Chapter 10
Influencing Perceptions Through Storytelling:
Reframing Interactions With Foster Care

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores a holistic storytelling approach used to influence a community's perceptions on foster care. Over the past 25 years, Peace4Kids, a non-profit organization serving youth in foster care, has engaged in a radical movement to understand and document the assets and strengths of youth who have been impacted by child welfare systems. The authors highlight how sharing these stories has informed narrative, policy, and even the built environment around you. By documenting the compounding effects of the foster care experience, along with the public's perceptions of youth in foster care, these explorations can be used as a vehicle for positive change. The contributing authors provide a unique perspective on this organization's approach: one author, Zaid Gayle, is the Executive Director of Peace4Kids and serves as Vice Chair for the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families; the second author, Mira Zimet, is a foster parent and documentary filmmaker who has traveled the country capturing digital stories of adults with lived foster care experiences through The Storyboard Project.

STORYTELLING IS THE HEART OF ADVOCACY

Storytelling is a fundamental part of our identities. It is how families and cultures carry forward their history and traditions for each generation to embrace. In West Africa, the griot continues to influence how tribes and villages remember their history. In the indigenous tribes of the Americas, stories are used to orient children to the customs and practices and origins of their people. In this way, stories hold an intrinsic value to the preservation of a people.

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However, in the foster care system, youth are not given the opportunity to hear stories of their ancestors. Since they are separated from their biological parents, there aren't customs and traditions to use as an anchor. Instead, youth embrace societal narratives that are written about them that typically lean into the struggles and victimization of their experience. This is perhaps one of the most abnormal parts of their childhood. Without stories to orient these children to their identity, many self-identify with these negative stories and go on to believe they are unloved and have no worth. It is for this reason there is often great shame associated with a lived foster care experience. As a result, adults who have had a foster care experience rarely share their stories. The authors believe that by keeping these journey's private, future generations of youth in care are robbed of counter narratives that highlight the resilience, perseverance and power these youth possess.

Before we dig deeper into the power of story, it's important to know how the negative perceptions of youth in foster care began.

The War on Drugs and Its Influence on Los Angeles's Increased Foster Care Population

The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) was formed in 1984 to serve as advocates for children. There was a recognized need for targeted services to families beyond what the Department of Social Services was providing. Since then, DCFS has become the largest foster care agency in the United States. Its growth was fueled in part by the emergence of the L.A. crack epidemic of the 1980s. Crack, a much cheaper and addictive form of cocaine, became more widespread and accessible in poorer urban spaces. While cocaine in powder form had been branded a benign party drug used by the cultural elite, the narrative flipped with crack. (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1999). The public opinion on crack quickly pivoted to one that was associated with crime and violence (Agar, 2003).

While the start of the War on Drugs was initiated by President Richard Nixon in the 1970s, in 1982 President Ronald Reagan implemented new policies and practices. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1986) increased penalties for drug possession, created minimum sentences for drug-related offenses, increased funds for drug enforcement measures that resulted in the creation of a disparity of 100:1 for crimes related to crack versus powdered cocaine.

This criminalization of substance abuse had a profound impact on the Black community, evidenced by the disparity in drug related arrests. In 1976, 22% of drug-related arrests were of Black people, while 77% were white. However, by 1992, Black people accounted for 40% of all drug-related arrests, while white people accounted for 59% of them — but, Black people comprised about 12% of the total U.S. population, while white people were about 82% (Crime & Delinquency, 1994). This drastic shift in arrests highlights how drug policy had a direct impact on Black communities.

The demonization of Black drug use also made the militarization of law enforcement an acceptable practice. In the 1980s, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) conducted massive police sweeps with the police chief declaring that, "the casual drug user ought to be taken out and shot." The 1988 Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (STEP) Act mandated additional incarceration of up to five years from nonviolent offenses by gang members. This gave law enforcement unprecedented latitude to unjustly label Blacks as gang affiliated to increase sentencing time. In fact, by 1992, the L.A. Sheriff Department listed nearly 50% of Black men under age 25 as gang members (Murch, 2015). Additionally, according to the Center for Juvenile & Criminal Justice, the number of women incarcerated in California increased 450% from 1980-'93 with 35.9% serving time solely for drug possession. Federal minimum

sentences of five years applied to possession of five grams of crack, as opposed to 500 grams of cocaine. This disproportionately affected South Los Angeles where many believe that the crack epidemic was born. In addition, Black people were six times more likely to be killed by homicide than their white peers.

All of these compounding factors led to an explosion of the Los Angeles foster care system in the 1980s, which also ended up disproportionately impacting the Black community. The militarization of police, substance abuse, increased incarceration rates and killing of Black parents during childbearing years led to a mass removal of Black children from their biological families. This had a generational and compounding effect. For example, by 2020 Black youth represented about 7% of the L.A. population, but 24% of the foster care population (Los Angeles DCFS Monthly Report, 2022). The residual impact and narrative of racially charged drug policy still influences how communities of color interact with child welfare systems. Families and communities are afraid of being caught in the crosshairs of DCFS and as a result, pervasive issues can go unchecked until removal of the child is absolutely necessary. This history of trauma in South Los Angeles has instilled a troubling narrative about foster care. As a result, youth who experience foster care keep their circumstances private. This is a way to protect, as it helps children of color avoid being associated with historically negative perceptions of foster care. Without an understanding of the stories that point to the diverse needs and history of youth who are entering the foster care system, it is nearly impossible to provide a network of adequate services and support to them and their caregivers.

While we have focused on how crack cocaine affected neighborhoods of color in the 1980s, we can also point to recent examples, specifically the opioid crisis, to see how differently the use of this drug was handled by the government and law enforcement. The crack cocaine epidemic criminalized the poor urban communities it afflicted, while the opioid crisis, portrayed as an issue primarily affecting white communities, was categorized as an abuse of power from drug companies. Opioid addicts are treated more as victims, instead of perpetrators. The federal government even passed bills to help in the treatment of opioid addiction, while states have successfully sued pharmaceutical companies over their handling of opioid distribution. In a review of media framing of these two drug crises there is a clear delineation in the more negative framing of the crack epidemic. Media around the opioid epidemic tends to use more medical terminology in its descriptions, while the crack epidemic uses more criminology terms (Shachar et al., 2020). Even if you argue that society has grown more tolerant to drug use over time, the negative impact of media portrayals of crack cocaine on the Black community is undeniable.

Negative Narratives

The negative perceptions of communities demonized by these characterizations often resulted in narratives that portrayed drug users as violent criminals. Thus it is reasonable to assume that social workers working with Black youth are conditioned to respond with their own specific biases and assumptions. The need to serve youth of color meant that it is likely that social workers and investigators feel a heightened sense of danger when operating in these communities. These perceptions also could — and often do — influence the way decisions were made in the removal of children from their families.

An example of how these influencing factors affected decision making comes from a story told by a DCFS administrator. In the early 2000s, the unit she supervised would audit cases to recommend reunification or termination of parental rights. Given the precarious nature of these relationships and the potential for DCFS and Los Angeles County to be sued, it was important they performed due diligence.

In this situation, the administrator was tasked with evaluating the potential loss of parental rights for a mother whose baby was placed in foster care. The mother first came under suspicion because of a substance abuse issue. She had been on a path to reunification, but the county social worker (CSW) had recommended ending family reunification services, citing the mother's inability to meet the scheduled demands of the court. These included scheduled supervised visits and drug testing to confirm that she was no longer using drugs. The mother explained that she missed scheduled appointments because they conflicted with her work schedule and skipping work would have, in turn, caused a financial hardship. This is not an unusual excuse for parents who need to adhere to stringent guidelines for reunification. The children's court clearly defines instructions for parents to reunite with their child. However, sometimes the availability of the required classes and scheduled activities conflict with the parents' ability to earn a living. This leaves parents with a difficult choice. Do they destabilize their financial situation, thus impacting their ability to care for their child when reunified, or meet the demands of the court by attending every scheduled appointment regardless of the hardship?

The social worker's position was that the missed appointments clearly articulated a pattern of behavior that suggested the mother was not capable of being a parent and was uninterested in being reunited with her child. They also stated how the child was originally detained by child protective services as another reason to move away from reunification. In this situation, the child was removed from the home, because the mother left her alone in the apartment while she was on a drug binge. The authorities were called when the neighbors heard the cries of the baby. When they arrived at the apartment, they found the baby placed under an upside down shopping cart with some of her toys. From the social worker's perspective this was a clear example of how the mother was incapable of parenting and would put the child at further risk if they were reunified.

The investigative team had a different perspective. The administrator had a deep understanding of the impact of substance use on the family. She had two parents who had addiction issues and never received the help they needed. As a result, her family was separated by DCFS. This led to an increase in the parent's substance use, which was a contributing factor to their early deaths. As her investigative team read through the case file, they sided with the mother and recommended that family reunification services be continued and the court should alter the plans to meet the demands of the mother's work schedule.

The rationale of the investigative team hinged on the moment the baby was detained. They argued that by placing the baby under a shopping cart with some toys to play with, the mother was showing concern for the wellbeing of her child. This was the mother's attempt to protect her child while she went out for a fix. While leaving the baby alone is an egregious act, the fact that she was trying to protect her child, even while she was consumed with scoring drugs, suggested that this mother loved her child.

This story exemplifies how ensuring that experts with lived foster care experiences should be a part of the decision-making process for young people. Because the administrator shared her own story, and her expertise, she was able to provide proper resources for the parent rather than taking her child away, another young person did not fall through the cracks and into the foster care system.

Understanding Foster Care in Los Angeles

It is important to have additional context as to why foster care has such a bad reputation. In addition to its association with the crack epidemic and criminalization, the child welfare system itself has a history of flawed practice. It is not our position that foster care services are unneeded. Quite to the contrary, the protection and safety of our children should always be the highest priority. There has been an enormous

amount of research into how traumatic childhood experiences affect the outcomes of adults. (Childhood Domestic Violence Association, 2018). However, the removal of children from their homes is, in itself, a traumatic experience. Therefore, we should be extremely careful in uprooting children from their homes and communities of origin. Removals should only happen when we know the child is at great risk of being harmed. As members of the community, mandated reporters are on the front line of this effort.

To be clear, in Los Angeles, foster care tends to be an issue that impacts poorer communities of color. The current breakdown of racial demographics of youth receiving child welfare services are: 10% White, 60% Hispanic, 24% Black, and 2% Asian/Pacific Islander. Children are most frequently referred to child welfare services by mandated reporters who call the child protective services hotline. The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) requires every state to designate certain professionals to report known or suspected instances of child abuse and neglect. In the state of California these professionals are people with consistent interactions with children. This includes educators, social workers, law enforcement, and health care workers. Law enforcement and education are the two groups reporting the most allegations of abuse and neglect, at about 50%. Between April 2021 and March 2022, there were 432,736 children who were subject to a child protective services (CPS) investigation. Surprisingly, only 13% of all these cases reported were substantiated, which means that child maltreatment was confirmed. Therefore, the vast majority of all calls to child protective services from mandated reporters are unfounded. This means that nearly 400,000 families could have had their lives disrupted by an ill-informed allegation of child abuse and neglect.

Remember, a mandated reporter only has to have reasonable suspicion that maltreatment has occurred. As a society, we tend to be hypervigilant about the risk factors that impinge on child wellbeing. As front line preventionist, mandated reporters take that hypervigilance to heart. As a result, they likely report suspicion of abuse even when the circumstances around the allegation do not add up.

As an example of this hypervigilance, we'll share a story about Destiny, a foster care advocate. Destiny, a Black woman, is the leader of a large nonprofit in Los Angeles. She has been a strong advocate for abolishing and reforming the child welfare and criminal justice system as she was impacted by both as a child and young adult. Because her own family was dismantled by system involvement, she was committed to changing the outcomes for future system involved youth. This work was deeply personal to her. Not only had she made this her career work, but she also took this responsibility to heart as one of the eldest siblings in her family. To mitigate the risk of child welfare involvement, Destiny had taken on the responsibility of raising her nephew while her sister managed through her own personal crisis. Destiny's nephew lived with her, her husband, and children for nearly a decade. She was actively involved in her nephew's school, ensured he was engaged in extracurricular activities, and made sure he felt like he was an integral part of her family. Destiny offered him stability while also encouraging her sister to take the steps necessary to get custody of her son.

One day, Destiny was visited at home by law enforcement and a social worker. They separated her children from her and her husband and took them into a separate room. Her children were stripped and examined for any bruises or markings that could have been caused by corporal punishment. They asked her children a series of questions about their home life and if they had experienced any abuse at the hands of their parents. Destiny and her husband were also interviewed as though they had been the perpetrators of violence against their children. When the episode was over Destiny was visibly shaken and upset. She couldn't imagine what allegations led to her family being subjected to these indignities.

Given her position and involvement in the child welfare system, she was able to find out that it was her nephew who had made an allegation against her husband. He had told his teacher that Destiny's husband

had thrown a grand piano at him. Now, any reasonable person would have suspected that it is highly unlikely that any adult could pick up a grand piano and throw it at someone. Regardless, this teacher, only needing "reasonable suspicion" decided to report it anyway. The result was a traumatic experience that caused Destiny's family to be investigated, and her children to be stripped in front of strangers.

Obviously, Destiny was furious. She couldn't understand why a teacher, whom she had been actively engaged with over the course of the school year, would make such an allegation. She felt like the teacher could have followed up with her and would have quickly discovered that there is no grand piano in their home. However, Destiny also knew that mandated reporters are encouraged to **NOT** do any investigating and that they are **NOT** required to tell a parent / caregiver that they are making a report or allegation. When Destiny spoke to her nephew about the situation, he was remorseful and ashamed. He explained that he only told his teacher that story, because he thought if Destiny got in trouble, then he would get to go back and live with his mom. He never wanted to hurt his family, he just yearned to be with his biological mother on a permanent basis.

This is just one story, out of many, that highlights how mandated reporting has a detrimental effect on families and communities. Again, we believe that the safety of our children is sacrosanct. This is a value we are grateful we uphold as a society. We must balance this with reason though. Because safety is both physical and psychological, Destiny's children were not made to feel psychologically safe in that moment when they were being stripped and evaluated. We must recognize when our need to keep children safe crosses a boundary and makes families, communities, and groups of people feel unsafe and dehumanized.

This background and these definitions matter because they shape the story of foster care, or rather the stories of the children who are in it. As you can imagine, a child growing up in foster care would be adversely affected by it. In addition to the trauma they endured prior to entry, they also must endure the perceptions others have of them while they are moving through the child welfare system. Perhaps even more detrimental, is whether or not these negative archetypes are believed to be true by the youth themselves. How damaging would it be to a child's psyche if they were to believe that they are the descendants of criminals and addicts who do not have the capacity to love or care for themselves or others? To combat the impact of how these narratives impact children in foster care, it is important to dispel the myths of the stories they've been told and encourage them to shape new narratives based on the lives that they want to create.

Story as a Healing Paradigm

The key imperative to the author's storytelling initiatives is to ensure that youth with a lived foster care experience have a voice in how their story is told. They are the ones who start a new oral tradition and help define the lessons that come from their journey. It is critical they have the chance to tell their story from their own perspective in order to help reframe how youth perceive themselves and demonstrate to the world a truer representation of who they are. These two goals are important in ensuring that youth in foster care can exist in safe spaces that do not center on their traumatic experiences. It enables them to reset and explore their identity beyond the conditions that caused them to be separated from their biological parents.

This is done with a recognition that the majority of the stories that have been constructed, thus far, about the foster care experience, are deeply flawed. Changing these narratives requires an audit of existing stories and centering on the ones that elevate a more positive framework. This is where the groundwork for

healing can begin. As youth in foster care begin to see themselves represented differently, they discover that stories provide new hope and perspective. As they integrate these stories into their own identities, it can serve in helping them make sense of their lives and conditions.

This shaping of their narrative identity is informed by the life story they begin to write based on the interpretation of their own life experiences. If a youth's story is one in which they feel beaten down and told they have no worth, then this lends itself toward a negative outcome. On the other hand, if a youth's story is based on overcoming challenges and searching out loving adult mentors, then it is more likely they will have positive psychological well-being (McAdams, 2011). It is important to note that auditing — and revising — how you interpret your life story, turning from a traumatic past into a more positive framework, can be a deeply reflective process. To maximize the benefits of this process there must be time and distance from the traumatic event to gain perspective. Given that many youth in foster care are still in the midst of their experiences, and may still be experiencing traumas, it is essential to lean into the collective knowledge and culture of the group. Trauma is an isolating experience. However, if you can lean into a community with shared experiences and stories, it encourages the dismantling of stigmas and the building of meaningful relationships. (Etherington, 2009).

Beyond the positive psychological impact narrative identity shaping and life stories can create, there is evidence that there are physiological benefits as well. Recent research has measured the impact of storytelling on children hospitalized in an intensive care unit. They discovered that just one storytelling session led to an increase in oxytocin, a reduction in cortisol and pain, and positive emotional shifts. (Brockington, Gomes, Buso, Altszyler, Fischer, 2018). Oxytocin is often referred to as the love hormone. In addition to stress reduction, it has also been shown to increase social bonding, emotional processing and empathy. The positive findings of this research directly correlate with the experiences of youth in foster care. While children in the ICU may still be under the care of their biological parents, they are enduring similar circumstances to youth in foster care. They've suddenly been separated from their social networks, their friends, and daily routines. They have also just undergone a significantly traumatic event where they will need to heal, often physically as well as psychologically. This correlation suggests that youth in foster care can receive similar positive benefits if stories are told with care and energy. So, while younger children may not be able to revise and audit their traumatic experiences, they can still receive great benefit from being told stories.

At Peace4Kids, we address conditions around childhood trauma and isolation through the power of community interactions and storytelling. During the Saturday program, youth aged 4-24 gather at the Boy's and Girls Club in South Los Angeles. These young people, all with a lived foster care experience, are given the opportunity to meet others who have also been touched by the foster care system. This recognition that they have peers who are going through a similar experience reduces the sense of isolation. Additionally, they are provided the opportunity to meet older youth and adults who had similar upbringings, and hear pieces of their stories. Meeting people with lived experience having a "normative" experience as an adult, suggests that their current conditions do not have to be predictive of their future. Peace4Kids, now in its 25th year, allows for youth who were once participants in the program, to step into roles of peer advocates and volunteers. This provides a great cultural context and solidifies program values as new youth join the organization. In this way, the generational stories are captured and passed down to each cohort of children.

In order for participants to share their stories, it is imperative to create environments where youth feel safe enough to be vulnerable. This is done through the rigorous training of volunteers and staff. Peace4Kids creates consistency in the environment so that youth do not feel threatened by any uncertain-

ties. Volunteers and staff also use universal communication tools to ensure that any emerging feelings of stress, anxiety or excitement can be managed through evidenced based trauma informed practice. In addition, Peace4Kids trains youth in the program on the power of storytelling.

The work of Joseph Campbell (Campbell, 2014) sets the framework for the type of storytelling we teach our youth. We introduce the idea of the hero's journey, a path whereby the "hero" must encounter numerous obstacles in order to achieve success. Youth are then invited to tell their own story based on this journey. Through this process, participants learn to make sense of the crises that they have endured, but through a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2007). They are provided the opportunity to journal and work in small groups to develop their stories. These stories focus on one singular transformative event. As part of their story development, they define what their world looked like before this moment, how / why they were called into action, who assisted them on the journey, what the crisis looked like as they failed and overcame, and then what treasure they were able to take away from the journey. There are 12 different prompts they must describe, and they are given the opportunity to test out the value of their concepts by discussing their narrative with others. At the same time, they are encouraged to simplify their stories to tell them in a compelling way.

Because the retelling of past events can be triggering, in addition to learning the art of storytelling, participants are also provided evidence-based tools to regulate their nervous systems and discharge energy through learning how to be better in touch with what is occuring in their body. This is predominantly done through breathwork techniques, shaking and tapping a part of their body. However, participants learn how to lean on their own intuition through their own senses, and to use their predefined tools for regulation when they are feeling overly anxious, excited or withdrawn. Although storytelling is a healing practice, it is equally important that those telling the stories, and listening to them, are in the right frame of mind.

During this process, we share stories with youth that are both fictional and nonfiction. However, often the most impactful stories we share are fiction, specifically existing superhero narratives. Most youth are already familiar with these stories, yet they have not recognized that these narrative backstories are often based on a foster care experience. Perhaps the most recognizable superhero is Superman. Most people know that Superman's planet exploded and that he was adopted by a family in Kansas. Yet, when you reshare this with youth in foster care, suddenly they recognize their own shared experience has value. Superman is not the only character in pop culture with a foster care experience: Batman, Scarlet Witch, Spiderman, Storm, Shazam, Peter Quill (Star Lord), Rogue and Harry Potter, all have similar origin stories. Additionally, there is evidence that fictional stories also impact identity (Shackleford, 2020). As adolescents begin to frame their beliefs and future, fictional stories allow them to orient themselves to narratives that they deem important.

At Peace4Kids, as teens and young adults begin recognizing their place in the shared experience of the community, they are also given the opportunity to tell their story through various mediums. This includes digital storytelling, art, spoken word, poetry and music. These cathartic forms of communication allow the youth to do something creative and fun while they are exploring feelings of hurt and isolation. This provides them with a more positive association toward their experiences.

Since storytelling is one of the most foundational approaches to our work, it is important to establish clear boundaries to ensure a sense of safety is felt both during the process and after the stories are told. Traditional foster care narratives have been about victimization and criminalization, and we have witnessed foster care stories use these tropes to get sympathy from the audience. While this can be an effective strategy to manipulate audience members into action, it also serves to distance them from the storyteller, as these narratives are often extreme.

As an example, in 2013 a group of teens from Peace4Kids witnessed the testimony of a young woman to a group of policy makers at a state legislative meeting. This young woman told a heart-wrenching story of being sexually and emotionally abused throughout her childhood, and how she is currently living on the streets. She was in tears as she recounted these stories and everyone in attendance verbally grunted their disdain for the broken system that caused her to suffer. She poured her heart out for 15 minutes, which was well beyond the five minutes others had been allotted for their testimony. The legislators were also visibly shaken by the horrors that this young woman endured. When she finished, members of the audience tried to console her and find quick fixes for her current condition. The legislators also spoke to how these horrors were unacceptable and that something must be done to prevent them from happening. Unfortunately, there were no real policy decisions that were made because of her story. Everything she shared, publicly opened up old wounds that were still unresolved. The story she presented made people feel bad for her, but that guilt and sadness was not actionable. While that night she was given a meal and a place to sleep, there were no long-term fixes. It pulled on people's heart strings and their desire to be a "savior" for the misfortunes of this young woman.

Recently the teens who were on this trip recounted that experience. They were able to remember the details of the horrors the young woman shared, but they were unable to remember her name or even what she looked like. Years later, the only thing that remained was the sting of the pain she endured. When asked how they think her story transformed things for the foster care community, everyone shrugged their shoulders. Finally, one of the young women spoke up, "I don't think it changed anything. In fact, I think it made things worse. You might not remember this, but I gave my testimony right after she did. I had policy recommendations and a clear ask for the legislators to provide some needed funding for an initiative. Since everyone was focused on her crisis, no one truly heard my request."

This story exemplifies why establishing boundaries for effective storytelling are critical. These boundaries protect the storyteller and the audience. There are definitely spaces and places where raw and unfiltered storytelling is viable. However, when stories revolve around oppressed populations who have not typically had a voice in the broader community, it is more important to be strategic and ethical.

Ethical storytelling centers on the unique needs of the storyteller. It asks a series of important questions. How would the story being told impact the storyteller today, tomorrow or 10 years from now? In what ways will this story humanize the storyteller and appeal to a broad audience? How might this story negatively impact existing relationships that the storyteller deems as important. How does the story advance the goals of the storyteller in a meaningful way? The storyteller must acknowledge that they are comfortable with all outcomes from their story.

For example, a young person might have had a few minor run-ins with the police, perhaps for stealing food or being affiliated with a gang. While these might be part of their story, they should ask themselves if telling this part of their journey is necessary to a much larger narrative about their lives. By sharing some of their experiences more broadly, they might run the risk of impacting future relationships or job opportunities. It is therefore important that they are challenged by their community of peers and advisors to consider all of the repercussions. Once the storyteller is satisfied with the answers to these questions, then the terms for how the story is published must also be determined. Will it only exist in local spaces, online, through social media? Will it go on in perpetuity or will it have a limited run? How frequently does the storyteller want to check in about the reach of the story and its residual impact? Ethical storytelling gives the creator full autonomy and power over the story with agreed upon limitations. In this way, if there are unintended consequences, there is an agreed upon method to quickly address them to keep the storyteller safe.

This type of strategic storytelling centers on why and where this story should be told, along with an idea of who the audience is. The primary goals of storytelling are to captivate and engage the audience. Stories educate, entertain, and make meaning out of a world that can sometimes be complex or confusing. Our approach to digital strategic storytelling is to create short moving narratives that engage the viewer in experiencing a slice of life in the journey of someone with a lived foster care experience. Research has confirmed that the public's perception toward youth in foster care are negative based on what they have witnessed in the media. (Abioye et al., 2020). To combat these biases our strategy is not to shame people into submission. Instead, we aim to humanize the foster care journey by producing short documentaries that show the diversity of people who have been part of the foster care system. Since 2015, Peace4Kids has partnered with the non-profit digital web series, The Storyboard Project (The Storyboard Project, 2014) to publish some of these narratives.

The Storyboard Project was founded in 2014 with the express purpose of giving youth with a lived foster care experience the opportunity to share their journey through a video narrative. The project was founded to give voice to many who have not traditionally been heard. The mission is to give youth the space to share their own journey, without a dramatic framing often used by the media to detail horrors in order to evoke sympathy. The person in the story is the protagonist, not their traumas. During the interview process, the young person is prompted with questions, but guides how they want to share their experience. It is very much a collaborative process and is designed to allow youth the chance to highlight their triumphs, as much as their challenges. We also wanted to show that what youth need to succeed are universal to us all: Love, connection, acceptance and someone who cares. By anchoring on the power and perseverance of the protagonist, we are more likely to get an empathic response from the viewer.

The more youth we filmed, the more we realized that youth who were experiencing good outcomes after transitioning out of care had, simply, either had someone in their lives who believed in them or a community they felt they belonged. Sometimes it was a teacher or a guidance counselor, a mentor, an organization. Other times it was their faith or the belief that they were going to prove everyone wrong who thought they would fail. These pivotal points in their lives are woven into each story and allow viewers to witness how trust is built and how it sometimes just takes one person to change the life of a child. Audiences are able to see their own humanity in these stories and relate the journey of the protagonist to their own personal experience. The hope is to encourage the viewer to see foster care as a normalized part of our shared societal experience and not further stigmatize a young person who often landed in the system through no fault of their own.

Youth interviewed by The Storyboard Project have often gone on to further explore their own stories after the initial video. It was the first time Marquis Williams (The Storyboard Project, 2015) shared his story aloud. He painted the picture of a non-existent father, a violent mother and a life in kinship care with his grandmother, before going into the foster care system. In his case, a high school he attended gave him the tools to be successful academically, and he went on to get a bachelor's degree from California State University at Northridge. He wrote The Storyboard Project a year later to say that he realized how important his story was, and decided to reflect more on his experience and write a book (Williams, 2017). This is just one example of how telling your story empowers you to understand how critical your voice can be in this space.

While the stories of youth in care, both in the Peace4Kids community and within the Los Angeles area are critical, The Storyboard Project extended its reach in 2022. The non-profit went on the road with an Airstream trailer, traveling throughout the United States to meet up with youth from different cities to share their journey's — and document best practices for youth in other states. They teamed up with

Journey to Success, a policy advocacy campaign seeking to improve opportunities and outcomes for all youth and young adults who experience foster care. During the interview process, youth are also asked to give their opinions on how the system could have helped youth find and stay in kinship placements, if there could have been better resources to help with their own mental health and well-being and how they were able to manage financially after aging out. By documenting their stories — and their expertise — and bringing these stories to policymakers, the goal of both Peace4Kids and The Storyboard Project is to show how powerful authentic storytelling can be in shaping and reshaping perception.

Our strategic approach throughout all of these storytelling ventures provides guide rails for the young person to help them maintain their dignity and limit the risk of being triggered by uprooting unhealed traumas. National research has determined that the public predominantly perceives media depictions of youth in foster care to be victims, survivors, criminals, and drug addicts. Furthermore, a majority of the public also believe these portrayals to be at least somewhat accurate (Gayle et al., 2021). This defines a clear direction for the types of counter narrative storytelling we must produce. Our approach is designed to ignite a curiosity in the viewer by introducing them to content that they have never really considered. Since we know that there is a bias toward perceptions of youth in foster care, we hypothesize that showing them narratives that dispel these myths will pique their interest. This must be done through a "drip campaign," which means persistent messaging and content, delivered over an extended period of time. Through consistently showing these positive narratives, we hope that eventually the public perceptions will shift as they interact with multiple media products. Every type of narrative that is produced asks the following strategic questions:

1. Does this story lean into the negative perceptions the public has about youth in foster care?
2. How does the protagonist garner empathy from the viewer?
3. In what ways might the viewer be able to relate to the content in a way that sustains interest and curiosity?
4. What does the narrative encourage the audience to feel, say and do?

In any strategic storytelling campaign, it is essential to run your content through a clear set of questions to measure its effectiveness toward your goal. One should also screen any videos, photos or any written materials before they are released to the public. Peace4Kids and The Storyboard Project understand the first person who must approve the piece of content is the young person being interviewed. After their feedback, edits and approval, the material is then tested with a small group of other viewers with lived foster care experience. If it tests positively with that group, then it is shared more broadly. This process of feedback helps us understand how the story is landing with a diverse audience. While it is a huge undertaking for every piece of content, it ensures that everything is on brand and is eliciting the desired response. It also ensures that we are not doing any further harm to young people by the content we are releasing.

Narratives That Have Influenced Policy, Practice, and Perception

There are many examples of how storytelling in the Peace4Kids community has led to healing and transformation for its participants, however, equally compelling is how these stories have influenced changes in the broader community and society. These three examples that follow, highlight how we listened to the youth in our community and found ways to storytell their experiences. You'll see how a

public relations campaign, a uniquely built facility and a social justice movement were used to create narratives that influenced policy, practice and perception.

All I Did Was Turn 18 Campaign

As youth age out of foster care, they notoriously experience high rates of homelessness. Of the nearly 44,000 homeless adults (age 25 and older) in 2022 about 12% self-reported involvement in the foster care system in the Los Angeles homeless count for the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA). In the same LAHSA report, of the approximately 1,000 transition aged youth (TAY) who were experiencing homelessness 15% self-reported involvement in foster care (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, 2022). In 2008, this reality of homelessness was an even greater reality. About 1 in 4 youth in foster care experienced homelessness upon exiting the system. In Los Angeles, homelessness is primarily informed by two strong competing issues. First, there is a lack of affordable housing. Los Angeles does not have a sufficient enough supply of housing for all of its residents. This means that property owners can charge a premium for apartments and housing because the demand is so strong. Secondly, the cost of living in Los Angeles exceeds the rate of income for many renters. The federally recommended percentage of income that should be spent on housing is 30%. This means that to afford the average one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles, someone needs an annual salary of about $99,000. This salary is well beyond the earnings of most TAY. This stark reality directly impacted a beloved member of the Peace4Kids community.

Antony was a disciplined, intelligent and resourceful eighteen-year-old. In the Fall of 2008, he was a recent graduate from high school where he was selected to be the valedictorian. After graduation, he went right into community college and got a job at the Universal Studios theme park. He often worked into the night, well past the time that the trains operated to get him back to his foster home in Compton. Being resourceful, Antony explained his situation to the security guards who worked the night shift. They provided Antony a room with a couch, which he used to do his homework and sleep overnight. In the morning, when the train service resumed, he would head home, shower and go to school.

One morning, as Antony was heading home on the train, he received a call from his foster mother. She explained that Antony was no longer able to stay in her home and had dropped off his belongings at the Peace4Kids office. Shocked, Antony showed up at Peace4Kids confused about what had just happened. Unfortunately, because Antony was 18, his foster parent was no longer receiving funding for him to live in her home and, which is often the case, she asked him to leave. At this point, in order for Antony to get prioritized transitional housing, he had to technically be homeless. Because of the Peace4Kids network, Antony was provided an immediate solution to his housing needs. However, this experience heightened the concern and anger with Antony's peers in the organization.

They all rallied around Antony to figure out how they might use his story to encourage a change in policy. Antony's younger brother Akin was the most vocal of the advocates. He was struck by the fact that Antony was doing everything right, but still ended up experiencing homelessness. He was even more disheartened by the reality that while Antony had a community to quickly address this issue, many other TAY did not. From his perspective, this meant that generations of youth in foster care were transitioning onto the streets with no support or understanding on how to secure housing.

They decided to launch a campaign to highlight Antony's experience. The campaign was called *All I did was turn 18.* They put a call out to the foster care community to identify all the places people spent the night in Los Angeles when they were homeless. They made homemade signs on cardboard with

the *All I did was turn 18* slogan written on them and took pictures at the places where youth in foster care had slept. Additionally, Akin rode his bike 1,800 miles to represent the approximate number of TAY that were expected to be homeless in 2010. This campaign attracted the attention of the media and Antony's story began to have a ripple effect. Policy makers began to take notice and used their advocacy to advance Assembly Bill 12 (AB 12). AB 12 was a bill in California designed to take advantage of a federal law called the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Among other things, this law would provide partial federal funding to support TAY in staying in their foster care placements until age 21.

Eventually, this campaign had its desired result. AB 12 was passed in the state of California in 2010, and went into effect in 2012. As a result, the number of homeless TAY has decreased in the past 10 years. As the data we shared suggests, the problem still persists, but Antony and Akin's campaign is a prime example of how strategic storytelling can advance a strong advocacy agenda.

Perhaps even more important than the broad policy shift their story informed, is the personal impact it had on their lives. Antony, feeling supported by his community, went on to finish college and earned a culinary degree. He has worked in the restaurant industry ever since and has never experienced another day of homelessness. Akin (AKA George White) was selected as a White House Champion of Change for the Obama administration in 2015.

The story of Akin and Antony was made into a short film by The Storyboard Project (The Storyboard Project, 2016). They two talked about their upbringing, their relationship as brothers and the impact of being part of the Peace4Kids community. In their voices, we watch how the Peace4Kids mentorship taught them how to not only advocate for themselves, but turn this advocacy into something much larger. The video is shown to prospective volunteers as a way to show how this community works together for the betterment of youth in care. Akin has gone on to earn his Ed.D. and advance other federal and local policy issues that impact education and foster care. Today, his campaign to change housing outcomes has come full circle. He serves as the Chief Financial Officer for a nonprofit providing housing and supportive services to LGBTQIA+ populations in Baltimore. They are both parents.

The Mobile Village Kitchen

It has long been known that the built environment influences our health outcomes. The way spaces are designed to encourage healthy or unhealthy behaviors. These behaviors can lend themselves to negative or positive health outcomes. Access to parks and open green spaces, safe public transportation, and quality grocery stores and restaurants all influence our health and well-being. In fact, just living in a socio economically depressed community is a predictor of weight gain and early death (American Association for Cancer Research. "People living in poorer neighborhoods are at increased risk for death, worse health risks." (ScienceDaily, 2009). The insights on these trends are alarming for South Los Angeles residents.

- One in seven residents has diabetes, compared to one in 12 in West LA.
- Forty-two percent of South LA residents live below the federal poverty level, compared to only 12 percent in West LA.
- South Los Angeles – nearly 100 square miles and 1 million people – has about 1.2 acres of park space per 1,000 people. The national standard is 6 acres for every 1,000 residents.

Figure 1. Akin Abioye: All I did was turn 18 from his 2010 bike ride initiative

- The lack of healthy food options and prevalence of fast-food restaurants in South Los Angeles caused the Los Angeles City Council to sign a moratorium on building new fast food restaurants in 2008 that is still in effect today.

A group of teens at Peace4Kids, living in and around South Los Angeles, recognized the negative impact of their community's design, as fast-food restaurants were the predominant choice. Many of their caregivers were facing issues of diabetes, heart disease and obesity, all of which was impacting their placement stability. As youth found themselves moving due to caregiver incapacity or death, they aspired to create a new narrative around health and food that could transform their community.

According to the Children's Law Center of California, many children in California's foster care system experience frequent placement changes. Children who are in foster care for 24 months or longer 15% experienced 5 or more placements and 44% experienced 3 or more placements.(California Child Welfare Indicators Project, nd.)

First, it was determined that youth needed to better understand their peers' attitudes about food and the environment in South L.A. To do this, we decided to do a small social experiment. We took 30 teens and broke them into two separate groups and then isolated them from each other. These teens had grown up together in the program and had known each other for years. Some of the teens were even siblings or cousins, but were split up in the opposing groups. One group was given donuts and limited water. The other group was provided a smorgasbord assortment of healthy foods and drinks. This group also had essential oil diffusers, floral design, calming music and a diverse seating arrangement to create ambience.

Each group was told that the only way they could experience the other group's environment was if everyone in the other group agreed to share. Neither group knew what the other group had, so their desire to share would only be based on their goodwill. To incentivize their desire to want to share, we

made sure each group had more than enough food to give out to the other group — but we did not tell them this. Each group was given 20 minutes to experience their environment and to decide if they were willing to share.

What we found was the donut group was willing to share, but the group with the smorgasbord assortment of healthy foods and drinks, was not. When we debriefed after the experiment, there were two discoveries that informed their food justice project. Their first discovery was that the environment plays an essential role in how people behave. This environment also articulates the values and behaviors that are most important to the community.

Peace4Kids also conducted a second experiment. During the youth's lunch break, some of them were asked to eat their food on the bleachers, while others were set up at picnic tables. The youth who ate on the bleachers tended to eat faster and leave more of a mess. Students who sat with a group at a picnic table, stayed longer, ate slower, talked to their tablemates and threw away their trash.

After these experiments, the young people discussed how the idea of a family dinner — where people in the household would gather and eat a meal, while discussing their day — was missing from their lives. They wanted to create a food space that honored the unique strengths of the foster care community and the stories that mattered to them. That wish for those communal moments, coupled with wanting to learn how to create healthy foods, resulted in the creation of the Mobile Kitchen Village.

Deborah Richmond, one of the board members of Peace4Kids at the time, as well as a professor at Woodbury University, brought her architecture students to the Peace4Kids campus. Working together, the teens at Peace4Kids shared their personal stories with food and their vision for a mobile kitchen. The kitchen needed to be mobile because it honored the fact that the health challenges in South L.A. influenced the mobility of youth in foster care. Instead of that being a negative experience, they decided it should represent how these diverse experiences informed their own food preferences and how they experimented with different foods in their different homes. They also decided on an exterior paint that was chalkboard material. This way, when the kitchen traveled, that community could incorporate their own art or elements of their own story onto the exterior. Finally, the mobile kitchen needed to be adaptable. Not only was their design a kitchen, but it could transform into a performance stage, a classroom, and a gallery.

After three years of research and design, the physical representation of the foster care journey around food was launched as the Mobile Village: Kitchen (MVK) in November of 2015. This 32-foot black trailer was designed with movable side walls that open up with hydraulics to make it an open-air kitchen. It is a one-of-a-kind design and has been featured in local press for its unique approach. (KCRW, 2015). Since the launch, the mobile kitchen has traveled throughout Los Angeles to provide meals and educate Angelinos on both the culture of food and the foster care community. We have visited food festivals in downtown L.A., block parties in West L.A., and community events in South L.A. Each place the kitchen travels, the story of food and foster care lifts up a new understanding of how food and the built environment play a critical role in our communities. Prior to the pandemic, the kitchen was used each Saturday to prepare meals for the rest of the Peace4Kids group and/or teach young people cooking skills.

The development of this unique facility has also inspired some of the teens involved in its creation to pursue careers in the food industry. Some of these stories were captured by The Storyboard Project. (The Storyboard Project, 2016). Additionally, these young people frequently come back to Peace4Kids to teach the current youth about food and how to prepare healthy meals. The kitchen has not only been a beautiful representation of the power of food and story, but it also provides over 1,000 free healthy meals a year to the South L.A. community.

Figure 2. Young children learning to cook on the Mobile Village: Kitchen
Source: Photo credit @hannaharista.com

The Revolution of Care Movement (ROCMove)

When we see ourselves in the stories that are told around us, we get a stronger sense of self. But what happens when those stories don't exist? Or if they do exist, they paint your identity in an extremely negative light? As we've stated, within the Peace4Kids community, it became clear that a lot of the stories that the media portrayed painted youth in foster care in a negative light. To address and counter the impact that these stories were having on public perceptions, the youth and young adults at Peace4Kids launched their own movement in 2020. The Revolution of Care Movement (ROCMove) was designed to change the media landscape using authentic storytelling about foster care.

Given that Peace4Kids has built much of its programming on the power of storytelling, a group of advocates from the community decided that a strength-based narrative could greatly advance the public's awareness of the foster care experience. Content providers needed to see that the types of stories produced about foster care by television shows and movies were having a negative impact on the foster care community. Not only were the public perceiving negative portrayals of youth in foster care, but people with lived foster care experience were also perceiving themselves in the same negative light. In most cases, people with lived foster care experience believed negative media portrayals were more accurate than people without foster care experience (Ponciano, in press).

Shifting these perceptions would require a coordinated effort. This presented a unique challenge. At its core, Peace4Kids is a direct service organization, not a media company. How could we produce enough content to influence the public's perception of youth in foster care? Produced content should be based on nuanced stories that share the diversity of the experiences of people in foster care. These advocates felt like we should use different media outlets to get these stories distributed and shared. Social media was a simple way to advance these narratives, but the scope is still limited given the restraints of various platforms. To achieve the desired result, they would not only create their own content, but they would also lean into other content creators to tell the stories they believed were important.

The first project they undertook was working with the University of Southern California (USC) and Professor Robert Hernandez through his JOVRNALISM course. Each year, since 2015, Robert and his students create immersive and innovative non-fiction projects that harness technology to tell compelling stories from diverse and oppressed communities. The ROCMove team explained their vision to Robert and got his commitment to train and collaborate with Peace4Kids on a series of personal foster care narratives. This resulted in five distinct 360-degree videos that featured the personal stories of members of the Peace4Kids community (Finding Home, nd). *Who We Are: Finding Home* won a National Mark of Excellence Award from the Society of Professional Journalists both for the series, and for best Independent Online Student publication. The series was nominated in the Excellence for Immersive Storytelling category in the 2020 Online Journalism Awards (OJA) alongside the New York Times and USA Today. Additionally, this series won an OJA for The David Teeuwen Student Journalism Award.

To build on the success of that effort, the ROCMove team decided to use the platform to inform other content creators and create new content. Members of the team have since gone on to advise and develop screenplays that include foster care characters. They have launched a podcast to highlight foster care voices in the community, and have self-published a children's book. ROCMove's hope is that as they build a larger portfolio of self-produced work, they will become a trusted brand in the content creator community. Their goal is to design and develop a playbook that proposes best practices in developing nuanced foster care narratives that dispel stereotypes.

Mission-Generated Storytelling

In this piece we talked a lot about storytelling in general, but we wanted to also share how a big part of telling stories of youth in foster care is also tied to the intention of the organization that plans to show them. Oftentimes we've heard from youth that organizations want them to talk to the more traumatic parts of their journeys, in the hopes of pulling on donor's heartstrings and thus raising more money. We strongly feel that this doesn't honor the child. What we've hoped to convey throughout this chapter is how important it is to give youth the chance to share their strengths — as well as challenges – as that will paint a more accurate picture of them as humans. The goal of influencing perceptions through storytelling is to work toward not inflicting further trauma.

We see how stories frame how we see and interact with the world. And know from our own experiences how biases are made based on what we read or see in the media. Earlier in the chapter we talked about how the negative story framing of the Black community around drug use influenced the perceptions and actions of law enforcement. We've seen time and time again how young Black men are shot by police and then villainized by the media. This criminalization is a furthering of the narratives that were instilled by the crack epidemic and still deeply impact how law enforcement engages with the Black community some 40 years later. Once these narratives are set in the public consciousness, it is extremely challenging to shift them. They become pervasive and even influence the way others of a similar background see themselves and interact with others like them. Even as we write this chapter, there is a strong public outcry for the beating and killing of Tyre Nichols by five Black police officers in Memphis, Tennessee. The stories that we tell about oppressed and marginalized communities can have real, and sometimes deadly, consequences.

For youth in foster care, the stories they've both experienced, and have been told, have often proven to have a negative impact on their life outcomes and self-perceptions. By ensuring that our storytelling

is ethical and mindful of a young person's life, we will come a long way in ameliorating how youth in the foster care system are viewed.

In working with youth in care to share their stories, we recommend first discussing with them your needs as an individual, or an organization, as well as their needs. We tied in the hero's journey which might be a good way to start this process to see how strength comes from challenges. Talk to youth about ethical storytelling practices and how much of their life experience needs to be included to paint an accurate picture of their story. The Storyboard Project worked with a young woman recently who shared a lot of details about the abuse she suffered, and how she acted out based on this abuse. We chose not to add in all the examples she shared of how traumatized and let down she was by her caregivers but were still able to make the point of how her continued wish for a better life led her to find healthy adults to trust. This led to a better life outcome. This young woman recently graduated from college, is employed and was adopted by a woman in the church she attended.

To effectively advance change for this specific population it is essential to develop stories for healing and transformation that center on their resilience instead of their traumas. We have shown how we've created spaces where stories can be created and shared. As others engage communities who are oppressed, underrepresented, and misrepresented, we encourage them to see their stories as a whole. At Peace4Kids — and through the stories created by The Storyboard Project — we believe that the best way to change cultural misconceptions is to empower storytellers to elevate their truths in a dynamic and authentic way. And we challenge the public to wrestle with their preconceived perceptions and find ways to rethink any biases toward youth in care they may have not realized were there. Only then can we see these young people for who they are – superheroes in their own right.

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