

# **Storytelling and Activism,** **Putting Our Stories on the Map**

Natasha Freidus, Creative Narrations

[www.creativenarrations.net](http://www.creativenarrations.net)

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*“When people connect to political issues through personal stories, they see them in a different way. They don’t just see democracy in the abstract, they see ‘my democracy.’ The transformative potential of storytelling is written into the fabric of our lives.”*

Johanna Wheeler, 2015

For today’s lecture I will be sharing some of the work we’ve done at Creative Narrations in the field of social change digital storytelling over the past decade and a half. I’ll be focusing on our U.S. based work and exploring the ways that we’ve seen stories be effective tools for change within, among, and outside of underserved communities.

Stories for Change. We know it’s trendy now. The Rockefeller Foundation just launched a multi-million dollar initiative on it. Entrepreneurial sorts are making a whole lot of money with high-end retreats about it. Public relations and communications teams everywhere are desperately asking their colleagues to collect stories for their website.

Why? Maybe, because it works. And maybe because with all the new apps and tools and tweets, we still need to work on our old fashioned storytelling skills.

Why? Because too often, we throw our stories away.

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In the mid-nineties I was working in Tucson, Arizona as an adult education teacher and community organizer. By community organizing, I’m referring to developing leadership and political power in underserved communities. The families I worked with all had stories that they shared over coffee, on the way into the classroom, and in group discussions. There were stories of domestic violence, abuse at the hands of the border patrol, discriminatory labor

practices. They were stories that broke my heart over and over again. They were stories that fueled my activism.

Part of my job was working one on one with people to help them tell their stories publicly, in front of decision makers. I would coach them— stories were a central part of our campaigns. Stories were how we showed the powers that be the reality of our lives and the impact of their policies. I'll never forget the time I spent hours helping a young father rehearse his speech. He talked about trying to support his family on minimum wage while taking language classes every evening—all the barriers he faced. Despite his limited English, despite being nervous, he got up in front of the city council to advocate for a living wage. Later that evening, I saw him walking out of the community centre, I saw him crumple up the paper on which he had written this story, and I saw him toss it in the bin.

So what does it mean to throw a story in the trash? At the time, it struck me a wrong, very wrong. But It wasn't until a few years later, when I was doing the fieldwork for my thesis that I realized that throwing a story away is tantamount to tossing away a treasure. I learned this from Sister Judy Donovan, a Catholic nun and community organizer along the U.S. Mexican border in the depths of Texas.

**Please watch: Stories as a Primary Resource**

<https://vimeo.com/126229241>

**“When you tell a story publicly, you create something new”**

So today, I want to take this apart a bit. I want to talk about storytelling and activism. How we stop throwing our stories in the trash, how we value them, how we use them to create change. How we make something new.

Back when I met Sister Judy I was researching the relationship between individual change and community change. I wasn't thinking visually in the beginning. I made repeated trips to Texas with one of those little cassette recorders, taping stories, and ended up with reams and reams of transcripts. The vibrancy of the interviews all seemed somewhat bland on paper. The twenty-five individuals suddenly merged together in a sea of Palatino font and A4 printer paper.

It was at that point that I began to think differently, that video seemed essential. I began to get over my fear of plugging the wrong cable in, to open the manual once in a while. It was that point that I moved from wanting to hear people's stories, to wanting to see and document their stories, to wanting to teach people how to document their stories themselves.

### **Stories plus Democracy**

I always start off workshops by explaining a bit of this background, because we want to make sure it's clear that it's the stories that are central to building power and effecting change. The multimedia part, that is always secondary. We based Creative Narrations and our approach to social change on the premise that storytelling is in and of itself a democratic action. We see equal access to telling our own stories as an essential part of democracy. We believe that citizens publicly telling their stories, in their own voices, is a form of civic participation. In "Hope within History" Walter Brueggeman describes the act of storytelling as the public processing of private pain. We take our own small story, we connect it to others. Making it digital is just another way of doing this publicly, too public as we often know.

In return, stronger democracy provides citizens with more opportunities to "CREATE" their own stories, rather than having their stories told for them. It's an iterative process. As we teach digital storytelling, we believe that people can become their own narrator—can co-create their own lives.

In our workshops we also tie the process of becoming a digital storyteller to media justice—to the idea that we can effect change by accessing tools that were traditionally held in by just a few. Over the past decade and a half we've witnessed a movement in the United States and across the world based on this premise, we've witnessed activism be transformed as individuals have new tools to share the stories that have been happening for years, undocumented. Again, as Sister Judy explained, these stories have become public. In the case of Black Lives Matter, the public telling of these stories of racism at the hands of the police is creating new movements, new policies, and new outrage.

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Sometimes you're in the right place at the right time. I finished my degree and a few weeks later landed a spot in a Center for Digital Storytelling workshop at the cable access TV station down the street in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I was finding there was a hunger to use new media tools, all this software and hardware that now came packaged in home and office computers, but nobody new how to use them. A few weeks after taking this course, I was asked to lead a workshop. I did.

I Started Creative Narrations, and began to work with a wide range of organizations— domestic violence, service learning, environmental justice, community development. Overall, new ways to support the public telling of silenced narratives.

While I believe it's always valuable to tell stories, to create stories, and to show them publicly, I have found that the projects I'm most passionate about

are the ones with very targeted audiences, purposes, and concrete actions tied to the stories. I'm going to share three of those with you all today.

### **Stories as Constructed Objects**

Saul Alinsky is one of the founders of modern-day community organizing in the United States. He argued that stories are the foundation of leadership development and becoming a public person. The process of storytelling is one of constant of action and reflection. In that way, digital stories become constructed objects, they allow us to examine ourselves. As we change our communities, we change our stories. So the process of reflecting, crafting, and telling these stories is transformative for the storytellers themselves.

### **Stories as Codes/Stories to Influence Voting**

Early on, we also saw enormous potential for digital stories as peer education tools—objects for community dialogue. We began to use digital stories as “codes” as defined by Paulo Freire for problem posing, a process by which individuals react to a trigger, analyze their situations, and create opportunities for change. We teach this methodology as part of our workshops, so that our storytellers have concrete ways for showing and discussing their pieces.

In 2004, I, like many of my colleagues was concerned about the upcoming elections. We saw a disengaged electorate and began to explore what it might look like to bring together digital storytelling and voter education. This was the beginning of the Our Stories, Their Decisions, Voter Education project— a series of stories created in workshops with adult literacy students in Arizona and New Hampshire. In these stories, the storytellers highlight the impact of government decisions on their lives. Our goal was to provide a “face” to public issues —to provide individuals typically disenfranchised from the voting system with tools to make connections and engage with public decision-making.

We based our work on the premise that sharing, listening to, producing, and viewing stories can play a central role to deepen understanding of issues, to create a sense of efficacy, and to move people to action.

**Please watch Laura's Story <https://vimeo.com/40605693>**

Over the past decade, we have seen how these stories assist individuals in drawing connections between how elected officials make decisions, and the day-to-day impact of these decisions on low-income communities. They have served as a powerful tools to resonate with other adults in the same situation.

While these videos are often showed in the context of voter education, they address a range of issues including health care, immigration rights, substance abuse policy, and public assistance. Advocates working in these contexts also show these stories in facilitated settings with the accompanying discussion guide.

One key component of these workshops is that we learned to explicitly state that people don't have to come up with policy solutions in their stories, the stories don't have to prescribe the ending... perhaps more effective is for the the stories to raise the questions.

Again, this storytelling project had a very clear audience, purpose, discussion methodology, and concrete action for audiences to take .

*When people connect to these political issues through personal stories, they see them in a different way. They don't just see democracy in the abstract, they see 'my democracy' - 'what it means for me, in my life, and in the lives of others who I know.'* Johanna Wheeler

## **Stories as Bridges**

In Boston, several of our early projects built on the potential of storytelling as a tool for dialogue across communities at conflict. While in our voter education project, storytellers geared their stories for an audience similar to themselves, in conflict resolution projects storytellers have the audience of the “other” in mind. We had youth from neighborhoods that were having racial and ethnic gang related activity create and share stories about their lives—they came together with their parents to screen and discuss. The project was designed to build bridges and common ground.

Likewise, we brought together youth leaders from the Middle East to create stories as peace building tools. The project evaluator wrote, “Indeed, too many Arab and Israeli young people are being brought up in cultures of ignorance, myth, distrust, violence, and even hate for the “other.” These negative concepts are being inadequately counterbalanced with accurate information and positive alternatives.” So our job here was to create these missing positive alternatives.

In bringing together groups that had deep rooted conflicts, we learned the importance of showing drafts of the story, storyboard, and rough cuts to the other, to get feedback of imagery or wording that would trigger unintended reactions. “On a number of occasions, participants changed aspects of their stories based upon suggestions from members of the other community.” We began to record stories in multiple languages, experiment with subtitling. We began have the storyteller involved in thinking through what people needed to know or discuss both before and after seeing the story. Each storyteller became a participant in developing accompanying materials and discussion guides.

As anticipated, we found that digital storytelling as a tool for conflict resolution

helped to break down stereotypes of the “other”, create opportunity for dialogue, and foster voice. They had a very clear audience, they brought the collection stories to the youth that each of them worked with in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan as part of their peace building work—their efforts to humanize the others across the wire fences .

Through this project, I learned that not only is storytelling essential in democracy, it is essential for peace. As Jessica Senehi writes, “In a peaceful community, all persons have access to processes for developing knowledge. ... In peace, all feel their story is told and heard.”

**Please view Mohammed’s Story**

<http://www.creativenarrations.net/videos/nablus-city-life-and-death>

**Mapping Our Stories**

About eight years ago, my own story changed. I was pregnant with my first child and my husband had just been offered a job in Seattle. The day we decided to make the move I received an email from a woman who worked at a health clinic in south Seattle. She had seen some of our community partners present on digital storytelling and wanted a quote on how much a train the trainer workshop would cost. It was a beautiful serendipity and after emerging from my maternity leave, I began a seven year collaboration with SeaMar Community Health Centers and their network of health clinics in Washington State. For the first two years, we held regular capacity building workshops with a range of community health centers, training bicultural and bilingual storytelling facilitators throughout the county. Our next step was to develop a project to bring together digital storytelling with on the ground community health organizing—. Mapping Our Voices for Equity, or MOVE.

MOVE was designed to engage community members in civic action to address specific policy priorities related to healthy eating, active living, and tobacco-free environments. Because the initiative was so neighborhood and place based, we came up with a story mapping approach where digital stories were used to support and advocate for specific policy changes. We changed the City Council's budget to add hours to a community center, we helped a primary school change their nutrition policies, and we convinced a business to open up a store offering food in a "food desert" in the south of the county.

My favorite part of this project was being able to see direct results in policies from stories. At this point, this was new for me. I'd seen groups systematically show stories as a means to sustain public funding, but I was intrigued at how we could integrate digital storytelling systematically in a place based organizing strategy. I was curious as to whether we could maintain the integrity of the personal stories, while making sure they aligned with the community's policy priorities.

We began the project partnering with three community organizations, each with a different geographic, racial, and language or identity group. Central to our dissemination strategy was series of community forums. Each partner organization hosted one forum as a means to engage the story producers with key audiences: both peers in their communities and decision-makers. The events were tailored around the specific policy objectives within that community but shared the common goals of engaging new new community members in the process of civic action and pilot the approach of using our map-based stories to advocate for policy changes . We trained representatives from each community to identify storytellers and to facilitate workshop and we found that if we were flexible, we were able to find people to create stories that aligned with our policy priorities as well as to develop new ones.

For example, originally, in the International District, essential Seattle's Chinatown, our focus was on access to healthy food. However, we get in deeper in the community, we learned that access to green space was key. Jonathan Chen, chief gardener at the community gardens, became a key advocate for us and was the protagonist of this mini-documentary about the process.

### **Stories as Seeds of Change**

**Please view** <https://vimeo.com/48540037>

In summary, through the MOVE process, change was achieved at multiple levels.

- At the **individual level**, we found all kinds of neighborhood residents who not only engaged with new technology but became community leaders. People like Julie and Diane, who created a lovely piece about a park they grew up in, spoke publicly for the first time in front of their peers and the City Council. They brought their family and friends to the community forum, people who wanted to support them and see their story, but wouldn't typically attend a city council meeting. But the changes didn't just happen at the individual level.
- At the **institutional level**, local community based organizations increased their capacity to communicate through digital media, to organize a successful community forum, and to advocate on their own behalf. So, for example, THE LOCAL health clinic who usually stayed out of the policy realm, has moved from solely providing health services to also working to make sure that their neighborhood itself healthy.
- Lastly, at the **neighborhood level**, the entire community benefited through sustained levels of access to physical recreation, access to healthy food, increased "smoke free areas" and the knowledge that their collective efforts brought about change.

**Please view Julie & Diane's story**

<http://www.mappingvoices.org/story/video/our-second-home>

In our workshops, we always talk about how stories breed stories, it's contagious if you will. By the time we had launched the MOVE website — we were thinking about ways to build on the platform to integrate other data types. We were learning that the stories were important, but organizers on the ground wanted additional tool tools, they wanted ways to highlight inequity and the reality of their neighborhoods. For example, as Julie and Diane advocated for green space in their neighborhood, we wanted to contextualize that story by showing maps demonstrating green space per capita across the county.

**Healthier Together**

About a year after MOVE's launch we received a call from the other side of the county, Palm Beach County Florida. A local health foundation was interested in bringing our story mapping work to their area, and they wanted to expand on it — they wanted a repository for all data about the county in one place, everything from narrative data, videos, publicly available census data, and local data the community collects to track and set benchmarks. We launched Healthier Together earlier this year, it's based on a GIS or geographic information systems platform, and we are just beginning to see how the community uses the site to collect, share, and track stories plus other data.

Our goal here is to strategically bring together qualitative and quantitative data and see how it is effective as a means to track data, disseminate information, and effect change. I think about these story maps in two ways; we can put stories in context by embedding them in statistical data. And, likewise, we can show the nuance and complexity

of data by adding stories to our maps, this way we can also highlight what's "missing" from the data.

For example, Palm Beach County has one of the highest percentage of the population in the U.S. with access to health insurance, but anyone who has experienced the US health care system knows that it's not always so simple. When you drill down, you get a more nuanced view. This map shows the uninsured population by tract...and of course, adding stories to the mix reveals even more complexity. Here we have a story by one of the Foundation staff, Regina, that illustrates the challenges of navigating the health care system, even when properly insured.

We have expanded on the Florida work to build a StoryMapping Hub in collaboration with a national mapping platform called Community Commons. We are now working with four partners across the country to pilot this communications strategy. To kick it off we have started a "story layer" with about one hundred digital stories about topics including healthy eating, tobacco prevention, cancer, and diabetes management. These are publicly available and can be embedded in other data layers. For example, I have a sample of stories about food access paired with data showing food security by neighborhood. With these maps it's very easy to add other data layers, or upload your own. For example, Phillipia, who has the wonderful story about the rates of diabetes in the African American community, can embed her story to demonstrate how people in her neighborhood have limited access to food.

**Please view Phillipia's story:** <http://bit.ly/1E5kMTY>

She can also add data about race, diabetes rates, obesity rates, etc. For example, here I can overlay a map of poverty level that shows that she lives

exactly where the highest poverty level intersects with the a neighborhood where over half of the population has limited food access. Phillipia can also work with her local organization to gather information about what markets offer fresh produce, or collect testimonies from neighbors about the need for health food, and add that information to the map.

And for me, it's been fascinating to see how the technology has caught up with us as we wanted to do something similar fifteen years ago in Springfield MA. Back then, we had the vision, we had the stories, but the software just wasn't ready for us.

Which brings me to another question of change. The changes in the field. One of the most astounding aspects of this work is how little it's changed. Yes, it's trendier now, there are new storytelling apps coming out every week, better ways to create "story banks" and organize our files, and new ways to share and distribute these stories but the essential tools and process for making the stories remains the same. If anything, they have gotten simpler, which is what we really want.

One of the main surprises we've had over the past five years is the ability to work virtually. We went from this uber local, community focused work like the kind we did in the North End of Springfield to broader - city and county wide work before being hired to lead a virtual training. Honestly, we were skeptical, but they were paying for it so we gave it a go. I've been thrilled to see how the cloud-based tools have evolved to make collaboration on video editing and teaching online easy enough to work from anywhere in the world. However, I will say there's nothing like face to face workshops to break bread, brainstorm during lunch, and watch as the lightbulbs go off. These small, but monumental changes that occur as individuals begin to discover and value their own stories.

## **Stories as Tools for Change**

In Acts of Meaning, Bruner writes that stories can conserve memory or alter the past. I think we can take this one step further—yes stories can help us remember. Yes, stories can help us understand our present, understand the “other” . But it doesn’t stop there. Across the world, we’re seeing individuals and communities change their future by sharing their stories publicly. When we have stories developed for specific audiences, with concrete actions, the change is tangible.

We’re seeing stories as tools within communities, to reflect, to measure change, to engage residents in civic action. We’re seeing stories as object for discussion and dialogue across communities - a way to connect disparate groups and build peace. We’re seeing stories influence new policies, which, of course will lead to new stories. These stories are becoming public, creating connections, sustaining momentum.

What can we learn from this? Our stories are too powerful to toss in the bin, to leave undiscovered on a hard drive in the back of our office, or unlabeled on a DVD, or on a Youtube link that is never shared.

I hope we will all continue to draw on our greatest resource---the experiences and wisdom of our elderly, the dreams of our youth, the insights of our workers. Again, as Sister Judy said , we need to make these public, we need to create something new. We need to put our stories on the map, both literally and metaphorically. We need to find new ways to spread these stories, develop actions people can take after seeing these stories, and we need to be strategic about how we share them. Through doing so, we will be equipped with the tools it takes to co-create a new collective narrative.

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