

The Public Voice Project: Creating a Storytelling Program with the Formerly Incarcerated

Posted on [October 9, 2013](#) by [storybiz](#)

by Lani Peterson Psy.D.

The first Public Voice Project (PVP) was launched in November of 2004 by the City Mission Society in Boston. Over the course of four evenings, seven formerly incarcerated men met for the purpose of exploring the use and effects of storytelling.

My participation with PVP was as the storytelling coach. Carla Kimball was the public speaking coach. The overall hope was that the process we engaged in could be as helpful to the ex-offenders as the content could be to the public forums where they were invited to tell their stories. Through re-visiting and telling the stories of their journeys through and after the penal system, we envisioned that these men could impact policy reform while gaining increased self-awareness, confidence, and ability to positively present themselves to prospective employers, landlords, and future colleagues.

From City Mission's perspective, the goals of the project were threefold:

- **Healing:** to support the ex-prisoners in remembering their journey into, through and out of the incarceration experience as a means of gaining perspective, insight, and comfort in relating their stories.
- **Education (for tellers and listeners):** to increase the ex-prisoners skills in speaking about their incarceration experience in community forums as a means to raise public awareness about social justice issues relating to incarceration, rehabilitation, and re-entry.
- **Social action:** to challenge and motivate the public to take personal action. Through witnessing the stories of those who have been impacted by systemic social issues, listeners would be motivated to stand up for social change.

From my perspective as a leader of the program, my goals were somewhat more complex:

- Create safety and trust in a group storytelling workshop.
- Increase participants' skills of mining and telling difficult personal stories, with meaningful content as well as safe and powerful delivery.
- Increase participants' life skills (grounding, emotional intelligence, confidence, resilience).
- Promote a sense of self and team in the interdependent process.

From the ex-prisoners perspective, they were there for:

- **Food:** a free meal one night a week.
- **Companionship:** a chance to meet in a warm room with some of their closest friends who could understand their lives and experience.

- Hope: that the skills they were building and the public speaking they would be doing could lead to a better life and world than the one they had previously known.

The men had been gathering regularly at the City Mission Society since their release dates, from one to six months. They met for discussion and to support each other through the re-entry process.. The length of their incarcerations ranged from two to 40 years. Their specific offenses were never discussed.

They were EX-offenders who were eager to focus on their futures. In relationship to this, the job of the coaches was to support them in re-visiting the incidents of their past that they might integrate them into a future of stories containing strong, meaningful and motivating messages for themselves, and for others to hear and learn from. To accomplish work, it was important to initially build a safe and trusting environment that would allow participants and staff to work together respectfully, openly, and deeply.

Pre-Work

1. Interview Process — Before the workshop could begin, pre-work was required to set the stage for the process to be successful in meeting all levels of the organization’s, participants and staffs goals. Questions needed to be asked to ensure that all were ready to meet the challenges of engaging in this demanding project, such as: Are you ready, willing, able and stable to do this work? We asked these same questions of ourselves as staff as we did in a preliminary interview with prospective participants.

- **Ready** (Clarity of personal mission and purpose): Why do I choose to engage in this project? How does this work fit into my life journey and personal goals? Is this the right time in my life, personal healing process, etc. to do this work? Sample question: What do you hope to gain from your involvement in this project? What do you hope to contribute?
- **Willing** (Prepared and ready to risk opening up): Am I willing to deal with deep emotion, intensity and potential conflict that could occur through this work? Am I willing to explore difficult material? Can I be thoroughly present for both myself and others through this process of self-discovery vulnerability, and disclosure? Sample Question: “Have you ever been in a situation where you were required to stretch beyond your comfort zone in order to achieve something greater? Tell us about this experience. How successful were you? What was positive about this experience for you? What was difficult?”
- **Able:** Do I have the appropriate skills and ability to engage in this process? For staff this would be: Do I have the story teaching skills, people skills, management skills to lead this kind of work? For participants this would be: Do I have the ability to physically commit to this process, including the time and resources to do this work, as well as transportation to get to meetings? Sample question: Does this project conflict with other responsibilities in your life right now or can it take priority for the duration of the program?
- **Stable:** Will I be able to manage my emotional journey through this process? Will I be able to follow through on this commitment? What are my resources

(e.g.: outer resources of family, friends, mentors, therapist, clergy, and/or inner resources of self-discipline, resiliency, conflict resolution skills, experience with similar challenges in the past) to support me through this process? Sample question: What is your experience of working with people who are different from you (people whose struggles may have seemed to you to be less important or heavier than yours?) Tell us about your experience. How did you feel? What did you do to make it work? Sample question: Have you ever had an experience where you were upset and wanted to bolt, but ended up staying and things worked out all right? Tell us about that time. What or whom did you rely on to help you through this experience? What would need to have in place to be comfortable in this workshop experience?

2. Contract — After this first round of interview questions, potential participants who were still interested in attending the workshop were asked to sign a contract/agreement that included program expectations as well as a place to write personal statements about their level of commitment and expectations.

- **Program expectations:** Participants are required to attend all four meetings, adhere to group-established ground rules, and be willing to publicly tell a 10 minute personal story as part of a "graduation ceremony." Following the workshop, participants would be given the option to become part of City Mission Society's speaker's bureau and attend ongoing story support sessions.
- **Self-expectations:** Write a paragraph about: Why are you here? What do you want for yourself out of this program? Predict what will be hard for you, and tell how you plan to work through any difficulties you may possibly encounter.
- **Group expectations:** Write a paragraph about what you see as your role and responsibility in being part of this group (people) and this experience (storytelling workshop and ongoing speaker's bureau).

3. Ground Rules — In the first meeting, after brief introductions, participants were invited to brainstorm to create the ground rules they felt were important in keeping the process comfortable and safe. The men were quick to come up with the following list. It was posted on newsprint and kept visible in the room throughout the four-week program.

Group Ground Rules

1. Speak firsthand accounts—no speaking for other
2. Be open—no assumptions about each other, no judging, no comparisons
3. Acceptance of self and others—tolerance
4. Acceptance of all ideas and all emotions (especially tears)
5. Freedom of expression
6. Keep it respectful and supportive
7. Be able to hug, but respect boundaries
8. Each person sets personal limits—seek permission to go further with others
9. No violence of any kind—physical, verbal, emotional
10. Don't get stuck, press on to the mark, carry each other through (team)

11. Confidentiality—what’s said in the room, stays in the room until we are ready to bring our stories out.
12. Have fun!

Session format

To encourage familiarity, comfort, and clear expectations, each session followed a familiar format, including rituals (check-ins, checkouts, closing circle, singing), “grounding” time (meditation/reflection), storytelling exercises, appreciations, processing of exercises, feedback (to each other as well as to us). The weekly structure /pattern:

- **Shared meal:** participants were invited to come a half hour before group starting time to eat and talk informally with staff and other group members.
- **Starting time:** form a circle with structured check-in (each participant shares one high point and one low point in their lives since last meeting).
- **Grounding:** guided meditation (breathing), eye contact exercises, and relaxation and warm-up exercises.
- **Storytelling exercises:** each person tells a story and afterward is showered with appreciation from the listeners. At the end of each round of telling the group then processes the experience. (What was it like for you to do this exercise? What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about others?) We repeat the process with new exercises for as many times as the evening allows.
- **Closing circle:** check-out (feedback for staff about session—highs and lows of meeting.)
- **Closing ritual:** usually singing or group pulse.

Workshop Content

Throughout the four-week program, the coaches approached the work from two perspectives: presence and influence. Exercises in each session focused on both of these areas.

A. Presence – Before any content was explored, the coaches introduced the participants to the notion of presence. (What is presence? What does it look like? Feel like? Who is someone you know or have seen whom you feel has the quality of presence?) Some of their responses of people they knew to have presence: Martin Luther King JR., John F. Kennedy, Mohandas Gandhi, Oprah Winfrey, Maya Angelou. Some of their preliminary ideas of what presence looked like: powerful, strong, clear. Then we began to practice some of the skills of presence including stance (confidence), eye contact (connection— a difficult challenge for any one who has been incarcerated), breathing (centeredness), grounding (using calming mantras to bind anxiety), and tone (intention, mood). After exploring the notion of presence and practicing some of the qualities through experiential exercises, we asked the men again for words to describe their experience of presence. Their shift from an intellectual understanding to a personal experience of presence was reflected in their ensuing statements: presence is

“quiet strength” “calm confidence,” “connected mind and heart” “compassionate” “subtle softness with power.” They were ready for words.

B. Influence – Using the model of three intertwined circles we talked about the interrelation of teller, listener and story.

a. **Teller:** As tellers, who are you? What are the unique experiences only you know, perspectives only you have? What is it you want to, have to, share with others? What are the hopes, values, intentions you bring to your telling?

b. **Audience:** What do you want your listeners to know/feel about you? What do you want them to understand differently or better (content/subject matter) after listening to your story?

c. **Story:** What is the most important message (MIT) you want to convey through your story? What are your intentions in sharing this particular story with this particular audience at this particular time?

Before telling personal stories, participants brainstormed about the most important messages they wanted to convey in their stories:

Inside the penal system — the need for rehabilitation programs that included:

1. Education (career skills)
2. Life skills programs (dealing with relationship skills, anger management, forgiveness, responsibility)

Upon release — programs that included:

3. Early intervention
4. Support systems on the outside
5. Ongoing educational opportunities

Negative impact of CRIs (Criminal Record Information) — Checks made on prospective employs, volunteers or renters to see if they have a criminal record. Even after a prisoner serves his or her time, the criminal record comes up during a CRI check. This allows many with a history of incarceration to continue to be punished through denial of gainful employment or safe housing.

- Treatment of families
- Present day life
- We are human beings!

Themes they wanted to incorporate:

- Forgiveness
- Redemption
- Freedom

- Change
- Woundedness and healing
- Dignity
- Belief in transformation
- HOPE

Emotions they wanted to convey: Humor, truth, horribleness, spiritual, passionate, angry, sensual, painful, respectful, joyful, energetic, emotional, cathartic, painful, scary, edgy, stark, realistic, disrespectful, dangerous, risky, inclusive, authentic, stellar

Finally, they were ready to dig for stories.

Storytelling Exercises

Throughout the four weeks, the storytelling exercises gradually unfolded from the most simple (least intimidating), gradually working up to more intimate and revealing stories. Each exercise involved a process of going within, coming out and sharing, checking in with self, re-committing to what should be kept, letting go of what was not needed, appropriate or comfortable, then going back within to reach for more (repeating cycle). Coaches guided participants to find the balance to self-challenge (explore deeper meaning within stories) while also monitoring personal boundaries (comfort levels, appropriate sharing).

Over the course of the four weeks, participants tended to start from a very protected place, testing the waters, feeling out what they and others could tolerate. By week three, most participants had built a level of trust and comfort that their stories went to very deep and painful levels. Anger, deep grief, frustration and shame permeated their stories. With each telling, the coaches probed the storytellers to explore: What do I gain from telling this? What do listeners gain from hearing this? What are the risks for me in sharing this? What are the risks for others in hearing this? By the final evening, most tellers had formed their stories at a level of safety for themselves and their listener, enabling their content, influence and delivery to maximize impact and fulfill intention.

For the participants, the process of active listening to each other's stories was as powerful and healing as exploring their own. After each storytelling exercise, listeners shared their appreciations of the tellers stories and delivery. Tears and cheers were all present as listeners connected with common experience and a full array of emotions. Following appreciations, coaches raised questions like: "How did this story impact you? How did this story shape your thoughts and/or next question? What surprised you about what you heard? What did you want more of? Less of?" Following each telling, lively discussion of common experiences, coping skills, offers of support and plans for activating dreams for the future ensued.

Over the course of the four sessions, each participant repeatedly stood before the group to share new versions of his story. With each telling, they challenged themselves to reach deeper levels of vulnerability, struggling through issues of shame, humility, anger and grief to uncover the meanings within their experience and the most important messages

they wanted to convey. By the final evening of telling to each other, they felt confident to bring their telling to the public domain, encouraged to think that their stories might make a difference in others' lives while continuing to heal their own. In one of the participant's own words: "That's why I'm alive today—because there is no such thing as a hopeless human being. We must never give up hope on anyone, no matter how far off track they might have gone. That's my message now. And I have even greater hope now that I have a chance to tell YOU my story."

Outcome and Follow-up

Since their graduation ceremony, these men, who now call themselves "The Magnificent Seven," have spoken to over 1,000 people, including lawyers at Harvard Law School, high school and college students, church groups and social justice groups. As one audience member said, "Their sharing really puts a name, a face, and a story to the reports that I read about in the newspaper." Speaking to the power of these men's stories, Dr. Marrey Embers, Former Director of the Public Voice Project said, "Their stories also connect people, in a very deep way, to see that we all basically want the same thing—to be loved, to be safe, to find a way to contribute and be productive, and to be part of a community."

Since this original program in 2004, City Mission has held a series of Public Voice Project workshops, including one for formerly incarcerated women, as well as female family members of the incarcerated (mothers, siblings, lovers). The speaker's bureau has continued to grow as each new group of graduates joins the original Magnificent Seven in speaking out about their prison experiences, addressing issues of criminal justice reform within and without the prison walls.

In the process, personal goals for participants applying to the program have shifted. When one perspective member was asked why she wanted to attend a Public Voice Project storytelling workshop, she replied, "I heard one of your graduates speak. I want what she's got. I heard her speak and I want to be able to help others with my story the way that she does."

This article appeared in the Diving in the Moon Journal, Issue 5, Summer 2008.

Lani Peterson (www.Lanipeterson.com) and her co-leader Carla Kimball (www.Riverways.com) continue to work with Public Voice Project, helping the formerly incarcerated become storytellers who are stepping forward in leadership roles to present a previous unheard of point of view on criminal justice. Lani Peterson is a psychologist, storyteller, public speaker and coach. She enjoys working with individuals, groups and organizations on the use of story as a healing art, a leadership tool, and powerful medium for personal growth, connection and change. In addition to her work with children, elders, businessmen, ex-prisoners, and everyday people on the use of story, Lani serves on the Executive Committee of the Healing Story Alliance and is a member of the National Speakers Association. Her CD, "Stories from Within" won a 2004 honor

from Storytelling World Magazine for her original story “Broken Glass.” When she is not telling, teaching, counseling or coaching, Lani stays busy with her husband and four children in Andover, Massachusetts.