



# free-range THINKING™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact



## Need Some Inspiration? Begin at the Beginning...

In 2011, Heidi Johnson created [Charity Matters](#), a website that shines a spotlight on small nonprofits and the stories of how they began. "Starting a nonprofit isn't just something you wake up and do one day," Johnson says. "It's a lot of work, so there is often a very powerful story behind why an organization was started." Johnson keeps her stories brief by focusing on a single transformative moment that inspired the founder to create a nonprofit.

For these organizations, the "creation story" is a great place to begin talking about their work, but there's a larger value here as well. If you've ever been so deep in the weeds of your own work that you started to wonder, "Exactly *why* am I doing this?" these stories offer inspiring reminders of how the right person with the right idea can build a better world. [Full story](#). *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.*

### Upcoming online classes at The Goodman Center

GIVE BETTER PRESENTATIONS

Why Bad  
Presentations  
Happen to Good  
Causes

April 20 & 21  
11am - 12pm PT

PLAN BETTER CAMPAIGNS

Strategic  
Communications:  
Cutting Through  
the Clutter

April 25 & 26  
11am - 12pm PT

TELL BETTER STORIES

Storytelling:  
Tapping the Power  
of Narrative

July 7, 14, 21, & 28  
9am - 10am PT

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For Johnson, this turning-point moment isn't just something she writes about: it happened to her. In



Heidi Johnson

2002, her parents were in a car accident in which her mother died instantly and her father was left in a coma. With three young children to care for, Johnson relied heavily on friends, family, and the hospital staff for emotional support in the aftermath of the tragedy. Several weeks after the accident - on Thanksgiving Day, to be exact - her father was finally able to return home. Johnson's moment of inspiration, however, was still to come.

One year later, Johnson was asked by her long-time friend, Father John Sigler, to visit Children's Hospital of Los Angeles. As Johnson toured the facility, she learned that Father John was the only full-time chaplain for a hospital serving 300,000 children annually. As the tour neared its end, a woman wheeled a little boy up to Father John and gave him a big hug. "Do you know what this man did for me?" she asked Johnson. "I was taking my son to school and he was run over in the carpool line. He was not supposed to live and we were Helivaced into CHLA. Father John

greeted me at the helicopter and he sat with me through eight hours of surgery. He gave me hope and he came every single day for the past month. He was my emotional lifesaver, and my son is going home *Thanksgiving Day.*"

The synchronicity in dates felt like more than just a coincidence to Johnson. She reflected on all of the spiritual and emotional support she had received throughout her family's trauma and knew she needed to make sure the families at CHLA had access to the same kind of support. Out of this moment, and with Father John and several other women pitching in, [Spiritual Care Guild](#) was born. Within the first year, they had raised enough money to have a chaplain on duty at CHLA 24 hours a day.

Johnson has shared this creation story often, and she believes passionate storytelling by Spiritual Care Guild's founders helped the organization get on its feet quickly. "In most cases," Johnson says, "it's not a cause but a person that ignites something in us and makes us want to take part. The founders are the 'passionaries' that we all get behind." Since starting Charity Matters, Johnson has shined a light on dozens of nonprofits by telling their founding stories:

[Cell Phones for Soldiers](#) was founded by Rob and Brittany Bergquist in 2004 when they learned that US soldiers deployed to places like Iraq and Afghanistan could spend thousands of dollars just to call home. To date, their organization has donated over 300 million minutes in free talk time for our troops abroad, but what's most impressive about Rob and Brittany's story is that they are *not* a married couple, but siblings who launched this project when they were teenagers.



[The Empowerment Plan](#) was founded by Veronika Scott. In one of her college classes, Veronika was assigned to create a new product that would fill a need in her community. She designed a winter coat that could fold out into a sleeping bag - an ingenious solution for Detroit's homeless population. But this was only the first chapter in a story that ultimately led to the founding of a nonprofit that employs dozens of women and helps them break the cycle of homelessness permanently.



[Gordie.org](#) evolved from the tragic story of Gordie Bailey, a fun-loving college freshman with a bright future who died as a result of fraternity hazing. The organization's mission to ensure that parents of college students fully understand the risks of fraternity hazing and binge drinking has since been absorbed into the University of Virginia's Center for Alcohol and Substance Education, but it is still Gordie's story that drives this important work.



Gordie Bailey

As Johnson shares more stories on her site, she grows even more convinced that the founding story is one of the best catalysts to get people involved and excited about a cause. "People are constantly coming up to me or sending me notes that say I was inspired to donate clothing or money or time because of the story I read on your website."

If you're not telling your founding story, or if you don't know the story behind how your organization began, it's time to dig into your own history and start using this powerful tool. In addition to your own channels, Johnson is always looking for new founding stories to feature on her site. Get in touch with her [here](#).

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## About Us

*free-range thinking* is written by Andy Goodman and Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit [www.thegoodmancenter.com](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com).

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