



Toolkit

I Want You to Meet Joe
How a riveting story can get your message across

By Alessandra Bianchi

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I Want You to Meet Joe

How a riveting story can get your message across

BY ALESSANDRA BIANCHI

Erin Hall's stomach sank as she sat at a roundtable with 40 of Colorado's most powerful decision makers in a conference room in downtown Denver last summer. Hall, the project manager of a new mental health and substance abuse program in a semi-remote, northern part of the state, in Northern Larimer County, had been invited to present at the statewide mental health summit. In a freakish stroke of bad luck, her Power-Point presentation had failed to accompany her there. While awaiting her turn, trying to listen to the presenters and not draw attention to herself, she frantically worked to have a backup copy e-mailed to her. She listened to several data-heavy presentations, anxiously watching the audience – which included the president of the County Sheriffs of Colorado and several state representatives – nod their heads in agreement.

Hall, an energetic 40-year-old, and former occupational therapist, had a brand-new presentation that explained what her program did without the usual charts and statistics so prevalent in her field, instead relying on telling a simple story with compelling photographs.

She had been planning to utilize this new approach at the conference, which “no one really important will attend,” she recalls thinking. But the conference was surprisingly well attended, and Hall stood alone in not having a data-driven presentation – or any presentation, for that matter. “The presentations were all charts, tables, and stats, and I’m thinking



mine is all stories, all pictures, no data, and no facts,” she recalls.

In the midst of this stressing, she received word that her assistant had succeeded in e-mailing the presentation to the wireless laptop of a colleague in the building. A CD-ROM was spirited into the room, and suddenly her first slide was up on the screen. She took a deep breath, tried to ignore the fact that she was sitting beside many of the state's most prominent movers and shakers in law enforcement, education, healthcare, and business, and grabbed the remote.

“I’d like for you to get to know Joe,” Hall began, as a picture of a distraught, 40-something, slumped-over man appeared on the screen. (Joe is a real person, whose name was changed to protect his identity.) “Joe’s really a

nice guy once you get to know him, but he’s had a pretty tough life, and now he just doesn’t care too much whether he lives or dies. And if you want to get to know him, you’ll have to go on down to the jail, because that’s where he is,” she continued.

Thirty-one slides and 25 minutes later, Hall had recounted Joe’s sad life story complete with the appalling

admission that in the two years since he’d been in her community: “Joe has been involved with at least 11 organizations, none of which coordinated any of his care. He’s been contacted by police at least 50 times; he has been in and out of the ER, detox, and jail; he has nearly lost his life several times, and he has cost the system nearly a quarter of a million dollars. And the outcome was jail.”

At this point in her delivery, Hall deliberately paused. Telling a story like this in a professional context was completely different from anything she’d ever done. The audience remained deadly silent throughout the telling of her tale – a reaction she couldn’t tell was good or bad. Sounding as ambitious and official as she could, Hall told the assembled group that, terrified and inspired by the

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alarming story of Joe, her county health district was in the midst of a massive systemwide overhaul. It was completely restructuring itself to make it work better for people like Joe. In her old-style presentations, this would have been the part where Hall went into lengthy detail showing charts outlining the 12 strategies for uniting 34 different organizations under a common umbrella, called the Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse (MHSA) Partnership. On this day, she simply showed a slide of a successful, 40-something man in a shirt and tie, smiling and holding a pair of glasses, accompanied by the question, "What if Joe's story had been different?"

Hall then recounted an entirely new Joe story, still no fairy tale, but one where Joe received proper, coordinated treatment over the course of his life for what he learned was his bipolar disorder. "He has had no jail time, has used remarkably less primary care, the police and ambulance don't even know who he is, and he has never again been close to suicide," explained Hall. "The first Joe is reality, the second Joe is the changed reality that we're working on. Our partnership really believes that things can look different for the Joes of the world."

The slide show ended, the lights went on, and just like a scene out a heart-tugging movie, the 40 listeners jumped up from their chairs and, for the first time all day, broke into thunderous applause. "Holy cow! They really liked it and it touched them," Hall remembers thinking at the time. The rest of the day, the entire group talked about Joe, bringing him into the context of every program they address. "How would this affect Joe?" they would ask. Since the summit,

word of the Joe story and Northern Larimer County's ongoing massive revamping of its mental health and substance abuse program continues to spread far beyond the county.

The MHSA Partnership is being used as a model for a statewide group trying to help other counties implement similar systemic changes. This past fall, Hall got a call from the state governor's office asking permission to use the Joe story in one of its presentations. For Hall's birthday, co-workers

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gave her a life-size cutout of Joe holding a birthday card signed by all of them. "We take him to meetings with us now to keep us on track," quips Hall. "Joe lives, for sure."

That afternoon, Hall became a storytelling zealot. In the nonprofit world, she is hardly alone. Increasingly, iterations of the Joe story and its impact on Northern Larimer County's health district are being replicated across the country, as nonprofit and philanthropic organizations of all stripes recognize and harness the power of storytelling.

Serious Business of Storytelling

Nonprofits are using stories to sway board members, investors, and policymakers. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, for instance, which funds nearly 1,000 different healthcare ini-

tiatives annually, began incorporating storytelling seminars into its programs in 2000, and made a workshop on storytelling the centerpiece of its annual meeting last fall. (Hall was one of its panel presenters.) Faith in Action, which runs hundreds of community faith-based volunteer initiatives across the country, treated 300 of its members to a storytelling workshop at its plenary session last summer. The very next day, more than 250 of its staffers, armed with their freshly minted stories as lobbying tools, marched on Capitol Hill and told their tales as they met with their state representatives. (One congressman, Minnesota's James L. Oberstar, was so taken by the stories he heard, he read them into the Congressional Record.)

Environmental Defense, one of America's most influential environmental advocacy groups, chose storytelling as the theme for its summer 2003 retreat. At Environmental Defense, which boasts more Ph.D. scientists and economists on staff than any similar organization, "One has a tendency to speak in terms of the data," concedes Joel Plagenz, its associate director. "At the workshop, we learned that the story can trump the data. Speaking in stories is clearly a more effective way of communicating."

Nonprofits that have realized the power of storytelling are using stories to communicate with their stakeholders in a variety of mediums beyond in-person presentations – from holiday cards to annual reports. In addition, stories are cropping up on an increasing number of nonprofits' Web sites, where the well-chosen tale can poignantly and efficiently encapsulate a particular program. Local Initiative Funding Partners, a grant-matching, grassroots offshoot of the Robert

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Wood Johnson Foundation, features a particularly rich “Storybook” section on its Web site (www.lifp.org) with both written and audio stories.

“Daddy Hurt Mommy Again,” for example, vividly depicts the critical role one of LIFP’s domestic violence grant recipients played in the greater Kansas City, Mo., area by telling a story in the words of a 5-year-old.

Another entry in the LIFP Storybook, “On the Loose,” is a streaming audio collection of rap poems lifted from a CD written and produced by teenagers from the Healing Arts, an LIFP project in San Antonio that helps abused youth express their feelings through the arts. Hearing the poems recited by the teenage girls’ own voices makes their work, and by extension that of the supporting non-profit, come alive in a way that cannot be matched by any chart or report.

Stories to Motivate and Educate Staff

Nonprofit groups are also using stories to acclimate new staffers through staff handbooks. One such handbook, “Staff Told Tales: Stories about Environmental Defense by the people who made them happen,” features the irresistibly titled chapter “I Eat RCWs” (endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers, that is). Written in a folksy, easily understood way, the story recounts the compromise reached between Environmental Defense and a crotchety North Carolinian landowner who initially couldn’t care less how the Endangered Species Act affected the pesky woodpeckers that made their homes in his family’s longleaf pine forests.

Others, like Erin Hall and her health district colleagues, use storytelling as an internal reporting mechanism – “to understand our systems and each

other’s limitations,” as she says. After all, the Joe story only emerged when she was new to her job and asked staffers to tell a true-to-life case example that helped illustrate how their particular agency worked. When it turned out that four of the seven stories were written about the same person, and that eight of the 13 people at the table knew this person because

they had all served him (not being able to name him for privacy reasons, they christened him Joe), all realized their system was woefully in need of revamping. To keep on top of her organization, Hall today is constantly on the hunt for new Joe stories, and has even come up with some new characters whose stories illustrate other features and services of her

Seven Questions to Sharpen Your Stories

Who’s the Protagonist? Just as a car needs a driver, stories also need someone to drive the action. Use real names where possible, or else composite, fictionalized ones (like Joe).

What’s the Hook? Begin your story at a place where the audience can identify with the situation, or with the protagonist’s goal. The idea is to hook them from the start.

What Keeps It Interesting? Predictable stories are boring; throw some barriers and surprises in there to keep your audience’s attention.

Where’s the Conflict? There is no drama without conflict (“narrative demands reversal,” to quote Aristotle), and heroic action is heightened when juxtaposed against villainous misdeeds.

Have You Included Telling Details? Brevity is a goal, so try to find the few well-chosen details that concisely and vividly paint a picture of the world you are portraying.

What’s the Emotional Hook? In return for their time and attention, readers expect more than a recitation of the facts. Give them an emotional experience that makes their time worthwhile.

Is the Meaning Crystal Clear? “We don’t need more information,” writes Annette Simmons in “The Story Factor.” “We need to know what it means. We need a story that explains what it means and makes us feel like we fit in there somewhere.”

From *free-range thinking* newsletter, ©Andrew Goodman, October 2003

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county health district.

One Mark of a Good Story: Throw Rocks at Your Hero

The stories nonprofits use are as varied as the organizations themselves, but the good ones all have at least one thing in common: obstacles. While the temptation will always be to jump to the happy ending (and what your fabulous organization did to bring it about), good storytellers know to prolong this moment by throwing obstructions in the way. To paraphrase legendary Hollywood screenwriting guru Robert McKee, a good story proceeds as follows: "Act I: Get your hero up a tree. Act II: Throw rocks at him. Act III: Bring him down."

To be riveting, good stories need these ups and downs. They make protagonists more sympathetic and interesting. That's why Hall shares the appalling admissions about how uncoordinated Joe's care was in her health district's initially fragmented system. It's why the "I Eat RCWs" tale features the pipe-clenching, environmentalist-hating forester whose license plate inspired the story's name, as well as an equally cantankerous colleague who blurts: "This is ridiculous. You can't trust the Fish and Wildlife Service. You can't trust Environmental Defense or any other environmentalists and no one should do this." Sharing the low points of an organization makes a reader care long enough to stick around to hear about its high points.

To be sure, the process can be tricky. Storytelling organizations want to be humble but also impressive, confident but not sanctimonious in the telling of their tales. Striking this balance is not easy. Neither is instilling the discipline not to rush to the happy conclusion. As Debbie Dunn Solomon, LIFP's director of communications,

concedes, "There are a lot of pitfalls out there to storytelling." Still, her nonprofit, like scores of others, is convinced that the benefits of good storytelling are well worth their challenges. "It has completely changed the way we do things," she notes.

Why Are Stories More Effective?

What do these enlightened storytelling nonprofits know that the rest of their colleagues don't? While it is rare to meet an individual who does-

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n't like a good story, most people intuitively categorize storytelling as a leisurely – rather than a professional – pursuit. Storytelling may be fine for sitting around a campfire or bedtime, but if you want to persuade serious-minded individuals in a professional context, throw numbers, charts, and statistics their way, the thinking goes. As Hall notes of her former, pre-Joe presentations, "Before we tried to let the statistics speak for themselves." But guess what? "They don't. They're not memorable," she deadpans.

In fact, data and statistics actually point out that data and statistics are a surefire way of losing your audience. As Andy Goodman, who teaches story-

telling to nonprofits for a living, likes to say: "Numbers numb, jargon jars, and nobody ever marched on Washington because of a pie chart. If you want to connect with your audience, tell them a story."

Goodman, a former Hollywood sitcom writer, is an evangelist for storytelling. He counts among his clients Environmental Defense, Jane Goodall's Chimpanzee Collaboratory, and the Centers for Disease Control, to name just a few. Interspersed between explanations of human evolution as a storytelling culture and biological evidence of a nodule in our brain whose sole purpose is to make narrative sense of all input, Goodman says something very simple and very alarming in his workshops: "Don't assume that *anyone* is interested in anything you have to say! ... In a two-hour speech, people will remember a two-minute story."

"Telling stories has become one of the most powerful aspects of what we do," agrees Larry Weisberg, Faith in Action's communications director. "It isn't about the grant money. It isn't about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. It's about relationships between the people who help and the people who are helped [something we share through stories]."

What's more, the process of story gathering and storytelling can be far more enjoyable than compiling data. Now that she's become somewhat of a veteran raconteur, Erin Hall describes an added benefit of storytelling. Not only is the Joe story a great way to explain a complicated project in a compelling manner, she notes: "It's also fun. I like to tell it, and people like to hear it." ■

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