

Stories in the Wild: Dramatic Narrative at Work in Public Interest

In our last newsletter, we requested examples from you of how you are using dramatic narrative to engage your audience and further your mission. The Goodman Center works with organizations across all kinds of issues and geography, and this month, we are featuring the interactive digital storytelling project “[Neighbors, Not Strangers](#),” from the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., or CLINIC.



Since 1988, CLINIC has been providing training and support to charitable immigration law offices as well as specialized direct legal representation and advocacy for immigration policy at the federal, state and local levels. Communications Project Manager Kathleen Kollman Birch and her team began “Neighbors, Not Strangers” in order to “help shift the narrative” around immigration, and they are off to a great start. *(Scroll down to read the whole story.)*

Upcoming online classes at The Goodman Center		
TELL STORIES Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative	RUN MEETINGS Meetings for People who Hate Meetings	GIVE PRESENTATIONS The Platinum Rules of Presenting
Feb. 21, 28, and Mar. 7 & 14 9am - 10am PT	March 22 & 24 11am - 12pm PT	April 5 & 7 11am - 12pm PT

Stories in the Wild: Dramatic Narrative at Work in Public Interest (cont.)

Before releasing the first stories, CLINIC kicked off the project with some connecting narrative moments to draw in their audience. Connecting narrative moments are story snippets, like this:

Maria opened the envelope and gazed at the letter inside, her eyes blurry with tears. After 15 years of waiting, it was finally here: the green card that would allow her to visit her ailing mother in Mexico and provide for her three children here in the U.S.

Immediately, we are drawn into the moment with Maria. There are sensory details that create a scene, instead a summary of facts. In just two sentences, we know who the story is about (Maria), what she wants (to care and provide for her family) and we are emotionally connected to her. This is what dramatic narrative is all about, because if you don't care, you don't do.

“Neighbors, Not Strangers” released their first full story in January of this year, and a second in March. I'd like to share a couple excerpts from those stories and break down what is working so well about them- what The Goodman Center calls “The Seven Distinguishing Qualities of Dramatic Narrative.”

The first excerpt is from the story, “In the Name of Compassion: The Journey of Aden Batar.” Batar is the director of migration and refugee services at a CLINIC affiliate organization, where he has worked for more than 25 years. His story begins in Somalia in March of 1992, but this section picks up in Nairobi, Kenya in May of 1992.

Aden and his cousin stood at the airport, squinting in the glaring afternoon sun as they gazed at the horizon. The little plane carrying Aden's wife and son should be arriving any moment.



Aden's heart was pounding, his breathing shallow. What if something had happened? What if the pilot hadn't been able to locate his family at the airport in Mogadishu? What if soldiers had stopped them on the road? It was such a precarious plan, the details communicated to his wife via a shaky military radio current. Anything could go wrong.

Kollman Birch, who wrote this story through interviews with Batar, has exemplified several of our seven distinguishing qualities:

- *We feel like we are inside the scene.* We can picture the airport through the glaring sun, and we are even brought right into Batar's thoughts and feelings.
- *Readers experience the action as if in real time.* We are waiting for the little plane, moment to moment with Batar.
- *We must stay until the end.* Batar's heart is pounding and ours start to do so as well. “Anything could go wrong,” and we must keep reading to find out if his wife and son arrive safely.
- *Good stories engage our emotions.* When we hear, in our minds, his shallow breathing and the anxious thoughts swirling in his mind, our emotions are engaged. We find ourselves caring for this man and his family.



The second excerpt is from “A Dream Uncaged: Part One,” another story written by Kollman Birch with beautiful art by [Michelle Garcia](#). This is a story about Jessica, a teenager from a close-knit family who leaves her home in Nicaragua to seek asylum with her father.

“I’ll see you soon, Mami. Right?” [Jessica] whispered.*

“Yes, mi amor,” her mother answered, stroking her hair. “Soon. Now you must go with your father to catch the bus. I’ll say goodbye to abuela for you.”

Angélica kissed Jessica’s cheek and let go. A few minutes later Jessica and Daniel left the house. Jessica stole a look back at the house where she had grown up. No lights illuminated the windows.

They moved through the dark streets of their town in an eerie silence.

Let’s break down why this is so effective:

- **Characters speak to each other like real people.** Instead of using journalistic quotes, there is dialogue: Jessica and her mom are talking to each other. Whenever there is a quote in a story told in dramatic narrative, as a writer, you must ask “to whom are they speaking?” What I see, all too often, is that people in the stories are speaking to the journalist or through the journalist to the audience instead of to another person inside the story.
- **Good stories are concise but vivid.** This true moment is so full of emotion, thoughts and feelings and facts that could have been shared. Instead, Kollman Birch has carefully chosen what is essential to paint the picture. She does not need to say how much Jessica and her mom love each other, we experience it through the stroking of Jessica’s hair, through a look that Jessica steals back at her home. We get a sense of the danger by the darkness of the windows and the eerie silence.
- **Stories = scenes (or scenes + summary).** This is about showing instead of telling. This story could be written, “Jessica and her father left in the middle of the night. They said goodbye to Jessica’s mother.” These are the facts of the story, but they don’t create pictures in your mind. That is what scenes do so well.
- **We must stay until the end.** In journalistic storytelling, all the important facts, including the ending, are given up front. That’s great for times when informing your audience is your goal. In dramatic narrative, you never want to give away the ending. This kind of storytelling makes the audience want to stay and read more. Jessica’s accomplishes this on two levels. First, the story is full of dramatic tension. Second, CLINIC has only released Part One of this story. In order to find out what happens to Jessica and her family, the audience has to be on the lookout for Part Two- or, even better, subscribe to the newsletter!

“Neighbors, Not Strangers” is an excellent example of storytelling in action. At The Goodman Center, we will keep collecting and sharing real-world examples of dramatic narrative at work, so that we can all learn from each other how to move from believing in the power of story, to wielding that power.

**Names of all characters have been changed to protect privacy.*

We Want to Feature Your Stories

Be the next organization featured in this newsletter and on the [Do Good Better Blog](#). Where and when are you telling stories and how is it going? We want to collect and share examples of stories from your websites, your annual reports- even anecdotes about a story you shared with a donor or volunteer that worked (or didn't)!

We want to feature your stories and your work so that we can learn from each other and ensure you have the tools to grow your storytelling. Please send your story to kirsten@thegoodmancenter.com.

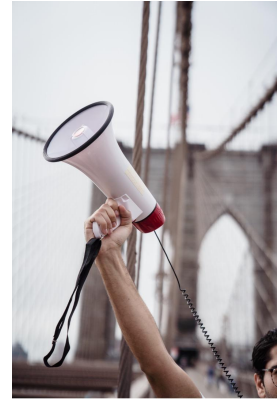


Photo by Lara Jameson

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