

# JOHS Provider Conference

## June 6, 2025

### Notes from Session:

#### Non-Exploitative Storytelling

Presenters: Nili Yosha, Nel Taylor

Moderators: Alyssa Plesser

Notetaker: Anna J.

### **-Main Points from Session Overview/Presentation (high level; detail not required):**

- Outside the Frame—teaching filmmaking to homeless youth—so they can be the directors of their own films and lives
- Community Centric fundraising
  - Many orgs are choosing to shift away from individual storytelling into organizational storytelling—but we don't have to completely abandon individual storytelling
- Traditional fundraising practices and transactional storytelling can cause harm
  - Editing for grammar without permission
  - Improper media training causing a storyteller to reveal more than they're comfortable with
  - Stories could even put the teller at risk of danger
- What brought folks to the room?
  - Moving from a corporate nonprofit setting to more social justice style—need communications tools
  - Want tools to be able to speak up when storytelling doesn't feel right in my organization
  - Qualitative storytelling for a research project—how to do qualitative research in a non-exploitative way
  - We are a small team at a newer nonprofit and folks haven't been trained in this. We have gotten feedback from storytellers that the way their stories are used in fundraising has been exploitative—I want to learn how not to do that
- Outside the Frame youth made videos in support of the affordable housing bond in 2017
- The Circus Project
  - Combination of physical body movement and mental health
  - Circus performer training program for houseless youth
  - My story was exploited in a number of ways

- Circus Project video—what did you notice?
  - Some very intentional staging
  - Participant self-deprecating / deficit language to describe themselves / their history – not focused on strengths
  - Personal testimonies speak to common tropes about homelessness that reinforces it as a personal problem
  - Homelessness framed as a choice – but for the actual participants in this video, they didn't choose it
  - Behind the scenes—participants were asked leading questions
- What not to do:
  - Not giving participants media training before an interview to ensure they know they have a choice in what they divulge
  - Not being responsive to participant needs during an experience or interview
  - “If you cry during the appeal people are 30% more likely to give”
- What to do:
  - Sharing stories with the people involved beforehand so they can give feedback—building in the time for this
  - Art first—how will we use it later—considering how you might integrate that perspective
- Queer affinity safe rest village: a cautionary tale
  - This project was put together too fast. It takes time to build trust with the folks you're working with. It's a privilege and honor to hear someone's story.
  - Also need to pay everyone who was in it (even in the background), provide lunch, etc
  - Giving folks a chance to decide whether they want to be involved
  - Have folks sign a media release first—and if they decide later they don't want to be involved, honor that
- Storytelling Equity Lens
  - What is an equity lens?
    - A series of questions you ask yourself to unearth inequities in a project, plan, etc. Questions like who is benefiting? Who is being excluded? How are decisions being made?
  - Finding what inequities we can fix right away, prioritize for next time, etc
  - Most equity lens tools are built for programming vs. internal things like fundraising
  - Who are we speaking for? Can they speak for themselves?
  - Are they involved in every part of the editing process?
  - Do you have a backup plan in case a participant revokes consent?

- Are we using strengths based language?
  - John advocated for himself and accessed housing through our programs vs. We helped John get housing
  - Are you defining someone by their marginalization, or their strengths?
- Are we using first person language? Can be clunky or require more words, but it's important
- Are you tokenizing the one person of color at your organization so it appears more equity work has been done?
- Who is smiling and who is not? (i.e. the helper is smiling and the person receiving services is not)
- Is the imagery meant to elicit sadness or joy, fear or confidence? Challenge stereotypes or reinforce them? We want to lean into stories of hope and joy
- Making folks want to be part of that community, not save them
- Inviting folks who have participated in stories before to stay involved through paid opportunities
- “Music from the Inside” Outside the Frame film
- Your reputation will get you the next referral, but trust has to be earned one person at a time—there are no shortcuts.
- Ways to tell stories ethically
  - Put out an open call for stories vs asking an individual (makes it hard for them to say no)
  - Meet the individual beforehand to begin forming a relationship (not corresponding over email). Honor and be responsive to body language and any discomfort
  - Be specific about how the story will be used and be honest about where you / the org are at in your ethical storytelling journey. Have a plan for if you do cause harm
  - Ask permission for everything and look for enthusiastic consent. “I noticed you shared something really personal, may I include that?”
  - Manage donor interactions and keep story owners safe—give the owner the power of the story. Field questions and inappropriate topics. Not just putting a storyteller at a table at a gala with donors and no buffer.
- Now This consulting—has an equity lens that folks can use
- If your org needs storytelling support, you can hire orgs that practice non-exploitative storytelling

**-Questions/Answers (summarization):**

- N/A

**-Main Discussion Points not captured above:**

- N/A

**-Takeaways or Follow-Ups for JOHS  
(expectations/priorities/recommendations/etc):**

- N/A