

LIVING PROOF

**Telling Your Story
to Make a Difference**

EXPANDED EDITION

Praise for the 1st Edition of
Living Proof: Telling Your Story to Make a Difference

“As authentic as an advocate's story may be ...it can always be improved in style and delivery; that's the mission of this exceptional instructional guide. ... Smart, well-delivered and timely advice to help advocates and spokespersons tell the most effective stories.”

Kirkus Reviews

“If we're going to make change, we're going to have to tell our stories and tell them effectively. This book shows us how.”

Paul Loeb, author of *Soul of a Citizen*

“*Living Proof* had a fantastic impact on my students. Rarely have I seen students so enthusiastically engaged with a required course text. They learned about the impact of transforming personal experience into public action. The exercises in the text offered excellent insight and created a platform for one of the best semesters I have ever had with this course.”

**Dr. Michael Tew, Professor of Communication, Director of
the Center for the Study of Equality and Human Rights,
Eastern Michigan University**

“Everyone's talking about the power of stories these days but we need more resources to help advocates, activists and nonprofit communicators find their own voices, get heard and win real change. *Living Proof* is a sourcebook for trainers and advocates alike that fills that need. It's full of hands-on exercises, good ideas and useful suggestions.”

Gordon Mayer, National People's Action

“The principles of rhetoric are translated here into contemporary language to make them accessible to anyone who wants to persuade through storytelling. This book provides instructions, examples, and exercises to make your stories come alive. A superb guide.”

Dr. Sonja K. Foss, University of Colorado Denver, author of *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric and Inviting Transformation: Presentational Speaking for a Changing World*

“As a longtime radio journalist and adversity-driven advocate, I’ve spent years attempting to hone my storytelling skills. This book, more than any other I’ve run across, succeeds in consolidating and bringing to life those very skills in one powerful primer. *Living Proof* communicates so well the art of communication!”

Jeff Bell, author of *Rewind, Replay, Repeat: A Memoir of OCD*

“This is an extraordinarily effective guide for advocates seeking all kinds of social and institutional change. But don’t mistake it for another ‘how to.’ Above all, this book helps us to see how to take our lives seriously enough to tell them. The practices recommended in this book are a gift. A great read for all interested in what their stories can do for others.”

Dr. Della Pollock, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, author of *Telling Bodies Performing Birth* and editor of *Remembering: Oral History Performance*

John Capecci and Timothy Cage

Living
PROOF

**Telling Your Story
to Make a Difference**

Expanded Edition



Granville Circle
— P R E S S —

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DEDICATION



To the thousands of advocates whose stories we've been privileged to share,
and in memory of those whose stories continue to inspire us:

Gianna Capecci
Robert Compitello
Deborah Voss Mankiewicz
Annie Lewis Martin

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Introduction to the Expanded Edition

Everybody likes ice cream, right?
That's the bet Ocean Robbins made as he stood before an audience of five hundred and told his story.

My grandfather started Baskin-Robbins ice cream company. Thirty-one flavors. (Audience applauds.) And from his earliest childhood, my dad, John Robbins, was groomed to one day join his father in the family company. He grew up with an ice cream cone-shaped swimming pool in the backyard and a commercial freezer in the garage, full of thirty-one flavors of ice cream at all times. He grew up working in the factory and he was expected to join the family business. But then, when he was in his early 20s, he was offered that chance and he said “no.” And my grandfather was pretty hurt and said “Why? What has come over you?” And my dad said, “You know, dad, we live in a world under a nuclear shadow. Every two seconds another child is dying of hunger and malnutrition. The environment’s deteriorating rapidly under the impact of human activity. And given those circumstances . . . I don’t think inventing a thirty-second flavor is an adequate response for my life.

Ocean delivered this keynote address at the National Alliance for Peace conference in Washington, DC. A tireless advocate for young people building a better world, he drew upon his experience

to talk about citizen responsibility and youth empowerment. He hooked the audience with his unique family history. And he told his personal story naturally and passionately.

While writing *Living Proof* and since its initial publication in 2012, we've been fortunate to meet many people like Ocean who've found they can make a real difference telling their personal stories. Working for more than twenty years as communication trainers, we've helped thousands reach that same goal. Some, like Ocean, tell their stories on a national stage; many more share their stories in community meetings or with bloggers and local newspaper reporters. They're "ordinary" people and first-time speakers. They're also skilled presenters and media personalities. They speak in support of large and small nonprofits, local and national groups and publicity campaigns for the arts, the environment, education, health, and youth. They stand at lecterns, sit in circles and knock on doors. They're interviewed over the phone and on-camera. They've appeared in high school gymnasiums, at the White House and on TV talk shows. But no matter where they're from or how much (or how little) experience they have, these people share the same objective: to tell a personal story with clarity, passion and purpose, and to have that story make a difference for someone or some cause. They are advocates.

In Roman law, the *advocatus* was called to plead others' cases in a court of law. Today, our use of the word *advocate* has expanded beyond the legal sense to include anyone who supports or recommends a cause, policy or practice—anyone working to make the world a better place. We wrote *Living Proof* for these many people because we've seen how, with the right support and coaching, ordinary people can become extraordinary advocates.

Personal stories have a unique ability to affect audiences. But it's not by story alone that successful advocates urge others to take action, whether that action is donating money, improving public policy or changing behavior. Advocating with stories takes a specific kind of preparation. It requires practice with elements of persuasion, public speaking, media interview skills and storytelling—not to mention healthy doses of fortitude and commitment.

**It's not by story alone
that successful
advocates urge others
to take action.**

We also wrote *Living Proof* to provide advocates with a single resource for this special kind of preparation—a one-stop shop that gathers together what you need to stand up next week and tell your story effectively at a town meeting or on national television. We knew from experience that such a book didn't exist. In fact, shortly after the initial publication of *Living Proof*, an advocate told us that whenever she had gone looking for a book that focused on the power of stories, most people pointed her to Robert McKee's *Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting*—a classic text on the craft of storytelling, but one that's focused on screenwriting, not advocacy. When participants in our workshops had asked for additional resources, we too could only point them to excellent works like McKee's or other writings about personal narratives, public speaking, media skills, persuasion, marketing, autobiography, civic action, and social change. There was no single, accessible guidebook that pulled together the essentials and specifically focused on how one person tells a personal story in this unique context—as an advocate.

Living Proof is based on our experiences training advocates and it draws from the work of experts and colleagues in many

fields. It focuses on the essentials: what you need to know to tell your story effectively in public (from talks to keynotes) and media interviews (from blogs to broadcast). At the center are **The Five Qualities of the Well-Told Advocacy Story**. These qualities form a simple, strong foundation for success, wherever and whenever you tell your stories. You'll find the Five Qualities echoed throughout *Living Proof*.

This edition of *Living Proof* follows the same general progression as the previous edition, though now it's expanded into two parts: Part One, Preparing to Make a Difference, explores the power of stories, recommends ways of finding, crafting, and preparing your stories, and introduces the skills needed to deliver powerful presentations and give great media interviews. Part Two, Telling Your Story, contains two new chapters that explore barriers you may encounter as you prepare to go public, and how advocacy acts as a persuasive agent of social change. Part Two also includes chapters that offer tips and tools for a variety of public speaking and interview situations.

You can work through *Living Proof* from start to finish—over a weekend, a week, or in conjunction with a course of study. You can also flip to the sections most useful to you right now or keep the book on hand as a resource. As in our workshops, we've tried to make *Living Proof* adaptable to individual needs.

- Each chapter's opening page previews what's inside.
- *Exercises* help you explore and plan.
- *Practice Runs* guide your run-throughs for specific speaking engagements or interviews.
- *Prep Sheets* provide blank forms to plan your talk or interview.
- Sidebars feature additional notes from us, insights from advocates, and inspiration from experts.

Since the publication of the first edition of *Living Proof*, we've trained and advised many new advocates and organizations working on causes as diverse as sustainable agricultural practices, lung cancer, community bicycling programs, racial and gender equity, and safer teen driving. We've also talked with instructors, trainers, and change-makers who are applying *Living Proof* principles in their classrooms, in communications and marketing efforts, in community organizing, and in fundraising campaigns. This expanded edition of *Living Proof* allows us to share some of the insights we've gained in conversations with our readers and to include additional information appropriate to specific contexts. In this new edition of *Living Proof*, you'll find:

- Refinements and expansions to certain topics such as “pointing to the positive” and “framing”
- New examples from advocates and organizations
- Additional suggestions on how to structure talks or presentations
- New sections that explore advocacy, persuasion, social change, and the barriers you may encounter as you prepare to speak out.

Oh, and we've added a bit more white space to the design of the print edition since so many readers told us they liked to write in the margins.

We've also taken the opportunity with this new edition to clarify a few key themes:

This is about spoken communication. While *advocacy* can mean letter writing or voting or tweeting, in *Living Proof* we honor the classical root of the word and focus specifically

on public speech: from casual talks to formal presentations to interactions with the media.

While the principles in *Living Proof* are certainly applicable to written or visual forms of advocacy and storytelling, our focus here is on respectful and effective face-to-face communication.

The Latin root of *advocate* is *vocare* (to call), closely related to *vox* (voice).

Advocacy is a persuasive act that benefits others. When you speak as an advocate telling a personal story, you do so with a purpose. You are asking others to *do something* as a result of hearing your experience. You hope others will relate to, connect with and perhaps be moved by your story—but it is always with the aim that that connection will lead to some positive action that will benefit others. Our recommendations throughout *Living Proof* for crafting, structuring, framing and delivering stories always place storytelling within this context of altruistic persuasive communication. We explore this stance further in Chapter 12, Public Speech, Public Narrative.

This is (often) about cultural change. It's perhaps obvious—but no less important to state—that we view personal stories as powerful instruments of both individual and cultural change. Personal stories are always in dialogue with larger cultural narratives, either helping to build them, strengthen them or—as is often the case—challenging and rewriting them to more accurately reflect a better, more just reality. We explore this notion also in Chapter 12.

This is more about the *how* and the *why* than it is the *what*. *Living Proof* is not about fitting your life story into an existing story structure, nor finding the “best type” of advocacy story. That's because we define effective advocacy stories in context,

by how well they stand as proof of an idea or cause—not by independent qualities of what makes a “good” story such as drama, a sense of struggle or high emotional content. Advocacy requires personal stories of all kinds. That’s why you’ll find examples in *Living Proof* that range from Gayathri Ramprasad’s heart-rending story of her consuming depression, when her husband discovered her in the backyard trying to dig her own grave, to Teresa Opheim’s quiet reflection on the importance of family farming, describing the gradual erasure of her grandparents’ farm from the Iowa landscape.

Throughout *Living Proof* you’ll meet advocates like Gayathri and Teresa, from diverse walks of life, with stories big and small. These advocates have generously shared their stories and their experiences with us, and we’re indebted to them for the richness they bring to this work.¹

They have reminded us again and again of the simple power of a well-told story and we’re thankful for the positive changes they’re working toward.

Your stories, too, *can* make a difference. We offer *Living Proof* as a guide. Be an advocate for the people and causes important to you, using the most powerful tool only you have—your personal stories.

John and Tim

“Americans have always loved outlaws, but the true heroes are likely to be in-laws and the other good people who help us travel through our lives. ... right now our country desperately needs just such people to step up to the plate and try to make things better.”²

—Mary Pipher

You can read about many of the advocates mentioned in *Living Proof* and view videos of their advocacy at www.livingproofadvocacy.com/blog/resources.

Part **ONE**

**Preparing
to
Make
a
Difference**



Get Ready

However you work with *Living Proof*—whether you read it from start to finish or flip to the sections that are most relevant to you—be sure to take these important first steps.

- **Complete the first two exercises: My Six-Word Reason and Story Map.** My Six-Word Reason (page 26) is a great starting point that focuses immediately on your goals. Story Map (page 42) is the important conceptual foundation for much of the work in *Living Proof*, and you'll return to it often.
- **Start speaking now.** While you may share your stories in written form online or in print, our focus in *Living Proof* is on the power of the *spoken* story. So speak out early and often. When you talk out your ideas, even stand and speak them alone in your home or office, you're training your body and voice, and this "everyday training" goes a long way in helping you become more comfortable and confident. Of course, there are times when

How To Free-Tell

1. Find a comfortable, private space.
 2. Set a timer for 2 minutes.
 3. Begin speaking and continue until the time is up. Don't critique yourself or worry that your story is coming out sloppily; free-telling is the verbal equivalent of writing a first draft or doodling. If you get stuck, just repeat the last thing you've said until a new thought comes to mind.
 4. If you need to pause and jot down a moment of brilliance, do. But continue speaking immediately. If you can, record your free-telling and then listen for ideas or language you may want to keep in subsequent "drafts."
-

you need to work out your ideas on paper. That's fine. But don't rely too heavily on the written word. As you get used to speaking your stories, you'll get ever closer to a comfortable and genuine delivery.

- **Practice free-telling.** One way to get in the habit of speaking your work is to use *free-telling*, a composition technique based on *free-writing*. Free-writing is a stream-of-consciousness exercise that writers use to generate material and break through writer's block: the writer sets an amount of time (say five or ten minutes) and doesn't stop writing until the time is up. Not all of what is written is usable, but the exercise forces the writer to put on paper whatever comes to mind—often, great ideas that were lurking just under the surface. The principle behind free-telling is the same, and a number of exercises in *Living Proof* recommend this technique. Free-telling is particularly helpful as you search for the parts of your experience that will become your story, as you craft your language, and as you practice for presentations and interviews.
- **Decide how you'll capture your ideas.** Plan how you'll keep notes or record your insights from the exercises in *Living Proof*: a written or electronic journal, an actual or online filing system, or an audio or video recorder.
- **Enlist partners.** Stories need listeners, and speakers need audiences. As you work on your story, it will often take someone saying, "Hey, that's really interesting" or "I'm confused. Tell me more about that" or "Is that detail really necessary?" If you want to measure how your story takes shape or affects others, you'll need a partner or coach. A partner may be another advocate working on the same or

different goals or a professional communication coach. Whoever you choose, make sure it's someone who can give you candid and helpful feedback.

- **Go with the flow.** Preparation to tell a personal story publicly rarely follows a straightforward, linear path. It requires giving over to the fluid creative process—that back and forth, push and pull that happens as you craft your experience into stories, adapt to changing settings and audiences, and manage your identity as a public advocate. Be flexible, stay limber. Here we go.

Working with a Partner

Be specific about what you'd like your partner to listen or watch for. Ask open-ended questions that prompt specific responses rather than questions that will get a yes or no answer. You'll get more useful information from "What part of my story can you visualize most clearly?" than from "So, was that okay?"

Chapter 1

Your Stories as Living Proof



IN THIS CHAPTER:

- How advocates and organizations use stories
- Why and when stories work—and why and when they don't
- An important exercise: My Six-Word Reason
- Five qualities of the well-told advocacy story

Answering the Call

During a small fundraising event for a cancer-support organization in Minneapolis, Derek Cotton stands in a board member's living room, clutching a half-page of notes. He tells guests what it felt like to be diagnosed with colon cancer and how, when he lived in Texas, the Dallas affiliate of the organization provided support that "balanced me out. Kept me off the ledge."

Loren Vaillancourt takes a deep breath as the news anchor of CBS' s The Early Show says, "You believe it was distracted driving that led to your brother's death. He was just 21 years old. What happened in that accident?"

Sitting with other parents in the library of her son's Brooklyn grade school, Theresa Greenleaf calmly tells them what it's like being the mom of a kid with food allergies, how appreciative she is of the school's support and assistance—and how critical parents' cooperation is to safeguarding all kids at the school who have allergies or asthma.

Nineteen-year-old college student Zach Wahls hears his name announced in the rotunda of the Iowa House chamber. He walks to the lectern and turns to face the standing-room only crowd of lawmakers and citizens. Hands shaking, he taps the start button on the timer of his

iPod and sets it down. He has three minutes to make his case in defense of families like his.

Every day, millions of people go public. They stand up at community meetings to address their friends and neighbors. They sit under bright lights in a television studio, waiting for the interviewer's next question. They approach lecterns, adjust microphones, and look out at unfamiliar faces.

At rallies and fundraisers, in radio and television studios, in community centers, on the phone with local reporters and in front of web or smartphone cameras, millions of individuals like you come forward daily to tell their stories.

They speak to raise awareness. They speak to change minds. They speak to educate, mobilize, or empower others, to promote a beneficial product or service, and to raise money. They speak for causes local and global—from creating safer schools to reducing the incidence of heart disease, from encouraging arts funding to ending homelessness. They tell their stories with anger, humor, hope, candor, and passion. They go public with their personal and sometimes intimate stories not for their own celebrity—though they may in fact be celebrities—nor purely for dramatic effect, though their stories may be dramatic.

They tell their stories because they believe they can help others and make a difference.

Like you, they are advocates.

Whether you call yourself a spokesperson, activist, representative, change-maker or champion, if you speak out on

behalf of someone or some cause, you are an advocate. Advocates fight for the rights of others. Advocates publicly endorse valuable products or services. Advocates raise funds for a cause. In each instance, the action at the heart of advocacy remains the same: speaking out. You are answering the call to help others and—in the true spirit of advocacy—are being vocal about it.

You share an objective with all other advocates: to have your story move audiences from apathy to empathy to action.

You may have come to advocacy on your own, it may be part of your job or you may have been asked to “put a face” on a campaign by serving as its spokesperson. You may be acting as a lone crusader or as part of a larger advocacy effort. Either way, you share an objective with all other advocates: to have your story move audiences from apathy to empathy to action.

When Derek Cotton told the people gathered in that Minneapolis living room of the support he received from Gilda’s Club in Dallas, he was living proof of the value of this national cancer support organization. He advocated for opening a Gilda’s Club affiliate in the Twin Cities, his new home. He spoke in support of others dealing with cancer, and he wanted the people in that living room to open their wallets.

When Loren Vaillancourt told the CBS anchor that her brother Kelson was killed in a crash involving a distracted driver, she was living proof of the personal loss that results from a preventable accident. She spoke on behalf of others at risk on the

road, and wanted viewers to change their driving behaviors and open their eyes.

When Theresa Greenleaf described to other parents the night her son suffered a severe allergic reaction and collapsed in the cab on the way to the hospital, she was living proof of the importance of vigilance. She advocated for compliance with school policies regarding allergens in packed lunches. She spoke in support of her son and others at the school. She wanted the parents in that school library to open their hearts.

When Zach Wahls, Eagle Scout with two moms, testified before the Iowa House of Representatives in 2011 that “our family really isn’t so different from any other Iowa family,” he was living proof that loving families come in all forms. He spoke against codifying discrimination. He wanted the legislature and fellow citizens to open their minds.

Like Derek, Loren, Theresa and Zach, you are an advocate because you, too, hope your story can move others to act.

Why Stories Work

There are more than 2.3 million nonprofit organizations in the United States, and the vast majority rely on people like you to share stories and help them deliver their messages.¹ Social movements—from advancing civil rights to working for environmental justice—have been built upon individuals’ stories. Commercial businesses, too, depend on the stories of real people to prove the value of their product or service, whether it’s a vaccine that saves lives or a light bulb that saves energy. And every day, individuals committed to making a difference in their corners of the world are standing up to say, “Let me tell you what happened. Let me show you what I’ve seen.”

What these diverse groups and individuals have in common is the belief that stories can provide compelling answers to the question: “Why should anyone care?”

Every day we see examples of how one person’s story *can* make us care, inspire us, or persuade us to act. An inspirational news feature shows an athlete overcoming her personal challenges

Google™ “share your story” and you’ll get millions of responses including the Kansas City Public Library, the Native American Advocacy Program, the Human Rights Campaign, the National Council of La Raza, The National Breast Cancer Foundation, The American Bible Society, Harvard University, Greenpeace and The Alaska Tobacco Control Alliance. The organizations and causes that rely on people like you to share a story are numerous and diverse.

to win Olympic gold, and we reevaluate our own goals and motivations. A beloved celebrity talks candidly about his battle with Parkinson's disease and, thinking of friends similarly affected, we make a donation to help fund research. A bereaved mother stands up at a local school board meeting and tells how her son, the victim of a hate crime, was bullied in the school hallways and we change our minds about how safe and inclusive our schools are.

The questions about how and why we respond to personal stories this way constitute a vast field of study that spans anthropology, psychology, theater, ethnography, communication, and folklore, as well as public relations, advertising, and marketing. The power of storytelling is not news.

But some claim we are currently in a “golden age” of story. Storytelling skills are encouraged in MBA and medical training programs, scientific institutions, and law schools. The shelves of our local and online bookstores overflow with guides on how to tell stories to enhance leadership skills, build community, alter our life's direction, create an oral or written personal history for our families, brand our business, and sell more widgets. All these applications are grounded in the same fundamental truth: we are storytelling beings. So when we use our own stories as tools for advocacy, we tap into an essential and universal quality.

The ability to see our lives as stories and share those stories with others is at

The Universal Need for Connection

A study at The Wharton School asked participants to read three stories and contribute \$5 to alleviate hunger in Africa. In one version, their donation would go to a particular 7-year-old girl in Mali named Rokia; in the second, to millions of suffering Africans; in the third, to Rokia—but in this version, she was presented within the larger context of world hunger: “Rokia is just one of millions suffering from hunger.” The study found that people were more likely to give directly to the story of Rokia—not to anonymous millions and not to Rokia when presented as part of a larger scenario. Stories of individuals draw upon our universal need for connection.²