

# **LIVING PROOF**

**TELLING  
YOUR STORY  
TO MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE**

**THIRD EDITION**

**Praise for**  
***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* is a great tool for anyone sharing a story and hoping to move—and motivate—an audience.”

**Lee Woodruff, cofounder of the Bob Woodruff Foundation and author of *In an Instant***

“We understand the world through stories. This book will help you understand why that is and how to take advantage of them to make the planet a better place.”

**Bill McKibben, founder, 350.org**

“*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**

“Much of what John and Tim have to say in *Living Proof* is certainly in line with my own experiences. Their magic is in presenting it in a brilliant fashion that makes it both accessible and helpful to anyone who wants to change the world and has a story to tell. Before you tell your story, read this book.”

**Zach Wahls, Iowa state senator and author of *My Two Moms***

“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, Professor, University of Colorado Denver  
and author of *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric and Inviting Transformation: Presentational Speaking for a Changing World***

“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, owner, Gordon Mayer Communications**

“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 anyone interested in what their stories can do for others.”

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

“This book belongs on the shelf of every advocate and activist. *Living Proof* is a practical guide for getting your message heard by anchoring the message in the truth of your own experience. If you’re working to change the world and need help with your story—read this book.”

**Michael Margolis, CEO and founder of Storied and author of *Believe Me: A Storytelling Manifesto for Change-Makers and Innovators***

# LIVING PROOF

“  
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TO MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE**”

THIRD EDITION

John Capecchi and Timothy Cage



Granville Circle  
— P R E S S —

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## **DEDICATION**

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

Gianna Capecci  
Robert Compitello  
Deborah Voss Mankiewicz  
Annie Lewis Martin  
Michael Perelman





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## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

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**P**ersonal stories have the power to move audiences from apathy to empathy to action.

That's the fundamental belief upon which this book is built. Our focus is on individual advocates and what it takes for them to turn their stories into powerful, persuasive tools for change.

Since we first published *Living Proof* in 2012, much has happened—and is still happening—in the United States and around the world to remind us how powerful personal stories are when it comes to making a difference:

- Patients, caregivers, and physicians continue to speak up, share stories, and call attention to health issues that have been overlooked, underfunded, or stigmatized for generations.
- Women and girls, many of whom have stayed silent for decades, are coming forward with their stories of being sexually harassed and assaulted, galvanized by the #MeToo movement. Likewise, men and women abused by those in religious institutions and the military are sharing their stories to spur healing, demand justice, and ensure reform.
- People of color globally are amplifying their stories to expose systemic, historic racism, build coalitions of partners, and proclaim *no more* to violence and injustices inflicted upon them and their communities.

- LGBTQ+ individuals and families are recounting their personal stories to help shift notions of gender identity and demonstrate the need for inclusion and equity.
- High school students subjected to the horrors of gun violence in their classrooms and to the tragic loss of friends and family are taking their stories to the streets and to state legislatures across the country to demand gun-control reform.

And more. Changemakers working on these and other issues—from education policy reform to sustainable farming, from opioid addiction to arts funding, from homelessness to indigenous peoples' rights—continue to rely on personal stories to make the case for change, whether that change is in individual actions and attitudes or broader cultural and political arenas.

When those personal stories unite, when one story becomes the story of many and momentum builds, positive change becomes inevitable.

But change is seldom swift. And when voices rise, the competition among stories can become fierce. We have often been reminded of this in the years since we first published *Living Proof*. Especially in today's turbulent sociopolitical times, efforts to squelch or silence true stories of lived experience—or to devalue and dismiss them—become more fervent. As a result, the need for and importance of sharing our stories become even more critical.

Thankfully, there is no shortage of dedicated and passionate individuals who believe steadfastly, as do we, that one person's story—by providing living proof—can truly make a difference.

## A Specific Type of Storytelling

Sharing personal stories in order to make a difference is a very specific type of storytelling, another fact we've been regularly reminded of since writing the first edition of *Living Proof*. In the near-decade since, there has been a virtual explosion of interest in personal storytelling skills. In fact, some claim we are currently in a “golden age” of personal storytelling.

Books, articles, videos, online classes, and more explain how to develop and tell personal stories to enhance leadership, build community, change life direction, document family and community histories, brand businesses, or sell more stuff. Coffee shop open-mic evenings offer opportunities for individuals to perform crafted true-life tales. *The Moth* and TED events provide platforms for speakers with personal stories that inspire, entertain, and illuminate. College prep guides encourage high school students to use personal narratives in their college admission essays. StoryCorps gives people of all ages the opportunity to record and archive their personal stories in the Library of Congress. And the list goes on.

What these various contexts share is their celebration of humans as storytellers and of narrative as a uniquely human form of communication and connection. Where they differ, however, is in their intent and emphasis. In some cases, the intent is entertainment. In other cases, it may be on the craft of storytelling. Sometimes the emphasis is on facilitating bonds between people; other times it's on strengthening communities, educating others, healing wounds, or even boosting the bottom line.

Using personal stories for the purpose of advocacy—*with the intent and emphasis on making a difference in the lives of others*—is different from spinning yarns around a campfire, from delivering performances that bring audiences to their feet, and from personalizing a brand to

attract customers. Those kinds of storytelling are no less engaging, moving, or effective, but their specific goals differ from *this* use: to spur actions that benefit the common good.

We are delighted to share this newest edition of *Living Proof*, written for the dedicated individuals who are committed to this goal and who are truly making a difference in the lives of others . . . today, tomorrow, and for lifetimes to come.

### **What's New in the Third Edition**

Here's what you'll find in this edition of *Living Proof*:

- twice as many stories from advocates who are working on a wide range of issues, everything from healthy diets to road safety to hoarding
- more about the science behind why personal stories are so powerful
- refinements to the notion of framing, with helpful new examples
- more organizational models and examples for structuring advocacy presentations
- a new section on self-care, with valuable lessons shared by advocates

John Capecci and Timothy Cage  
Minneapolis and New York  
September 2019



# INTRODUCTION

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**E**verybody likes ice cream, right?  
That's the bet Ocean Robbins made as he stood before 500 people 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 own family 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.

---

“So, they completely misdiagnosed your stroke and sent you home from the hospital?”

When the interviewer asked this question, heart-health advocate Dina Piersawl had to pause . . . and focus. After all, she was on national television for the first time, surrounded by cameras and a live studio audience.

What’s more, the interviewer, sitting an arm’s length from Dina, was Dr. Mehmet Oz. And next to him? Oprah Winfrey, host of one of the most popular television talk shows in history. Dina recalls:

Dr. Oz had an oversized model of my artery, demonstrating to Oprah and everyone watching what happened when I had my stroke. I was thinking of my mother, who was a huge Oprah fan; I had just lost her to congestive heart failure less than six months before. That was on my mind. So, I thought, “Just breathe. Put your game face on and go with it.”

Flash back three years. Dina was participating in an advocacy-training program sponsored by the Mayo Clinic and WomenHeart: The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease. As part of the program, Dina publicly shared the story of her stroke for the first time. “I was so nervous, and I definitely rambled,” Dina recalls. “I was all over the place.” But by the time the training was over, Dina was supercharged to launch her life as a heart-health advocate. And she had big plans.

In fact, at the event’s closing dinner, Dina told the other advocates in attendance, “I’m going to take my word to the world. And someday,

I'm going to be on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*”—though she didn't quite know how that was going to happen. “It was just a shot in the dark,” she admits.

Well, Dina's prediction came true. Her advocacy landed her on the show, giving her the opportunity to reach millions of women with her two important advocacy messages: take your heart health seriously, and know your blood-pressure numbers.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Broad Scope of Advocacy**

In our more than two decades of communications coaching, we've met and worked with thousands of “living proof” advocates—people who share their personal stories in order to make a difference in the lives of others.

Some, like Ocean and Dina, tell their stories on national and even global stages. Many more share their stories in neighborhood meetings, at political rallies, in weekly podcasts, and through local media. They're ordinary people who have never before spoken out. They're also skilled presenters and trained media pros. Many speak in support of health and wellness; others speak in support of social justice, racial and gender equity, the environment, the arts, education, safety, and every other important issue of our day.

Some act as lone crusaders. Others speak on behalf of nonprofits, advocacy groups, grassroot initiatives, and cause-marketing campaigns. They stand on podiums, sit in circles, and knock on doors. They're interviewed over the phone and on camera. They appear in school gymnasiums, throughout the halls of government, and on local and national talk shows.

But no matter who they are, where they're from, when they speak, or how much (or how little) experience they have, these individuals share a common objective: to tell their personal stories with clarity,

passion, and purpose in order to make a difference in the lives of others. They are advocates.

If you share that same objective (whether or not you consider yourself an advocate right now), *Living Proof* is written for you. It provides you a single resource for this special—and powerful—way of using stories, a one-stop, information-packed, easy-to-use guidebook that gathers together what you need to tell your story effectively, whether at a neighborhood meeting or on national television.

When we first began working with advocates and conducting Living Proof Advocacy™ workshops back in the late 1990s, no such guidebook existed. In fact, many of the advocates we coached back then told us that when they looked for additional resources to help them improve their personal stories, they were directed to books about writing memoirs or screenplays, or to articles about how studios such as Marvel or Disney craft big-screen stories that blow us away (and bring us to tears). They could find no single, accessible guidebook focused on how one individual tells *a personal story* in this specific context—as an advocate.

So what does it mean to be an advocate?

In its broadest sense, *advocacy* means “any public action to support and recommend a cause, policy, or practice.” That covers a lot of public actions, from displaying a bumper sticker to sounding off with a bullhorn. But whether the action is slapping a pithy saying on the back of a car or speaking out in front of a crowd, every act of advocacy involves making some kind of public statement, one that says, “I support this, . . . and you should, too.”

**Advocacy—as we define it in *Living Proof*—is about using your personal stories to make a difference for others by spurring action.**

Advocacy—as we define it in *Living Proof*—is about using your personal stories to make a difference for others by spurring action. This very specific kind of

storytelling requires elements of persuasion, public speaking, media interview skills, *and* storytelling skills—not to mention healthy doses of fortitude and commitment. It means engaging listeners’ hearts *and* minds. It means balancing the personal with the public (and, frequently, the political). It means understanding the unique and powerful role you and your story can play in creating change.

## Living Proof Advocacy Coaching

The approach we take to coaching advocates forms the basis of *Living Proof*. It is not cookie-cutter, by-the-book, or fill-in-the-blank. Instead, it’s a set of principles, values, best practices, tools, and objectives.

Rather than tossing you a trout, we aim to teach you to fish.

At the heart of our approach are our seven core beliefs, which you’ll hear echoed throughout the book:

### Being Vocal

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

### CORE BELIEF #1

**Spoken communication is one of the most effective ways to advocate with personal stories.** While *advocacy* can mean letter writing, voting, tweeting, phone calling, and a host of other activities, we honor the classical root of the word and focus specifically on public speech—from casual talks to bullhorn activism, from informal talks to media interviews.

### CORE BELIEF #2

**Advocating with a personal story is a persuasive act.** When you share a personal story as an advocate, you are asking others to *do something* as a result of hearing about your experience. Of course, you hope others will relate to, connect with, and be moved by your story—but it is always with the hope that they will also take action.

**CORE BELIEF #3**

**Everyone’s experience of publicly sharing their stories is different.**

Such experiences also can be complex and nuanced—emotionally, physically, socially, and psychologically. Learning to navigate this terrain is critical to preparing to share your story.

**CORE BELIEF #4**

**There is no “best” type of advocacy story.** We never ask advocates to fit their experiences into a particular story framework.<sup>2</sup> That’s because the best advocacy stories don’t fit a mold. Instead, they are defined by how well they stand as living proof of an idea or cause and by how well they are told. And while many advocacy stories arise from dramatic circumstances, dramatic stories aren’t the only ones with the power to persuade. The best—and most moving—advocacy stories are those that stand as living proof of an idea or cause.

**CORE BELIEF #5**

**Personal stories are always in dialogue with larger cultural narratives.** Advocacy doesn’t happen in a vacuum. The personal stories being told at state legislatures and on street corners influence and reflect larger narratives being written collectively and culturally, which is why it’s important to consider and explore your roles within today’s larger political and social systems.

**CORE BELIEF #6**

**Context is everything.** While we know Living Proof Advocacy coaching has worked for a wide diversity of people and issues, we recognize that its approach and philosophies are determined by our own cultural lens, and we embrace cultural humility in our writing and our coaching.<sup>3</sup> As with all types of communication, context is everything; what works for one audience, cause, culture, or time may

not work for others. So we invite you to explore how the ideas and approaches in *Living Proof* relate to—and can be used to support—your communication style, values, and advocacy goals.

### **CORE BELIEF #7**

**The truth will prevail.** While people do sometimes fabricate their life stories, we strongly recommend that you share your stories truthfully, filtered as they are through memory and time. Untruths, told for whatever reasons, risk being discovered, destroying any trust you might have built with others.

But even true stories, honestly told, will not always be valued, listened to, or believed—a reality experienced too often by members of marginalized or disenfranchised populations or those experiencing discrimination, abuse, or other injustices. That doesn't mean we stop telling our truths; quite the opposite.

### **Inside Living Proof**

*Living Proof* is divided into two parts: Part One, Preparing to Make a Difference, explores the power of stories; recommends ways to find, craft, and prepare your stories; and introduces the skills you need to deliver powerful presentations and give great media interviews. Part Two, Telling Your Story, explores the successes and challenges you may encounter as you go public with your story. It also includes tips and tools for a variety of public speaking and interview situations.

This edition of *Living Proof*—as with the previous editions—focuses on the essentials: what you need to know to share your story effectively through spoken communication (from casual talks to keynote addresses) and media interviews (from podcast to broadcast). At the center are The Five Qualities of Well-Told Advocacy Stories. These qualities form a simple, strong foundation for success, wherever

and whenever you share your stories. You'll find the five qualities echoed throughout *Living Proof*.

You'll also meet advocates such as Ocean and Dina from diverse walks of life with stories big and small. These advocates have generously shared their stories and experiences with us, and we're indebted to them for the richness they bring to our work. They remind us again and again of the simple power of a well-told story, and we're thankful for the work they do to create positive change.<sup>4</sup>

You'll also hear about nonprofits we've had the honor of supporting and working with whose very existence depends on the success of their advocates. They include The Stability Network, an organization whose Stability Leaders across the United States and three other countries speak out to inspire people with mental health challenges to thrive; the National Safety Council, which provides training to Survivor-Advocates who are addressing the opioid crisis, road safety, workplace violence, and more; and WomenHeart: The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease, which, at the time of this writing, has provided Living Proof Advocacy training to more than 900 WomenHeart Champions nationwide who are raising awareness of women's heart health and literally saving lives with their stories. We are thankful to these and other organizations for their insights. We are especially grateful to WomenHeart, one of the first organizations to ask us more than two decades ago, "How can we share our stories powerfully?"

## **Get Ready**

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 keep the book on hand as a resource or flip to what's most useful to you right now:



- Not sure why you're telling your story? Flip to page 20.
- Have an interview next week? See Chapter 10.
- Feel uneasy about going public? Turn to Chapter 13.
- Eager to get started? Read on.

Everyone's process for going public with a personal experience is different, depending on many things such as the kind of life experiences you've had, how recent or distant those experiences are, how you feel about speaking out, and more. And we know that some of you may come to this book having already shared your story as an advocate, while others are coming to this fresh.

Wherever you start and however you plan to work through *Living Proof*, make sure to use these five tips to get ready:

**1. Start speaking early.** One of *the* most valuable lessons from the best public communicators is this: speak out early and often. We'll repeat that a lot in this book. When you are alone in your home or office, talk out your ideas to yourself and move around. Give your ideas voice rather than simply *thinking about* what you will say eventually. Say it now. Think of each time you speak as another "rough draft," whether you're alone or trying out drafts with a partner.

Why is this so important? When you speak out early and often, you start to train your body and voice, and this everyday training goes a long way toward helping you feel more comfortable and confident as a public speaker.

Of course, there will be times when you need to work out your ideas on paper or on screen. That's fine. But don't rely too heavily on the written word. Get used to speaking your early drafts, and you'll get ever closer to a comfortable, confident, and genuine delivery.

## 2. Practice free-telling.

One way to get in the habit of speaking your work is to use free-telling, a technique based on the composition technique called *free-writing*, a stream-of-consciousness composition exercise writers use to generate material and break through writer's block.

Free-writing goes like this: Choose a writing prompt such as “My earliest memory,” and then set a timer for a specific amount of time (say two minutes). Put your fingers to the keyboard or a pen or pencil to paper and just write whatever comes to mind until the timer goes off. Not all of what you write will be usable, but this exercise forces you to get your thoughts on paper—often great ideas that were lurking just under the surface.

The principle behind free-telling is the same, except you're speaking rather than writing. Free-telling, especially if you record yourself, 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.

### How to Free-tell

If you can, record your free-telling and then listen for ideas or language you may want to keep in subsequent drafts.

1. Find a comfortable, private space.
2. Set a timer for two minutes and turn on your recorder.
3. Begin speaking and continue until the time is up. Don't critique yourself or worry that your story is sloppy; free-telling is the verbal equivalent of writing a first draft or doodling.
4. If you get stuck, just repeat the last thing you've said until a new thought comes to mind.
5. If you need to pause and jot down a moment of brilliance, do. But continue speaking immediately.

**3. Decide where and how you'll capture your ideas.** Plan where and how you'll keep notes or record your insights as you work through the exercises in *Living Proof*. A written or electronic journal, an actual or online filing system, or an audio or video recorder are the tools the advocates we work with find most helpful.

**Working with a Partner**

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

**4. Enlist partners.** Stories need listeners, and speakers need audiences. As you work on your advocacy stories, you may be unsure about what's working and what's not until someone listens to you and says, "Hey, that's really interesting" or "Tell me more about that" or "I'm confused." If you want to measure how your story takes shape or affects others, you'll need a partner. 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 will give you candid and constructive feedback, and who understands the goals you're working to achieve.

**5. Complete the first two exercises: Six-Word Reason and Story Map.** Six-Word Reason (see Chapter 1) is a great starting point that helps you focus immediately on your goals. And Story Map (see Chapter 2) is an important foundation for much of the work in *Living Proof*, one you'll return to often.

One final note: Preparing to share a personal story publicly rarely follows a straightforward, linear path. It requires giving yourself over to a 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. You'll see that we suggest approaching this process from as many different directions as possible. So be flexible, and stay limber.

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

Ready . . . breathe . . . begin.

# PART ONE

“

**PREPARING  
TO MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE**

”



# CHAPTER

## Your Stories as Living Proof

### **THIS CHAPTER COVERS:**

- how advocates and organizations use personal stories.
- an important exercise: Six-Word Reason.
- when personal stories work . . . and when they don't.
- five qualities of well-told advocacy stories.

## ANSWERING THE CALL

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**D**uring a home fundraiser for a cancer-support nonprofit in Minneapolis, Derek Cotton stands in a board member's living room, clutching a half-page of notes. He explains what it felt like to be diagnosed with colon cancer and how the nonprofit provided support that “balanced me out. Kept me off the ledge.”

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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 twenty-one years old. What happened in that accident?” Loren Vaillancourt takes a deep breath.

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Sitting with other parents in the library of her son's Brooklyn grade school, Theresa Greenleaf calmly explains 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 parent cooperation is to safeguarding all school kids who have allergies or asthma.

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Nineteen-year-old college student Zach Wahls hears his name announced in the rotunda of the Iowa Senate 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 his family—and families like his.



Every day, millions of people like these go public with their stories.

They stand up at community meetings to address their friends and neighbors. They sit under bright lights in television studios, waiting for an interviewer's next question. They stand at lecterns, adjust microphones, or grab bullhorns to persuade crowds of often unfamiliar faces that the issue they're about to discuss is an important one.

At rallies and fundraisers, in radio and television studios, at community centers, on the phone with reporters, and in front of web and smartphone cameras, millions of individuals 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 life-changing product or service; and to raise money. They speak for causes local and global—from creating safer schools to reducing the incidence of rare diseases, 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) or purely for dramatic effect (though their stories are often dramatic).

They tell their stories because they believe their stories can make a difference in the lives of others.

“Some believe their personal stories don't matter, that others won't care or that we shouldn't talk about ourselves so much. But if we do public work, we have the responsibility to give a public account of ourselves—where we came from, why we do what we do, and where we think we're going. . . . If we don't author our story, others will—and may tell our story in ways that we may not like.”<sup>1</sup>

—**Marshall Ganz, senior lecturer  
in public policy at the Kennedy  
School of Government at  
Harvard University**

They are advocates.

In ancient Roman law, the *advocatus* was “called to one’s aid” to plead others’ cases in court. Today, use of the word *advocate* has expanded beyond its original legal sense to include anyone who “answers the call” to support or recommend a cause, policy, or practice—and, in this case, to make the world (or a corner of it) a better place.

Whether you call yourself a spokesperson, activist, representative, changemaker, or champion, if you speak out on behalf of a person or cause you care about, you are an advocate. Whether you’re fighting for basic human rights, endorsing valuable products, lobbying for helpful services, or raising funds for causes and organizations you care about, the action at the heart of your advocacy remains the same: speaking out. You are answering the call to make a difference and—in the true spirit of advocacy—being vocal about it.

You may have come to advocacy on your own, as part of your job, or because you’ve been asked to “put a face” on a public service or fundraising campaign by serving as a spokesperson. You may be acting as a lone crusader or as part of a larger effort. You may have had some experience doing this already, or perhaps you are telling your personal story for the first time. However you got here, you have a common goal with all other advocates: to share your story and move people from apathy to empathy to action.

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**You have a common goal with all other advocates: to share your story and move people 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 Dallas when he lived in Texas, he was living proof of the value of this national network of cancer support centers. He spoke in support of others dealing with cancer and of

the need to open a Gilda's Club affiliate in the Twin Cities. He wanted the people in that living room to open their hearts—and their wallets.

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When Loren Vaillancourt told the CBS anchor interviewing her that her brother Kelson was killed in a crash caused by a distracted driver, she was living proof of the personal loss that results when people text and drive. She wanted viewers to change their driving behaviors and open their eyes . . . and keep those eyes on the road.

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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 understand the perils of allergies and open their hearts to the young people who live with them.

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When Zach Wahls, Eagle Scout and son of two lesbians, testified before the Iowa House of Representatives 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 legislating discrimination. He wanted the policy-makers and fellow citizens to open their minds to the diversity of families.

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Like Derek, Loren, Theresa, and Zach, you are an advocate because you, too, hope your story can spur actions that benefit the common good.

“Life itself assigns us our causes.”<sup>2</sup>

—Mary Pipher, author and  
clinical psychologist

## ADVOCACY BEGINS WITH INTENT

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Why are you an advocate?

Answering this question is the starting place for effective advocacy. Being able to articulate your *why* gives you a foundation that will ground you throughout the process of preparing to make a difference.

When participants in a recent Living Proof Advocacy workshop explored this question, one advocate remarked, “It seems to me that everybody is just one incident away from becoming an advocate for a cause.” This may be the situation you find yourself in. What drives you to be an advocate may be the result of one significant, perhaps even unexpected incident. Or perhaps your decision to become an advocate is based on a whole lifetime of events and moments, rooted in your identity and experience of the world. Perhaps your desire to advocate comes primarily from a deeply held value or belief, or from your expertise in a particular field. Perhaps your career or your volunteerism requires you to share what you know with others. Or maybe you’re still trying to figure out precisely what—and who—you have the power to impact with your personal stories.

For Derek and Loren, specific incidents—a cancer diagnosis and a life-ending car crash—propelled them into advocacy. For Theresa, it was years of protecting a child with allergies who had been rushed to the hospital one too many times. And for Zach, it was witnessing the attacks on his loving and supportive family.

“Well, it’s pretty simple, because I live it every day. When you have a job that doesn’t supply sick time and you know what you go through yourself, and what other employees go through every day . . . the story is there. It’s right in front of me. I live it every day.”

—Brian Kulas, advocate  
for a living wage and  
affordable housing

What differences have Derek, Loren, Theresa, and Zach made?

- Derek went from sharing his story in a living room to sharing it on stage at a large fundraiser. His efforts helped Gilda’s Club Twin Cities raise \$500,000 for its capital campaign so that no Minnesotan would face cancer alone.
- Thanks to Loren’s efforts, thousands of young people have pledged to stop texting while driving.
- After hearing Theresa’s story, accompanied by a talk from an allergist, parents at the Brooklyn grade school her son attended truly understood, for the first time, why complying with the school’s policies regarding packed lunches is so important.
- When Zach finished his three-minute address to the Iowa House of Representatives, the crowd erupted in cheers. The next day, someone posted a video of his speech on YouTube. Three days later, the video had been viewed more than a million times, quickly becoming a powerful prompt for national dialogue about LGBTQ+ rights. By the end of the year, it had become the most-watched political video on YouTube.<sup>3</sup>

Why do *you* advocate? Who do you advocate for? What will keep you going? Use the following exercise to find out.

“I first got involved in seventh grade when I saw that a lot of my peers were starting to use tobacco products. At the same time, I noticed how the tobacco industry was using special tactics, like candy flavors, to attract my peers. The more I learned about these tactics, the more motivated I got to go out and advocate for change.”

—**Sachit Gali, teen advocate for tobacco-free kids**