

## **Storytelling and Social Change: How Stories Help Advance Human Rights**

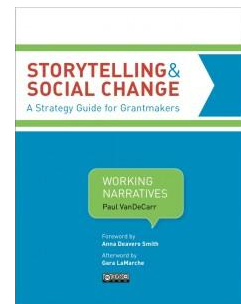
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*The following excerpts are drawn from “[Storytelling and Social Change: A Strategy Guide for Grantmakers](#),” written by Paul VanDeCarr for [Working Narratives](#).*

Child soldiers in Burma. Elder abuse in the United States. Discrimination against Moldovans with intellectual disabilities. Violence against sex workers in South Africa.

Pretty weighty stuff. How could something as frivolous as storytelling help stop or prevent any such human rights violations?

Some foundations and organizations are demonstrating that storytelling, however light it may appear, can make a big difference. These case studies show how stories help empower the people most directly affected, educate target audiences, frame issues to attract support for change, and complement other efforts to challenge human rights abuses.



### **Health Media Initiative / Open Society Foundations**

Stanislav “Stas” Tcaci is 15 years old and lives in Straseni, a village in Moldova. He studies geography, math, biology, English, and Romanian. “The only difference between me and other people,” he says in a short flip-cam video shot by his brother, his mother, and himself, “is that I have physical problems, and they don’t. But they may have other problems.” The video is part of a larger media campaign by Keystone Human Services International Moldova Association (KHSIMA), which advocates for the deinstitutionalization of people with intellectual disabilities. The campaign is funded in part by the [Health Media Initiative](#) of the Open Society Foundations Public Health Program.

“For the participants who tell their stories on video, it’s a lovely experience, and it’s challenging personally,” says Brett Davidson, Director of the Health Media Initiative. “But that’s not the reason we’re doing it. The goal here is to support [KHSIMA’s] advocacy effort.”

“The stories fit into an already existing strategy,” says Davidson, “whether it’s to close the institution and reintegrate people back into regular schools, or change the government’s policies, or raise money for community housing. We need to hear from these children and their families in order to boost these efforts.” For example, stories help allay teachers’ fears about integrating children with intellectual disabilities into the classroom, and they persuade policy makers by using emotional arguments.

In order to help grantees communicate effectively, Davidson hires trainers to teach organizations how to produce media or tell stories. Trainers have worked with such groups as a multinational campaign on AIDS and sex workers in South Africa. The Public Health Program, of which the Health Media Initiative is a part, “is not a traditional health program,” says Davidson.

“We’re more of a human rights program that works in the area of health.”

“Storytelling is an empowering process in itself,” says Davidson, “and the stories that come out of it can be used to help change policy.”

### **Voice of Witness / Panta Rhea Foundation**

Hla Min tells a story about when he was 9 years old. “It was a school holiday on the full moon day in November, and we were making a picnic. ... At around 8 p.m., one of my friends and I went out to buy some chicken. At that moment, an army truck came and took us.” The two children were being taken as soldiers in the armed conflicts in Burma.

Hla Min’s account is one of 22 life stories in the book [\*Nowhere to Be Home: Narratives From Survivors of Burma’s Military Regime\*](#), compiled and edited by Maggie Lemere and Zoë West. It is one volume in [Voice of Witness](#)’s growing catalogue of oral-history books about human rights crises around the world.

The organization’s Executive Director, Mimi Lok, says the books are almost “novelistic” in their depth, so that readers “end up spending time with a person and their life experience over the length of a long-form narrative.” This is vital to understanding human rights, which mean nothing without a sense of the humanity of those whose rights are being violated.

Voice of Witness’s education program introduces teachers and students to socially relevant, oral history-based curricula through guides, workshops, and partnerships with educational and rights groups. The result: “For students participating in oral history for the first time, it can be a potent realization that history does not always emanate from the top down,” says Voice of Witness education program director Cliff Mayotte.

For the [Panta Rhea Foundation](#), the interest in Voice of Witness has to do with how the arts can enable young people to “open a space between the way things are and our desire for the way things ought to be,” as the foundation website paraphrases educational philosopher Maxine Green. The foundation provided general operating support for *The Power of Story* guide, as well as a project grant for collaboration between Voice of Witness and the Magnum Foundation to “use words and photos to bring the books to life in a new way—as visual poems,” says Panta Rhea’s Executive Director, Diana Cohn. That may be the same spirit that animated a young Hla Min, who spent hours telling his story one dusty, humid night years ago.

### **WITNESS / Overbrook Foundation**

The 1991 beating of motorist Rodney King by Los Angeles cops might have been just another incident relegated to police logs had it not been for a witness. Standing on his apartment balcony, a man named George Holliday recorded the episode on his Handycam, and the resulting video quickly made its way onto TV screens worldwide, igniting public outrage over police brutality and racism.

The video’s powerful impact helped propel an idea that musician and activist Peter Gabriel already had; [WITNESS](#) was formally founded in 1992 to “give cameras to human rights activists around the world,” and has since grown into a much larger organization using what it calls

“video advocacy.”

“Stories are a critical part of our overall strategy on human rights,” says WITNESS Executive Director Yvette Alberdingk Thijm. For a video clip to make sense—much less to effect change—she says it needs to be “put in the context of a larger story about a human rights situation.”

WITNESS outfitted human rights groups worldwide with video cameras, then started providing hands-on training to support issue-driven campaigns. In an era when people can shoot video on their mobile phones and distribute it online, access to technology is no longer the biggest challenge. Instead, says Alberdingk Thijm, the big question is how to “work with allies to build a safer and more conducive ‘ecosystem’ for human rights.”

To that end, WITNESS has developed soup-to-nuts resources that support the entire human rights field, including a toolkit and curriculum, phone apps, a peer network, and other resources for video-for-change activists.

The [Overbrook Foundation](#)’s support for WITNESS springs from a belief that “the advocacy organizations that are going to have the biggest impact are those that are either making media, influencing media, or providing media tools and training to other organizations,” says the foundation’s president, Stephen A. Foster. “In contemporary communications, you have to abandon the traditional ideas of big media mentions,” he adds. “The question now is, how do you get your messages out to your constituencies, and how do you hear from those constituencies in ways that will bolster your work?” The better that WITNESS does that, the more George Hollidays will be equipped to expose—and contextualize—the Rodney King incidents happening worldwide.

### **Lessons for Funders**

The experiences of these organizations and others point to several lessons for funders:

- People don’t relate to issues so much as they do to the lived experiences of other people—in other words, their stories. Stories such as those in Voice of Witness’s oral history book series help to educate target audiences and build support for human rights.
- Advocates may be experts in their issues areas, but they are not necessarily natural-born storytellers. Provide training in how to tell good stories and how to produce media, as the Health Media Initiative does, to boost grantees’ capacity in this area.
- People worldwide are now equipped with simple technology to record and distribute basic video. Funders can also support the infrastructure advocates and organizations need to share their stories and inspire progress on human rights issues.

Storytelling can be a part of any grantmaking strategy. Funders can explore narrative strategies within their existing portfolios:

- **Talk with current grantees:** One grantmaker suggests starting right in your backyard. “Ask your grantees,” says Taryn Higashi of Unbound Philanthropy, “because some of them may already be using storytelling and can help grantmakers understand.”
- **Make experimental grants:** “You don’t necessarily need a complete theory of change to get started,” says a grantmaker who works on public-policy reform. “I’ve made some small experimental grants to media and storytelling projects. Even if some of the grants didn’t turn out to be very high impact, they answered some questions I had about

strategy.”

- **Integrate storytelling from the start:** Storytelling can be used at any phase, but grantmakers say that thinking about how to integrate it from the very start helps them identify opportunities for impact. “For some people, storytelling and other art forms are an afterthought,” says Denise Brown is Executive Director of the Leeway Foundation, which funds women and transgender artists creating social change. “My question is, What would it be like to have a storyteller in the room when setting the agenda?”
- **Develop a “story of change”:** Theories of change might just be abstract versions of deeply embedded narratives. Grantmakers can use storytelling to explore how they think change happens and to develop their grantmaking strategy.

Download the [full report](#) for more case studies from grantmakers, and contact Paul VanDeCarr at [paul@workingnarratives.org](mailto:paul@workingnarratives.org) to learn more.