakeholders who may need more coaching, support, or clarity on the new standards. - **Christina Tzavaras Edwards**

For a long time, that "poverty porn"-style was VERY common, so it's often a case of people really, truly, not knowing that this style is exploitative. I recommend **emphasizing that the people whose stories we're sharing are individuals** & focusing on their comfort & dignity. You may not need to launch into a whole diatribe about ethical storytelling, it might be as simple as saying, "I want to make sure John

feels good about this story, and that we protect his dignity." In other cases, you may find it worthwhile to explain what "poverty porn" is, and why you need to avoid it. - **Megan Donahue**

Not only do "poverty porn"-style stories tend to be unethical, they are also not what your audience wants to see. You want to **share stories that make people want to see more**. Poverty porn makes them turn away. In telling ethical stories, you establish trust and build a relationship with the right people for your mission.

While poverty porn may yield some quick donations out of guilt, it won't result in long-term relationships built on trust and shared values. Ultimately your people want to know they are partnering with you on the solution, and poverty porn only focuses on the problem. Ethical storytelling not only benefits those you serve, but better serves your organization as well. - **Jordana Merkin**



TOPIC #1

**ETHICAL
STORY
TELLING**

TOPIC #2

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE FROM NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE

“

Focus your lens on the angles that are about
the transformation versus the failure.”

NATALIE MONROE

HOW DO WE TELL STORIES ABOUT OUR FAILURES BUT IN A POSITIVE LIGHT?

With honesty, transparency & by sharing what you learned so the program can improve. If the failed project was grant-funded, releasing an article or thought-piece in collaboration with the funder is even more powerful. -

Caliopy Glaros

Stories about failure are pivotal in this arena. Our world doesn't need one more platform that focuses only on the successes. Share stories of failure & let your audience know this is not a filtered version of anyone's life. **Failure is a part of the journey.** We pick ourselves up after every failure, learn & evolve so that we can achieve success. Trust the process & keep going. -

Jordan Corcoran

Focus less on the failure & more on the learning, as well as the action steps moving forward. Naturally, people are more forgiving if they feel there is a plan in place to grow from the experience. -

Chris Miano

There's a sense that we can only share the BIG wins, but I encourage thinking small.

You want to share transformational stories, but that doesn't mean every failure turns into a success—and that's actually not what you want anyway.

Things don't always work out & being authentic - & - ethical in sharing stories will draw your people closer to your mission. Similarly, when telling a story with a smaller transformation, it reinforces the need for your supporters to partner with you in solving the problem your mission addresses (there is more work to be done together!).

Transformation doesn't necessarily mean a complete life turnaround. Maybe someone didn't achieve the thing they set out to do, but the transformation is believing that they could when they didn't previously.

Sometimes it's about taking that first step in the right direction.

When we redefine what failure looks, we open the door to more positivity in partnership with those who are willing to share them. -

Jordana Merkin

TOPIC #2

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

CONTINUED: HOW DO WE TELL STORIES ABOUT OUR FAILURES BUT IN A POSITIVE LIGHT?

Every success is the result of multiple failures. While there is certainly a risk associated with highlighting failure - especially on a regular basis - that can be mitigated with positive framing around the ""outcome"" of that failure. What was learned? **What blind spot do you now see?** How did that failure cause you to adjust your approach? Adversity is our strength. - **Joshua Parrish**

Failures are an opportunity to grow & learn from your actions to make things different the next time around. As a marketer, I try tactics & strategies; some fail & some are successful. **When I “fail”, I see this as an opportunity to be more creative**, to innovate & find a different way to achieve my goal.

So when I tell stories about my failures, I focus on what I have learned & what I will do next. Then, I share what the result was, making a contrast between both actions. - **Marcela Zafra**

Consider all the angles from which you can approach a story. Focus your lens on the angles that are about the transformation versus just the failure.

Perhaps you ask your storyteller the most important thing that they have learned from their experience or how they've grown as a result. Perhaps you ask them to share how their life is different now or to identify what now makes them most proud.

Maybe look ahead & ask your storyteller to share what they are most looking forward to in the future or what aspirations they have. Ask them to share what about their experience makes them happiest.

These are all ways to **allude to the failure** but still depict it with more positive framing.

- **Natalie Monroe**



TOPIC #2

**CHANGING
THE
NARRATIVE**

CONTINUED: HOW DO WE TELL STORIES ABOUT OUR FAILURES BUT IN A POSITIVE LIGHT?

Stories about failure are often very powerful as people are often more able to relate to them than stories of triumph. If it is important to put a positive light on stories of failure, learnings from the failure are always important. Ownership of the failure is equally important when telling the story - the story becomes much less powerful to the listener if you add excuses or try to "spin" the story. Stay authentic & reflect on why you failed - then share that. - [Geng Wang](#)

Stories of failure are an opportunity to be vulnerable, authentic & accountable. These stories build trust with your audience & allow for deeper conversations about innovation & improvement.
- [Erika Spence](#)

HOW DO YOU BALANCE BEING EMOTIONALLY APPEALING TO THE AUDIENCE WITHOUT CAPITALIZING ON TRAUMA?

I recommend when talking to or about someone that has had a life experience you don't understand or relate to consider the golden rule - treat others how you want to be treated. Put yourself in that person's shoes and ask yourself - how would I want to be talked about here? **What would make ME feel seen and empowered?** If someone read a bunch of cold statistics about you & aired your personal struggles to the world, would that make you feel supported or exploited? If someone instead shared the challenges you've been up against but still persisted, how would that make you feel? Speak from there. - [Danielle Miano](#)



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Shade Out DM Foundation, 2023 Foxie Award Winner, "Story Page of the Year"

TOPIC #2

**CHANGING
THE
NARRATIVE**

CONTINUED: HOW DO YOU BALANCE BEING EMOTIONALLY APPEALING TO THE AUDIENCE WITHOUT CAPITALIZING ON TRAUMA?

It's important to remember that the word "emotion" is not synonymous with sadness, despair or anger. There is a full spectrum of emotions that will inspire audiences to give! When I think about impactful storytelling, **my favorite emotions to elicit are hope and relief**. Writing your story in a way that gives the donor hope for the future of your program participant or your overall community is key to inspiring them to open their wallets.

Then, taking it one step further and appealing to a donor's sense of relief - that they can trust that their money will be a part of a real solution - is essential for donor retention. I believe that writing stories where hope and relief are the core emotions helps ensure you are not capitalizing on trauma because you are instead capitalizing on resiliency and growth! Making your community the hero of their own stories.

- Carly Euler

First & foremost, the story always belongs to the person who experienced it. In gathering stories we must center the teller, make the process about them & ensure that they are in control - what they share, what they retract, what they see, what they edit. That said, we tend to think that emotionally appealing stories have to be about Big Trauma or Serious Issues. Our stories don't have to be as big, as traumatic or as awful as we think - we can tell stories on a much smaller scale if we invest in some creativity & trust the power of storytelling.

Agents of Good in Canada did this brilliantly when they told **the story of people experiencing food insecurity through the point of view of the delivery truck!** The key to story is character going through conflict - we can lessen the visibility of the character & soften the conflict while still telling the truth. - T. Clay Buck



TOPIC #2

CHANGING
THE
NARRATIVE

CONTINUED: HOW DO YOU BALANCE BEING EMOTIONALLY APPEALING TO THE AUDIENCE WITHOUT CAPITALIZING ON TRAUMA?

A decade ago, everyone was talking about telling stories with the "donor as the hero". That never sat well with me fundraising for social justice causes because it underplayed the desperately hard work my team & I were doing, & took agency away from the people we served. Now, **I coach my clients to tell stories using my "Powerful WE" framework.** It goes like this: "Client was facing Challenge. They found Nonprofit, and Nonprofit worked with them to overcome that challenge. And Nonprofit was able to be there for Client because you, Donor, were there for Nonprofit and Client. Together as a team, WE made a change." There is a compelling, community-oriented story in that which doesn't require you to focus on the trauma of your client, but rather the joint work of helping our community members overcome that trauma.

I love this example from a client who provides animal-assisted therapy to

domestic abuse victims. "Sue came to us after years in therapy, where she had made no progress in processing her trauma. In her first session with us, as she was brushing one of our horses, she told me 'I wish someone had cared for me the same way I am caring for this horse right now.' A window opened & she shared more with me that day than she did in 5 years of office-based talk therapy." I love the way my client tells this story. She doesn't at all disclose the trauma her clients have gone through, but rather the impact of the intervention; the empowerment they feel on the other side. Every time she talks, it gives me chills.

- Kelly McLaughlin

For nearly a decade, my approach to storytelling has always been to portray the positive & the effect of the impact. **Storytelling should also reflect the brand identity.** Your stories should be the same if your brand personality & tone are friendly, uplifting &

TOPIC #2

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

CONTINUED: HOW DO YOU BALANCE BEING EMOTIONALLY APPEALING TO THE AUDIENCE WITHOUT CAPITALIZING ON TRAUMA?

warm. The emotion shows up when you, through the words & images you use, paint the picture of what your program users are living & the impact your services have.

For example, how I do storytelling for a charity that provides lunches to kids to go to school hungry: I focus on what kids like to do - play! My imagery shows kids playing, smiling & eating. Then, my language is not about the kid who is hungry & struggling; it is about how the community comes together so kids in our city receive the food they need to play, learn & grow. We pull to the emotion with the kids, with all the possibilities and benefits of kids receiving the food they need.

- **Marcela Zafra**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: CT Humanities

HOW DO YOU SHARE HARD STORIES IN A LIGHT-HEARTED WAY? SPECIFICALLY IN SHORT VERSIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA?

A timely hook resonates again & again. From changing seasons to “National Day of __,” **there’s always a way to connect your story to a larger conversation.** For example, on National High Five Day (yep, it’s a thing), I posted a story on social media about how hard work pays off, illustrated by a student & teacher exchanging high fives. The post also thanked the community, volunteers & funders who made that moment possible. - **Erika Spence**

TOPIC #2

**CHANGING
THE
NARRATIVE**

CONTINUED: HOW DO YOU SHARE HARD STORIES IN A LIGHT-HEARTED WAY? SPECIFICALLY IN SHORT VERSIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA?

Humor can be a great tool for addressing heavy issues on social media. While there is always a risk in this approach, the reward for going viral can be huge if done well.

Memes, TikToks or CapCut video clips can capture the frustration & zeitgeist of your community & attract the attention of supporters & donors. The "this is fine" dog in a flaming house is **a good example of a meme that can point to a problematic issue** such as climate change or the housing crisis without veering deeply into negativity & feeding peoples' anxiety around the perma-crisis we currently live in.

While it might be a bit risqué (with some pretty foul language) for some, the "Honest Government Ads" from Juice Media in Australia are another phenomenal example of using humor to talk about difficult topics including human rights & political corruption. Their bold Aussie approach has garnered nearly a million YouTube subscribers & a

solid base of Patreon subscribers who love their sharp, humorous brand.

- **Elisabeth Noble**

There is humor, joy & honesty in real life! Many nonprofits miss this part - though their mission may be very serious, even incurable, the stories they tell can be uplifting, light-hearted & even silly! Giving readers a 360° view is more trust-building than a single narrative that is heavy & serious. Humor is what often gets families through the hardest times - so there are stories of joy to tell... you have to look for them!

- **Christina Tzavaras Edwards**

There is so much "poverty porn" in the world. I feel stories on social media need to leave space for the other side - **the side of hope**. We know this is hard & big, but you can be part of the solution. In dealing with children's hard stories, we are offering people to walk alongside our kids & families & be a part of a solution.

- **Beth McGorry**

TOPIC #2

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

WHAT DO YOU RECOMMEND AS A "POSITIVE-SPIN" IF STORIES ARE FRIGHTENING & RAISE ANXIETY LEVELS? (EX: WILD FIRES, DROUGHT, FLASH FLOODS)

Sadly, "spin" is widely considered only in engagement metrics — how many "likes" something will rack up on social media.

Disaster stories & stories of hardship create short bursts of interest, though they can prevent stakeholders (e.g., donors) from seeing those suffering in their brightest light. If someone has experienced hardship — lost a home, succumbed to an illness, etc. — show them in a dignified way, especially if their story is meant to inspire philanthropy.

The *output* of a donation may help someone buy new clothes or put food on the table, but the *outcome* is how some small corner of their life might be transformed. Again, this part of the story isn't always as "catchy" as the disaster part, but it will cut through the noise & show you who is most interested in helping your org find long-term solutions to big challenges.

- Evan Wildstein

I recommend writing in a way that shows the positive impact that your organization, or the people who support you, will make. How you & your gift will help turn tragedy into triumph or help to combat the impacts of climate change. Donors give to feel good, so share how their support can create positive change.

- Rachel Zant

Focus your story on what was rescued, protected & restored. Use this as an educational opportunity. This can create some incredibly powerful social content & people on TikTok, Reels & Shorts are looking for this. The American Red Cross has gained over 850k followers on TikTok by creating this type of content for their followers.

- Cameron Bartlett



TOPIC #2

CHANGING
THE
NARRATIVE

CONTINUED: WHAT DO YOU RECOMMEND AS A "POSITIVE-SPIN" IF STORIES ARE FRIGHTENING & RAISE ANXIETY LEVELS?

In these situations, it's important to emphasize resilience, hope & community strength:

Highlight Resilience: Focus on how individuals & communities have come together & persevered in the face of adversity. Emphasize the resilience they've shown, the strategies they've employed to cope & the progress made toward recovery.

Showcase Community Support: Highlight the support systems & collaborative efforts that have emerged during challenging times. This could include community initiatives, aid organizations stepping in, or individuals supporting each other, showcasing the human spirit in times of hardship.

Empowerment through Solutions: Shed light on the solutions & proactive measures taken to mitigate future risks or recover from such events. This could involve sharing stories of

preparedness & steps taken towards rebuilding.

Focus on Positive Outcomes: While acknowledging the difficulties faced, emphasize any positive outcomes or lessons learned from these experiences. Highlight personal growth, newfound resilience, or strengthened community bonds can help balance the narrative.

- **Sabrina Walker Hernandez**

In moments of disaster response, I often highlight the hope instead of the devastation. Mister Rogers famously said, "When I was a boy & would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, **"Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."** I don't offer that sentiment to uplift saviorism but as a guidepost to find moments of inspiration, perseverance, commitment, or other community values demonstrating how neighbors care for each other. - **Erika Spence**

HOW DO YOU TELL COMPELLING STORIES ABOUT DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS THAT ARE RECEIVING SERVICES WITHOUT CONTRIBUTING TO STEREOTYPING?

Sharing the stories of vulnerable individuals requires thoughtful care & consideration. As storytellers & activists, how can we uplift their voices in a way that builds empathy yet avoids exploitation?

Fundamentally, we must approach such stories with compassion, nuance, & a commitment to just causes. Here are a few guidelines to consider on this journey toward ethical & trauma-informed storytelling:

- **Obtain informed & enthusiastic consent.** Make sure the person understands how their story will be shared and is willing to have their experience made public.
- **Use sensitive language.** Avoid terminology that might dehumanize or degrade.
- Focus on their **humanity, resilience, & strengths** rather than just their vulnerability.
- **Consider anonymity** if it protects the person yet allows their story to be told.
- **Seek truth & nuance** in your stories. What are the great injustices at play? - **Maria Bryan**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: UNICEF USA

TOPIC #3

TRAUMA- INFORMED LANGUAGE

“

Empathy & care create an environment where vulnerable individuals feel safe, respected & in control *before* sharing their most difficult truths.”

MARIA BRYAN

HOW CAN I ASK CLIENTS TO SHARE THEIR STORIES IN AN TRAUMA-INFORMED WAY?

Tell them they are the owners of their stories. Tell them they will be involved in the process from beginning to end. **Tell them they will have final approval of the final draft.** At the same time, we must remind ourselves that these are not our stories. And because they are not our stories, we must craft them with respect & dignity. - **Frank Valesquez Jr.**

At Stop Soldier Suicide, it's difficult for our clients to share their stories with us. And so we started by asking our team members to share their own personal connections to the cause. This is a great place to start because team members, donors, volunteers may

more easily be able to share their stories with you. - **Cameron Bartlett**

Give people multiple opportunities to say no or change their mind. I understand that can be frustrating when you're working on a story, but I think with trauma working how it does, we can't just count on that first "yes." Making it super clear that they can opt out, that there's no pressure or expectation, that they can stop in the middle, is important. And it has to be true! Check yourself: Are you exerting pressure or an expectation? Do you think on some level that they "owe you" this story? Do not proceed. - **Megan Donahue**

HOW DO I TELL IMPACTFUL STORIES THAT ARE BOTH ENGAGING TO MY AUDIENCE, WHILE STILL DOING NO HARM TO MY COMMUNITY?

TOPIC #3

TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE

I often encourage my clients to look at Marshall Ganz's Public Narrative Framework if they work with people whose stories are sensitive. It's used in community organizing & political advocacy, but it's an amazing way to tell our nonprofit stories in any field. You **start by telling your story of self** (why you got into the work), then the story of us (what change have you created as an organization),

CONTINUED: HOW DO I TELL IMPACTFUL STORIES THAT ARE BOTH ENGAGING TO MY AUDIENCE, WHILE STILL DOING NO HARM TO MY COMMUNITY?

& finally the story of now (why is now such a critical time to take action). With this framework you center the stories on yourself and the organization, & those can be really powerful too...and often rely less on disclosing trauma. - **Kelly McLaughlin**

Draw from this trauma-informed checklist:

1. Sensitive Topic Disclosures/Trigger Warnings:

Use these appropriately to prepare your audience for content that might be distressing.

2. Strengths-Based Language:

Focus on the strengths, resilience & positive aspects of the community's journey.

3. Person-First Language:

Ensure your language prioritizes individuals over their challenges, fostering respect and dignity.

4. Emotional Check-Ins:

Start and maintain sessions with emotional check-ins

to gauge & attend to emotional states.

5. Safety Prioritization:

Highlight how your storytelling considers the emotional & physical safety of your community members.

6. Inclusivity: Ensure cultural inclusivity in examples, language & visuals to represent all community members authentically.

7. No Cultural Stereotypes:

Avoid stereotypes, language, or ideas that could be culturally insensitive or triggering.

By integrating these elements into your storytelling approach, you can create impactful narratives that engage your audience while upholding the well-being and dignity of your community members.

- **Sabrina Walker Hernandez**

TOPIC #3

**TRAUMA-
INFORMED
LANGUAGE**

CONTINUED: HOW DO I TELL IMPACTFUL STORIES THAT ARE BOTH ENGAGING TO MY AUDIENCE, WHILE STILL DOING NO HARM TO MY COMMUNITY?

To be able to tell impactful stories that engage your audience & not harm the community, you have to know your audience deeply & **listen to your community**. Our audience on social media includes a combination of multiple stakeholders. Therefore, understanding what moves each group is crucial to building engagement. You can listen to those you serve & ask questions about your language, content & how they perceive you.

At a nonprofit, we did this, & we learned that families who were part of the program prefer the word "support" rather than "help". & we listened! We changed the language on our website & how we wrote copy for social media. Yes! For donors, we still use the word help, but publicly, we use support because we know those families are reading our newsletter & social posts. - **Marcela Zafra**

DOES TRAUMA-INFORMED STORYTELLING HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY BEFORE THE INTERVIEW?

We must be better educated in trauma-informed language when meeting with our interviewee. We do prep work with them, finding out what their story is & how they want to share it. Knowing the language around the work you are doing every day comes into play.

My biggest fear is to retraumatize one of my families. We are so careful about our language & prepare for it on our end. We also prepare them with the questions & are very open with them about where they want to take their story. **They are heroes for sharing their stories** & we need to give them the space to share it with authenticity and compassion. - **Beth McGorry**

TOPIC #3

TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE

CONTINUED: DOES TRAUMA-INFORMED STORYTELLING HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY BEFORE THE INTERVIEW?

We can strive to create a trauma-informed space leading up to an interview. Empathy & care can create an environment where vulnerable individuals feel safe, respected & in control before sharing their most difficult truths. Here are some suggestions:

- Explain the **interview process** in advance & obtain enthusiastic, informed consent. Make it clear they can stop the interview at any time.
- Allow them to select the **location** where they feel most comfortable. Offer options like their home, a private office, or a peaceful outdoor space.
- Ask if they would like a **support person**, such as a close friend or family member, to attend the interview with them.
- Ask about any **potential triggers** you should avoid. Tailor questions accordingly to minimize distress.
- Have **referral information** ready for affordable counseling, support groups, crisis hotlines, or other relevant community resources.
- Begin with **rapport building** conversation to help them ease in before recounting traumatic memories.
- Reassure them they can **take breaks** at any point if feeling overwhelmed. - **Maria Bryan**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: America's Service Commissions

TOPIC #3

TRAUMA-
INFORMED
LANGUAGE

IS IT OK TO SAY: "I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS, BUT I MIGHT NOT USE SOME OF THE RIGHT LANGUAGE, AND I APOLOGIZE IN ADVANCE FOR THAT"?

I love this phrasing because it shows vulnerability. "I might not know the exact right words to say, but I'm here." That's the start. It's also asking for consent - which is essential to start the interview & I'd even check-in after the interview for a consent-check if they still feel comfortable with the story they've shared. -

Christina Tzavaras Edwards

It's always good to assume a posture of humility; we can't know everything about everything. But I don't recommend apologizing in advance - it does not benefit the listener in any way & makes them feel pressured to forgive you for something you might do, but haven't done yet.

Instead say, *"I'm still learning about this topic & might not have the right words. I welcome your feedback on any of the language I use."* At the end of the interview, you can ask, "Did I capture this correctly? Was there

anything I said or did that you would recommend I do differently in the future?"

- Caliopy Glaros

In 1-on-1 conversations where you are seeking to understand someone, a little bit of vulnerability about where you might be falling short from a language or education about a topic can be a great way to build trust & understanding.

If you are on a panel or speaking on behalf of a topic, it's best to do your research first & if you don't know then the kind thing to do is to say nothing at all. If you have to, **address that you would like to spend more time understanding that topic before commenting.** Stating you might not use some of the right language in public spaces is already doing that community a disservice by making them feel like they weren't important enough to be understood.

- Danielle Miano

TOPIC #3

TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE

CONTINUED: IS IT OK TO SAY: "I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS, BUT I MIGHT NOT USE SOME OF THE RIGHT LANGUAGE, AND I APOLOGIZE IN ADVANCE FOR THAT"?

It is absolutely ok - in fact its not only ok, it's encouraged. When working with any population that is not your own - whether it's because of a situation or their background or their race or gender or physical status, approach it with humility & honesty. *"Please let me say right up front that I will likely not get my words right. I'm here to learn & understand, so please forgive me in advance - & help me learn - so that I don't use the wrong language or phrases."*

Bear in mind - it is not the "population's" response to be the teacher. When working with any underrepresented population, the best thing we can do is **DO YOUR RESEARCH BEFORE** sitting down to talk with them. WE have to do the hard work first. Do not put people in the position of having to teach us or take care of us in the storylistening time. It is about them, not us. But humility & honesty

& vulnerability, as Brene Brown says, go a long, long way. - **T. Clay Buck**

Approach any conversation from a place of seeking to understand & as an opportunity to learn from the client. Don't assume you know all the answers upfront.

I learned the importance of this after an event with elected officials when a client told me, *"They keep referring to us as poor, but I have a job. I'm working class."* Clients want to be heard & recognized for who they are. Now, **I ask people to describe themselves in language** that makes sense to them. I ask clarifying questions to make sure we're on the same page.

As a storyteller, you cannot possibly know the correct language for every situation. Give a client the agency to tell, edit, amend & rewrite their story in their own words. - **Erika Spence**

TOPIC #3

TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE

IS AN ETHICAL DILEMMA ASSOCIATED WITH PAYING PEOPLE, EITHER DOLLARS OR GIFT CARDS, FOR THEIR STORIES?

There is an ethical dilemma in much of the work we do as changemakers where the philanthropic model is built to paper over gaps in broken public systems, but that doesn't mean we should paralyze ourselves with inaction. Luring vulnerable people to share sensitive stories about themselves in exchange for money is certainly not ethical, but nor is using their stories for the benefit of our orgs without compensating people fairly for their labor & lived experience.

The more that orgs can bring people with lived experience directly into their leadership & staff, the less chance there will be for these ethical dilemmas to arise, because the very people choosing to tell their stories will be embedded in the org & will (ideally) already be fairly compensated.

- Elisabeth Noble

Lived experience has incredible value. Sharing

stories of that experience can refine operations & procedures, adjust program delivery & impact communications efforts more than an industry consultant. **Compensating people for their stories & their time demonstrates a level of respect** & dignity for their experience.

- Erika Spence

Honestly, I'm very torn on this. On the one hand, stories & time have value & if we're raising money by sharing someone's experience, maybe we should pay them. On the other hand, this creates a bit of a dilemma. Concerns I'd have: Does money put pressure on storytellers to "make it worth it" & reveal more than they otherwise would? Some of the people you serve are going to have more interesting stories than others; does that create a hierarchy where people with less dramatic stories or compelling personalities feel "less than"? - Megan Donahue

TOPIC #3

TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE

CONTINUED: IS AN ETHICAL DILEMMA ASSOCIATED WITH PAYING PEOPLE, EITHER DOLLARS OR GIFT CARDS, FOR THEIR STORIES?

I believe this depends entirely on the nature of your intent. If you are "buying" stories from people to use (i.e., exploit) for your organization's benefit, that creates a massive, flag-raising ethical issue. However, if someone is kind enough to share a story about lived experience & your organization has the means to help support them in some small way (financial or otherwise), I believe that can be a meaningful demonstration of trust. - [Evan Wildstein](#)

WHEN PREPARING TO CREATE A STRONG STORY, WHAT INFORMATION IS NEEDED? IF TRAUMATIC, HOW TRAUMATIC SHOULD IT BE?

One of the biggest challenges storytellers face is that our brains are hardwired to look for threats. The old journalism adage - *if it bleeds, it leads* is rooted in neuropsychology. As a result, there is a long tradition of capitalizing on the impact that telling traumatic stories can have when trying to capture attention. Fear-based storytelling is statistically proven to keep people glued to their televisions, phones, or newspapers.

But **ethical storytelling is about transcending fear & anger-based narratives** by capturing attention with a deeper & more meaningful connection - by generating hope & enthusiasm. When preparing to create a strong story, we need to keep this goal in mind & focus the narrative on what will inspire hope in the hearts & minds of our audience. If we ask ourselves, "*how can this story be centered in love, joy & liberation?*" we will find the answers we need to tell stories ethically.

It's not necessary to go into gory details when recounting trauma, even if it is a part of someone's story. It can even be as simple as saying, "*trauma is a part of this person's story*" & then pivoting to the positive impact that was co-created by your working together. Focus on creating a meaningful connection between the audience & the subject of the story is most important. Communicate our shared humanity & collective heartbreak at injustice & trauma can be built without digging into triggering details. - [Elisabeth Noble](#)



TOPIC #3

TRAUMA-
INFORMED
LANGUAGE

TOPIC #4

BEST PRACTICES FOR STORY COLLECTION

“

We talk about the questions you will ask...

And ask them what is *off limits*.”

BETH MCGORRY

WHAT ARE YOUR TIPS FOR HELPING PEOPLE FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE AT THE START OF AN INTERVIEW?

Go out of your way to make them feel comfortable & remind them that they are in charge every step of the way. **They can stop at any time, they can say no at any time** & they are under absolutely no pressure to answer any questions or share anything they do not want to. Interviews should be done in a comfortable, neutral environment with absolutely no distractions.

They should feel like they are the absolute number 1 priority at that time and there is no place you would rather be than with them listening to their story. MOST beneficiaries WANT to tell their story. They want others to know what they went through so that others can avoid it. If any beneficiary feels at all coerced, upset, or damaged in the process then we have not done it right.

Remember, too, that the beneficiary is talking to the donor. We're just there to be the conduit between the two. - **T. Clay Buck**

Make sure you have plenty of time to talk with the person you are interviewing. If you're looking at your phone or watch because you've got to keep an eye on time, they'll sense that & it'll feel increasingly like you just need to get in & get out.

I try to make sure I time check with them to see if THEY have somewhere to be so I respect their time, but I make sure I have all the time in the world to chit chat, take breaks, whatever so that they feel comfortable taking whatever time they need. I think it communicates that they are important to me.

Honestly, I increasingly believe the most important thing we can give people is our attention, so make sure you're in a position to give 100% of your attention to show you value them & their story.

- **Kelly McLaughlin**

TOPIC #4

**STORY
COLLECTION**

CONTINUED: WHAT ARE YOUR TIPS FOR HELPING PEOPLE FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE AT THE START OF AN INTERVIEW?

Start slow, with easy questions about their name, their connection with the organization. I ask people to simply tell me a bit about themselves. I often try to share little tidbits of connection that I have with their story. If they mention they have children, I'll say I have some too. If they like to hike or spend time outside... I'll say I do too. This creates a level of trust & connection.

Also a pro tip: At or near the end of the interview, **ask if there's anything they thought you would have asked**, but didn't, or is there

anything else they'd like to share. You'd be surprised by what people will share with you at the end of the interview when they feel relaxed & comfortable. You don't know what you don't know! - **Rachel Zant**

Because of my position & that I am a mental health activist that works for myself, I am able to share my story & my life with the individual so they know there is no judgment & that it is a safe space. Sharing my story gives others permission to do the same. If this is possible for you, it is very effective. - **Jordan Corcoran**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: CT Humanities

TOPIC #4

STORY
COLLECTION

CONTINUED: WHAT ARE YOUR TIPS FOR HELPING PEOPLE FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE AT THE START OF AN INTERVIEW?

Lay out an agenda so people know what to expect and what is coming up next. Ideally you share the questions with the interviewee in advance of the interview. **Provide them with expectations and any "rules of engagement"**, like they can always skip answering a question. I would also provide guidance for how long an answer should be, especially for folks who are not used to doing interviews. Finally, start with questions that allow you to get to know the interviewee better & make them feel heard, including asking them if they have any questions that you should ask them. - **Geng Wang**

Be a gracious host. Conduct the interview in a safe, comfortable place. Offer a drink of water, adjust the temperature, and have a friend, family member, or other supportive face in the room. Share a little about yourself and create a conversation, not a question-and-answer session. - **Erika Spence**

WHAT IS THE BEST APPROACH FOR ASKING TO SHARE A FAMILY'S STORY?

The approach that has worked for me is creating relationships with our families. I am very upfront with the kids I work with about my role at the agency & it's my job to share their stories & give them space to tell them. Our relationship becomes much more transparent.

When we select a family to be our family story, we have many conversations, we talk about where it could be shared. We talk about the questions we will want to ask. And I often ask them what is off limits.



TOPIC #4

**STORY
COLLECTION**

We will meet with a family several times before we do a final taping. We give them the opportunity to look & feel their best on camera, giving them a safe space to share their story. - **Beth McGorry**

WHAT'S THE BEST PRACTICE FOR GATHERING TESTIMONIES FOR THE PURPOSE OF RAISING FUNDS?

Being transparent about the way you intend to use the stories is best for two main reasons. First, being honest about your intentions upfront builds trust, because it **provides clarity & reduces stress for the storyteller**. When they are aware of your intentions, then they are able to visualize exactly how their story will be retold & how that can lead to real outcomes. Often, when someone has agreed to share their story, they want to help the organization! It's important to empower them to do so by providing as much information upfront as possible.

Second, being honest about the way you intend to use their story can help shape the way the individual tells their story. Not everyone is a natural-born storyteller, so setting them up for success by providing targeted questions is best practice.

- Carly Euler

The best practice is always transparency. I start by talking with program staff

& being upfront with the project goal (to raise funds, report to a funder, increase awareness, thank volunteers, etc.). I share the same goal with the person interviewed & an example of a past story so they can read or watch the finished product if such a thing exists.

- Erika Spence

You have the opportunity to honor their story, make sure it's not retraumatizing & ensure it's a story they're proud of. What's important about this goes far beyond the success of that one piece by itself, but it can serve as a template you can show others who are considering sharing.

If people can see how well you could tell their story, they may be more comfortable sharing it. Make each piece you produce an opportunity to invite more people to share their story. Especially if you can help them understand how much of an impact their story could make.

- Cameron Bartlett

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO APPROACH INTERVIEWING BENEFICIARIES WHILE RESPECTING THEIR BOUNDARIES?

The best way to ensure that we're telling ethical stories is to tell them with someone, rather than about someone. The disability community made popular the phrase "nothing about us without us," & it's true for storytelling too.

Of course, we need to get consent before collecting & sharing a story. Beyond that, transparency about how the story will be used & the goals around using it are important in gaining trust so everyone feels comfortable. The storyteller is your trusted partner in this process & they need to know that from the outset. You are all on the same team, working toward the same goal.

Throughout the process, it's important to **remember that the storyteller doesn't owe you anything.** Even if your nonprofit completely

changed their life for the better. With this understanding, it's easier to keep in mind that an approach of openness, transparency & mutual respect benefits everyone.

- **Jordana Merkin**

Have them review the interview questions in advance if that is a possibility. - **Caliopy Glaros**

Do not require them to come to you. Do not give them a deadline. Do not ask them to share their story somewhere that is publicly accessible (YouTube, Facebook, etc.).

Instead, give them the ability to share **"their story" on "their timeline" and "their terms"**. MemoryFox is one of many tools that nonprofits can use to collect powerful, authentic stories from their beneficiaries while completely respecting their boundaries.

- **Joshua Parrish**



TOPIC #4

**STORY
COLLECTION**

CONTINUED: WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO APPROACH INTERVIEWING BENEFICIARIES WHILE RESPECTING THEIR BOUNDARIES?

Here's a guide to approaching client interviews while honoring boundaries:

- **Establish Trust & Consent:** Ensure the client understands how their story will be used. Obtain explicit consent for the interview, making it clear they can withdraw or skip any question.
- **Set Expectations:** Communicate the interview process beforehand, outlining the topics to be discussed.
- **Create a Safe Environment:** Conduct the interview in a private & comfortable setting.
- **Use Open-Ended Questions:** Frame questions in a way that allows clients to share at their own pace & comfort level.
- **Active Listening & Empathy:** Be mindful of verbal & non-verbal cues indicating discomfort or distress. Pause or redirect if needed.
- **Respect Silence & Pauses:** Allow for breaks if the client needs time to collect their thoughts or emotions.
- **Avoid Re-traumatization:** Steer clear of triggering topics & focus on their strengths & positive experiences whenever possible.
- **Be Flexible & Respectful:** If the client expresses discomfort or reluctance, be respectful & adapt the conversation accordingly.
- **Follow-Up Support:** Offer support or resources after the interview. Reiterate your willingness to provide further assistance if needed.



TOPIC #4

STORY
COLLECTION

- **Review & Confirm:** Before concluding, review what was discussed, ensuring accuracy & confirm consent for using the information shared. - [Sabrina Walker Hernandez](#)

TOPIC #5

VISUAL AND VIDEO STORYTELLING

“

With the rise of AI, especially AI that can
generate images *within seconds*,
audiences are going to become
increasingly skeptical of online images.”

CARLY EULER

HOW DO YOU HANDLE BEING ABLE TO TELL A STORY WITHOUT USING ACTUAL IMAGERY OF THE STORYTELLER?

When using photos or videos of the storyteller is not an option, consider these approaches:

- **Use Symbolic Imagery:** Instead of showing faces or specific individuals, use symbolic or abstract imagery that represents the essence of the story. For instance, for the *spouse abuse shelter*, an image of a packed bag in a closet can symbolize the journey to safety without revealing identities.
- **Visual Metaphors:** Employ visual metaphors that evoke emotions & convey the narrative indirectly. For the *homeless shelter* example, a transition from a cardboard box used for sleeping to an image of the same box repurposed as moving boxes could symbolize the journey from homelessness to a new home.
- **Artistic Representations:** Consider using illustrations, artwork, or creative visuals that capture the essence of the story without depicting real individuals. This allows for artistic interpretation while protecting anonymity.
- **Testimonials or Voiceovers:** Consider using voiceovers or written testimonials from individuals sharing their stories. Focus on their experiences, emotions & the journey without revealing their image.
- **Focus on Details:** Highlight specific details or elements of the inanimate objects that convey the emotions, struggles & resilience of the individuals without directly showing their faces or identities.

By employing these storytelling techniques, you can create compelling narratives that honor the experiences of individuals without compromising their privacy. - [Sabrina Walker Hernandez](#)



TOPIC #5

VISUAL STORY TELLING

CONTINUED: HOW DO YOU HANDLE BEING ABLE TO TELL A STORY WITHOUT USING ACTUAL IMAGERY OF THE STORYTELLER?

Consider supporting visuals that may symbolize themes you want to convey: hands, a teddy bear, a knot. Brainstorm with your team & **use images that evoke powerful feelings** but don't reveal the identity of the storyteller. - **Chris Miano**

Take your time to map it out. Curate the message & practice, practice, practice. Show it to others & see what they take away from the story & make sure your mission is being accomplished. - **Jordan Corcoran**

Use photos of the site, building place, hands, backs of heads, shadows, etc. Or **use real photos of people who don't have to be anonymous**, like staff members or case workers. - **Caliopy Glaros**

Illustration is your friend in these situations! My friends at Agents of Good are experts in this arena - using illustration to depict situations & stories that can't be captured in photos. - **Rachel Zant**

WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON USING STOCK IMAGES? COULD THIS BE SEEN AS MISLEADING TO POTENTIAL DONORS?

A picture is worth a thousand words, especially when you're telling an impactful story! Using stock photography can enhance visual appeal, but it carries a lot of weight & the potential for misinformation. Stock photos that are "too polished" or "too gritty" can be equally misleading. **Transparency is key** & if you're using a free stock image be sure to add a footnote with the source. Photos of your location, team, or programs should be the real deal.

We've worked with several organizations that cannot share photos of the people they serve in order to protect their identities. If they had photos we could use, we strategically covered up their faces. If stock images are your only option, build up a library of photos that feel true to your brand & aren't directly associated with an individual story. As much as possible, sharing pictures of real people are way more effective! - **Lauren Atherton**



TOPIC #5

**VISUAL
STORY
TELLING**

CONTINUED: WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON USING STOCK IMAGES? COULD THIS BE SEEN AS MISLEADING TO POTENTIAL DONORS?

I highly recommend sticking to real, authentic photos & videos whenever possible.

With the rise of AI, especially AI that can generate images within seconds, audiences are going to become increasingly skeptical of online images. The more authentic your content, the more relatable your brand will be to real people (and real people are the ones who donate, right??). Getting creative with voiceovers, b-roll & images that do not have people in them might be a good option for you!

If you do find yourself in a situation when you must use a stock image, I believe you owe it to the person consuming the content to share that it is a stock image. In fact, this would be a good opportunity to explain why you were not able to use real content - perhaps due to privacy, safety or accessibility - which further informs them of the complexity of your mission. The transparency will be appreciated

by your audience.

- **Carly Euler**

I believe stock images are helpful in certain situations. But I think we do a disservice to those we work with when images are not authentic. I don't believe in purchasing stock pictures. I think there are ways for agencies to create their own while honoring the people and places we work with. -

Beth McGorry

I have a client that, when they can't use a photo of the person, uses illustrations done by a client in their program. Since it's an illustration, it's obviously not the person they are telling stories about. I do believe photos are important, but the idea of using stock images made both the client & me uncomfortable. One of the people they serve is a brilliant painter & he made a painting to go with the story. It was absolutely beautiful...and then we had the story of the painting to share in another email. Win-win! - **Kelly McLaughlin**

TOPIC #5

VISUAL STORY TELLING

CONTINUED: WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON USING STOCK IMAGES? COULD THIS BE SEEN AS MISLEADING TO POTENTIAL DONORS?

My take is that stock photos or AI generated images can be appropriate, especially if someone wants their story to be told, but not identified personally. In cases like this, the stock or AI imagery should always be clearly credited as being so. Just as I would always want to credit a creator with any visuals being used to accompany any stories, so too would I want it to be clear that stock imagery is being used to protect the identity of the storyteller.

Consent, honesty & clarity are key to avoiding confusion or being misleading.

Generally, I find that there is a greater concern with the CONTENT of imagery, more than the source: we want to avoid "poverty porn" & other

fear-based imagery which might perpetuate harmful stereotypes. - **Elizabeth Noble**

There is a place for stock images if they relate to the story. Sometimes, I conduct interviews over the phone or in a way that doesn't allow images to be captured in real-time.

For example, a recipient of a food bank home delivery program told me he learned to cook different recipes after receiving zucchini & spaghetti squash. I didn't have a picture of his specific produce box, but sharing images of those two ingredients helped the viewer – & funder – connect with him in a way that just words on the page wouldn't. - **Erika Spence**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Brown Bagging for Calgary's Kids

TOPIC #5

**VISUAL
STORY
TELLING**

HOW DO YOU EFFECTIVELY SHARE STORIES WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE THE BUDGET & MANPOWER TO MAKE A WELL-EDITED VIDEO?

Organic, authentic, raw stories are often the ones that are most relatable. Authenticity is what builds trust with your audience. These types of videos are what people crave nowadays. You don't always need a big, produced piece; smartphones are really powerful devices for capturing video footage & short snippets are more digestible. Plus, Canva has a powerful video editor that turns you into a pro without any video editing experience! - **Natalie Monroe**

The most effective stories don't need to be highly produced. Authentic, high impact stories can be on-the-fly iPhone style. TikTok & Reels are proof of that! - **Christina Tzavaras Edwards**

Not everything has to be slick & glossy & "well-edited." Some of the best & most compelling videos we saw during the pandemic were shot with shaky cell phones in bad lighting. Donors don't want "Brand" -

they don't want slick & professional & well-edited & perfect. They want to know the truth & they want to know that they can do something to help. Very often the less edited & "clean" the better the response. This is why we do direct mail with underlines & circling & prompts - humans are messy & there's no better way to prove that this is humans connecting with humans than by letting our flaws show through. - **T. Clay Buck**

I would try two things. The first is to keep your questions simple so the answers are relatively brief. This eliminates many of the editing issues that come up. So less open-ended questions. The second is to remember that, like anything else, oftentimes having something is much better than nothing at all. Or as they say, don't let perfect be the enemy of good. And remember, the more you do something the better you'll get at it. - **Geng Wang**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Arbor Day Foundation, 2023 Foxie Award Winner, "Storyteller of the Year"

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHEN AN ANONYMOUS STORY WITH A STOCK PHOTO IS WORTHWHILE, APPROPRIATE & ETHICAL?

Some people are open to sharing their stories, as long as it doesn't tie back to them. And in some cases, like when working with the International Justice Mission, there were open court cases we were working on & the identity of our clients who were rescued was vital for us to keep anonymous. That included many details of the case & their story — not just their names.

The question you might ask is, *"Will donors connect with a highly-redacted story?"* **The reality is, if you're upfront with people, they care a lot less that you've changed details** & are still able to become emotionally invested in the story.

At times, we've changed names, used representation photography, used actor portrayals in videos, changed ages, locations, components of the story, all to protect the identity of the people we were serving. When we added those disclaimers to our posts, emails, landing pages, etc. people were fully in support of us protecting them. In fact, it actually helped them gain trust in us, because we were being so intentionally protective & responsible.

- Cameron Bartlett

TOPIC #5

**VISUAL
STORY
TELLING**

TOPIC #6

CONSENT AND PRIVACY

“

They should have the *ABSOLUTE RIGHT*
to review & approve any content that
includes their story before it is published
or released in any form.”

T. CLAY BUCK

HOW CAN WE ENSURE OUR CONSENT AGREEMENT INFORMS & PROTECTS EVERYONE INVOLVED?

Creating a consent agreement that informs & protects all involved parties requires a multi-faceted approach. First & foremost, it's crucial to ensure clarity, transparency & voluntariness in the agreement's language & purpose. Participants must fully understand what they're agreeing to, the potential implications & their rights within the context of the agreement.

Next, **seeking legal review serves as an added layer of assurance.** Legal experts bring a specialized understanding of laws & regulations, ensuring the document minimizes any risks or liabilities. Their involvement not only bolsters the agreement's legitimacy but also helps safeguard the interests & rights of all parties involved.

Legal scrutiny contributes significantly to the document's robustness by verifying its accuracy, compliance & enforceability. This process helps in identifying & addressing any legal intricacies or potential pitfalls that might not be immediately apparent, ultimately enhancing the agreement's ability to inform & protect everyone involved.

- **Sabrina Walker Hernandez**

ARE THERE WAYS TO EDUCATE YOUR AUDIENCE ABOUT ANONYMITY & PRIVACY? FOR EXAMPLE: "HERE IS WHY YOU WON'T ALWAYS SEE PERSONAL STORIES"

TOPIC #6

CONSENT AND PRIVACY

Yes, you definitely want to educate the audience, but try to frame it in terms of what they are seeing, not what they are not seeing. Instead of saying "here are the stories we can't share" **say, "here are the types of stories we share...and why".** Instead of saying "We will not show you actual photos of clients," say "We respect our clients' privacy & will only show photos in line with this principle." Tell people what they are getting, not what they are not getting. - **Caliopy Glaros**

HOW DO I TELL A DETAILED STORY WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE PRIVACY (& AT TIMES SAFETY) OF MY CLIENT?

Ask. Ask if there are things the storyteller doesn't want included. Ask what privacy means to them. **Ask if there are dangers or sensitivities that are important to consider.**

Then, think like a detective as you review your story. Which details could you use to identify someone? Are locations named or pictured? If you wished this person harm, is there anything in the story that could help you do it? *"Kara moved with her son & two daughters back to her parents' home in Detroit"* has a LOT of information, none of it terribly important for understanding the story or inspiring fundraising. *"Kara & her children moved in with her family"* tells the story without revealing more than it needs to. - **Megan Donahue**

Crafting **composite stories** is a great way to tell a detailed story without compromising privacy.

Instead of featuring one person's story, use recurring themes & elements from several of your program participants to create one combined story. A composite story is a compelling, accurate way to convey your impact to your audience without providing identifying factors. One thing to note, let your audience in on what is happening! Educate them that the stories you share are representative, not verbatim & explain why this strategy is essential for your nonprofit storytelling. - **Carly Euler**

My favorite lines are "I have a kiddo..." "I have a mom..." But I ask permission to share that story. I also believe people only need a snapshot of a situation to keep all involved safe and protected. I have had people ask me who I'm speaking about & I always respond with you know I need to protect the families I work with. - **Beth McGorry**



TOPIC #6

**CONSENT
AND
PRIVACY**

CONTINUED: HOW DO I TELL A DETAILED STORY WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE PRIVACY (& AT TIMES SAFETY) OF MY CLIENT?

When sharing traumatic personal narratives could endanger vulnerable individuals, storytellers should consider producing composite stories. Storytellers can conceal identifying information by compiling details from multiple sources into a single anonymous story while still bringing vital issues to light. - Maria Bryan



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Wreaths Across America, 2023 Foxie Award Winner, "Campaign of the Year"

SHOULD PEOPLE SIGN A PHYSICAL AGREEMENT BEFORE SHARING THEIR STORY (VS. AGREEING VIA EMAIL/CALL)?

While we should always assume good intent on behalf of those whose stories we tell, I believe it is helpful to have some clear, **tangible way to track someone's approval.**

TOPIC #6
CONSENT AND PRIVACY

Although we're a very litigious society & something formally written (contract, MOU, etc.) may be helpful, at the very least you might consider having someone clearly agree to some basic terms via a medium you can track — email, text message, etc. That said, if something is ever in question, it is never a bad idea to run the specific situation by a trusted legal advisor. - Evan Wildstein

CONTINUED: SHOULD PEOPLE SIGN A PHYSICAL AGREEMENT BEFORE SHARING THEIR STORY (VS. AGREEING VIA EMAIL/CALL)?

Yes, absolutely. It protects the person sharing their story & the organization. It should not be a legally binding document with tons of legalese, but it should lay out the expectations, how their story will be used, their rights in telling the story & allowing the organization to use it with the absolute caveat, in writing, that the beneficiary can change their mind at any time & is in full control of what is shared.

They should also have the ABSOLUTE RIGHT to review & approve any content that includes their story before it is published or released in any form. - **T. Clay Buck**

Yes yes yes yes!
- **Jordan Corcoran**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Camp Ao-Wa-Kiya

For legal purposes, this can be a good idea, but not with every community. For example, in many Indigenous legal orders, public storytelling in a group setting is what is considered legally binding. People can be called as witnesses - in effect to act as a living library - to witness & record agreements made between people & orgs.

In North America, many treaties were signed & broken between colonizers & Indigenous Peoples, so while a signed legal document might protect your org in the colonial courts, it might not protect you from impacts in the community you work with.

Understanding your community, their expectations & clarifying consent repeatedly is essential to gathering & telling stories in an ethical way. - **Elisabeth Noble**

TOPIC #6

**CONSENT
AND
PRIVACY**

TOPIC #7

BUILDING A CULTURE OF STORYTELLING

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You're all on the *same team*, working together toward the same goals, with your beneficiaries as your partners.

JORDANA MERKIN

HOW DO WE CONVEY THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLECTING STORIES TO OUR PROGRAM STAFF?

Program staff are often THE PEOPLE who are witnessing the best stories in action... but it can be hard to document. **Creating an easy SOP** for them whether it's using MemoryFox or some other way to remember the story in real-time is so important. Snapping a photo, writing a quick quote from a client in their Notes app, or even a quick Voice Memo are great options. - **Christina Tzavaras Edwards**

Show or share how your donors respond to stories & how stories make a tremendous difference to the amount of money you can raise, which in turn impacts the work your program staff are doing.

Also, try to make it fun, have an incentive program for staff who share stories. I worked at an organization that offered a gift card to program staff if their submitted story was used in an appeal. - **Rachel Zant**

Make it a regular practice to elevate their story too! - **Chris Miano**

You need to share with staff members that storytelling, something they might see as an extra task, could actually ease their workload & significantly benefiting those they serve. The stories collected from those they help aren't just narratives; they're tools that can lighten their load & bring more support to our clients. How? When we share stories, we're inviting others into our mission.

Staff need to understand that more people offering support means less strain on them. It's a way to amplify their impact without adding extra weight to their daily tasks. By showcasing their client stories, they're not just raising awareness; **they're inviting additional hands to assist those we're dedicated to serving.**

It isn't about creating more work. It's about working smarter, leveraging the power of storytelling to ease their load while securing more resources & assistance for their clients. - **Sabrina Walker Hernandez**

TOPIC #7

CULTURE OF STORY TELLING

CONTINUED: HOW DO WE CONVEY THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLECTING STORIES TO OUR PROGRAM STAFF?

Build a culture of trust, camaraderie & shared vision - This has to come from leadership. Reassure program staff that the beneficiary is in charge of the process, respected & honored & the story will be used fairly, truthfully & appropriately. Let them be involved in the process, but let's not expect them to be the creative storyteller - all we need are facts. And remember that we don't have to tell the stories of the worst things they see & experience. Some times things that they think are minor or irrelevant make the best stories.

One of the most effective campaigns I ever did was about paper towels - they had run out of paper towels while making lunches for homeless youth, so we told the story that "the only thing standing between a kid who's hungry & a healthy meal is a paper towel." Donors loved the reality of it & it involved Program Staff in being a part of what we invite donors to engage in.

Again, our job is to connect the programs & the staff. And, by the way, let's tell the stories of our Program Staff. THEY are the ones doing the work the donor is supporting! - **T. Clay Buck**

When I was an on-staff fundraiser, I spent a lot of time with the program staff (I refused to stay in my little fundraising silo). I used my donor coffee meeting budget to also take my program staff out for coffee so that I could build relationships with them as much as my donors. I made sure to go to happy hours when they were celebrating a program victory. **I would share what I was doing with donors, what kind of communications we were sending & how they could help me.** I'd ask them about challenges they had & what extra budget money they might need to solve those challenges, so I could look for funding for those issues. When they understood why helping me helped them, they would bring me ALL the stories. - **Kelly McLaughlin**

TOPIC #7

CULTURE OF STORY TELLING

CONTINUED: HOW DO WE CONVEY THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLECTING STORIES TO OUR PROGRAM STAFF?

You show them. Show them the impact of not having stories. And make them feel like **they are just as important part of that process** as the storytellers are, because a story isn't just about the person you're helping. It's about the village that makes it happen.

- Danielle Miano

We have an amazing program team. We work with them to collect great stories. They are part of our selection of families & kids that we share stories about. I love when I hear from a team member that they saw their story or their picture being used. We have worked hard to stay connected to the team. I have to ask them to tell me more, because there is always more to a story. I see them as our partners in this process.

- Beth McGorry

Getting buy-in from programs to help collect stories is a challenge. My approach has been to **include program staff in ethical storytelling training**, collaborate with them in building our storytelling guidelines & parameters, & have a transparent process where they feel included & in control.

I also bring up the importance of sharing stories in all of my meetings to raise brand awareness, which will eventually boost our volunteer recruitment efforts & fundraising. -

Marcela Zafra

Tell them about the impact stories have. If you believe in the power of storytelling then tell them a story or anecdote on how sharing a story has had a positive impact on the program. Perhaps a donor really came around after hearing a story. Perhaps a client believed in themselves more after hearing a story shared. - Geng Wang

TOPIC #7

CULTURE OF STORY TELLING



Nonprofit Photo Credit: DAV

HOW DO YOU EDUCATE & IMPLEMENT NEW LANGUAGE TERMS ACROSS THE STAFF, BOARD, VOLUNTEERS, ETC.?

Having a messaging guide in writing is an important piece of onboarding staff, board members, volunteers, etc. It should include your organization's preferred language around your work & those you serve, along with **what words not to use, which can often speak louder than the words you do use.**

Including ethical storytelling guidelines is also a good way to familiarize your team with the ways you write & speak about your organization & your beneficiaries. It's a good way to reinforce that you're all on the same team, working together toward the same goals, with your beneficiaries as your partners.

All materials & communications should reflect the language in your messaging guide, so that you present a cohesive & clear message—continuing to educate & inform your people internally and externally. - **Jordana Merkin**

They should attend workshops that address how to use asset-based language, how to engage donors using community-centered practices & how to ask for unrestricted donations. Workshops like these help stakeholders better frame stories, narratives & asks that ultimately uplift communities & unrestricted funds so that nonprofits can holistically do the work to achieve the mission. - **Frank Valesquez Jr.**

Schedule time during your next board meeting & staff meeting to present the new terms, discuss WHY you are making these changes & leave room for questions without judgement. Then, practice, practice, practice! - **Carly Euler**

We have a brand guidelines document that I maintain, update & share as more significant changes or shifts happen. We also have an annual speaker's bureau training for staff, board members & volunteers/brand ambassadors, covering language updates, programs & impact statistics. - **Erika Spence**



TOPIC #7
CULTURE
OF STORY
TELLING

HOW DO YOU TEACH YOUR TEAM MEMBERS TO USE THESE SAME PRINCIPLES WHEN INTERACTING WITH YOUR AUDIENCE?

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO A PARENT WHO THINKS YOU ARE "SHOWCASING THEIR CHILD" RATHER THAN SHARING THEIR MARVELOUS STORY?

Create a "best practices" document & distribute it across your organization. **Hold a staff meeting where you gather your entire team & review these best practices**, share strategies, showcase relevant examples & field any questions around these principles. Consider making this an annual meeting. Then when stories are collected that do this well, highlight those for everyone to see. - **Natalie Monroe**

Take the time to teach your entire team (including leadership & board members who may be more apprehensive to change) that when you create a culture that prioritizes ethical storytelling, then you, collectively, can take comfort in knowing that any stories you chose to share with your audience will have been ethically sourced & approved for use by your storytellers.

As the nonprofit ecosystem continues to adopt more ethical frameworks with regards to philanthropy, fundraising & advocacy - it will become increasingly important for organizations to invest in tools & training that create a similar framework for their impact storytelling process.

Ethical storytelling is not a fad, it is here to stay. The sooner your team commits to these principles, the more successful your nonprofit will be. - **Joshua Parrish**



TOPIC #7

CULTURE OF STORY TELLING

Parents should always have a chance to review/approve stories about their children before being made public. **Children, in most states, cannot legally provide consent for themselves**. If there are trust issues with parents, that means there is a breakdown in the process. Have the parents review the story in advance. - **Caliopy Glaros**

TOPIC #8

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

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A compelling, well-crafted story has
the potential to *transcend bias* by
eliciting empathy, emotional
connection & understanding.”

SABRINA WALKER HERNANDEZ

HOW DO YOU TELL COMPELLING STORIES ABOUT DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS WITHOUT CONTRIBUTING TO STEREOTYPING?

Through telling the story of ONE. One person, one event, one thing. Human brains can really only conceptualize & develop affinity for one thing. We can't process what it means to say, for example, there are 1,00,000 hungry children. Tell the story of one, make them human (or human-like - personification of inanimate objects or animals do WONDERS), make them relatable & recognize that nothing else matters. The key is that the situation - the conflict that the mission & the ask promises to solve with the donor's help - is never the character's fault. Present them with dignity & with worth & the recipients will connect to the human.

And say it outright:
"Homelessness is never a character trait. Addiction is not a flaw or a mistake. Every human deserves dignity & hope."

Let's not hide the reality of being a human going through trouble - because our donors may not relate to the exact situation we're discussing, but they know what it's like to be scared, lonely, hungry, etc. Our job is to present situations with truth, with dignity, with joy - & invite the donor to be a part of the best side of human nature - generosity. - **T. Clay Buck**

Before you can avoid playing into stereotypes, you need to know what the prevalent stereotypes that are applied to those populations are. **Digging into your own bias will be important**, along with historical attitudes & widespread misconceptions. Try to present the entire picture: there's more to people than "receives services" & "is disadvantaged". - **Megan Donahue**

TOPIC #8

DEI



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Blessman International, 2023 Foxie Award Winner "Photo of the Year"

CONTINUED: HOW DO YOU TELL COMPELLING STORIES ABOUT DISADVANTAGED POPULATIONS WITHOUT CONTRIBUTING TO STEREOTYPING?

Start by not using deficit-framed language. Words like "disadvantaged" & "underserved" conjure stereotypes just by virtue of our brains associating them with certain groups. Narratives that use deficit-framed language blame those who are left behind for their predicament rather than the policies & practices that perpetuate oppressive & inequitable systems. We need to disrupt that bias in our brains. Instead of implying connections between the problems at hand & the traits of the communities experiencing them (which leads to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes), asset-based language connects systemic disparities with their systemic causes. - [Frank Valesquez Jr.](#)

TOPIC #8

DEI

IS IT IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER THAT EVERY DONOR WILL READ THE STORY WITH A PRECONCEIVED BIAS?

While it's not accurate to assume that every donor will approach a story with a preconceived bias, it's crucial to acknowledge that biases can influence how individuals interpret narratives. Donors, like anyone else, bring their own experiences, beliefs & perspectives to the table when engaging with a story. These pre-existing viewpoints might shape how they perceive & connect with the narrative.

However, this doesn't mean that every donor's bias will inherently hinder their ability to engage with a story. In fact, **a compelling, well-crafted story has the potential to transcend biases** by eliciting empathy, emotional connection & understanding. The key lies in how the story is presented—its authenticity, relatability & the emotions it evokes. A well-told story fosters a deeper connection between the donor & the cause by appealing to shared human experiences and values.

While it's impossible to completely eliminate biases, acknowledging their existence & striving to present stories in a relatable manner can help bridge gaps & resonate more universally with donors, regardless of their initial predispositions - **Sabrina Walker Hernandez**

HOW DO YOU PREVENT "CHECK LISTING" THIS WORK AS DEI VS. COMMITTING THESE PRINCIPLES TO HOW COMMUNICATIONS SHOULD BE DONE?

Do the research. What does your community really need to feel supported? Make sure someone with lived experience has a seat at the decision-making table. Do your healthcare benefits, language you use in everyday communications & physical spaces (bathrooms) really make your community feel welcome? - **Danielle Miano**

They are one in the same. **Ethical storytelling is DEI work.** By committing to these ethical storytelling principles you will be doing DEI work & therefore will avoid check listing. - **Frank Valesquez Jr.**



TOPIC #8

DEI

HOW DO YOU WRITE STORIES FOR UPPER-CLASS, WHITE DONORS THAT RESONATE ABOUT WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE OF COLOR WITHOUT WHITEWASHING THEIR EXPERIENCES?

By getting rid of our own biases & preconceived notions with these classifications. Look at our donors as "people who care who can, and want to, help". **It doesn't matter how much money they have or what class of society they're in** - or what race they're from. They care about the problem and they want to help. The people we're helping - the organization's beneficiaries - are humans, too, regardless of their income level, their race, their background, anything.

We connect humans to humans. Period. The situations, the problems, our beneficiaries face are not character flaws, they are not faults - we present them truthfully, honorably, and with respect . . . and we hold the same view of our donors. Tell them the truth, and invite them to be a part of the solutions.

- T. Clay Buck

First, I would not assume all your donors are upper-class white people. Even if you have run the data & proven that true, we should be working to attract philanthropic support from all communities, not just upper-class white ones.

Second, in writing across cultural differences, I would use direct quotes from the clients as much as possible. Even if you have to explain certain words or phrases so that the audience understands, we should honor our clients' direct words & experiences.

- Caliopy Glaros



Nonprofit Photo Credit:
United Way of Buffalo & Erie County

TOPIC #8
DEI

CONTINUED: HOW DO YOU WRITE STORIES FOR UPPER-CLASS, WHITE DONORS THAT RESONATE ABOUT WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE OF COLOR WITHOUT WHITEWASHING THEIR EXPERIENCES?

Storytelling goes back to tapping into shared values, emotions & experiences. Does a donor know what standing in line for food is like? Maybe not. But do they know what it feels like to share a warm meal with family during the holidays? More likely. Instead of listing the myriad challenges facing the person asking for food, try to humanize their situation by focusing on shared feelings & values. - **Erika Spence**

We have an important role as ethical storytellers to bring them along a journey into a new understanding of the world and the intersecting systems of oppression that exist. **Storytelling can circumvent cognitive bias by introducing alternative worldviews & complex concepts in non-threatening ways.** For example, telling someone that BIPOC properties tend to get undervalued might trigger a dismissive response. But sharing a story hits differently.

For example: One black family felt that their house had been undervalued before listing it for sale. To see if it made a difference, they replaced all their family photos on the wall with stock pictures of a white family. The property assessment came back nearly 30% higher when the white photos were on the wall. A local news station reported on the story & went undercover, finding the same results with multiple properties & multiple property assessors across the city. It was shocking! The reporter asked the question, *"how would you feel if your family photos devalued your home by 30%?"*

In this case, wealthy white donors understand what it's like to own property & can feel the injustice if their family photos were a factor in the value of their own home. - **Elisabeth Noble**



TOPIC #8

DEI

KEY TAKEAWAYS

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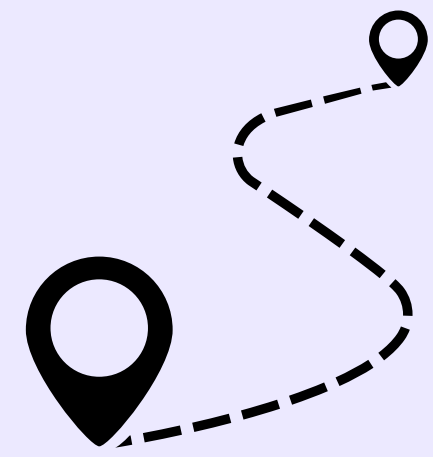
Seek always to uplift & *never* to exploit.

A person's story is not a tool,
but a life that is infinitely valuable
& should be cared for as such.

CHRIS MIANO

WHAT IS YOUR #1 RULE WHEN IT COMES TO ETHICAL STORYTELLING?

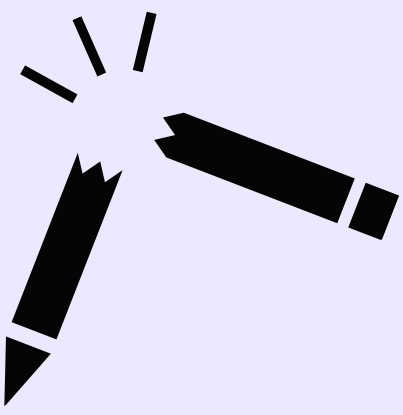
Trauma-informed storytelling is a journey,
not a destination. Keep moving forward! - **Maria Bryan**



Break the "nonprofit" rules.

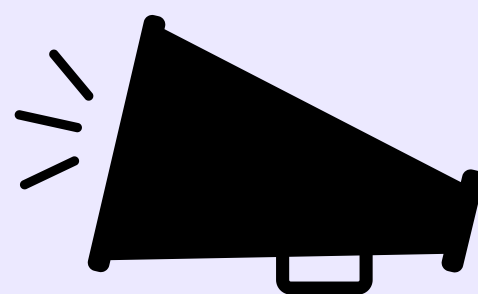
Just because the sector has been telling stories one way for decades, doesn't mean it's the best way to grow your org.

Ethical storytelling requires clear brand standards & boundaries - & often lead to conversations that aren't easy - but worth investing in - & your supporters will feel more connected to you than before. - **Christina Tzavaras Edwards**



Openness will *always* serve you well on this journey.

The more openly you can share your plans, expectations & limitations for sharing a story, the more opportunity you have for the story to translate to real good – & the less confusion & challenges you will have later on. - **Evan Wildstein**



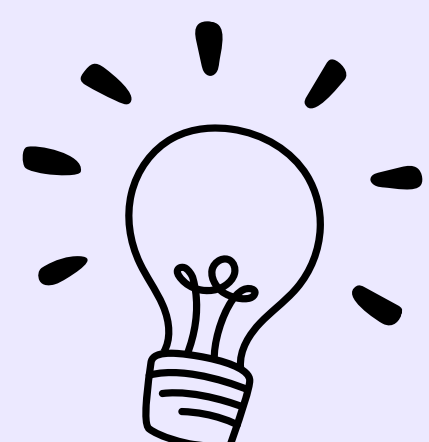
Give your storyteller the power to share their lived experience

through their own voice.

- **Natalie Monroe**

If it feels "icky", it probably is!

If you find yourself wondering if the way you are telling a story is exploitative, then chances are your audience will feel the same way. And if you are feeling this way, do not take chances! Take time to reevaluate, refocus & seek resources or training. There is no deadline more important than making your community feel like you are a good steward of their stories. - **Carly Euler**



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CLICK TO LEARN MORE FROM OUR CONTRIBUTORS



MARIA BRYAN
creative



PHILANTHROPY
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TCB Fundraising
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From Scratch
FUNDRAISING

Voice for Good
MISSION-DRIVEN MARKETING

Rachel Zant
PEN WITH A PURPOSE

{ LISTEN,
LUCY. }



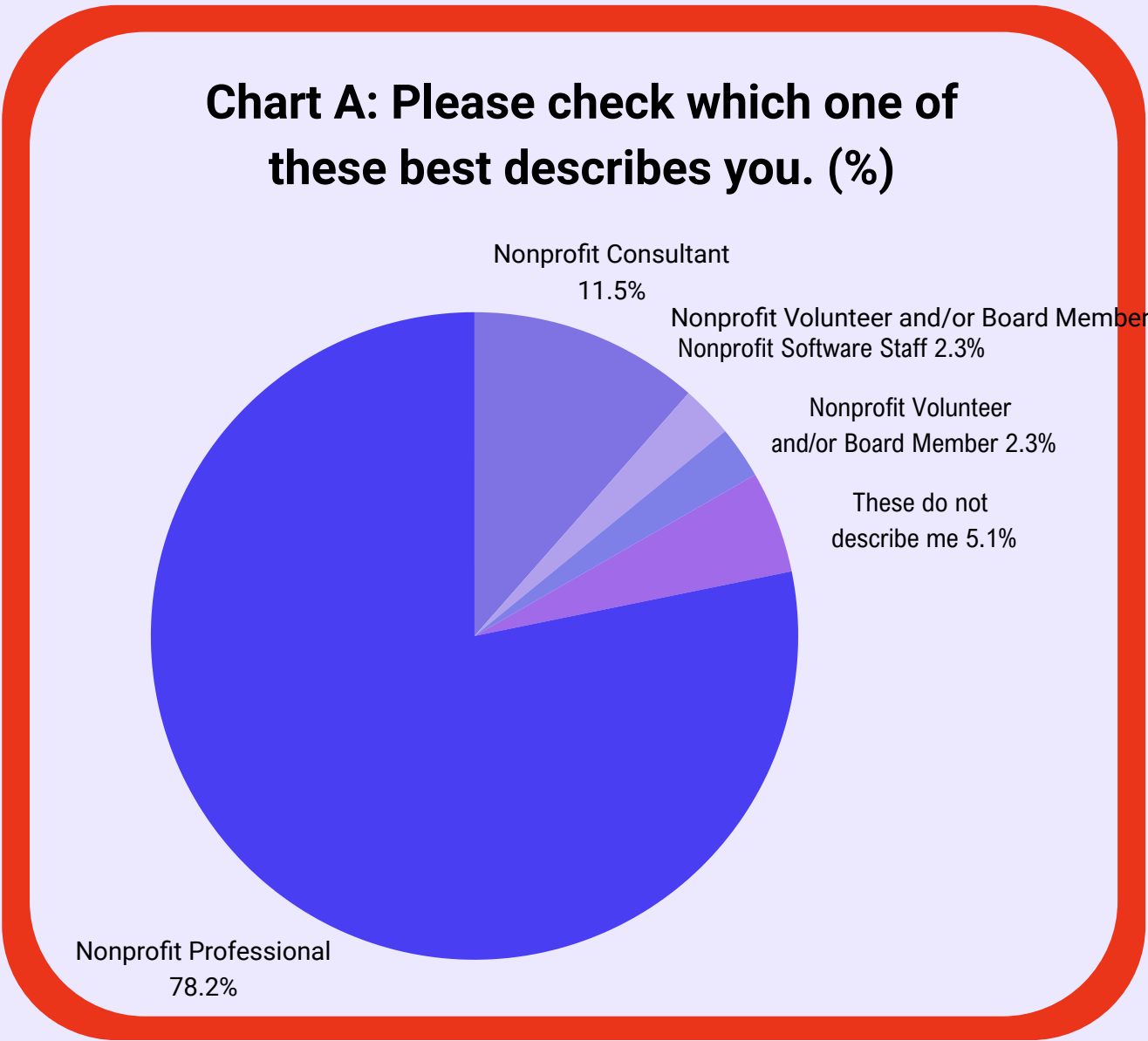
 **CIVIC
CHAMPS**



METHODOLOGY

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The survey of 78 respondents was conducted online during the month of December 2023. Respondents were asked to self identify how this topic related to their professional life. (See Chart A below). Survey respondents represent a wide spectrum of organization sizes and verticals. Those surveyed use a wide range of technology solutions, and are not required to use MemoryFox. Respondents were sourced via MemoryFox’s email list and social media channels. All data in this survey is self-reported, not transactional.



ABOUT THE WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS

The written submissions for this book were collected online during the months of December 2023 and January 2024. Written submissions are the advice of the contributor, and have not been influenced by MemoryFox. In some cases, written submissions have been edited for length. The questions posed in this report are direct quotes from nonprofit professionals who registered to attend MemoryFox’s December 2023 Special Event “Narratives With Integrity: Exploring Stories That Do No Harm”. Contributors were sourced by MemoryFox staff via email and LinkedIn. All submissions were voluntarily submitted with no exchange of goods or funds.

THANK YOU

TO OUR SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

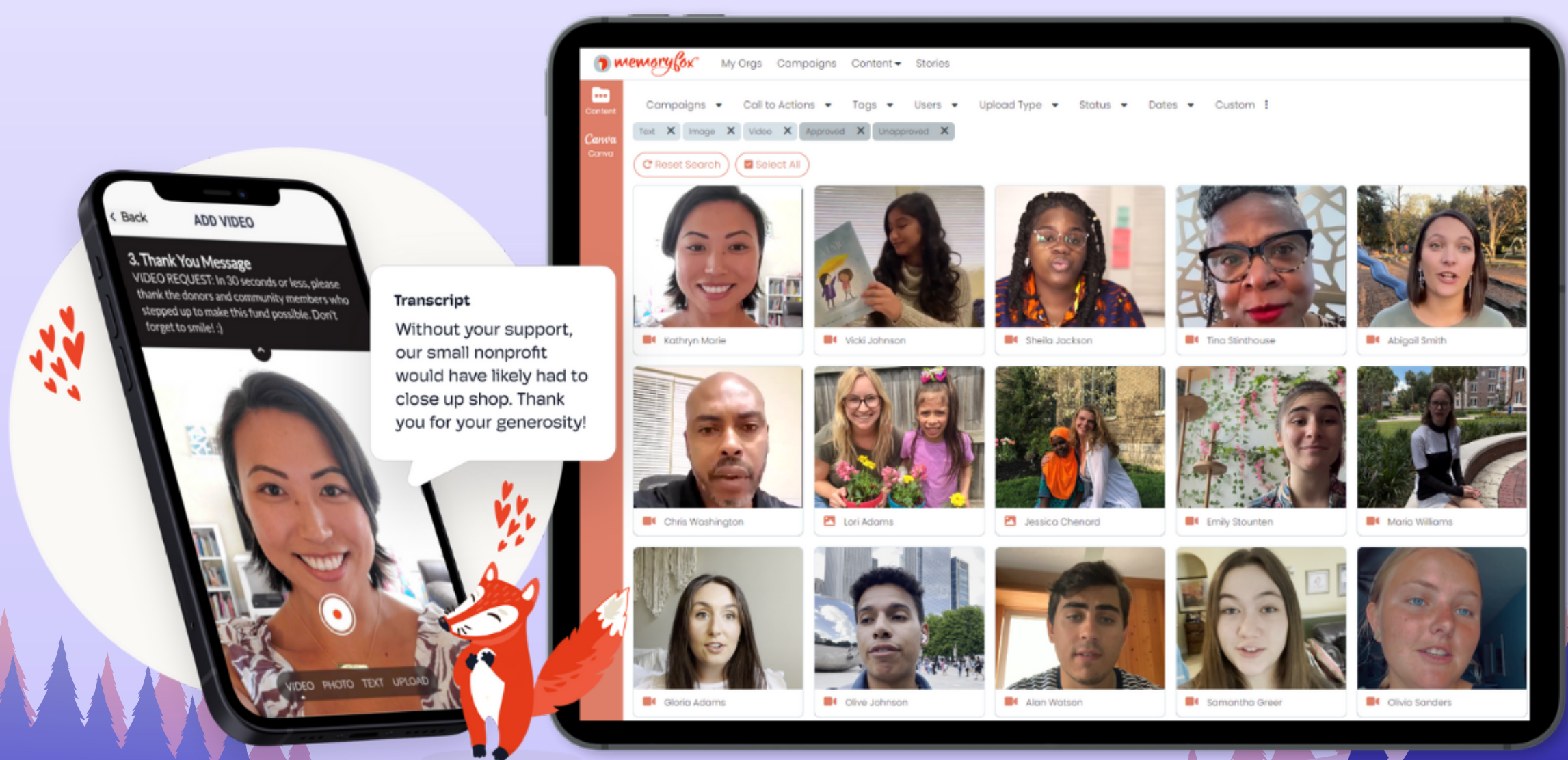
Alberta Registered Nurses Educational Trust
(ARNET)
All Our Kids, Inc.
AMDG
American College of Chest Physicians
Artvocate
Betsy Eves Group
Blue Canoe Philanthropy
Boys & Girls Club
Brightpoint
Broken Chains, Inc.
Brown Bagging For Calgary's Kids
Cancer Support Community
Capstone Adaptive Learning & Therapy
Centers, Inc.
Coastal Kids Home Care
Code of Support Foundation
Disability Resource Association, Inc.
DRG
DVSSP
El Refugio
Ele's Place
FastForeward, LLC
Foundation for Sustainable Care
FRIENDS National Center for Community-
Based Child Abuse Prevention
Friends of Fisher House St. Louis
Game Changers SA
Gateway Center of Monterey County Inc
Goodwill Industries of Greater Nebraska, Inc.
Historic
Horizons National
Impact Campus Ministries
Jewish Family Services
Joseph Ndisile Foundation
Life and Death Matters

M.Y.U. SUPPORT
Maarif Organization for Humanitarian Aid &
Development
Meals on Wheels Durham
Milad
National Latina Institute Reproductive
Justice
Nonprofit Storytelling Conference
Northwest Justice Project
Oasis Ministry Ventures, Inc.
Oley Foundation
Orchard's Children's Services
Pacific Dental Services Foundation
Panhandle Community Services
Pasadena Community Foundation
Paws For Hope Animal Foundation
Pinnacle Living
Prosperity Connection
RKC Infrabuilt Private Ltd
Roots Ethiopia
ShadeOutDM Foundation
Teen Health Mississippi
TextPledge.us
The CARE Group, Inc.
The Lake Ballinger Center
The Nonprofit Hive
The Wily Network
Thumb Community Health Partnership
Thundermist Health Center
United Way of Bruce Grey
United Way of Greater Waterbury
United Way of King County
United Way of the Piedmont
Urban Harvest STL
Voce
World Impact

ABOUT MEMORYFOX

MemoryFox is a technology solution that helps nonprofits collect, organize, and share stories directly from their community. Since 2017, MemoryFox's mission has been to elevate the authentic stories of real human beings, in a trauma-informed, ethical way. To date, we have empowered 350+ mission-driven organizations collect over 75,000 pieces of content.

For more information, visit www.memoryfox.io or follow us on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (Twitter) or YouTube.



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