



Telling Our Stories: Storytelling as Community Organizing

What is organizing?

When we think about grassroots or community organizing, we normally think of some fairly standard features:

focus on long term change with shorter term intermediate steps; collective action rather than individual action; evaluation and assessment toward improving strategy and tactics, and most importantly, shifting power from the *status quo* to marginalized communities.

For those of us engaged in community organizing projects, we gather together to develop our own solutions and responses to the problems we face rather than relying on (or actively being denied) responses by those in power. We gather together because we understand that we are the experts on our own situations and that we are the essential agents in transforming our conditions.

From Organizing to Institutionalization: The Anti-Violence Movement

Community organizing played a crucial role in highlighting the pervasive nature of sexual violence against women as well as in educating communities about the ramifications of such violence on their families and neighborhoods. This collective action also bolstered the development of domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers and hotlines, and legitimized domestic violence advocacy as “real work.”

With increased leverage coming from recognition of this sector as a force to be taken seriously and respected, anti-rape and anti-domestic violence organizers were positioned to make greater and greater demands. They were able to insist that violence against women be taken seriously and addressed as a violation. They were able to get the attention of legislators and law enforcement officials who were supposedly meant to be protecting the health and well-being of all community members.

Placing pressure on law makers and enforcers also placed these organizers in closer collaboration with those forces. In their efforts to get violence against women treated seriously, anti-rape and anti-domestic violence organizers began to push for more laws to protect women from their abusers, more active police response to domestic violence calls, and more funding to provide the ongoing advocacy and services that had become centerpieces of the movement.

In some ways the pinnacle of these efforts is illustrated by the successful campaign to pass the 1994 Violence against Women Act (VAWA). While VAWA was instrumental in allocating \$1.6 billion to support anti-violence strategies, those funds were directly connected to collaboration with law enforcement and was premised on increasing penalties, extending pre-trial detention for people accused of perpetrating violence, and expanded investigations into charges of violence. VAWA cemented the ties between formal efforts to end violence against women and the criminal legal system, effectively integrating policing and punishment into every aspect of domestic violence advocacy.

Similarly, the changing nature of the US non-profit sector has seen an increase in the professionalization of advocates, thus transforming the mainstream anti-violence sector from its grassroots origins to a firmly entrenched social service sector. The dependent relationships the





anti-violence movement developed with the state in terms of funding and the use of the criminal legal system in response to situations of violence has severely limited the options that anti-violence advocates have available to them in providing services to people seeking support. At the same time, we can clearly see how the criminal legal system has co-opted the language and, in some cases, techniques developed by community organizations.

The Search for Alternatives

Additionally, communities that have historically found it difficult to access domestic violence services including communities of color, immigrants, queer communities, and transgender communities, have pushed the sector to acknowledge that accessing services associated with the police or other governmental agencies is often not an option for them.

While more and more people in anti-violence and broader social justice movements have been calling for alternatives to imprisonment and policing in response to intimate and interpersonal forms of violence we are constantly searching for on-the-ground examples of alternatives that people have actually used. The lack of concrete examples reinforces the continued reliance on criminalization as the only effective response to intimate violence.

Through sharing stories of instances in which everyday people have intervened in situations of violence without relying on the state or social services, we begin to add to a toolbox of community resources to respond to violence as community organizers with a focus on long term change with shorter term intermediate steps; collective action rather than individual action; evaluation and assessment toward improving strategy and tactics, and shifting power away from the state and toward our own self-determination.

Telling Alternate Stories

Creative Interventions is an organization that developed in response to the environment described above. Rather than assuming that the relationships, families, and communities in which violence occurs to be locations of irreparable, unchangeable harm, Creative Interventions assumes those relationships, families, and communities to be locations of potential change and transformation. We view learning about violence intervention as an important and necessary aspect of community health and organizing.

Despite the availability of an array of domestic violence services specifically targeting communities who have historically been denied access to resources including shelter, advocacy, and legal services, the scope and impact of these services remain limited. For instance, most interventions are appropriate for those people leaving violent relationships but do not address the needs of people unwilling or unable to choose this option. Similarly, many people will not use conventional domestic violence resources due to language/cultural barriers and fears of involvement in criminal legal and immigration systems. Finally, current options tend toward interventions at advanced stages of violence after long-term physical and mental health impacts have already occurred.

After researching existing programs and participating in local and national discussions confirming the need for alternative options, Creative Interventions founder, Mimi Kim, decided to form an independent organization in 2004 from which to nurture these alternative community-





based interventions to violence. Creative Interventions starts with the assumption that those people closest to and most impacted by violence have the greatest motivation to end that violence, i.e. survivors, friends, family, and community members. As these are often the people to whom survivors turn first, they are in a unique position to offer the most accessible and culturally-appropriate assistance at the earliest stages of violence. In our experience, people's intimate networks are often already engaged with the person(s) acting violently and may be in the best position to leverage their authority through that connection to demand and support change. Given that, the key to community-based interventions is not outside systems, but rather intimate networks. The missing pieces are the framework, knowledge, and resources to equip these intimate networks to offer effective, ethical, and sustainable intervention options.

The StoryTelling & Organizing Project (STOP) developed as one of the primary means through which Creative Interventions responds to these gaps in current responses to interpersonal violence. The project records and circulates stories of everyday people's experiences intervening in situations of interpersonal violence. From Korean and Latina mothers protecting their children from physical and sexual harm, youth standing up for a friend who had been sexually abused by someone in their neighborhood, a mother who taught her son to stop rape, to a Maori family coming together to stop a father from beating his son, hearing the stories of concrete actions people like us have taken to stop continued violence or prevent violence from happening altogether.

STOP was originally called The National Story Collecting Project. The project was developed in collaboration with other anti-violence and social justice organizations, including Generation Five. The groups conceptualized the kinds of stories would be most useful in this regard and developed good systems for training community members on collecting and telling stories. As the project progressed we began to work more closely with DataCenter, a community research organization, to also develop systems for analyzing the information we were gathering from the stories that were in line with our grassroots goals. As new stories get shared through the project we turn the audio and textual documentation of the storytelling into products that can be shared with others interested in intervening in situations of interpersonal violence. Short audio pieces will be available on our website as will excerpts from the story transcripts. We are also working with our organizational partners to develop a range of additional STOP-related tools and materials that will support their ongoing organizing and advocacy efforts.

STOP in Action

In Los Angeles, a coalition came together to work with the StoryTelling & Organizing Project. This coalition was comprised of members of the LA Chapter of Critical Resistance, Youth Justice Coalition, and the Southern California Library.

Critical Resistance (CR) is a national grassroots organization calling for the *abolition* of the prison industrial complex. The Youth Justice Coalition (YJC) has a similar analysis as CR, but with explicit attention to impacts on youth, specifically youth of color in Los Angeles. The Southern California Library (SCL) is an historic labor library located in South Central Los Angeles. Recently, the library has undergone a political regeneration, and is working toward being a vibrant community and cultural hub for residents in surrounding neighborhoods, paying specific attention to the need for the space to be used by youth. It is in this capacity that the SCL began working with CR and YJC.





Although the CR-YJC-SCL-STOP collaboration is still in its fledgling stages, it offers an example of a vibrant, collective use of storytelling as organizing. CR and YJC will collect stories drawn from their own memberships and connections in their communities. This collaborative effort will be supported by the SCL-through the use of library space and recording facilities. The story collecting itself will be fueled by the politics of the organizations with an explicit intention for their use in the organizing work the organizations are doing both individually and collaboratively. A likely scenario: CR members collect a story from a young person affiliated with YJC, in which a situation of harm was responded to without using police. The story itself is then collected at the SCL, with its technical support.

The “lessons” of the story will be used in the organizing work of CR or YJC. For instance, when CR advocates for the abolition of policing, many questions arise in regards to how a community would protect itself from harm if there were no police. The STOP story collected becomes a concrete example of a community-based attempt to address harm. The story could take on a life not only as a lesson but could also be transformed into other media and be used as part of a wider set of resources.

Why Storytelling?

STOP’s vitality and strength come through collecting stories from everyday people who have successfully ended violence in their lives and the lives of their loved ones, showing us that ending violence actually is possible. These audio-recorded and written stories offer lessons on how we can help ourselves and others organize to share tested strategies and build capacity to stop violence right where it happens, in homes, streets, and communities.

STOP seeks out, documents, and analyzes stories from people who have used community-based interventions to violence within their own families, among their friends, and or within other social networks without relying on the criminal legal system or social service agencies. The stories we have collected and shared so far have inspired people who have heard them by highlighting what everyday people can do to confront violence, encouraged them to imagine themselves as violence intervention and prevention agents, and led them to share stories with their own friends, family, and intimate network members.

At Creative Interventions we have seen the ways that storytelling brings knowledge, resources, and power back to our communities, especially to those closest to and most impacted by violence, to support survivors, and to confront and demand accountability from people when they are abusive. Storytelling offers information, tools, and an orientation toward collective organizing that can equip a community to make interventions effective. Storytelling, as an organizing strategy, shifts the dynamics of power that allows violence to persist in the first place. A community that is able to support safety and self-determination for all of its members is one with the power to challenge the other injustices it faces.

Is Storytelling Organizing?

If we understand community organizing to focus on long term change, prize collective action over individual action, engage in evaluation and assessment of our approaches, and strive to shift power to marginalized communities, then STOP’s storytelling and story collecting can most certainly be seen as community organizing practices.





The stories collected through STOP remind us that alternative strategies for dealing with violence have a long history in our communities and are still being tried all the time. They emerge from our collective experiences, practices, and values and provide lessons that can continue for future generations. They highlight how change is incremental while helping us to begin building stepping stones leading to even more fundamental shifts.

We can look to indigenous communities and slave diasporas and see vibrant storytelling practices spanning centuries whose direct purposes are cultural and political preservation in the face of genocidal violence. Even in the face of our histories being suppressed and outlawed, marginalized people have often included storytelling and collecting in our struggles against oppression. The examples are so numerous that we could probably include every liberation struggle and movement for social change that has ever existed.

Storytelling practices among our communities move beyond the realm of simple “oral tradition” in that very often the practice of telling a story, the language a story was told in, the space where a story was told, indeed even the story itself, were outlawed. Storytelling was an essential tool in the clandestine Underground Railroad organized by former slaves and other slavery abolitionists, with mixes of descriptions of familiar geography, Biblical and mythical references, and folklore being used as code for the complex networks of travel routes, safe houses, and allied comrades. In this case storytelling was an organizing tool that was instrumental in the liberation of thousands of slaves. It is of little wonder then that the story of these stories have become powerful organizing tools in the continued struggle for Black liberation.

In the later half of the last century, storytelling practices played key roles in global national liberation struggles, civil rights struggles, women’s liberation struggles, queer liberation struggles, labor struggles, and HIV/AIDS activism, to name just a few. Again, storytelling was not simply a form of history keeping or oral tradition, but an active, dynamic organizational element. Telling a story- the exploits of a guerilla in South Africa, the remembrance of a disappeared activist in Argentina, the day-in-and-day-out of a pitched strike, commemoration of life in queer spaces, etc.-can create a bridge that connects the social movement to an historical lineage, draw lessons for strategies in the present, and serve as the broad strokes in an illustration of a better future. The way stories have been told, collected, retold, and preserved acts as a glue that binds together a social movement’s sense of itself (what it is, what it does, where it’s going) and serves to combat the isolation and subjugation that feeds oppression.

Storytelling as Collective Action

One of the basic premises of the stories we gather through STOP is collective action. The intervention experiences described in the narratives could not have happened through individual action alone. They required some level of collective responsibility and accountability to occur. They also proceed from the foundational assumption that the collective (the family, an organization, a neighborhood) impacts and is impacted by both the harm done and the responses to that harm.

Telling and re-telling the stories of our interventions in situations of interpersonal violence not only solidifies our memories that these kinds of actions are possible and happen regularly, but also allows us to look at the stories as documentation of our movement. Individually the stories have power to instruct, inspire, and suggest new paths. Taken collectively, the stories also allow





us to evaluate the contexts in which we encounter interpersonal violence and assess which tools and tactics have had the greatest impact when we examine the situations as a whole. Being able to look across different kinds of situations of violence and intervention strategies also allows us to imagine ways of uniting elements from a variety of interventions into new approaches.

Both the acts of telling and listening to people's stories as well as translating those stories into organizing tools help make meaning, pass on traditions, and explain how common practices come to be. In the tradition of raising up people's histories, organizing projects like STOP build community resources and help create environments in which people feel confident and competent to test new intervention strategies (or intervene at all) for interrupting and ending violence. Sharing experiences in story form helps communities acknowledge the tools and expertise that already exist among them and encourage them to build their capacity even further.

The challenge for the StoryTelling & Organizing Project is for the stories collected through it to be more than just a catalog of oppressive situations. While naming and opposing violence is powerful in ripping down the veil of silence surrounding interpersonal violence, STOP challenges us to go even further. The challenge is the *organizing* part of STOP. How do we use these stories in the work we do? How can they inform the way we do our work? How do we translate whatever *learning* that happens around these stories into a methodology that moves our work forward; that moves us even small steps towards shifting the balances of power and strengthening communities' agency and practice of self-determination?

Isolation is a key factor and tool in perpetuating violence. Survivors of violence often find themselves silenced and stripped of power by their abusers, by the criminal legal system, or by the shame and fear that often accompany survival. Telling stories is crucial to giving voice to people who have been told that their voices are not worth hearing. Sharing stories allows the telling and re-telling of what survivors have weathered and withstood.

Breaking Isolation through Storytelling

When a story is told or collected, silence is broken. This is no small thing. At its strongest, the act of naming the violence breaks an essential circuit in the cycle of violence. When a story is told and collected, there is a direct challenge to survivors' isolation. There can also be a bond created between the storyteller and the story collector that has the possibility to reverberate and grow. The act of storytelling, the act of story collecting, and the relationship created between the two processes can translate into increased senses and practices of agency.

If the story is told and collected within a collective environment, then the potential for people to exercise their own power may grow even stronger. If the story collector is not simply an individual collecting a story, but a member of a family unit, an organization, a coalition of organizations, a community whose work has brought themselves together, there is already organizing happening around collecting the story itself. When our various communities unite to organize collectively we maximize our ability to address, confront, and struggle against the systemic and intimate forms of violence so many of us face. Storytelling is a vital element in building and strengthening our movements for social change.

