



# 2025

## ETHICAL STORYTELLING REPORT

FOR NONPROFITS DEDICATED TO  
TELLING STORIES ETHICALLY,  
THROUGH EVERY SEASON

CREATED BY  **memoryfox®**

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# WELCOME TO YEAR-ROUND STORYTELLING

I'm thrilled to share the third edition of the Ethical Storytelling Report! Each year, this project challenges us to grow, but this year's theme pushes us in an exciting new direction: **storytelling all year long**. You'll see that reflected throughout the report in the visuals of the four seasons, each representing one of the four parts of the guide. It's a reminder that building a storytelling culture is something we nurture throughout the entire year, not just during our important fundraising moments.

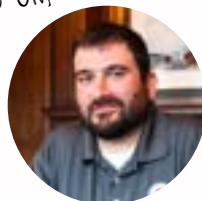
With that in mind, this year's report is designed to be our most immediately useful yet. We focused on what you can put into practice right away. There are more actionable lists, clearer step-by-step guidance, and new case studies from nonprofits generously sharing what's worked for them. Our hope is that no matter where you are in your storytelling journey, you'll find something you can bring back to your team tomorrow.

One of the true highlights of this past year has been the opportunity to participate in so many ethical storytelling panels and learn directly from the nonprofit storytellers doing this work every day. Their insights, questions, and honesty shaped this report in meaningful ways, and I'm incredibly grateful for their leadership. We're lucky to have such thoughtful stewards across the Social Good sector.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this edition and thank you for carving out the time to learn alongside us. I'd love to hear what resonates with you. I invite you to share your reflections or comments using the QR code below!



KEEP PRESSING ON,

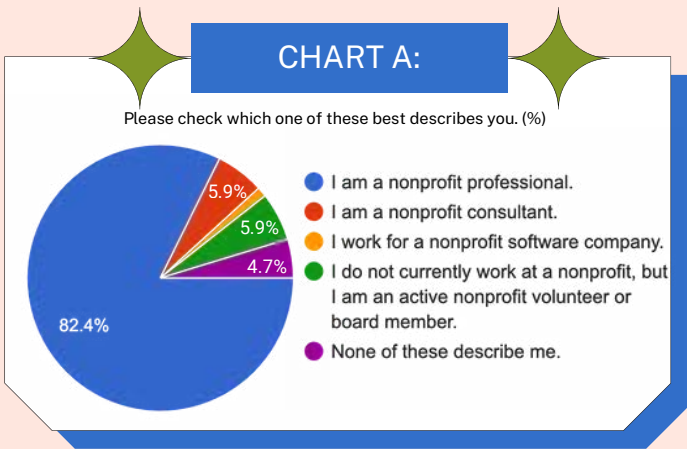


CHRIS MIANO  
Founder & CEO, MemoryFox

# STATE OF THE SECTOR

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The 2025 Ethical Storytelling Survey was answered by 172 respondents. When asked to identify their relationship to the nonprofit sector, the vast majority were nonprofit professionals (82.4%), followed by both consultants and nonprofit volunteers or board members (5.9%). 4.7% of respondents did not feel these categories described them, and 1.2% identified themselves as working for a nonprofit software company (See Chart A).



## THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICAL STORYTELLING

At MemoryFox, we believe that **collecting and sharing community stories ethically should be of the utmost importance for nonprofits**. That is why the first thing we aimed to explore was whether respondents saw ethical storytelling as an essential part of how they represent their community - both individually and from an organizational standpoint. We understand that one's individual values may differ from what they perceive the values of their organization to be. Therefore, we hypothesized that ethical storytelling would be slightly more important to individuals, and that a fraction of respondents would feel their organization does not feel as strongly about the importance of ethical storytelling.

Chart B: On a scale of 1-5, how important is ethical storytelling to you? (%)

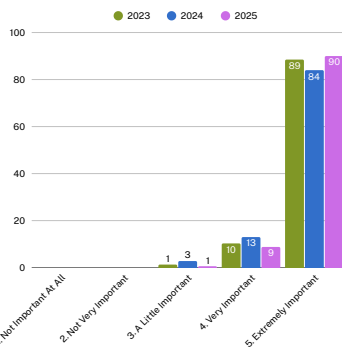
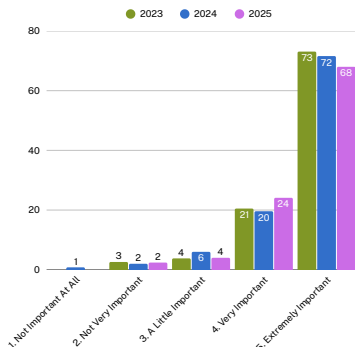


Chart C: On a scale of 1-5, how important is ethical storytelling to your organization? (%)

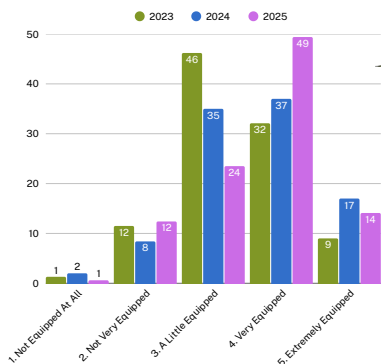


We are proud to report (Chart B) that every single person surveyed rated ethical storytelling as a 3 (*a little important*) or greater in 2023, 2024, and 2025. In 2025, the vast majority, 90% of the community, views ethical storytelling as *extremely important*, while 9% believe it is *very important*.

When compared to Chart C, answers skewed lower on the scale, with only 68% reporting that they believe their organizations finds ethical storytelling to be *extremely important*, while 24% think their organization finds it *very important*. Notably, responses remained consistent across the board since 2023, meaning there have been **no improvements** in the realm over the past 2 years.

## ETHICALLY COLLECTING & SHARING STORIES

Chart D: On a scale of 1-5, how equipped do you feel to collect & share stories in an ethical, trauma-informed way? (%)



**Ethical storytelling begins during the story collection process.**

For the third year in a row, no single category dominated when assessing respondents' preparedness to collect and share stories ethically.

However, we are pleased to report that more than half of respondents (63%) feel either very or extremely equipped compared to 54% in 2024 and only 41% rating themselves a 4 or 5 in 2023.

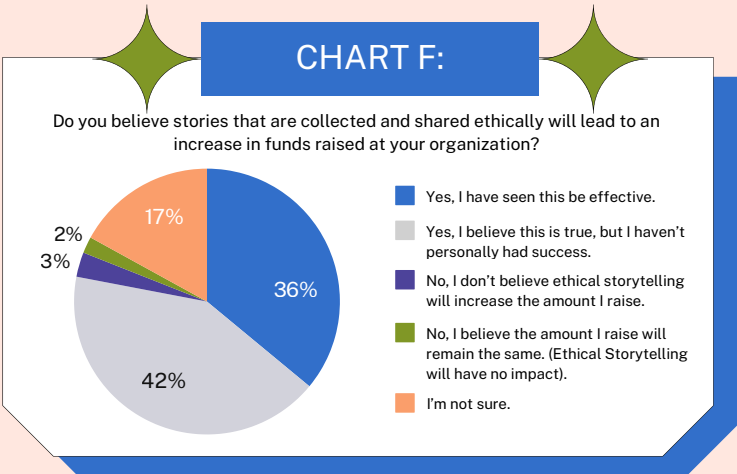
We understand that feeling “equipped” can mean a variety of things. We wanted to better understand what actions nonprofits are currently taking that ensure stories are collected and shared ethically. This portion of the survey was an optional fill-in-the-blank question that 103 out of 172 people chose to answer. Our team analyzed each answer and sorted them in hopes of finding common actions. The following word cloud conveys every theme, with the biggest words representing the most common answers.

CHART E: What steps does your organization currently take to ensure stories are collected and shared ethically?



The most reported theme was *Consent* with 45 responses and similar themes like *Ask Permission* (36). Other common topics appeared as *Anonymity* (8 responses), *Training* (8 responses), *Offer Support* (6 responses) and *Maintain Dignity* (5 responses).

# ETHICAL STORYTELLING & FUNDRAISING

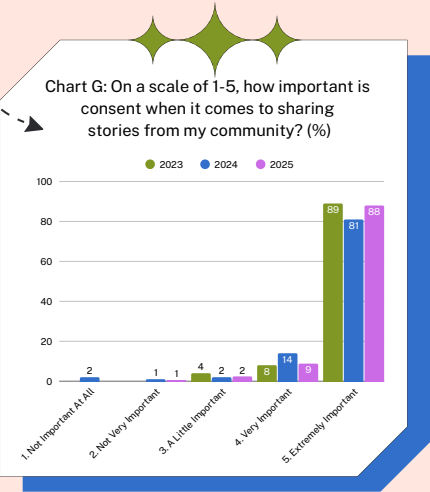


This year, we wanted to determine if nonprofit professionals felt ethical storytelling would have a positive impact on fundraising efforts. Historically, fundraisers have been asked to use overly emotional or sensationalized stories about people in hardship, also called ‘poverty porn,’ because they tend to drive donations. **We believe that sharing stories that have been collected and edited ethically is a crucial aspect of building a community of donors** that will inspire recurring giving, but we were not sure if the nonprofit sector agreed.

In accordance with Chart F, we are pleased to share that 36% of respondents have seen ethical storytelling be an *effective fundraising strategy* to raise more funds, while 42% believe it is an *effective fundraising strategy*, but have not personally had success (yet!). A mere 3% do not think ethical storytelling will increase the amount they raise, and just 2% do not think ethical storytelling will have any impact. It is our hope to see an increase in respondents answering “yes” to this question in the years to come.

# STORYTELLING CONSENT

**The most important part of story collection is capturing consent.**  
But many feel their organization does NOT have a solid system in place.



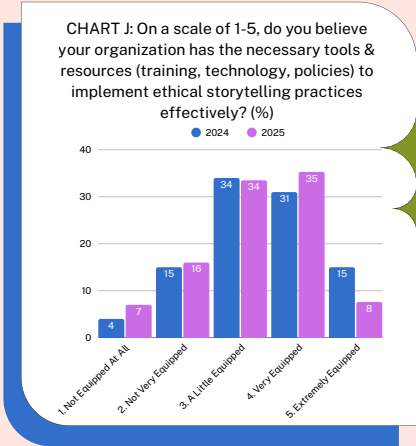
We’re pleased to share that nonprofit storytellers agree (Chart G)! 88% of survey respondents stated that consent is *extremely important*.

Even so, many feel their organization has not taken the necessary steps regarding consent collection. Respondents were most likely to *agree* (32%) or *neither agree or disagree* (29%) when asked if they felt their organization had a solid consent collection system in place (Chart H). Only 21% felt strongly that their current method works. The contrast displayed in Charts G & H are staggering, but thankfully, this report will explore the multi-faceted aspects of consent starting on page 35.

# ETHICAL STORYTELLING CHALLENGES

We sought to better understand the challenges nonprofits are facing when it comes to adopting and adhering to ethical storytelling practices. When asked if they felt their organization had the necessary tools and resources to ethically tell stories, the results remained similar to data collected in 2024, yet varied across the board. (This question was not asked in 2023).

Chart J shows respondents were most likely to answer that they felt *a little equipped* (34%), closely followed by feeling *very equipped* (35%). Only 8% of respondents felt extremely equipped while 16% did not feel very equipped and 7% reported a score of 1, not equipped at all.



## CHART K: What are the biggest challenges your organization faces in adhering to ethical storytelling practices?

Next, we dug deeper to explore the exact challenges nonprofits are facing. This portion of the survey was an optional fill-in-the-blank question that 95 out of 172 people chose to answer. Our team analyzed each answer and sorted them in hopes of finding common themes. The following word cloud conveys every theme, with the biggest words representing the most common answers.

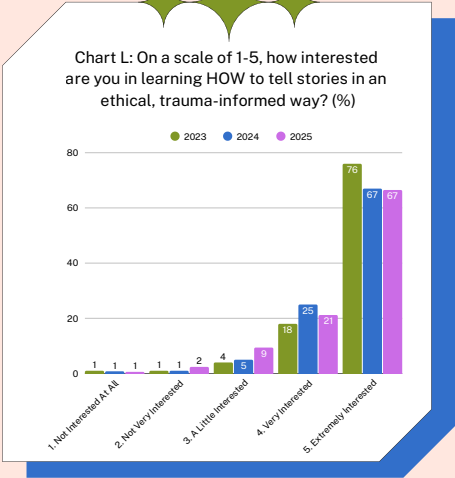


The five most reported themes referenced difficulty *Sharing* stories (20 responses), *Storing Consent* (14 responses), Lack of formal *Policies* or *Training Processes* (12 responses), lack of *Trauma-Informed* approaches (6 responses), and *Time Constraints* (6 responses).



# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Despite these challenges, we believe the outlook is largely positive! **New strategies and language are emerging every day.** Thus, a willingness to learn is an essential aspect of ethical storytelling. According to Chart L, a strong majority, 67% of respondents, are extremely interested in learning how to tell stories in an ethical, trauma-informed way, followed by 21% recognizing that they are very interested.



## Top Feelings of 2025

### Positively Charged Feelings:

- 75%:** I feel the culture of storytelling at my organization is trauma-informed.
- 65%:** I do *not* feel pressured to collect sad, traumatic stories to raise more funds.
- 61%:** I am confident that I collect stories that do not do harm to my community.

### Negatively Charged Feelings:

- 28%:** I struggle with wanting to collect stories while doing no harm to my community.
- 14%:** I feel pressure to collect sad, traumatic stories in order to raise more funds.
- 27%:** I do NOT have time set aside to educate myself about ethical storytelling.

We concluded our survey with 12 statements (above), asking respondents to choose which ones they felt applied to them. We are delighted to report that more than half of respondents feel the *culture of storytelling at their organization is ethical* (75%). However, the most reported negatively charged feeling in 2025 is struggling with wanting to collect stories while *doing no harm* (28%).

**How do we overcome these negatively-charged feelings?** You've come to the right place. In the following pages, 19 storytelling experts answer your toughest questions about ethical storytelling strategy and adoption. Let's get started!

# MEET THE CONTRIBUTORS



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# MEET THE CONTRIBUTORS



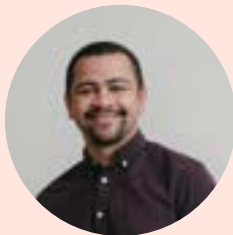
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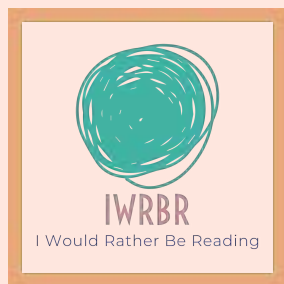
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# MEET THE CONTRIBUTORS

## ETHICAL STORYTELLING CASE STUDIES



ada developers  
academy



CLICK TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE ORGANIZATIONS



## **SECTION ONE**

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# **ETHICAL STORY COLLECTION**

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- **STORY COLLECTION STRATEGIES**
- **ADDRESSING POWER DYNAMICS**
- **TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVIEWING**
- **STRENGTH-BASED MESSAGING**

# PART ONE: STORY COLLECTION STRATEGIES

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## HOW DO YOU APPROACH A CLIENT ABOUT SHARING THEIR STORY IN THE MOST COMPASSIONATE WAY? WHEN IS A GOOD TIME TO DO SO?

When I approach an individual about sharing their story, my focus isn't on "getting the quote or soundbite," my focus is on building a trusted relationship with them. This takes time, transparency, and accountability on my part. In that initial email or conversation, I provide them with all the details they need about my project or storytelling ask and encourage them to make the most informed decision for themselves on if and when they want to share their stories. - **Carly Shein-Lanning**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Wreaths Across America





## WHEN APPROACHING THE PERSON FOR THEIR STORY WHEN YOU KNOW IT'S A SENSITIVE TOPIC, HOW DO YOU POSITION THE POSSIBILITY OF THEM SHARING IT ANONYMOUSLY?

When approaching someone about sharing a sensitive story, position anonymity as an option to protect them, not erase their identity. Let them know that choosing to remain anonymous doesn't make their story any less powerful or meaningful. It still carries weight, shapes understanding, and can inspire change. Framing it this way reassures the storyteller that their experience matters deeply, while also giving them agency over how it is shared. - **Maria Bryan**

When I approach someone about sharing a sensitive story, I begin by centering their agency and safety. I let them know that they are in full control of how, where, and whether their story is shared at all. I first ask if they feel comfortable talking about the topic privately, and only after hearing their comfort level do I introduce the option of anonymity. I also make it clear that anonymity doesn't diminish the impact of their story — that even without identifying details, their experience can help shape understanding and action. I explain the process: what details might be changed to protect identity, how the story will be stored or shared, and that they can withdraw consent later if they wish. - **Meena Das**



## HOW DO I ENSURE THE STORY WE COLLECT IS SOMETHING "USEABLE" IN TERMS OF CONTENT BUT ALSO VISUALLY APPEALING?

If you want a story that's actually usable, you've got to stop winging it and start asking with intention. You're not just mining for emotion; you're looking for moments that create connection and visual resonance. Before you even hit record, ask yourself: Does this person's experience show impact, not just tell it? Will it photograph well? Can it be translated into video or social content? At the Donor Relations Group, we talk a lot about CORE — Create Once, Repurpose Everywhere. Don't just capture quotes — capture energy. And for the love of gratitude, make sure you have visuals or b-roll that go beyond a headshot. Stories aren't just content — they're currency. Use them wisely. - **Lyne Wester**



## HOW CAN I MAKE STORY SHARING AS EASY AS POSSIBLE SO MORE PEOPLE WILL BE INSPIRED TO SHARE?

In my work with nonprofits on story collection, I encourage them to consider what their community would be proud or excited to share. This approach is rooted in what I learned while working at a veteran serving organization. When I asked for stories of how 9/11 impacted the veteran's life, we saw little participation; that was something very difficult to reflect on.



Alternatively, when we asked those same veterans to share a photo in military uniform to be turned into a webpage collage, we enthusiastically received 800 photos. This was the perfect intersection of a simple request and a prompt that tapped into their deep pride in sharing, and it materialized into a beautiful gallery of impact celebrating the collective years of service of these veterans. - **Natalie Monroe**

Set up a system and a culture of storytelling so it becomes a lot easier to collect and share stories! I recommend clients include extra space on paper reply forms, online donation forms, social media posts, emails, basically every communication!

Specifically ASK people to share their stories using emotional language. Encourage staff and volunteers to share stories. Make your existing (approved to use) stories easily accessible online. Use social proof by sharing stories in every newsletter and communication piece you send out, and keep at it! It takes time and effort, but it's worth it.


- **Rachel Zant**



## **GREAT STORYTELLING HAPPENS WHEN WE REMOVE FRICTION AND BUILD TRUST.**

Shift the ask from "we need your story" to "your voice matters here." Offer options: written, recorded, casual conversation, and clearly share how stories will be used. Reach out after meaningful moments and keep the process simple. Pair that human connection with smart tech to make collecting stories seamless without losing heart. When stories are easy to share and honored well, people lean in, and that's where deeper connection (and greater generosity) begins. - **Erik Tomalis**







## CONTINUED: HOW CAN I MAKE STORY SHARING AS EASY AS POSSIBLE SO MORE PEOPLE WILL BE INSPIRED TO SHARE?


Building a culture of storytelling starts with a strong internal foundation rooted in **process, empathy, and partnership**. Make sharing easy through simple systems, clear prompts, and consistent feedback.

Equip frontline staff with trauma-informed training and empower them to gather stories ethically. Foster collaboration between fundraising and communications teams to keep stories flowing. Create trust by honoring dignity and closing the feedback loop. Celebrate contributors and show impact so storytelling becomes natural, mission-driven, and part of your organization's culture (DNA). - **Derria Ford**




Sometimes gathering stories can feel more difficult than getting people to donate, but a good impact story is often worth several donations so the time invested is worth it!

I find that a big part of making sharing easy is a little bit of persistence and follow-up by the story gatherer. Consider the moment someone receives your video collection request - they start to think, "*Am I dressed okay?*" "*Is my hair messy?*" "*Did I have enough coffee?*" like we all do.



They'll say "*I'll do this later*" and let's face it - everyone gets busy and forgets things. Gentle reminders are usually met thankfully when it comes to important things like this! - **Chris Miano**



To be an ethical story sharer, you have to let the storytellers have full ownership of their stories. You need to let them know early and often that they are in control of their stories and what boundaries they can expect. By making this clear and transparent, storytellers will feel more comfortable setting boundaries and asking for boundaries that you may not have previously expected. - **Aaron Zeiler**

# 5 STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE PROGRAM STAFF TO SHARE STORIES

## **Strategy #1: Share Your Storytelling Plan to Promote Transparency**

Ethical storytelling is essential to sharing your nonprofit's mission and values. Inviting colleagues into the process, from obtaining consent and maintaining confidentiality to planning your publication timeline, supports both inclusivity and accountability. Together, you can develop an organization-wide [Ethical Storytelling Standards Guide](#) that clearly outlines the steps that reflect your shared commitments.

## **Strategy #2: Define Clear Goals to Support Clear Story Collection**

When your organization sets clear storytelling goals, it makes it easier for staff and teams to gather stories that support your mission in action. Defining the “why” behind storytelling helps everyone understand how stories connect to each program or department's objectives, and how their role in collecting them directly benefits program participants. With goals in place, story collection becomes more focused, meaningful, and aligned, and ensures that each story contributes to a larger purpose and reflects the impact of your work.

## **Strategy #3: Make it Easy. Make it Repeatable.**

Make it easier for staff to approach community members by providing short, customizable scripts they can use in conversations, emails, or texts. These scripts should clearly explain why you're asking for a story, how it will be used, and what consent looks like. This way, your team won't have to improvise or feel unsure about how to ask, ethically. By giving staff clear, repeatable language that upholds dignity and transparency, you remove guesswork, reduce discomfort, and build trust with storytellers from the very first interaction.

## **Strategy #4: Build Trust By Proving You're a Good Story Steward**

Staff trust grows when they see their stories don't disappear. Close the loop and show what happened because someone shared — whether a story helped drive support, moved a donor, or created an emotional ripple. People trust you when they feel seen, not used. Thank staff publicly, highlight story champions, or send personal notes from leadership to show how their voice strengthens your mission.

## **Strategy #5: Invite Staff Into the Process by Elevating Their Stories**

Your program staff see the impact of your nonprofit's work every day. They bear witness to the small moments and the big transformations firsthand. Their insights and experiences are a rich source of stories that can inform and inspire others. It also allows them to share their own unique connection to your mission and how they stay inspired every day. Sharing these stories highlights their dedication and expertise but also brings authenticity and depth to your fundraising and outreach efforts.



## PART TWO: ADDRESSING POWER DYNAMICS

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### HOW DO I AVOID HAVING OUR CLIENTS FEEL LIKE THEY "OWE" US THEIR STORY IN EXCHANGE FOR THE SERVICES WE PROVIDED?

Make it clear from the beginning that sharing a story is always an invitation, never an expectation. Let clients know that “no” is a full sentence and that your services are not conditional on their participation. To reinforce this, share anonymous examples of others who chose not to take part, perhaps because they weren’t ready, wanted privacy, or simply didn’t want to. This helps normalize opting out and reassures clients that their agency and wellbeing are your priority.

- **Maria Bryan**

I try to make sure that storytelling never feels transactional. From the very beginning, I separate the act of receiving services from the invitation to share stories. When I reach out, I make it clear that their access to care, support, or benefits does not depend on whether they choose to share.

I often say:

***“You don’t owe us your story. What you’ve already trusted us with through your participation is more than enough. Sharing your story is completely optional and only if it feels right to you.”***

I also emphasize why we invite stories — not for publicity or validation, but to help others learn, improve systems, and build empathy. Centering purpose shifts the dynamic from obligation to contribution. - **Meena Das**

I try to frame story collection as an invitation, not a checkbox. We serve people first, storytelling comes later, and only if it feels right to them. That’s the foundation of ethical storytelling: consent, context, and care.

- **Joshua Parrish**

## CONTINUED: HOW DO I AVOID HAVING OUR CLIENTS FEEL LIKE THEY "OWE" US THEIR STORY IN EXCHANGE FOR THE SERVICES WE PROVIDED?

Be crystal clear in your communications that **a story is an invitation, not an obligation** to share. At the same time, when you explain how someone sharing their story or experience can benefit another individual like them, this will likely inspire participation. People generally are willing to help others, especially if they understand their own testimony is a valuable component of this.

- **Natalie Monroe**

First, level with yourself, your staff, and your board that no one ever “owes” you their story. The people you serve do not owe you a testimonial or quote in return for the services you’ve provided. This starts with shifting out of a transactional mindset — your services aren’t a trade; they’re an extension of your mission.



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Dravet Syndrome Foundation

When storytelling begins with gratitude and respect, you remove power imbalances and make space for agency, dignity, and partnership. The next step is giving people true optionality. Some will share publicly, others anonymously, and some not at all. All are equally valid and beautiful choices.

- **Christina Edwards**

Be explicit that sharing is optional and not tied to services. For example: *“We value you and your privacy. Your story is just that, yours! If you’d like to share, we’re honored; if not, that’s completely okay.”*

Offer low-pressure ways to participate and provide a clear “no thanks” path. Close the loop with gratitude either way so no one feels obligated. - **Casey Keller**

You prevent it from feeling “owed” by making it clearly optional and rooted in purpose, not repayment. Explain that their story can help you serve others! Sharing is a way to pay it forward, not to “pay you back.” When people understand the impact and still feel free to say no, those who do share will do so genuinely. - **Danielle Miano**

## CONTINUED: HOW DO I AVOID HAVING OUR CLIENTS FEEL LIKE THEY "OWE" US THEIR STORY IN EXCHANGE FOR THE SERVICES WE PROVIDED?

This is something I am really intentional about addressing because naturally the storytelling process has a power dynamic. I make sure to tell my interviewees that their involvement or decision to be involved will have no bearing on their access to services or provided resources. And if they do want to be involved, providing opportunities to decide how they want their story/information shared, checking in on if they want to continue being involved at all stages of the process, and asking them to provide edits and approvals to their story before the content goes live.

- **Carly Shein-Lanning**

## HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUALS TO SHARE THEIR STORIES WHILE ENSURING THEY FEEL EMPOWERED TO SET BOUNDARIES?

Boundary-setting transforms storytelling from extraction to empowerment, but most people have never been invited to define their limits. I create a dedicated space for individuals to explore boundaries across life domains: childhood, family, relationships, work, etc.

### **Two questions guide reflection:**

*What am I comfortable sharing?*

*What am I not comfortable sharing?*

This isn't rushed. It's time their nonprofit partners commit to protecting them. After every work session, this is what I hear: "I never thought about setting boundaries before." Imagine. Now this tells us, as ethical storytellers, that boundary work with clients is critical and defines their experience of success in the storytelling process. - **Diana Farias Heinrich**

Invite, don't extract. Make it clear that sharing is optional, not expected. Explain how their story will be used, give them control over what's shared, and check in often. Offer review rights, respect their pace, and celebrate when they say "no" just as much as when they say "yes." Boundaries build trust — and trust builds better stories. - **Lynne Wester**



## CONTINUED: HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUALS TO SHARE THEIR STORIES WHILE ENSURING THEY FEEL EMPOWERED TO SET BOUNDARIES?

The term I feel most comfortable using is **Ethical Story Stewardship** which hopefully offers a more equitable interaction between both parties. As a steward, one is accountable for the care and attention given to the story, mindful that the ultimate "owner" is the story-holder.

A steward carries the gift with respect and honor, knowing that she/he is to ultimately provide an account to the story-holder for what was done with the narrative. Really, a steward is a conduit and therefore has an attitude of humility and respect throughout the process.

- **Marina Dalton-Brown**

Encouraging someone to share their story starts with respect, the kind that honors who they are and where they are in life. Storytelling isn't about pulling something out of someone; it's about creating space for them to offer what feels right, when it feels right. The best stories happen when people feel safe and in control. Empowering storytellers to set boundaries around what, how, and when they

share puts them in charge of their voice. When they have that agency, they share from a place of authenticity and strength. True storytelling isn't extractive; it's empowering, a space where people feel seen, heard, and valued for who they are. - **Liz Marcucci**

It's essential to walk each client through the meaning and process of informed consent. Informed consent creates space for transparent conversation about the potential implications of sharing their story and ensures that storytellers fully understand how their story may be used.

This discussion also provides an opportunity to help clients establish personal boundaries and reminds them that they are in control of their narrative. They do not need to share painful or deeply private details for their story to make a meaningful impact on the organization's mission.

As you are listening to the story, it is also appropriate to help them understand what might be oversharing. - **Derria Ford**







## CONTINUED: HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUALS TO SHARE THEIR STORIES WHILE ENSURING THEY FEEL EMPOWERED TO SET BOUNDARIES?

The key is shifting from asking for a story to creating space for someone to choose to share. Start by making it clear they're in control of what, how, and how much they share. Offer choices about format and anonymity, explain how their story will be used, and remind them they can change their mind at any time. When people feel seen and respected, they're more likely to share openly. Technology can help here too by creating safe, flexible ways to collect stories that honor boundaries while amplifying impact. - **Erik Tomalis**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: I Would Rather Be Reading



## WHEN IS IT APPROPRIATE TO COMPENSATE CLIENTS FOR THEIR TIME AND EFFORT IN TELLING THEIR STORIES?

It's so important to let them know that their story isn't payment for services. We're already committed to serving them regardless. Then I explain the "why" behind storytelling. Not for pity, but to show other people what's possible when they give. I frame it as them helping future clients by demonstrating impact, which repositions them as partners, not subjects.

For compensation, I support a simple model. Offer everyone the same, whether that's gift cards (\$25 to \$50), donated items, or service credits. Not payment per story (feels exploitative) but acknowledgment of time. Always offer it upfront, never as a surprise "thanks" because that maintains their dignity and choice.

**- Michael Mitchell**

I would even go a step further with this - regardless of whether we think it is appropriate, I would also argue that it is importantly helpful in maximizing your response rate! There are a whole range of great options when it comes to this, and it doesn't have to feel icky (as my kids say).

You can get as creative as having a donor/sponsor donate \$10 on the storyteller's behalf per story or you could have a drawing where one storyteller wins a local business gift card. Depending on the intimacy of the stories, these types of contribution drivers might not be appropriate - so yes - you absolutely can pay people directly for their time if it's a small amount of storytellers, but that could get pricy the more people you are collecting from! **- Chris Miano**



# 5 COMPENSATION MODELS

**There are many ways to provide compensation to your clients and storytellers, each with special considerations. Always remember that you are providing the storyteller compensation for their time and expertise rather than buying their story. Compensation by any model should be up front in writing on the consent form.**

## **1. Monetary Payment**

While providing monetary compensation for the storyteller's time and expertise, ask yourself who you are compensating. If the person is receiving certain benefits, will this income put them over their benefits bracket?

## **2. Gift Cards**

If you are sending gift cards to your storytellers, consider what people actually want. One gift card may not be as valuable to everybody. Providing gift cards may also open the possibility to start a partnership with a local small business.

## **3. Stipend**

A stipend is a consistent way to provide monetary compensation to your clients and storytellers. Consider the role your storyteller plays in the organization and use your prepared budget to decide what makes the most sense when accommodating your storyteller's time.

## **4. Formal Ambassador Program**

This may require more staff to be involved in the storytelling process. Ask your staff or ambassador what forms of compensation would be most appreciated by your story owners. Some may want to donate their allotted compensation to a small business or another organization. Find a way to provide compensation and be prepared to do so by putting it into your yearly budget.

## **5. Reimbursements**

Reimbursements are possible, but can become more burdensome. A reimbursement for gas, bus fares, ride shares, lunch, etc, is not considered compensation and must be handled in exact amounts by the organization. Consider the required processes of collecting receipts and calculating exact amounts before offering reimbursements in place of compensation.

# PART THREE: TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVIEWING

## WHAT ARE YOUR TIPS FOR HELPING PEOPLE FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE AT THE START OF AN INTERVIEW, ESPECIALLY IF I KNOW THEIR STORY INVOLVES TRAUMA?

These three small steps help the storyteller feel safe and in control before moving into more difficult parts of their experience.



### Offering Choice

Give them a choice over the format and setting, whether that's in person, on Zoom, over the phone, or through writing. If in person, let them choose the space where they'll feel most at ease.



### Pacing

When you know someone's story involves trauma, begin the interview with grounding rather than going straight into the hardest parts, which are often at the start.



### Care

Ease in with lighter questions about their day or other gentle topics before shifting toward the story.

- Maria Bryan

Start with empathy, not the camera. Build rapport before hitting record — chat, share your name, explain the process. Let them know they can pause or stop anytime. Avoid jumping into heavy topics right away; begin with light, open-ended questions. Most importantly, center their control: *"You're the expert on your story, and we'll go only where you feel ready to go."*

- Lynne Wester

When I start an interview, I remind the interviewee how we plan to share their story — the format, the medium, and whether they can be anonymous. I also let them know that we can take a break or stop the interview if they want, especially if I know that the conversation may be difficult for them. - Aaron Zeiler

## CONTINUED: WHAT ARE YOUR TIPS FOR HELPING PEOPLE FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE AT THE START OF AN INTERVIEW, ESPECIALLY IF I KNOW THEIR STORY INVOLVES TRAUMA?

I think it's important to start the interview with, *"We can stop anytime. You can skip any question. If you need a break, just say the word."* **I actually mean it.**

I've ended interviews at 8 minutes before. When someone becomes emotional, I immediately stop asking questions. Silence is okay. I might say *"Take your time"* or *"Would you like to pause?"* Never push through tears for content. The moment they apologize for crying, I respond with *"Your feelings are welcome here."*

When possible, debriefing afterward can be super helpful, as well. And then, I always try to remind myself going in that I'm a witness to their story, not a therapist. - **Michael Mitchell**

Set your interview up for success before it even begins. Communicate ahead of time about how long the call will be, the format it will take. Call it a chat or a conversation and not an interview, to allow for a less formal conversation.

I let people know at the beginning that they are in charge - they can answer anything they wish and can also say they don't want to answer anything. I tell them a bit about me, so I'm not a complete stranger. I let them know they'll have approval of any story content before it's used.

Then, I simply ask them to start sharing their story. I let them talk as long as they need to, before I jump in to ask any clarifying questions. I also share my own personal experience, where appropriate, to build connection.  
- **Rachel Zant**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: The Seattle Clemency Project

## CONTINUED: WHAT ARE YOUR TIPS FOR HELPING PEOPLE FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE AT THE START OF AN INTERVIEW, ESPECIALLY IF I KNOW THEIR STORY INVOLVES TRAUMA?

For all interviews, whether virtual or in-person, I make sure the interview takes place in a quiet, private space where there aren't other people walking around.



When we arrive, I give my interviewee time to settle in and set the stage of what we'll talk about today. If in person, I encourage them to bring any comfort items (ex. fidget toys, crystal, etc.) and provide a glass of water.

If I notice my interviewee needs a break, I ask if they want to take a minute and at the beginning of our conversation, also encourage them to let me know when they need to step back.



At the end of our interview, I make sure they know next steps and have my contact information to ask follow-up questions. - **Carly Shein-Lanning**

Start by centering the person, not the story. Before you ever hit record or take notes, spend time building trust and explaining that they're in control of the conversation.

Offer choices about where and how the interview happens, and remind them they can pause or stop anytime. Simple gestures like active listening, patience, and validating emotions go a long way.

Pairing that human care with thoughtful tools can also make sharing feel safer and more supportive, helping people feel seen without being retraumatized. - **Erik Tomalis**





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

Respect means giving people ownership. I always offer them the option to review, retract, or refine what they've shared. When they know they hold the power, the interview becomes a collaboration - not an extraction.


- **Joshua Parrish**

## WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY STORYTELLER BECOMES OVERLY EMOTIONAL DURING AN INTERVIEW?



### IS IT APPROPRIATE TO CONTINUE?


If a storyteller becomes emotional during an interview, pause immediately and prioritize their well-being over completing the story. Acknowledge their feelings with empathy and allow time for them to breathe or regroup. Remind them they are in control, they can skip questions, pause, or stop altogether. If they wish to continue, proceed gently and avoid pressing for painful details.



Afterward, check in to ensure they feel okay and offer support or a referral if needed. Do not continue if they are visibly distressed or unable to speak calmly. Preserve their dignity, thank them for their openness, and follow up later if appropriate. Storytelling should always center care, consent, and compassion. - **Derria Ford**

## HOW CAN I BEST PREPARE MYSELF IN A TRAUMA-INFORMED WAY WHEN APPROACHING POTENTIAL STORYTELLERS?

This sounds cliché, but if you commit yourself to approaching the interaction with love and curiosity you'll achieve beautiful results. Have the love to plan things out beforehand, have the love to ensure a comfortable setting, have the love to prepare for challenges, have the love to make sure they know how the resulting content will be used and for how long, and have the love to make sure they have total control over that end result. Ask curious, well-crafted questions that make the storyteller feel like this isn't a transaction but a genuine interest in their valuable journey. Preparation is everything! - **Chris Miano**



# 7

## TRAUMA-INFORMED CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWEE



### 1. Clear Explanations

Explain the interview process in advance & obtain enthusiastic, informed consent. Make it clear they can stop the interview at any time.



### 2. Choosing Location

Allow them to select the location where they feel most comfortable. Offer options like their home, a private office, or a peaceful outdoor space.



### 3. Include A Support Person

Ask if they would like a support person, such as a close friend or family member, to attend the interview with them.



### 4. Understand Potential Triggers

Ask about any potential triggers you should avoid. Tailor questions accordingly to minimize distress.



### 5. Build Rapport

Begin with rapport building conversation to help them ease in before recounting traumatic memories.



### 6. Referral Information

Have referral information ready for affordable counseling, support groups, crisis hotlines, or other relevant community resources.



### 7. Take Breaks

Reassure them they can take breaks at any point if feeling overwhelmed.



– Maria Bryan

## PART FOUR: STRENGTH-BASED MESSAGING

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### WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO TELL IF YOU ARE USING DEFICIT-BASED LANGUAGE AND HOW CAN YOU SWITCH TO STRENGTH-BASED LANGUAGE?

The test is this. Does this language show what someone overcame, or just what they lack? Deficit focuses on problems. Strength focuses on response to problems.

Instead of "homeless and desperate," try "determined to find stable housing for her kids." Instead of "suffered from addiction," use "in recovery and rebuilding relationships." The difference is agency and it makes all the difference in the world.

- **Michael Mitchell**

A quick gut check is to ask: does this story focus more on what someone lacks or on what they bring? Deficit-based language highlights need, while strength-based language celebrates resilience, agency, and possibility. Shifting is as simple as reframing: instead of "at-risk youth," say "young leaders building their future." Invite your team to practice this together so it feels like growth not correction. And remember, strength-based stories inspire generosity by showing what's

possible, and tools like Avid can help reveal and amplify those strengths. - **Erik Tomalis**

I have a very practical answer that shouldn't be tough to implement! This is a task where AI is actually incredibly helpful. I would, however *not* recommend simply uploading your document to ChatGPT and asking it for advice. First off, always make sure your documents are sanitized of anything you wouldn't want public.

But second, I wouldn't feel comfortable relying on AI to naturally get this task right! Develop or use a pre-built language guide that you trust, have ChatGPT reference that document when examining your document and it'll be much more likely to get you what you're looking for. Always double check though - you are responsible for the results! - **Chris Miano**





## HOW CAN WE EDUCATE OTHERS ON OUR TEAM TO SWITCH TO STRENGTH-BASED MESSAGING WITHOUT MAKING THEM FEEL LIKE THEY HAVE BEEN DOING SOMETHING "WRONG"?

It can be difficult to change how we tell stories because we've been taught that you have to tell deeply emotional stories to be successful or to please stakeholders. One way to encourage your team to make a shift to strength-based storytelling is to appeal to their identity in this work. We want to do good work and we want to be effective, so share research with them about how emotions like hope are more effective in creating long-term change that can sustain our good work.

**- Aaron Zeiler**

Start with good: Acknowledge what's working — your team cares deeply and wants to connect. Then show the better: Strength-based messaging builds dignity, not pity, and deepens trust. Finally, offer the best: Share examples of how this approach inspires more engagement and generosity. Frame it as evolution, not correction. We're not saying *"you did it wrong,"* we're saying *"here's how we can do it even more powerfully."* - **Lynne Wester**

Start by acknowledging why we often lean on deficit language in the first place. Many of us work on urgent, pressing challenges, and it feels natural to describe the problems in order to highlight the solutions we provide.

From there, you can introduce strength-based messaging as an evolution rather than a correction. Share how deficit framing, while effective at showing urgency, strips away dignity. Contrast that with asset-framed storytelling, which uplifts resilience and possibility and often has a greater impact because audiences are increasingly sensitive to undignified fundraising methods.

**- Maria Bryan**

We encourage collaborative learning. Trauma-informed storytelling is an ever-evolving practice and in order to ask tough questions and examine where shifts need to be made, we need to create safe environments with our teams to share feedback and questions about how we collectively create safe, affirming environments for our interviewees.

**- Carly Shein-Lanning**





## CONTINUED: HOW CAN WE EDUCATE OTHERS ON OUR TEAM TO SWITCH TO STRENGTH-BASED MESSAGING WITHOUT MAKING THEM FEEL LIKE THEY HAVE BEEN DOING SOMETHING "WRONG"?

One strategy is to create a shared **glossary of strength-based language** that outlines how the organization talks about clients, their experiences, and their goals. This tool serves as both a learning resource and a culture-building guide.

For example, replacing words like “needy” with “resource-seeking” or “at-risk” with “under-resourced” helps staff understand how small shifts in language can shape perceptions and promote dignity. Introduce this conversation through training, open dialogue, etc., rather than top-down correction. Encourage staff to reflect on how language impacts the people they serve and invite them to contribute ideas to the glossary.

- **Derria Ford**

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

I've learned not to shame people for asking -- most of the time, they've just seen that approach work before. I explain that while shock can grab attention, it doesn't build connection. Ethical stories don't rely on pity; they invite empathy and respect. That's what keeps audiences coming back. - **Joshua Parrish**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: RE:IMAGINE ATL  
Pictured are partners at Frontline Housing who support matched savings program for students

# STRENGTH-BASED V. DEFICIT-BASED LANGUAGE

USE THIS	NOT THIS
Students pursuing goals of...	At-risk youth
People returning from incarceration	Ex-cons
Striving for	Suffering from
Facing barriers of	Broken home
Schooling was disrupted by	Underachieving students
Survivors	Traumatized
Limited access	Poverty stricken
People in recovery	Addicts

## **SECTION TWO**

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# **CONSENT**

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- **BUILDING CONSENT FORMS**
- **CROSS-CULTURAL CONSENT CONSIDERATIONS**
- **YOUTH & OTHERS WHO MAY LACK CAPACITY FOR CONSENT**
- **INFORMED CONSENT FOR BEGINNERS**

# PART ONE: BUILDING CONSENT FORMS

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## HOW CAN I ENSURE OUR CONSENT AGREEMENT PROTECTS OUR STORYTELLERS AND OUR NONPROFIT?

Use clear, plain language, no legalese. State how the story will be used, where it may appear, and for how long. Give storytellers options (e.g., anonymity, image use) and the right to withdraw consent when reasonable. Include a reminder that sharing is voluntary and won't impact services or support. Most importantly, revisit your agreement regularly with legal counsel to ensure it protects both your storytellers and your mission.

- **Lynne Wester**

The best consent agreements are written in plain language, not legal jargon. When people actually understand what they're agreeing to, everyone's protected. Clarity eliminates confusion, reduces risk,

and sets the tone for a relationship built on trust. - **Joshua Parrish**

A strong consent agreement is about clarity and care. It should explain how a story will be used, where it might appear, and remind the storyteller that they can withdraw consent at any time. Use clear, accessible language and offer options like anonymity or limited use to keep agency in their hands.


For nonprofits, document how and when consent was given and revisit it periodically. Tools like Avid can help track and manage these details, protecting storytellers and organizations alike while ensuring stories are used ethically and respectfully. - **Erik Tomalis**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Cameras For Girls



## WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT MUST BE INCLUDED IN CONSENT FORMS?




Consent must be informed, meaning the person giving it understands and appreciates the nature and significance of what they are consenting to. To meet this standard, a consent form must include, at a minimum, the information that will be shared — such as the storyteller's name, image, or personal details — and how it will be shared — for example, whether it will be online, in print, or in other media. The consent should be as specific as possible as to what will be shared and how it will be shared. - **Allie Levene**

A good consent form should clearly explain why you're asking to share someone's story and how it might be used. For example, the website, social media, or in print materials. It should also remind the storyteller that sharing is completely voluntary and won't affect the services they receive. Make sure they know they can stay anonymous, change their mind later, and who to contact with questions. Finally, include space for signatures and a simple statement confirming they understand what they're agreeing to. Clear, honest communication builds trust and keeps storytelling ethical and respectful. - **Derria Ford**

Plain language explaining exactly where the story will appear. Not just "marketing materials" but specifics like "our website, printed newsletters, and Facebook page." Include how long you'll use it (I recommend 2 years with annual check-ins). Give them veto power over specific details or photos. State clearly that they can withdraw consent anytime and how to do it (email, phone, in person). The most important thing people miss is the "what happens next" section. After they sign, what's the timeline? Will they see the final story before it goes public? Who can they contact with concerns? Consent isn't a one-time signature. It's an ongoing conversation where power stays with the storyteller, not the organization.

- **Michael Mitchell**



You must outline how you plan to use a person's story. Even if you are unsure about the exact tactics or media you will use once you've collected stories, you should list out some examples so that a storyteller can make an informed choice to participate. You can also include a space where people can outline how they don't want their story to be used. - **Aaron Zeiler**

# WHEN SHOULD CONSENT "EXPIRE"? AND HOW CAN I MAKE SURE MY TEAM IS FOLLOWING THIS RULE?

This is an agreement that ought to be made on a case-by-case basis when dealing with sensitive stories, but a broader policy is usually appropriate for more general storytelling content. There should be a north star policy that covers all volunteers and employees for general content - i.e. pictures and videos taken at events and programs. That's going to save you a lot of time as that's the majority of content we're usually working with.

Beneath that, we've seen people have a lot of success by simply having a Google/Excel worksheet that lists out the sensitive content that is "in the wild" and how long it is approved for. Link this document in your SOP so everyone can see it, and if there is staff turnover, it'll be readily available! - **Chris Miano**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Neighborhood Centers Association, 2025 Foxie Winner, Storyteller of the Year (Individual)

# 4 CONSENT FORM RECOMMENDATIONS

## **1. Use clear, plain language that builds trust.**

Avoid legal jargon and explain, simply and specifically, what information will be shared, where it will appear, and why you're requesting it. Clarity protects both the storyteller and your organization.

## **2. Provide meaningful choices & protect agency.**

Offer anonymity, limited image use, and the ability to veto specific details. Remind storytellers that participation is voluntary, won't impact services, and that they can withdraw consent at any time.

## **3. Be transparent about scope, duration & next steps.**

Specify how long the story will be used, outline what happens after signing (e.g., review and approval process), and provide clear instructions for how to revoke or modify consent.

## **4. Document, track & routinely revisit consent.**

Record when and how consent was given, maintain organized tracking (e.g., sheets or tools like MemoryFox), and regularly review agreements, especially for sensitive stories, to ensure they remain accurate and protective for all parties.

# CONSENT FORM EXAMPLE

Consider this example by Good Neighbors when adding your own expiration policies in your consent form



## Annex 7. Consent Form for Media & Communications Activities

✖ This Consent Form applies to external media staff members from the press including broadcasting, newspapers, magazines who visit Good Neighbors partnership countries or global offices to photograph or film; this Form aims to pledge that they have understood the Good Neighbors Child and Adult Safeguarding Policy and behave in compliance with the Communications, Social Media and Digital Safeguarding Guideline.

### CONSENT FORM FOR MEDIA & COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES (\*For external media and communications staff only)

I have fully read and understood the GN Communications, Social Media and Digital Safeguarding Guideline. I consent to comply with the guideline throughout the entire process of media and communications activities including interviewing, photographing/filming, marketing and publishing the media contents to prevent any harm in communications and to ensure images and stories of the children or vulnerable adults are portrayed with dignity and based on the facts.

This consent form shall have effect for a period of two (2) years from the date on which it has been signed as indicated below.

\_\_\_\_\_

Date:

Name:

Signature:






## PART TWO: CROSS-CULTURAL CONSENT CONSIDERATIONS

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### WHAT OPTIONS DO I HAVE TO OVERCOME LANGUAGE BARRIERS WHILE GETTING CONSENT FROM STORYTELLERS?

Offer **translated consent forms** and use certified interpreters — not just bilingual staff — to ensure accuracy and clarity. Allow time for questions, and confirm understanding by asking them to explain the agreement in their own words. Consider **video or audio explanations** for accessibility. Consent isn't just a signature; it's comprehension. When in doubt, slow down, check in, and prioritize the storyteller's comfort. - **Lynne Wester**


To overcome language barriers during the consent process, organizations should provide consent forms in the storyteller's preferred language and review them at multiple points throughout the process to ensure understanding. Bringing in a trusted, **qualified translator or interpreter** (ideally someone familiar with the community and the organization's mission) can help families fully grasp what they are agreeing to and how their story will be used. Avoid relying on family members, especially children, as interpreters. Creating a safe, inclusive environment where storytellers can ask questions in their own language helps ensure consent is truly informed and culturally respectful. - **Derria Ford**



### HOW CAN I BEST ADDRESS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES - EVEN IN CASES WHERE WE SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE?


Even when we share a language, words can carry different meanings based on culture, experience, or history. The key is to write with humility and clarity. **Avoid jargon or assumptions**, and instead use plain language that's easy to understand. Consider including examples or scenarios to explain how stories might be used, and invite questions throughout the process. Most importantly, view consent as a conversation, not a checkbox. Building trust and understanding takes time, but it ensures that consent is truly informed and deeply respected. - **Erik Tomalis**

## EVEN WITH WRITTEN CONSENT, WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS THAT I CAN BE ABSOLUTELY SURE MY STORYTELLERS UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY ARE AGREEING TO?



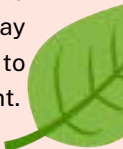
Ask them to explain it back to you in their own words. *"Can you tell me what you think will happen with your story?"* **If they can't articulate it, you don't have real consent yet.**

Watch for hesitation or checking with others before signing. That's not always a red flag, but it means slow down and clarify. In many cultures, saying "yes" is about being polite, not actual agreement. I also pay attention to the questions they ask. Thoughtful questions mean they're processing. No questions might mean confusion or pressure. Finally, revisit consent before publishing. Show them the draft and ask, "Is this what you expected?" Their reaction tells you everything about whether they truly understood what they agreed to.



- **Michael Mitchell**

I think the biggest concern here is that when something is posted to the internet. Even if it is a static picture on a website, it's nearly impossible to maintain control over that asset. We don't want to scare people away from sharing stories and content, so we want to be sure to explain to storytellers exactly how we intend to use the content.



If the desire is for your video to go viral... make sure they know that! If it's simply for a grant application, make sure they know that! Not only are you protecting the storyteller, but most people will unconsciously or consciously shape what they say based on the medium it will be shared. That Instagram Reel is a much more risky share than a grant application!

- **Chris Miano**





# PART THREE: CONSENT FOR YOUTH & OTHERS WHO MAY LACK CAPACITY TO CONSENT

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WHAT ARE SOME ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TELLING THE STORIES OF MINORS, SO THEIR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT DOESN'T HAUNT THEM IN THE FUTURE?

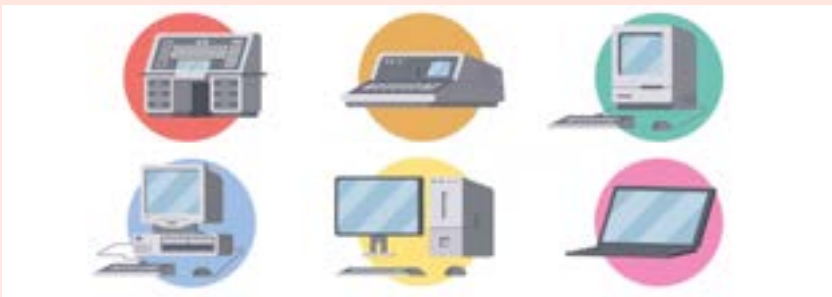


Once it's out there, it's out there. Digital footprints are permanent, making protection critical when working with minors. One high schooler told me, "I didn't know I could ask" to review content, request takedowns, or edit before publication. **I give them a list of questions like this** to ask their nonprofit partners before getting into the content:

- 1. Who will see/hear my story?**
- 2. When, where, and for how long will it be published?**
- 3. Can I make changes before it goes public?**

Equally important: who to contact if, years later, they need their story removed. A 15-year-old's story shouldn't follow them into the job market at 19 unless they want it to. My test: when young story owners feel empowered to ask for changes, I know I've succeeded.

**- Diana Farias Heinrich**





## CONTINUED: WHAT ARE SOME ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TELLING THE STORIES OF MINORS, SO THEIR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT DOESN'T HAUNT THEM IN THE FUTURE?

When telling stories about minors, the responsibility goes beyond today's campaign; it's about their future selves. Focus on language and details that celebrate their strength without exposing private information they may not want public later. Avoid full names, specific locations, or identifiers when possible, and consider using composite stories or anonymity. Always involve guardians in the consent process and explain long-term implications. Storytelling should empower, not follow them as a shadow, and our choices today shape how that story lives online tomorrow. - **Erik Tomalis**

Really consider if you need to include their photo with their story — you may not need it to tell a compelling story. Also, don't use their last name if you don't have to. That can help protect them from online searches in the future. If it is a story about a difficult subject where the minor may not want to be identified or may change their mind in adulthood, you should

consider using a pseudonym for them and make a note that you have changed names in the story to protect the identity of a minor.

- **Aaron Zeiler**

ChatGPT said: When collecting stories or media featuring children, consent must always be obtained from a parent or legal guardian before any information, photos, or videos are shared. In addition to written consent, it's equally important to talk with the child directly, in language that matches their age and understanding, about what it means to share their story.

This conversation, held in the guardian's presence, helps the child feel respected and included while reinforcing that participation is voluntary. Children should always have the right to decline or change their mind. Prioritizing both guardian permission and the child's comfort ensures storytelling remains ethical, empowering, and rooted in respect.

- **Derria Ford**



## CONTINUED: WHAT ARE SOME ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TELLING THE STORIES OF MINORS, SO THEIR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT DOESN'T HAUNT THEM IN THE FUTURE?

This is a great question that I'm sure a lot of our modern era parents think about. I'm a minimalist when it comes to my kids on social media, but that is of course not the same for everyone and that's okay! I tend to think about it this way - kids can be cruel, the job market is tough, and eventually this child will be an adult with their own story they want to define. Kids can be cruel - don't open your child up to bullying, it's hard enough as it is! The job market is tough - one day your child's future employer will do a Google/A.I. background check, and we don't want anything out there that might give them pause (fairly or unfairly). Finally, these kids will be adults someday... they ought to be able to define their digital footprint!

- **Chris Miano**

Think about what their 25 year old self would want online. Medical details, family trauma, behavioral struggles, anything tied to shame or stigma gets vetoed automatically, even if parents consent. Default to first names only for anyone under 18. Be cautious with faces. A photo of a kid playing is different than a photo paired with their story about homelessness or abuse. Consider angles, distance, or even illustrations instead. Also, build in automatic expiration. Stories with minors should sunset after two years unless you reconfirm consent when they're older. The internet is forever, but our use of their story should not be. That young person deserves the chance to tell their own story on their own terms when they're old enough to decide. - **Michael Mitchell**





## HOW DO YOU HANDLE CONSENT WHEN IT COMES TO CONTENT FEATURING CHILDREN?





To be ethical, you would need to feel assured that the child has the ability to give informed consent, meaning that they can understand and appreciate the nature and significance of what they are consenting to. That is a very hard judgment call to make, and why it is best practice to get consent from the child's parent or guardian. But even when you do that, you need to be mindful of the child's feelings. If the parent consents but the child's statements or body language are hinting that they don't want to be doing this, then you should honor the child's desires. - **Allie Levene**

One approach that I've seen work well is to collect consent from parents/guardians for their child upfront -- whether that's at the start of a year-long program, a summer program, or otherwise. That way, you know exactly for which children you have permission to capture photo and video content as you document events and programs and share your mission impact publicly. -**Natalie Monroe**



## WHAT ARE SOME BEST PRACTICES REGARDING CONSENT FROM ADULTS WHO MAY LACK THE CAPACITY, SUCH AS THOSE WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES OR MEMORY-RELATED CONDITIONS?




Start by assessing capacity. When in doubt, consult a legal or clinical expert. If someone can't provide informed consent, seek it from a legal guardian or representative. Still, include the individual in the conversation as much as possible. Use simple, respectful language, and honor their responses and comfort level. Consent is both legal and ethical; just because you can get it doesn't always mean you should use the story. Always prioritize dignity and do-no-harm storytelling. - **Lynne Wester**



# PART FOUR: INFORMED CONSENT FOR BEGINNERS

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## HOW DO YOU ENSURE THAT PARTICIPANTS, PARTICULARLY THOSE WITH PERSONAL STORIES THAT MIGHT MAKE THEM FEEL VULNERABLE, ARE GIVING INFORMED CONSENT?



Who, what, where, when is generally a good formula. **Who**, as in how are we identifying you (with the option to remain anonymous or to have only their first name shared, for example).

**What** exactly are we sharing about you. **Where** we will share your story as it pertains to various channels, mediums, communications, and collateral, and with whom those are being shared. And **when** will we publish your story, and for how long will it stay live. - **Natalie Monroe**

Walk through actual examples of past stories. Show a newsletter, pull up the website, scroll through social media posts. Say: *Your story would look something like this.* Visuals make it concrete. Be specific about reach: *This email goes to 5,000 people. This gets posted publicly where anyone can see it.*

For vulnerable stories, I'm honest about risk. *"Someone from your past might see this. A future employer might Google you."* I also practice the

*worst-case scenario* conversation.


Not to scare them, but to reality test their comfort level. *"What if this gets shared beyond where we post it?"*

True informed consent means they've thought through the implications and still choose to share. Anything less isn't consent. It's us convincing them.

- **Michael Mitchell**

Informed consent begins long before a form is signed. It is about building trust through honest, transparent conversation. Clearly explain how a story might be used, where it could appear, and who might see it. Use simple language, invite questions, and check for understanding by asking them to reflect back what they heard.

Reinforce that participation is always a choice and can be withdrawn at any time. When people feel fully informed and empowered, their stories become not just content, but catalysts for connection, empathy, and lasting change. - **Erik Tomalis**





## WHEN SHOULD YOU BEGIN THE CONVERSATION WHEN APPROACHING SOMEONE ABOUT SHARING THEIR STORY?

Begin the conversation after trust is built, but before you need the story. Avoid last-minute asks. Introduce the idea gently: “Your experience is powerful — would you ever be open to sharing it someday?” Give them time to consider, ask questions, and set boundaries. The best stories come from relationships, not rush jobs. - **Lynne Wester**


The conversation starts with understanding mutual value. Early in the relationship, people need to know their story has inspirational AND financial value. So often I hear from story owners, "I just want to help people like me," but they don't realize they're also helping keep the people running the organization employed! That shift in perspective can be life changing. Before any consent forms or interview prep, I establish the mutual benefit: Nonprofits need community voices to give the public compelling reasons to take action, and story owners need the organization to continue providing services to their communities. When each participant understands their value from the start, that's the environment where ethical storytelling thrives. - **Diana Farias Heinrich**




Nonprofit Photo Credit: Ada Developers Academy



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Braid Mission



## THE INTERNET IS UNPREDICTABLE. HOW CAN I BEST SHARE THE POSSIBLE OUTCOMES, WITHOUT SCARING MY STORYTELLER?



It's important to be transparent about the realities of sharing stories online without creating fear or mistrust. You can explain that while your organization takes care to use stories respectfully, the internet is public and unpredictable — once something is shared online, it may be impossible to fully remove or control where it goes. **Framing this as empowerment rather than warning helps storytellers make informed choices.**

Emphasize that they have full control over what details are shared, and that the story will be developed with them, not about them. Writing the story alongside the storyteller ensures accuracy, respect, and mutual trust while maintaining ethical transparency. - **Derria Ford**

It's all about being honest and upfront. Letting the storyteller have total control over outcomes. If you're trying to create a viral video... we don't want to let our storytellers go viral without setting expectations first!

- **Chris Miano**

## **SECTION THREE**

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# **ETHICAL STORY SHARING**

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- **ETHICAL STORY EDITING AND APPROVAL**
- **CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SHARING A STORY**
- **ANONYMOUS STORYTELLING STRATEGIES**



# PART ONE: ETHICAL STORY EDITING AND APPROVAL

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## WHAT ARE SOME SIMPLE WAYS TO KNOW THAT I'VE WRITTEN, OR EDITED, A STORY IN AN ETHICAL WAY?



A simple way to know you've written or edited a story ethically is to **ensure the storyteller has been part of the process from start to finish**. When stories are created with clients rather than about them, you honor their voice and agency.

Ethical storytelling also means getting informed consent, using respectful and strength-based language, and giving the storyteller a chance to review or approve the final version before it's shared. If the story reflects dignity, accuracy, and collaboration, and the storyteller feels proud of how they're represented, you can be confident it was written ethically. - **Derria Ford**


Read it out loud and ask yourself: **Would I want this written about me?** If you hesitate, that's your answer. Check for agency. Does the person in the story make choices and take action, or are they just acted upon?

Ethical stories show people as protagonists, not props. Look at your adjectives. Words like *poor*, *vulnerable*, or *needy* center the deficit. Words like *determined*, *resourceful*, or *persistent* center the person.

If you're using more problem words than strength words, rewrite it. Finally, send it to the storyteller before publishing. Their comfort level is the ultimate litmus test. If they want changes, make them. No story is worth someone's regret. - **Michael Mitchell**



Learn more about strength-based messaging in Section One (pg. 31)

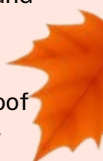


## HOW DO I ADD CONTEXT, LIKE BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT MY NONPROFIT OR STATISTICS, TO SOMEONE'S STORY WITHOUT CHANGING THEIR ORIGINAL INTENT?

Use direct quotes to honor the storyteller's voice, but frame them with context that connects emotionally. You're the narrator, not the editor. Weave in sensory details, mission impact, and audience relevance, but never exaggerate or manipulate. Emotion should come from authenticity, not embellishment. Let the story breathe, and let the truth move people.

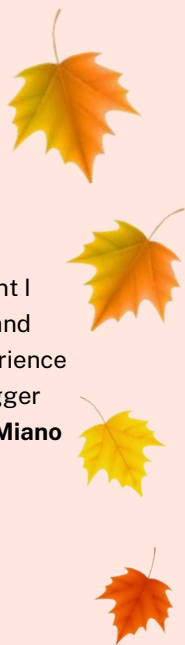
- **Lynne Wester**

Adding context is about complementing the storyteller's voice, not competing with it. Keep their words and experience at the center, and use data or background details only to deepen understanding, not to steer the narrative. Frame statistics as proof of the broader impact their story represents, and be transparent about why you're including them. Most importantly, share the final story with the individual before publishing. Collaboration builds trust and ensures the story remains authentic while still connecting audiences to the bigger mission at work. - **Erik Tomalis**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Ada Developers Academy

## HOW DO I ADD CONTEXT, LIKE BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT MY NONPROFIT OR STATISTICS, TO SOMEONE'S STORY WITHOUT CHANGING THEIR ORIGINAL INTENT?



For me, the key is to start with the actual person and their lived experience they are talking about, not leading with the bigger point I want to make. I try to tell their story honestly first, in their words and their context, and then I connect the dots out loud: “This one experience is actually something we see on a larger scale...” That way, the bigger theme comes from their story, not at the expense of it. - **Danielle Miano**

**Start with the actual person... Tell  
their story honestly first**

**-Danielle Miano**


Make the broader system a character in the story. Is the storyteller taking on the burdens of healthcare hurdles? Identify all the steps that they are taking and describe them with detail. The number of calls they have to make, how long they spend on the phone, the choices they have to make to afford healthcare are all details a reader can relate to. But remember that we don't solve problems on our own. Identify the community surrounding the storyteller and how they help them overcome the hurdles. These details together help identify the systems that get in the way and the community-based solutions we can relate to without undermining the storyteller's unique experience. - **Aaron Zeiler**



## PART TWO: CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SHARING A STORY




### HOW DO I ENSURE THAT INDIVIDUALS ARE REPRESENTED AUTHENTICALLY IN STORIES WITHOUT BEING TOKENIZED?




Tokenization happens when we use someone to represent an entire group rather than honoring individual experience. The fix is specificity. Don't write "as a single mother" unless that detail drives the story. Write about Maria, who happens to be raising kids alone while building a business. Watch your pattern around whose stories you tell. If we only share stories from one demographic when our work serves many, that's tokenization. Ask yourself "Am I sharing this story because this person's experience matters, or because their identity checks a box?" Answer honestly. And never, ever use phrases like "voices that need to be heard." **Their voices don't need us. We need their permission.**

- Michael Mitchell



Authentic storytelling starts with seeing people as partners, not props. Center their full humanity rather than a single circumstance, and resist the urge to make them stand in for an entire group or issue. Invite them into the storytelling process, ask how they want their story told, what details matter most, and what feels off-limits. Pair their lived experience with context that honors complexity. When people are represented as whole, multifaceted individuals rather than symbols, stories become more truthful, more powerful, and far more worthy of the missions they serve. - Erik Tomalis





## HOW DO I ENSURE THAT INDIVIDUALS ARE REPRESENTED AUTHENTICALLY IN STORIES WITHOUT BEING TOKENIZED? CONTINUED

You have to make sure you are using asset-based framing and you have to tell stories where the individual is connected to their community. Bootstrapping stories — or stories where an individual powers through on their own — tokenize the individual and misrepresent how change actually happens. We all find solutions with community support through individual friends, mentors, local organizations or our neighbors. Stories tokenize when they make a person feel alone; stories energize when they show community in action. - **Aaron Zeiler**

Involve them in every step, before, during, and after. Ask how they want to be portrayed, what feels respectful, and what's off-limits. Share drafts when possible. Focus on their whole story, not just their struggle or identity. Don't spotlight someone just to check a box — share because their voice adds value, not diversity optics. Authenticity means partnership, not performative inclusion. - **Lynne Wester**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Story Brook University

## PART THREE: ANONYMOUS STORYTELLING STRATEGIES

### WHAT ARE SOME IDEAS THAT INVOLVE USING VISUALS (PHOTOS & VIDEOS) WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO SHOW FACES OF THE PEOPLE WE SERVE?

Some of the most powerful visuals show programming in action. The hands of foster kids creating arts projects, writing in a journal, gardening, or painting. A blanket being knit and delivered to the hospital bed of an individual undergoing cancer care. A meal being served at a community pantry. Feet wandering along a path or a backpack being packed and slung onto someone's back, those show the journey toward a destination. These visuals center dignity, not deficit, all while keeping identities anonymous. They invite your audience to see the work happening (and not just hear about it), which builds transparency and credibility. Showcasing your mission in motion is a critical ingredient to making your viewer feel part of your work. - **Natalie Monroe**

When you cannot show faces, use creative visuals that still convey story and impact. Photograph hands at work, people walking together from behind, or silhouettes that protect identity while showing humanity. Objects can hold meaning too, like an empty chair, a meal being shared, or a place tied to the story. Wide shots of classrooms, gardens, or community spaces provide context without revealing identity. Strong narration makes a huge difference in video, carrying the emotional weight while visuals add texture and atmosphere. Together, narration and imagery protect privacy while still telling a powerful, authentic story. - **Maria Bryan**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Braid Mission

## CONTINUED: WHAT ARE SOME IDEAS THAT INVOLVE USING VISUALS (PHOTOS & VIDEOS) WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO SHOW FACES OF THE PEOPLE WE SERVE?

SHOW HANDS  
AT WORK

SHOW BACKS  
TURNED

USE  
SILHOUETTES



USE CLOSE UPS  
OF MOVEMENT  
OR  
ENVIRONMENTS


SHOW  
MEANINGFUL  
OBJECTS

PAIR VISUALS  
WITH POWERFUL  
QUOTES OR  
NARRATION

Show hands at work, backs turned, silhouettes, or meaningful objects — like a child's drawing or a well-worn book. Use close-ups of movement or environments to tell a story without faces. Pair visuals with powerful quotes or narration. Think emotion without exposure. You can honor privacy and still create connection by focusing on story-driven imagery that evokes, not reveals.


- Lynne Wester






## IF I WANT TO USE COMPOSITE STORIES TO HIDE IDENTITIES, WHAT "FORMULA" WOULD YOU RECOMMEND? DOES COMBINING TOO MANY STORIES ULTIMATELY MAKE IT NOT "REAL"?

Composite stories can be powerful when used thoughtfully. The key is to ground them in real experiences and be transparent about their purpose. Combine stories only when they share similar journeys or outcomes, and make sure the composite still reflects authentic experiences rather than creating a fictional narrative. It can help to note that details have been adjusted to protect privacy while keeping the heart of the story intact. Done well, composite stories honor dignity, safeguard identities, and still inspire donors and communities with the truth of the work.



- Erik Tomalis



## HOW DO I PIVOT TO ANONYMOUS STORYTELLING IF WE HAVEN'T PREVIOUSLY DONE IT BEFORE?

Pivoting to anonymous storytelling starts with a mindset shift: protecting someone's dignity is just as important as amplifying their voice. Begin by explaining to your team and community why anonymity matters and how it builds trust. Update consent processes to include anonymity as an option and offer storytellers control over how their story is shared. Practice using pseudonyms, composite stories, or non-identifying details. The goal isn't to hide the truth but to tell it responsibly — in a way that honors people and keeps the mission at the center.

- Erik Tomalis

## IT'S PARTICULARLY TRICKY IN A SMALL COMMUNITY TO DE-IDENTIFY THE PERSON. ANY SUGGESTIONS?

In small communities, we should assume people can be identified by context. You can change non-essential details, such as their name, role, setting, and timeline. Be sure to remove any unique identifiers.

- **Casey Keller**

In small communities, even blurred faces or pseudonyms can still “out” someone. So shift focus: tell composite stories (with permission), spotlight staff or advocates, or use illustrations instead of photos. Ask storytellers what they feel safe




Nonprofit Photo Credit: Linc Housing

sharing. When in doubt, prioritize safety over storytelling. The goal isn't just a good story — it's a dignified, risk-free one.

- **Lynne Wester**

In small communities, anonymity is nearly impossible with specific stories. Everyone knows everyone's business. So you have two options. Option 1 is to go fully composite. Combine 3-5 real stories into one that represents common themes without being identifiable. State clearly that it's a composite. That's honest and protects everyone. Option 2 is to get explicit consent to share details, knowing people might guess. Some are fine with that. They'll say "My neighbors already know, and I want my story to help others." Document that conversation. Never promise anonymity if you can't deliver. Better to say "Our community is small, so people might figure out it's you" than to make false promises about privacy that doesn't exist.


- **Michael Mitchell**



## WHEN I CHANGE A STORY TO PROTECT ANONYMITY, DO I STILL NEED TO GET CONSENT FROM THE PERSON?

Absolutely yes. Anonymity doesn't erase consent requirements. In fact, you need extra consent because you're altering their story. Explain exactly what you're changing. "We'll use a different name, change your job from teacher to nurse, and say you live in a different neighborhood." Then ask "Does this still feel like your story?" Sometimes changing details changes meaning, and they need veto power over that. Also, get their consent on the anonymity itself. Some people want credit for their resilience. Assuming they want to hide can feel like you're ashamed of them. Let them choose whether to be named or anonymous, and if anonymous, how much gets changed. Their story, their call.

- **Michael Mitchell**



If you are sharing someone's story and they want to be anonymous, you still need to get consent from them. The option for anonymity should be outlined in the consent form before you even interview them if you plan to offer it. If you are not planning on allowing anonymous stories, you will have to be willing to not use the story. - **Aaron Zeiler**

## WHAT SHOULD I DO IF ANONYMITY WAS PLANNED FOR BUT WAS SOMEHOW BREACHED?

Journalists usually avoid offering anonymity because it can be difficult to ensure total anonymity. They will never name an anonymous source, but sometimes other people can put together clues to identify a person. If you are planning to use anonymous stories, you should include crisis planning with your legal support and communications team early in the process. Outline ahead of time how you will reach out to the storyteller to inform them and how you will respond to media inquiries or stakeholder questions. Identify what steps you need to take to make sure your storyteller feels supported. This is not an easy process, so really consider if you want to offer anonymity. - **Aaron Zeiler**



# 10 ANONYMOUS WAYS TO TELL A STORY USING OBJECTS

## 1. Delivery Truck

### ***Best For Food Banks, Mobile Health Units, and Bookmobiles***

Shift the focus from a human to a delivery truck as an important character in the story. Mount a phone on the dashboard and film a day-in-the-life of the truck's route, adding narration and captions from the truck's perspective. A story about a delivery truck can describe the miles traveled to reach people and the obstacles along the way: fuel costs, flat tires, weather, or traffic. Mention what it's carrying such as meals, books, medical supplies, and dignity.

## 2. Paper Lunch Bag

### ***Best For Youth Summer Programs and Early Childhood Education***

The brown paper lunch bag can describe nutritional fuel that powers learning, confidence, and teamwork, as well as its role in providing a child with the energy to participate and belong. A lunch bag can show the journey from the pantry to the student's hands. Make a short video from the bag's POV and reveal what it held today. Then connect each ingredient to a skill the child built that day.

## 3. A Hammer

### ***Best For Housing Organizations and Rehab Nonprofits***

A hammer represents the rhythm and repetition of building a safe home with every nail as a step towards stability and safety. Create a photo carousel of the hammer at different project stages - first nail to ribbon cutting - to show the transformation of raw materials into dignity and how each swing contributed to security and a fresh start.

## 4. A Library Book

### ***Best For Literacy Nonprofits and Prison Education Programs***

Post a reel titled, "if this book could talk," and showcase the book traveling through hands (without faces). End by revealing how many lives one book can touch in a year. The book can describe unlocking dreams, worlds, and opportunities. The wear and tear being a sign of impact as it journeys from the shelf to imagination.

## 5. A Life Jacket

### ***Best For Disaster Relief, Water Safety, and Swim Programs***

Create a visual metaphor video, such as a lifejacket on the ground, a boat, or in a pool, and highlight how an organization equips people with tools that keep them afloat in more ways than one. A life jacket represents the feeling of safety vs. the fear of going under and the importance of access to safety, preparedness, and protection resources.



# 10 ANONYMOUS WAYS TO TELL A STORY USING OBJECTS

## 6. A Garden Watering Can

### ***Best For Environmental and Food Programs***

A watering can can describe the care, community effort, and consistency to grow change. Create a time-lapse or photo series of plants growing, with the watering can narrating as a part of the team. Connect the cycle of growth to the community's work to fight food insecurity or reclaim green space.

## 7. A Bedside Lamp

### ***Best For Domestic Violence Prevention & Services and Homeless Shelters***

The lamp represents the difference between darkness and safety, comfort through the night, and moments of rest and relief. Film the lamp turning on in a quiet room and narrate a simple script of what light means to someone (no faces or personal details, just atmosphere) adjusting to a new, safe environment.

## 8. A Leash

### ***Best For Animal Shelters & Rescues, Foster Homes, and Therapy Animals***

Film a short reel showing the many hands that hold the leash, the first tentative walk of a rescued animal, and the transformation from fear to joy as the leash becomes a symbol of connection and new beginnings. Film the shelter kennel, car rides home, or the leash hanging by a forever home. Capture paws, feet, and movement rather than faces and use captions from the leash's perspective as it tells its story of finding its "person".

## 9. A Running Shoe

### ***Best for Youth Sports and Health Organizations***

A running shoe could be used to describe mile after mile of perseverance through challenges of the terrain, healing, training, or rebuilding confidence. The movement of shoes is a good representation of how movement brings freedom, community, and hope. Record the POV of the shoe training for a cause by clipping captions like "Today, I helped her keep going" over different surfaces (gym floor, trails, sidewalks). Deliver the mission message, "every step matters".

## 10. A Stethoscope

### ***Best For Medical Nonprofits, Hospital, and Global Health Foundations***

Use the stethoscope to describe quiet moments of reassurance, fear, relief, and diagnoses it witnesses. A stethoscope can journey from one patient to the next, offering care regardless of circumstances, and listening to countless heartbeats, each with its own story. Create an audio-driven video using only the sounds of heartbeats, breathing, or faint clicks of the stethoscope being used. Use POV captions of anonymized moments the stethoscope experienced.



## **SECTION FOUR**

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# **AI & ETHICAL STORYTELLING**

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- **AI INPUT CONSIDERATIONS**
- **AI GENERATED CONTENT**
- **AI POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION**
- **COMBATING BIASES &  
MISINFORMATION**



# PART ONE: AI INPUT CONSIDERATIONS

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## WHAT PROMPTS, OR ASPECTS OF A PROMPT, SHOULD I USE TO ASK AI TO ASSIST US WITH WRITING STORIES ABOUT OUR NONPROFIT?

AI is most powerful when it's guided by intention and clear context. Instead of asking it to "write a story," give it the purpose, audience, and tone you're aiming for, along with the key themes you want to highlight. For example: "Help me write a story about a family we served, focusing on resilience and community support, written in a hopeful and empowering tone." Always avoid including sensitive or identifying details. Used thoughtfully, AI can help shape stories that honor dignity, protect privacy, and connect more people to your mission. - **Erik Tomalis**

Use prompts that give AI clear guardrails and a call-to-action. Feel free to add in ethical constraints. You can also ask AI to provide 1–2 examples and ask for two different tones: concise + emotive. - **Casey Keller**

A really strong way to leverage AI is to use it to help ensure compliance with any SOPs you have in terms of Ethical Storytelling or use of Strength-Based Messaging. It can't just do the work for you, but if you upload your SOP alongside the story you are trying to analyze, it can do a pretty good job! We're still responsible for the end result, of course. Use prompts to highlight words that are in direct violation or even words that are "on the fence" that you can make judgment calls on, just to make sure.

- **Chris Miano**

## WHAT TYPES OF INFORMATION SHOULD NOT BE ENTERED INTO AI TOOLS FOR STORYTELLING, SUCH AS NAMES, LOCATIONS, OR OTHER IDENTIFIABLE DETAILS?

When using AI tools for storytelling, I never enter any personally identifiable or sensitive information about real people. This includes:

- Names (of clients, staff, or family members)
- Exact locations (addresses, city names, or workplaces)
- Contact information (emails, phone numbers, social handles)
- Dates or timelines that could reveal identity
- Unique experiences or details that only one person or a small group could be linked to
- Protected identity information like race, gender identity, health status, immigration status, or trauma-related details unless these are aggregated and consented to

Even if anonymized, small details can still re-identify someone when combined. - **Meena Das**

Avoid entering any personally identifiable information (PII) like full names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, photos, birthdates, or specific locations tied to a person. Also, skip medical info, legal status, or anything that could reveal identity in a small community. If you wouldn't post it publicly with their name attached, don't feed it to AI. Keep your data ethical, minimal, and de-identified.

- **Lynne Wester**



MemoryFox Staff with MemoryFox Storytellers at the 2025 Nonprofit Storytelling Conference



## CONTINUED: WHAT TYPES OF INFORMATION SHOULD NOT BE ENTERED INTO AI TOOLS FOR STORYTELLING, SUCH AS NAMES, LOCATIONS, OR OTHER IDENTIFIABLE DETAILS?

Remember that, unless you have a license agreement with an AI company, everything you put into an AI tool can be used to train the tool or can be traced back to you or the individuals you are working with. I work at a university that has a more protected AI agreement, and we are still told not to include any information on students or patients in these tools. Despite our fancy names for AI, it is not actually intelligent or human. It is a tool made by a company. So if you wouldn't post this information on social media or share it with a reporter, avoid putting it into your AI tool.

- **Aaron Zeiler**

Never put full names, addresses, phone numbers, medical diagnoses, legal case details, or anything that could identify someone if the AI training data gets leaked or misused. That means no "Maria Rodriguez from the Denver homeless shelter with bipolar disorder." Use placeholders like "A woman from a major city dealing with mental health challenges." Get the AI to help with structure and language, then add the specific details manually after. Skip sensitive program details like intake forms, case notes, or internal communications. AI is a writing tool, not a secure database. If you wouldn't post it publicly on social media, don't put it in AI. - **Michael Mitchell**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: America's Service Commission

## PART TWO: AI GENERATED CONTENT

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### WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON USING AI-GENERATED IMAGES ALONGSIDE A STORY OF SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T WANT THEIR IMAGE SHARED? WHAT ARE SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE DOING SO?

I absolutely think it is okay, but it is nowhere near as effective as using real imagery. That real imagery doesn't have to include the identity of the person - it can include abstract representations of the story instead. Things like the bike they rode to school every day, or the backpack that held their school supplies, or the special blanket that kept them warm in the hospital - objects that viscerally generate emotions and motivate action. As you can imagine, a picture of a generic AI-generated blanket would not be as effective as the ACTUAL blanket.

- **Chris Miano**



Image created by AI

AI-generated visuals can be a respectful solution when someone prefers not to have their image shared, but they require thoughtful use. Always center transparency: clarify that the image is AI-generated and created to protect privacy. Avoid details that could unintentionally reveal someone's identity, and ensure the image reflects the dignity and spirit of their story without sensationalizing it. Most importantly, communicate with the storyteller about this choice. When handled with care, AI visuals can balance ethical storytelling with compelling communication. - **Erik Tomalis**

## CONTINUED: WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON USING AI-GENERATED IMAGES ALONGSIDE A STORY OF SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T WANT THEIR IMAGE SHARED? WHAT ARE SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE DOING SO?


You should avoid using AI to create a stand-in portrait for a story for the same reason you should avoid using a stock photo as a stand-in: this story could be associated with someone fully unrelated to this issue. For example, say you are sharing a story about someone who has experienced violence. If you share a stock photo of a person and the story goes viral, that person may be approached about the experience and not realize why. When it comes to AI, it will create an image of someone that doesn't exist, but it has to pull from existing photos to piece together what a realistic person looks like. Someone may look like this AI-generated portrait, and you don't want them to experience being approached about a story they are not related to.

**- Aaron Zeiler**




Nonprofit Photo Credit: Ada Developers Academy





## HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT USING AI TO CREATE COMPOSITE STORIES OF A "TYPICAL" PERSON WE SERVE? CAN AI TRULY BUILD A "REAL" STORY?



AI can assist in drafting composite stories, but it cannot replace the authenticity and emotional truth that comes from lived experience. When AI is used to generate a “typical” story, it can generalize experiences, unintentionally flatten nuance, or erase the individuality that makes stories powerful. That said, AI can play a responsible supporting role. For example, it can help synthesize large amounts of qualitative data to identify common themes or phrasing patterns. From there, a human storyteller can craft a composite story that honors these patterns while preserving empathy and context. If AI is used, transparency is key: we should always disclose that a story is composite, explaining how it was created. - **Meena Das**

AI can't build a real story because it hasn't lived a real life. It can only remix patterns from its training data, which means it's always derivative and often generic. Where AI helps is taking several real stories you've collected and finding common themes. You feed it anonymized

details from five different people and ask “What patterns do you see?” Then you write the composite yourself using those insights, grounded in actual experiences. But if you're letting AI invent details, you've crossed into fiction. A “typical” person doesn't exist. Real people have specific quirks, contradictions, and choices that AI can't imagine. Use AI as a research assistant to spot patterns, not as a storyteller to create people. That's our job. - **Michael Mitchell**

AI can help shape composite stories — but it can't create a “real” story without real human insight. It's a useful tool to protect identities or illustrate trends, but it must be grounded in actual experiences. Without that, it risks sounding inauthentic or misleading. Use AI to support storytelling, not replace it. The heart still has to come from humans. - **Lynne Wester**




## PART THREE: AI POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

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### WHAT GUARDRAILS OR POLICIES SHOULD NONPROFITS PUT IN PLACE WHEN USING AI IN STORYTELLING?


AI is a powerful tool, but without clear guardrails, it can risk trust. Nonprofits should start by defining what will not be shared with AI — like identifiable personal details or sensitive information — and create policies around review and human oversight before content is published. Build in steps for transparency so audiences know when AI has played a role, and ensure your use of AI aligns with your organization's values and mission. Most importantly, center dignity and consent in every decision. Technology should amplify human stories, not compromise them.

- **Erik Tomalis**



All organizations should have a Generative AI policy. While the details will vary, the policy should specify whether generative AI tools are permitted, for what purposes, and what limitations apply — including what information may or may not be entered into the tools. The policy itself is only the starting point; employees must also receive clear, ongoing training on the organization's AI rules and practices. - **Allie Levene**

AI is great for cleaning and organizing, but not for rewriting someone's words. If I get a story with very little context and I need to write it up, I'll sometimes ask AI questions to help me think about what context might matter, almost like coaching me before I present it. But I still go back to the person or to the facts before posting. AI can guide my thinking, but it shouldn't invent or speak for them. - **Danielle Miano**



## CONTINUED: WHAT GUARDRAILS OR POLICIES SHOULD NONPROFITS PUT IN PLACE WHEN USING AI IN STORYTELLING?

Set clear guidelines: no uploading identifiable info (names, faces, locations). Use AI only for drafting or structure — final stories must be reviewed by humans for tone, accuracy, and ethics. Always disclose when a story is AI-assisted. Protect privacy fiercely and prioritize dignity over convenience. And most importantly — train your team on when not to use AI. Just because you can doesn't mean you should.

- **Lynne Wester**

## HOW TRANSPARENT SHOULD NONPROFITS BE WITH DONORS OR THE PUBLIC WHEN AI IS USED IN CONTENT CREATION?

Trust is the most important currency nonprofits have with donors, and we should do everything possible to protect it. There are circumstances that may warrant using AI for content creation, particularly with regard to confidentiality and the need to protect a client's identity. In such situations, these disclosures should be communicated clearly to your community. It can be a simple and straightforward message: "We aim to protect the people we work with as our primary goal. This is the core reason why we exist as a nonprofit. In telling their story anonymously, we have used AI-assisted tools to help us create content that depicts the core message of the story while keeping our client's identity confidential." - **Natalie Monroe**

Default to disclosure, especially for anything that looks or sounds like a person. If you use AI to generate images, say so. If you use it to write composite stories, say so. If you use it to edit and polish real stories, that's less critical to disclose but I'd still mention it in your annual report or content policy. The test is simple. Would donors feel deceived if they found out later? If yes, tell them now. I'm less worried about disclosing AI use for background tasks like proofreading, headlines, or email subject lines. But for storytelling specifically, transparency builds trust. A simple note like "This composite story was created with AI assistance based on real client experiences" can go a long way. - **Michael Mitchell**

## PART FOUR: COMBATING BIASES AND MISINFORMATION

### DOES AI INTRODUCE OR AMPLIFY BIAS INTO OUR STORIES? ARE THERE WAYS TO AVOID THIS FROM HAPPENING?

Yes, AI can introduce or amplify bias because it learns from existing data, and data often reflects human bias. The key is not to trust AI blindly but to use it as a tool guided by human judgment and strong ethical standards. Always review outputs for stereotypes, language that oversimplifies complex experiences, or framing that strips people of agency. Diverse voices reviewing content can catch what algorithms miss. AI is powerful, but it should never replace the wisdom, empathy, and lived experience that make our storytelling truly authentic and equitable.

- Erik Tomalis

Yes — AI can introduce or amplify bias, especially if it's trained on biased data (and most is). It may reinforce stereotypes or erase nuance, even when unintentional. To avoid this, always review AI-generated content with a critical eye. Cross-check with lived experiences, diversify your inputs, and use AI as a draft, not the final word. The best safeguard? Keep humans — especially those closest to the story — at the center of your process. - **Lynne Wester**



Nonprofit Photo Credit: Neighborhood Centers Association, 2025 Foxie Winner, Storyteller of the Year (Individual)

## CONTINUED: DOES AI INTRODUCE OR AMPLIFY BIAS INTO OUR STORIES? ARE THERE WAYS TO AVOID THIS FROM HAPPENING?

AI absolutely amplifies bias because it learns from existing content, which is full of cultural stereotypes and power imbalances. It will default to deficit language about poverty, make assumptions about family structures, and lean into "savior" narratives unless you actively fight it. The fix? Better prompting and editing. Tell the AI explicitly, "Write from a strength-based perspective. Avoid deficit language. Center the person's agency and choices." And edit ruthlessly for bias because AI will still slip it in. Also, diversify your inputs. If you only feed AI stories about one demographic, it will produce narrow, biased outputs. And never trust AI-generated facts because it makes things up confidently. Verify everything before publishing. - **Michael Mitchell**

We know from the research of public interest technologists like Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru that AI has been and continues to be trained on biased data. As a result, AI outputs will rely heavily on bias and stereotypes. It is highly unlikely that we can train AI models out of bias because our data continues to be biased. So the best way to avoid bias seeping into our stories is by staying deeply involved in the process of writing and editing. Read the outputs closely and check for bias, have an editor review it, and rewrite it to the standards you and your storytellers should expect. AI isn't really efficient if it sets your good work back or creates a crisis. - **Aaron Zeiler**

## WHEN USING AI TO ADD CONTEXT TO OUR STORIES, HOW DO WE KNOW IF THE INFORMATION IS CORRECT?

Have AI give you its sources and only keep facts you can verify against other sites (e.g., .gov, .edu, reputable research, the nonprofit's own data). Cross-checking statistics/dates is also a good idea!

- **Casey Keller**

# 4

## THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN WRITING A STORY WITH AI

### **1. Keep Personal Details Out of AI Tools**

Avoid entering any information that can identify a real person. This includes names, exact locations, contact details, dates, photos, or unique personal experiences. Do not include protected or sensitive details such as health information, legal matters, immigration status, gender identity, trauma, or anything tied to a small group or community. Even “anonymized” details can identify someone. If you would not post the information publicly, do not put it into an AI tool.

### **2. Be Intentional When Adding AI Imagery**

Use AI visuals thoughtfully and only when real imagery is unavailable or inappropriate. Real objects connected to a story are more powerful and authentic than generic AI creations. Be transparent that the image is AI-generated and used to protect privacy. Avoid details that could reveal or suggest the identity of a real person, even accidentally. Do not use AI to create stand-in portraits because they may resemble real people and cause harm or confusion if a story gains attention. Always prioritize dignity, accuracy, and communication with the storyteller when deciding whether AI is appropriate.

### **3. Create Clear AI Guardrails for Ethical Storytelling**

Develop a clear internal AI policy that protects trust, privacy, and dignity. Clearly define what cannot be shared with AI tools, especially identifiable or sensitive information, and set rules for how AI may be used, such as drafting or organization. Require human review before anything is published and disclose when AI has contributed to content. Provide ongoing staff training so everyone understands responsible use, especially when not to rely on AI. Treat AI as a helper for thinking, not a replacement for human voices, and always return to verified facts and consent before sharing stories.

### **4. Check AI Outputs for Bias and Inaccuracy**

AI often reflects the biases and gaps in the data it is trained on, so its outputs can reinforce stereotypes, erase nuance, or spread misinformation. Use AI only as a starting point and rely on human judgment, context, and lived experience to shape the final story. Review content critically, prompt for strength-based and equitable language, diversify inputs, and verify all facts. Keep people closest to the story involved in reviewing and editing so authenticity, dignity, and accuracy remain at the center.



## **SECTION FIVE**

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# **ETHICAL STORYTELLING CASE STUDIES**

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- **ADA DEVELOPERS ACADEMY**
- **BRAID MISSION**
- **CAMERAS FOR GIRLS**
- **I WOULD RATHER BE READING**
- **THE SEATTLE CLEMENCY PROJECT**



# Story of Resilience: How Ada Developers Academy Made a Comeback and Continued to Thrive

## ABOUT ADA DEVELOPERS ACADEMY

The Ada Developers Academy is a tuition-free nonprofit coding academy. They are growing a high-quality tech talent pipeline across the US by removing barriers to entry and cultivating an inclusive community.

## WHAT PROBLEM DID THEY SEEK TO SOLVE?

In 2023, Ada Developers Academy weathered a dramatic reduction in staff, budget, and programs due to the hiring freezes and layoffs in the tech sector. By 2024, they recovered, and they were ready to begin welcoming students again. Ada Developers Academy needed updated, accurate, and authentic stories from graduates to provide a clear picture of their unique collaborative learning experience for prospective students and supporters, and now had far fewer resources with which to work. For instance, they no longer had dedicated staff and resources for alumni engagement.



**WHAT DID THEY DO?  
A STORY COLLECTION SHIFT.**

Ada Developers Academy values continuous learning and adaptability, so researching and experimenting with new story-collecting techniques was celebrated. Director of Student Affairs Sylvia Artiga Monreal attended a webinar provided by MemoryFox, titled "Narratives With Integrity: Strategies for Anonymous Storytelling." "The content presented by the panelists was engaging and helpful, and attendees shared great resources on how to balance privacy with organizational needs," Monreal reported, which is what inspired Ada Developers Academy to update their consent forms and add smaller opportunities for students to share stories in preexisting evaluation forms.

## HOW DID IT GO? EXPANDING OUTREACH THROUGHOUT THE ADA COMMUNITY

In the short-term, Ada Developers Academy was amazed to see recent students be so honest and engaging in their storytelling. Through small opportunities, they have shared advice for incoming students and poured a lot of insight into their community. The organization seeks to engage more alumni in the new storytelling practices, and they continue to educate potential supporters on the complexity of careers - not everyone's story will fit into a linear narrative, and that's okay!



**"Our students have incredible stories - it feels great to celebrate them and center them with intentionality and respect!"**

Sylvia Artiga Monreal, Director of Student Affairs



# Everyday Heroes: How Braid Mission's Giving Tuesday Campaign Elevated Mentor Stories

## ABOUT BRAID MISSION

Braid Mission provides consistent, caring support for young people who have spent time in foster or kinship care. Through teams of dedicated adult mentors who show up every week, Braid creates reliable, relationship-based communities that help youth build trust, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

## WHAT PROBLEM DID THEY SEEK TO SOLVE?

The Braid Mission team was looking to deepen engagement during a key fundraising period, seeking a fresh approach that would elevate the impact of their stories without straying from their core message.

To do so, they launched a “superhero” theme, drawn from real mentor anecdotes.



WHAT DID THEY DO?  
A VISUAL CAMPAIGN  
TO CELEBRATE MENTORS.

The Braid team developed the campaign in close partnership with Louder Media, which supports the organization through monthly nurture emails and fundraising strategy. Drawing from anecdotes submitted by volunteer mentors, Louder Media proposed a unifying “superhero” theme that aligned with Braid’s commitment to strength-based storytelling. By translating real mentor moments into a visually engaging narrative, the team helped deepen the emotional resonance of the Giving Tuesday campaign and spotlight the everyday impact of Braid’s mentoring teams in a fresh, inspiring way.

## HOW DID IT GO? RESONANCE ACROSS THE BRAID COMMUNITY.

The campaign’s approach aligned closely with Braid’s ongoing communications strategy, which consistently highlights uplifting stories and regularly shares “mentor moments” from volunteers. What made this effort stand out was the added impact of the superhero-themed graphics, which brought these stories to life in a bold, memorable way. Donors and followers responded enthusiastically, finding the theme both inspiring and engaging.

At the same time, mentors expressed some hesitation about being cast as superheroes, reflecting their natural humility. This offered Braid an opportunity to refine how they honor mentors’ perspectives while still celebrating the meaningful difference they make each week.



"We raised about \$15,000 with this campaign, which was our first major Giving Tuesday push. "

-Rebecca Edwards, Co-Founder & Co-Director



# How Cameras For Girls' Dedication to Education through Storytelling Created Lasting Loyalty and Growing Opportunities

## ABOUT CAMERAS FOR GIRLS

Cameras For Girls INpowers women with tools and training to access paid media work, dismantle barriers, and shape stories that represent their truth.

## WHAT PROBLEM DID THEY SEEK TO SOLVE?

Over the past year, Cameras For Girls identified a new challenge: applying ethical storytelling consistently across different African contexts. What is culturally acceptable in Uganda may not be in Tanzania, and vice versa. The main challenge was recognizing that ethical practices couldn't be standardized but had to remain flexible across cultures, requiring them to continually adapt and refine.



## WHAT DID THEY DO? EMBRACING ONGOING CHANGE.

To address cultural differences, Cameras For Girls began by asking questions and listening to students in Uganda and Tanzania. Through these conversations, they came to understand what was culturally acceptable in each context and adapted their Ethical Storytelling Guide. They adjusted their consent processes, training, and narrative approaches to respect local norms while ensuring that women's voices remain central, dignified, and authentic. This process was easy in that students were open and eager to share their perspectives.

## HOW DID IT GO?

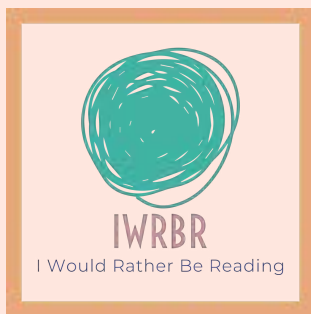
### CONNECTING THE COMMUNITY WITH TRUST & LOYALTY

In the short term, adapting their guidelines has built trust with students and strengthened credibility with partners. Over the long term, as they expand and navigate diverse cultures, they expect to see deeper respect, stronger relationships, and more authentic voices shaping how women's stories are told and valued. Ethical storytelling is now central to their work. It is not simply a policy but a mindset that guides their students, staff, and partners. As Cameras for Girls grows across Africa, the organization remains committed to cultural sensitivity while keeping dignity and agency at the core. **This work takes more time, but it builds trust, credibility, and lasting change in how women's stories are seen and valued.**



“Making ethical storytelling core to our program has proven powerful for our students’ growth and for deepening trust with donors and partners.”

-Amina Mohamed, Founder & Executive Director



# Centering Dignity: How IWRBR Used Strength-Based Storytelling to Unlock New Funding

## ABOUT I WOULD RATHER BE READING

I Would Rather Be Reading (IWRBR) is a remarkable nonprofit that provides after-school programs and summer camps free of charge to families living in Louisville, Kentucky. Their work is centered around the belief that quality education should be equitably accessible to all.

## WHAT PROBLEM DID THEY SEEK TO SOLVE?

Following the pandemic, IWRBR needed to identify new, sustainable funding sources and knew storytelling would be key, but traditional nonprofit narratives posed a risk. Because Educate & Elevate serves students with complex backgrounds, the organization faced a critical dilemma: how to share compelling stories without causing families to feel shame, embarrassment, or retraumatization. Approaches that centered on hardship or unmet needs threatened the trust IWRBR had carefully built, making it essential to find a storytelling model that inspired donors while protecting student dignity.



WHAT DID THEY DO?  
A STRENGTH-BASED STORYTELLING  
POLICY ROOTED IN DIGNITY.



IWRBR made an organization-wide decision to reframe how stories were gathered and shared. Instead of focusing on trauma or need, they created a formal storytelling policy centered on progress, learning experiences, and student accomplishments. To support this shift, the team developed strength-based storytelling prompts that were safe, affirming, and empowering, and explicitly avoided questions tied to trauma or deficits.

Student Prompt: What is your favorite thing that we do in Educate & Elevate?

Teacher Prompt: What's a story that warms your heart from the times you've been tutoring?

## HOW DID IT GO? FROM CHILDREN'S VOICES TO COMMUNITY-WIDE IMPACT

The composite video was shown at IWRBR's Hearts for Hope Impact Breakfast, and the response was immediate and powerful.

The video helped raise \$32,000, exceeding the original fundraising goal by 75%. By centering student voices through a strength-based lens, IWRBR demonstrated that it's possible to inspire generosity without compromising dignity or trust.

The success reinforced a core lesson for the organization: **Stories rooted in empowerment can protect the community and, at the same time, move donors to act.**



“By focusing on what our students love, learn, and achieve, we were able to raise more than we imagined, without ever asking families to relive their hardest moments.”

-Ashley Dearing, Executive Director



# Honoring Lived Experience: How The Seattle Clemency Project Changed the Conversation on Second Chances Through Storytelling

## ABOUT THE SEATTLE CLEMENCY PROJECT

The Seattle Clemency Project (SCP) works to increase access to justice for individuals in Washington State serving long sentences and to prevent deportations of immigrants with prior convictions. Since 2016, the organization has recognized the power of sharing the stories of people with lived experience, believing those directly impacted by violence and incarceration hold vital insights into the criminal legal system.

## WHAT PROBLEM DID THEY SEEK TO SOLVE?

While SCP regularly shared the stories of its clients and volunteers in e-newsletters and reporting projects, the organization lacked a standardized practice for compensating people with lived experience who participated in communications projects. Without fair compensation, clients' insights and expertise were valued but not fully honored.

SCP sought to ensure that clients were recognized and fairly supported for their time and contributions.



WHAT DID THEY DO?  
A COMPENSATION MODEL TO EMPHASIZE  
THE VALUE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE.

In 2024, SCP developed a client compensation model in collaboration with clients who had previously participated in storytelling projects or shared their experiences elsewhere. The model allows SCP to fairly compensate clients for their contributions to newsletters, reports, video production, panel discussions, and other communications projects. By creating a structured approach to compensation and incorporating clients' input, SCP ensured that future storytelling projects not only amplified critical perspectives but also recognized and respected their true value.

## HOW DID IT GO? EXPANDING THE ORGANIZATION'S REACH WHILE CENTERING CLIENT VOICES.

The compensation model has expanded SCP's communications work, enabling projects such as field reporting on the lives of deportees in Cambodia. Clients' stories are now central to reports, videos, and panels, helping shift narratives around healing, justice, and redemption. Over the past year, dozens of clients have been fairly compensated for their role in communications projects, resulting in nuanced storytelling that humanizes the issues SCP addresses and fosters empathy among audiences.







**“The life experience and perspectives our clients bring to storytelling projects are invaluable. SCP wishes to honor this expertise through fair compensation.”**

-Brooke Kaufman, Senior Writer

# TOP 10 TAKEAWAYS

Finally, each contributor shared their “#1 rule for ethical storytelling.” While each perspective was unique, as reflected throughout the report, several themes consistently emerged.

Here are the **Top 10 Ethical Storytelling Takeaways**, according to the 2025 contributors:

1. Center the storyteller’s autonomy & agency.
2. Establish consent as an ongoing conversation. 
3. Prioritize safety & emotional wellbeing.
4. Treat stories as gifts, not payment.
5. Use strength-based language over deficit-based.  

6. Anonymity doesn’t replace consent.
7. Acknowledge that AI is a tool, not a storyteller.
8. Always put people first. 
9. Ask for stories at the right time & with compassion.
10. Prioritize ethics over exploitation. 

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CLICK THE LINKS BELOW TO LEARN MORE & CONNECT WITH OUR CONTRIBUTORS



Your key to fundraising success



**NAMASTE DATA**  
DATA AND AI EQUITY  
CONSULTING



**MARIA BRYAN**  
creative

# THANK YOU

## TO OUR SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

4 Da Hood	Cottonwood Creative
Ada Developers Academy	Culver Palms Meals On Wheels
Adopt an Inmate	CuraHuman
Air Command Association Inc	Delicious Spoonfuls FL Inc
Albert Schweitzer Familienwerk Foundation	Do Good Leadership Collective
Philippines, Inc.	DuPage County Community Services and 211 DuPage
Alliance for Morris County Parks	Easterseals Central & Southeast Ohio
Alliance for Youth	Empowerment Plan
Amudat Interreligious Development Initiative	Endless Highway, Inc.
Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corporation	Environmental Investigation Agency
ASDAH	Every Bottom Covered, Inc.
Ashley House NW	Every Kid Sports
Back to School Shop	The Exodus Road
Be Aware Blount	Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center
Beach Food Pantry	Forward Service Corporation
Black Hills Works Foundation	Foundation for Monterey County Free Libraries
BlinkNow Foundation	Foundation Todos Juntos
Blue Ridge Legal Services	Futurewise
Bozeman Dharma Center	G4GC
The Brethren Church	Girl Scouts of Southwest Indiana
Bridge Refugee Services	Global Business School Network
Brilliant Detroit/Cities	Good Shepherd Food Bank
Brittany's Hope	Grandmothers' Village Project, Inc.
Business Ethics Alliance	Greater Clark Foundation
Cameras For Girls	Health Care for the Homeless
Camp Nor'wester	Health Projects Center
Canadian Lutheran World Relief (CLWR)	Heart-Driven Marketing
CasaSito Association	Hearthfire Farm
Cause & Effect LLC	Houston Methodist Hospital Foundation
CCMOW	IDS Foundation
CdLS Foundation	Impact Behavioral Health Partners
Ceca Foundation	International Society of Tropical Foresters
CFAIA	Jacksonville Speech and Hearing Center
Champaign Parks Foundation	Jewish Family Service
Chive Charities	JustLeadershipUSA
Christian Brothers Services	Kindred Matters
Cloud Forest School	The Kennedy Ladd Foundation
Coal Creek Meals on Wheels	Kossuth County Tails of Hope Rescue
The Collaborative	Laundry Lane
Community Culinary School of Charlotte	Legal Aid
Community Foundation for South Central NY	Legal Counsel for Youth and Children
Community Music School - Raleigh	Lilac Preservation Project
Compass Affordable Housing	LifeLegacy



# THANK YOU

## TO OUR SURVEY PARTICIPANTS (CONTINUED)

- The Little Red Dog, Inc.  
Lincoln Grant Services Limited  
Love INC of the Black Hills  
Lowell Philharmonic Orchestra  
MCAH  
Megan Donahue  
Merit America  
The Mindful Facilitator  
MOKA Foundation  
My Autism Connection  
National Association of American Veterans, Inc.  
National Farm Worker Ministry  
National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association  
Neighborhood Centers Association  
NEMHS Charitable Foundation  
New Beginnings Ministries  
Nishabdha Seva  
Nonprofit Hub  
North Carolina Adapted Sports  
Northwestern Legal Services  
Open Health Care Clinic  
Operation Mobilization Canada  
Oregon Zoo Foundation  
Our Generation Cares  
Outagamie County Volunteer Services  
Outreach Center of West Houston  
The Parenting Network  
Pennies 4 Pads  
Population Research Institute  
Project HOPE Boston  
Prosperity Connection  
Rebuilding Together Peninsula  
Rockbridge Area Health Center
- Ruth Papazian & Associates  
Sant'Egidio Belgium  
The Salvation Army  
SC 211  
School Year Abroad  
SCN  
Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida  
Second Harvest of Silicon Valley  
Share and Care Cockayne Syndrome Network  
Simply Hope Family Outreach, Inc.  
Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Dubuque, IA  
South Coast Literacy Council  
Southern Nazarene University  
St. Francis Animal Shelter, Inc.  
Starlight Children's foundation  
Stillwater Hospice  
Trevesom Organization  
Twisted Pink  
UConnectCare  
VA  
Valley Humane Society  
Vickery Meadow Youth Development Foundation  
WEEMA International  
Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra  
Wiregrass Museum of Art  
WIYS Grants Consulting, LLC  
World Learning  
YMCA of Northern Alberta  
York Literacy Institute  
Young Farmers Empowerment Network  
Yourecover  
Youth Dynamics



Nonprofit Photo Credit: The Seattle Clemency Project



# IN MEMORY OF SABRINA WALKER HERNANDEZ

BY MEMORYFOX FOUNDER CHRIS MIANO



We are deeply saddened by the passing of our dear friend and partner, Sabrina Walker Hernandez, whose influence on the nonprofit sector will be felt for generations. Sabrina contributed her expertise to our last two Ethical Storytelling Reports, and it was greatly missed this year.

Sabrina dedicated her life to strengthening missions and empowering the people behind them. Her leadership, generosity, and unwavering belief in the power of community shaped countless organizations and inspired everyone fortunate enough to learn from her.

From the very beginning, she championed MemoryFox's mission with genuine enthusiasm. As a fellow Army Veteran, we connected through our storytelling work and also through our shared passion for service. Whether she was hosting a webinar, writing educational insights, or brainstorming with us behind the scenes, Sabrina always showed up with warmth, curiosity, a tremendous sense of humor, and a desire to help others thrive.

We will miss her presence at conferences, where she seemed to illuminate every room she entered. People gravitated naturally to her joyful spirit, compassionate leadership, and infectious energy.

Our entire team holds her loved ones close in our thoughts. Her legacy lives on through the lives she touched, the missions she strengthened, and the communities she uplifted.

**[Learn more about Sabrina's extraordinary life and impact here.](#)**

# LET'S CONNECT

## AT THE ETHICAL NONPROFIT SUMMIT



"The team that hosts this conference is a group of thought leaders I trust most when it comes to ethical storytelling. They're who I follow closely to keep up with best practices and strategies for how to approach this work, which can often feel very challenging and full of uncertainties. If you are looking to lean into an instant community of people who care about collaborating, sharing what they've learned on their own journey, what practices and policies have worked well at their organizations, and who are open to dialogue about how to do this work better, then this is the space for you."

-Natalie Monroe

★ MemoryFox proudly sponsors! ★

# The Ethical Nonprofit Summit

May 6-7  
2026  
Virtual

"A high quality, high compassion experience that will continue to shape how I approach the stories of clients and whole communities."  
- Ethical Explorer, 2025

Join our community & be first to get access to early-bird tickets and more!

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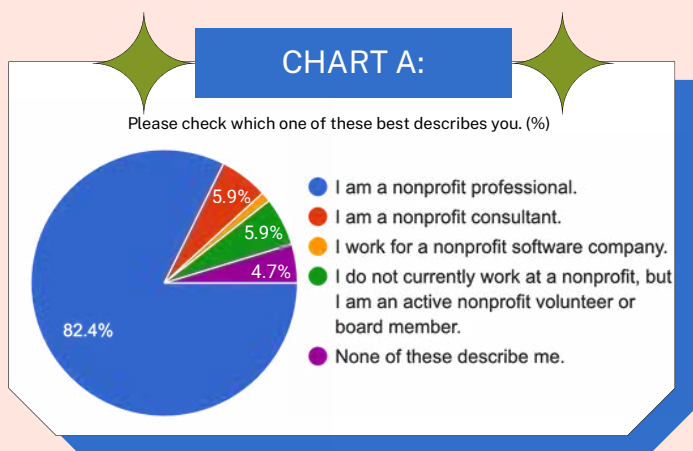


★ [ethicalnonprofitsummit.com/memoryfox](https://ethicalnonprofitsummit.com/memoryfox) ★

# METHODOLOGY

## ABOUT THE SURVEY

The survey of 172 respondents was conducted online during the months of October and November of 2025. Respondents were asked to self identify how this topic related to their professional lives (see Chart A below). Survey respondents represent a wide spectrum of organization sizes and missions. Those surveyed use a wide range of technology solutions, and are not required to use MemoryFox. Respondents were sourced via MemoryFox's email list, organic social media channels and paid social media ads. All data in this survey is self-reported, not transactional.



## ABOUT THE WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS & CASE STUDIES

The written submissions and case studies for this report were collected online during the months of October 2025 and November 2025. Written submissions & case studies are the advice of the contributor & have not been influenced by MemoryFox. Submissions were edited in accordance with Standard American English. The questions posed in this report were sourced from nonprofit professionals who registered to attend a “Narratives With Integrity” Ethical Storytelling Panel, hosted by MemoryFox. Case studies have been written by the MemoryFox team, using information provided by the contributor. Case studies were approved by the submitting nonprofit prior to publication. Contributors were sourced by MemoryFox staff via email & LinkedIn. All submissions were voluntarily submitted with no exchange of goods or funds.

# ABOUT MEMORYFOX

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## THE **#1** ETHICAL STORYTELLING TOOL FOR NONPROFITS

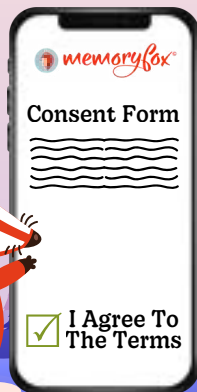
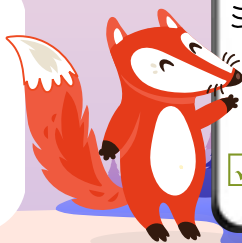
MemoryFox is a technology platform built specifically for nonprofits to collect, organize, and share stories directly from their community. Since 2017, MemoryFox's mission has been to elevate the authentic stories of real human beings, in an ethical way. To date, MemoryFox has empowered 645+ mission-driven organizations to bring their mission to life through over 250,000+ photos, videos & written testimonials.

For more information, visit [www.memoryfox.io](http://www.memoryfox.io) or follow us on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok.



"As someone who works with a sensitive population, it is so important that we get stories to resonate with our donors while still respecting our beneficiaries. MemoryFox has made it so easy to collect those stories."

-Katrina Grieve, Administrative Assistant at The ROCKC4YD



MEMBERSHIP OPTIONS

REPORT COMPANION



Share your feedback, your top takeaways and your commitments to ethical storytelling, by [submitting a video, photo or written testimonial here](#), or by scanning this QR code on page 3.