



# Funding Narrative Change: HOW COMMUNITIES ARE SHAPING AND WIELDING NARRATIVE POWER



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We want to share our deep appreciation to Mik Moore for conducting this research and providing us with narrative insights, findings and direction that are the core of this report. Moore + Associates have been a thought partner to us in our journey supporting narrative efforts. And, to Jen Thom for guidance and support shaping this report and takeaways for the field.



# A Note from the Executive Director

From Executive Director Amanda Navarro

Since the release of *Funding Narrative Change: An Assessment and Framework* in 2022, we've witnessed both meaningful progress and profound setbacks in social and political change in our country. Many funders have taken up the call to think more holistically about narrative and to better align investments to support long-term cultural and systemic change. Yet we now find ourselves facing an acute and sweeping crisis: the second term of a Trump presidency that has brought devastating consequences for racial justice, democracy, and public trust.



Narratives that have long shaped American life—individual liberty over the common good, exclusion over belonging, austerity over abundance—are being weaponized to justify repression, division, and disinvestment. These narratives are not new. But their resurgence underscores the urgency of investing in their counterweights: stories of

**Once a narrative takes root, it can shape perception and public behavior in ways that resist even the most compelling data or logic.**

solidarity, dignity, resilience, and collective power. Stories that emerge from communities closest to the harms—and the solutions.

We understand that narratives don't live in any one story but emerge across many. That's why it's not just about telling powerful stories—it's about how those stories add up. Once a narrative takes root, it can shape perception and public behavior in ways that resist even the most compelling data

or logic. This is why we believe that helping to shift harmful narratives is so critical to advancing priorities like racial justice, health equity, abortion access, and trans rights. And it's why narrative change—if it is to be effective—must be driven by the communities most impacted.

We do not believe narrative work is ancillary—it is essential to shifting the conditions that shape public will, policy outcomes, and cultural norms. Community narrative power is not just about telling stories, but about having the agency, infrastructure, and credibility to shape which stories are told, how they are framed, and who they reach.

To meet this moment, we as funders must treat the long-term work of building community narrative power with the same seriousness and strategic commitment we bring to short-term, responsive efforts. I hope the experiences and insights shared in this report inspire others to advance this work alongside us.

In partnership on this journey,



**Amanda Navarro**  
Executive Director  
Convergence Partnership



# Context for This Report

What, exactly, is community narrative power building? How do mass movements create narrative change? And how can we invest in both?

In the months following the release of our 2022 report, *Funding Narrative Change: An Assessment and Framework*, these were the most common, and most pressing, questions we were asked by other funders. It was simultaneously the most exciting and most confounding question. We had listed examples of community narrative power building in the report, including the AIDS Quilt and “public journeys,” like advocacy for the Dream Act, through “Walk to Stay Home.” Yet it was clear that the field would benefit from a deeper dive into some contemporary examples of grant-supported community narrative power building.

The report—commissioned by Convergence Partnership and co-authored by Mik Moore and Rinku Sen—sought to help increase the sector’s shared understanding of the state of the field, including best practices for narrative change work in philanthropy. The report’s framework places mass movements, alongside mass culture and mass media, as a critical and effective vehicle for narrative change that reaches a wide audience through collective action and storytelling. Because narrative change requires broad-based shifts in storytelling, mass culture (film, television, video games, music, etc.) and mass media (news and non-fiction media) receive the most attention.

**NARRATIVE  
POWER  
BUILDING:  
A FRAMEWORK**



Of the three areas on the framework, mass movements have consistently received less attention and funding than the others, despite their effectiveness in driving narrative shifts and expanding the power of people to shape and amplify the stories that influence public perception and policy. **We define community narrative power as the ability of a movement or organization that is rooted in a region or identity group to meaningfully shape the key narratives around a campaign or issue.** Ideally, it accrues this power over time and maintains a measure of control over it. That means effective ongoing efforts, like a TikTok account or a community theater, are well positioned to become increasingly important sources of community narrative power over time.

**Many funders and practitioners over the past couple of years have asked us if we have good examples of what it looked like to build community narrative power. This case study report attempts to do just that.**

Going into this we had a lot of unanswered questions. First, we wanted to know how those leading these community-based efforts were trying to create narrative change and build narrative power. Did they have a theory that they were testing, did they stumble upon a successful approach, or was it a bit of both? We took a close look at the narratives at play in their work. We wanted to know not only which narratives they focused on, but how they had navigated complex landscapes.

We looked at the organizations that Convergence Partnership has supported since we began funding narrative shifts in 2018. We selected two projects for comprehensive case studies, and spotlighted the efforts of three more.

**The first case study** looks at a year in the life of a TikTok account. The account was created by Jannice Newson, the former Program Coordinator at Elevated Chicago, a multi-sector collaborative focused on promoting racial equity, affordable housing, and community voice into transit-centered development to ensure all residents benefit from growth and investment. At a time when so many organizations are trying to figure out how to use social media effectively, Newson cracked the code.

**The second case study** focuses on DocuCourse, a project of the education advocacy nonprofit BeGreat Together, led by Avrell Stokes. They use storytelling as a way to

build narrative power in Black and Brown communities. After reviewing all of the materials for one of the courses, called *Bails & Bonds*, as well as its engagement and distribution efforts, we were struck by its innovative layering of stories with data and analysis, to increase the narrative impact.

**Our spotlights are three shorter summaries** focused on the community narrative power building efforts by Hutch In Harmony in Kansas, Ujima Company in Buffalo, NY, and Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability in California. Each leveraged a different form of storytelling as a narrative change vehicle, including public artwork, community theater, and local media engagement. Collectively, it was encouraging that so many different approaches have found success, even while our window into these efforts was relatively short.

**Finally, we close out the report with findings and recommendations for funders** that cut across the case studies and summaries, which include the following sentiments: It seems to be easier to exercise community narrative power than to build and keep it. There is real value to having community control over the means of cultural production. The cost of projects varies widely, but what's critical is the availability of funds to sustain it. Innovative approaches, like layering stories with expertise and data, or integrating a theater company into a lead paint removal campaign, are intriguing and deserve to be implemented in more places.

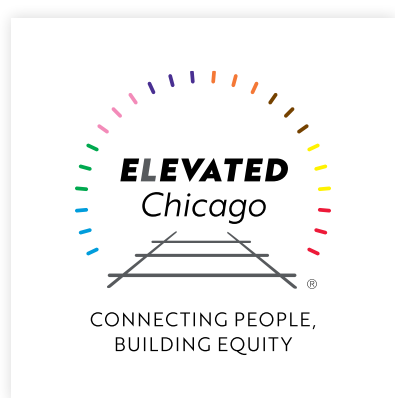
We hope you will continue reading and learn more about each of these stories and how the findings can support your own work creating or funding narrative change.



## CASE STUDY

# Elevated Chicago: Shifting Perceptions of Development and Transit

What happens when a social media account transforms a complex issue into compelling storytelling? How a TikTok account shifts public opinion on the future of community investment.



## Introduction

Elevated Chicago asks a simple question: What if development in Chicago neighborhoods worked for all residents? The key to achieving this vision is something they call **Equitable Transit Oriented Development**, or ETOD for short. Elevated Chicago's multi-sector collaborative believes that transit hubs should be welcoming and vibrant. Such areas should offer a mix of retail, public space, community institutions, offices, and

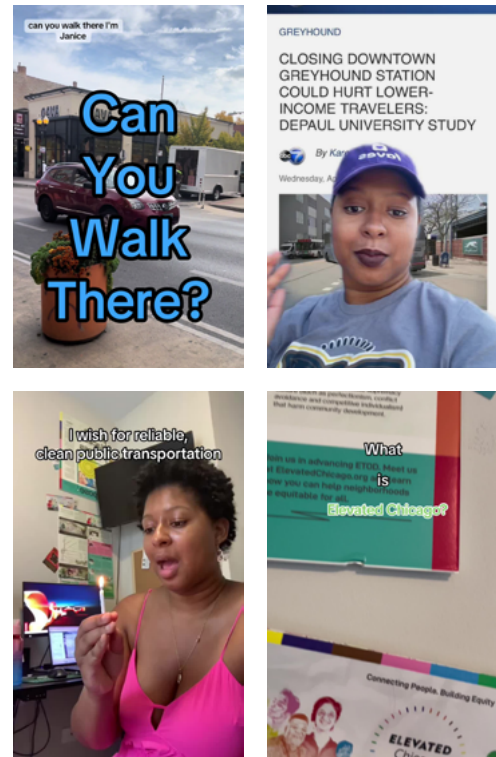
affordable housing. They advocate for development without displacement, and for public and private investments that benefit existing communities, particularly those Black and Brown communities harmed by red-lining, neglect, and gentrification.

**In May of 2022, Elevated Chicago's coordinator, Jannice Newson, started an account on TikTok, a video-based social media app. She was experimenting with a new way to talk about transit and ETOD in Chicago. In less than a month, her fifth video had surpassed 100,000 views and 21,000 likes.**



By the end of the summer, Jannice had posted seventeen videos. **She noticed that her videos fell into four main categories: walking, explainers, humor, and events.** Moving forward, Jannice became more intentional, creating and posting videos designed to fit into the structure that had emerged organically. She noted what worked well and what didn't, and adjusted accordingly. The account had started to get noticed, particularly by others in the urban planning community. Jannice began to get requests to have projects and campaigns in the Elevated Chicago pipeline featured on the account.

We focused on the account's first year, from May 2022 through May 2023.



Images from TikTok videos showcasing walking content, explainers, humorous moments, and event coverage.

## Method: TikTok Account

In 2024, there were 1.5 billion monthly TikTok users, with over 150 million active users in the United States. In the US, almost half (44.4%) of TikTok users are aged 24 or younger. Users, overwhelmingly amateur individual creators, generate all of TikTok's content. Most people open up TikTok to scroll through videos, many between 30 seconds and two minutes in length. They can interact with videos by liking, sharing, reposting, or commenting. Videos can also be "stitched," which is where one user makes a new video that features a clip or more from someone else's video. These are often "reaction" videos, where the viewer gets to see how one user reacts to another user's video; other times, stitched videos provide a way to creatively build on the original. When a video is stitched, the views count for both the original and the new video, so it can be a great way to reach a wider audience.

The Elevated Chicago TikTok account, created to share information about transit issues and ETOD, features four types of videos.

**Walking:** This is the only category of videos that is built around a named series. Each video opens by telling viewers, "This is Elevated Chicago's walkability series, 'Can You Walk There?'" The premise is simple. Jannice, the series host, is going for a walk from somewhere in Chicago to a

transit hub. She shows the route on a map and then records video of her walk. Throughout she narrates what we are seeing, helping us understand the key elements that impact walkability. Are the sidewalks cracked or smooth? Is it well lit? What is street life like? Are there vacant lots and storefronts, or busy shops and welcoming community spaces? What about bike lanes? How dangerous is it to cross at intersections? Does the layout prioritize cars or pedestrians? This series also acknowledges history, current events, and work by Elevated Chicago that pertain to the area. During the period we assessed, there were eleven of these videos.

**Explainer:** As the name suggests, these videos are intended to help viewers understand something relevant to transit policy and ETOD. The subject matter varied, but the approach was pretty consistent. For example, one of these videos explained the Connecting Communities Ordinance, which was a policy priority for Elevated Chicago. Others explained ETOD or framed the lack of development around transit as a scam. All of these are substantive videos that provide information likely to be new to most viewers. We counted seven of these videos.



Screenshots showing Jannice in each of the four styles of TikTok videos she produced

**In-Group Humor:** This might be a misnomer, since not every video is intended to be funny. But videos in this category tended to lean heavily on memes or inside jokes that Chicago transit users would appreciate. Often these videos poke fun at some of the shortcomings of the Chicago transit systems, while others express frustration with critics of investments in transit or ETOD. Some are self-deprecating. The fourteen humor videos were easily the most in any category.

**Events:** The events attended by Jannice and featured in the videos ranged from ribbon cuttings to a symposium to a transit-themed food pop-up. Those with greater community engagement were done in voiceover, with Jannice providing context, whereas panel discussions would include clips from the speakers. There were seven videos focused on events.

From the perspective of a viewer, the primary purpose of the account seemed to be to explain ETOD and why it's important, using a combination of first-person short stories, humorous observations, and informative mini-lessons. Beyond that, additional goals appeared to include raising awareness about Elevated Chicago and coalition partners, encouraging celebration of public transit infrastructure and workers, and building an online community of like-minded Chicagoans.

In its first year, the Elevated Chicago TikTok account posted **43** videos. Out of those 43, eight had more than **10,000** views and nine had fewer than 1,000 views. Four videos were shared more than **100** times, and six videos had more than **50** comments. This is very high levels of engagement for a new account, created by a non-profit organization, and focused on what is usually considered an unglamorous topic. The most popular posts were the walking and explainer videos, while the event and humor videos dominated among those with under 1000 views.

## Narratives

After reviewing the account, we picked up on a few narrative threads across the 43 videos.

### Narrative of Inequality

Investments in public infrastructure vary widely within Chicago, and between Chicago and other cities, with lower-income neighborhoods suffering most from this neglect. This narrative was most clearly found in the walking videos, which often showcased abandoned homes and lots and poorly maintained sidewalks. A couple of videos featured neighborhoods where investments in infrastructure had been made, including one video from Ann Arbor, Michigan, which most powerfully underscored both the inequality and what is possible with proper investment.

### Narrative of Racial Representation in Transit Advocacy

There is a stereotype that Chicago residents, particularly Black people, don't care about sidewalks, bus and train service, bike lanes, and other ways of getting around, because they are happy to drive everywhere in their cars. By having Jannice, a Black woman, as the show's host, and by featuring guests (and commenters) who didn't



look like the typical transit advocate (ie: a white, economically secure, bike rider), the videos were telling an important story about who cares about public transportation and transit hubs.

## People-First Narrative

This is a narrative that says transit hubs attract people and should be developed with people in mind. By showing people using transit and engaging in development, and providing a space where folks could share their experiences and perspectives on transit and development, the videos placed people at the center of the story. Even short videos, like one expressing appreciation for bus drivers or explaining “lot jams” where an empty lot is turned into a concert space, did an effective job highlighting the role people play in these systems.

## Systemic Change Narrative

People buy into the narratives that transit is only for the poor and development is only for the rich. These videos attempted to advance the narrative that systemic change such as equitable development is possible and transit can work for everyone. This may have been the most difficult narrative to advance, because in order to keep it real, many of the videos poked fun at the ways the systems often didn’t work well. Yet Jannice used the credibility those videos gave her, as someone who loved yet could be frustrated by transit, to tell stories of when transit and development worked. Sometimes this was through advocacy, like support for the Connected Communities Ordinance, or by attending ribbon cuttings for new buildings, or showing public spaces put to good use by and for local residents. Jannice also pushed back against cynics in the comments, who believe development always leads to gentrification and that cars are always better than trains or buses.

In addition to these narratives, we were interested in how the account helped build community **narrative power** for Elevated Chicago and the wider community. We found a number of ways in which we saw the account doing just that.

The Elevated Chicago TikTok account doesn’t just attract viewers, it engages them through comments, shares, and stitches. An engaged audience means that the posts are helping to shape the way the public thinks about transit issues in Chicago. Because the account is fully controlled by Elevated Chicago, its influence accrues to a community organization with deep

**Because Jannice and the account are on the ground in these different communities, showing them to the public from a first-person perspective, the TikTok videos themselves are perceived as coming from the community. This authenticity gives the community voice more power.**

relationships in these neighborhoods. Because Jannice and the account are on the ground in these different communities, showing them to the public from a first-person perspective, the TikTok videos themselves are perceived as coming from the community. This authenticity gives the community voice more power.

By using videos from the TikTok account in presentations (as Elevated Chicago has done, according to Jannice), rather than just sharing statistics, the videos demonstrate the power of storytelling to key stakeholders. This makes it clear

that the community can tell stories about their experience in ways that are persuasive. Finally, the account helps build community narrative power by generating media attention, like a CBS News report about the account that lets elected officials and other decision makers know about the organization's reach and influence via TikTok.

## Key Takeaways

Overall, we believe Elevated Chicago models many of the best practices for harnessing community power to advance narrative shifts. A few practices stood out.

1

**Social media accounts thrive when anchored by a host who is informed, authentic, and relatable to their audience.** Jannice's love for transit and equitable development is clear, as is her depth of knowledge about these issues and Chicago more broadly. The account is very much in her voice, which is key on a platform where the on-screen creators make or break accounts.

2

**Prioritize audience connection over promotion.** Most organizations' social media fails to share information about their work in a way that connects to an audience that is primarily interested in the subject matter. Once an account gains a following, like this one, there is a lot of pressure to "cover" the (often less interesting) work of the organization. Elevated Chicago's account addresses this by keeping its institutional posts to a minimum and integrating institutional content subtly into fun,

useful, and informative content. However, it's worth noting that the most nakedly promotional posts (for example, where Jannice attended an event) tended to perform the worst.

3

**Insider talk shuts out new audiences.** A related challenge faced by many organizational accounts is a tendency to fall into jargon, which is deadly for an account seeking a wider audience. Jannice told me that she has a rule for every video: "If my mom doesn't get the video, I need to do it again." When jargon is used (and it's rare), it is always explained so every viewer will understand. This sends a signal to potential followers that this is an account for them, not just for insiders.

4

**Acknowledging real challenges and frustrations helps build credibility.** One of the challenges faced by many advocates is striking the right balance between acknowledging the problems that exist, while not allowing them to breed cynicism about the possibility of change and a better future. While Jannice clearly loves transit (and development), she is also clear about the ways it frustrates or disappoints her. Many of the humorous videos show Jannice expressing frustration, sometimes with opponents of ETOD, but more often with the transit system itself. This has the effect of giving her added credibility as an advocate when she tells the story of a new development or successful legislation.

5

**Navigate neighborhood change with integrity.** Another challenge these kinds of efforts face is how to avoid praising something about a neighborhood that may be seen by residents as a negative development. Most people have very strong feelings about changes made to a neighborhood they love, so what may seem like progress to some will be remembered as a step backwards to others. It is impossible to please everyone (for example, bike lanes are loved by bikers and hated by many drivers), but trying to tell stories in a way that is consistent with Elevated Chicago's values is harder than it might seem initially. Jannice said she will avoid doing a video about a particular neighborhood if she doesn't feel well enough informed about its history.

6

**Social media managers need deep familiarity with the platform(s) they are using.** The account feels like it was created by a TikTok native, someone who is familiar with both the conventions of TikTok and the tools it offers to make videos more compelling. Looking across all 43 videos we surveyed, there was an excellent use of still and moving images, text on screen (both for closed captioning and to provide

additional information), voice over, and music. The images and videos are a mix of original (things Jannice shot or took herself) and found footage. Stitched videos performed particularly well.

7

**Find the formula for maintaining audience trust.** Many TikTok accounts find an approach that works and stick with it. Users come to expect certain things from different accounts. After some experimentation, Jannice settled on four kinds of videos to create a good balance that quickly becomes familiar. The short, funny videos rarely hit, but they are easy to make and allow Jannice to keep the account from getting too heavy. One of her most popular videos, in what I'm guessing will become a recurring feature, was a quiz about Chicago transit, where users were encouraged to record and stitch themselves answering the questions upon hearing them for the first time.

8

**Navigate online discourse through intentional engagement as a strategy for cultivating belonging.** Comment sections are often a mixed bag, attracting genuine engagement along with trolls seeking bad faith encounters. Most of the comments on the account videos are genuine, positive, and often substantive. Jannice responds to questions selectively, enough to make it clear she's reading the comments, will answer good faith questions, and cares about her viewers. This encourages more comments and helps to create a sense of community among the account's followers.



## CASE STUDY

# BeGreat Together: Amplifying Black and Brown Communities' Realities and Solutions

What happens when narrative power is put back where it belongs: in community hands? How an educational documentary becomes a catalyst for policy change.



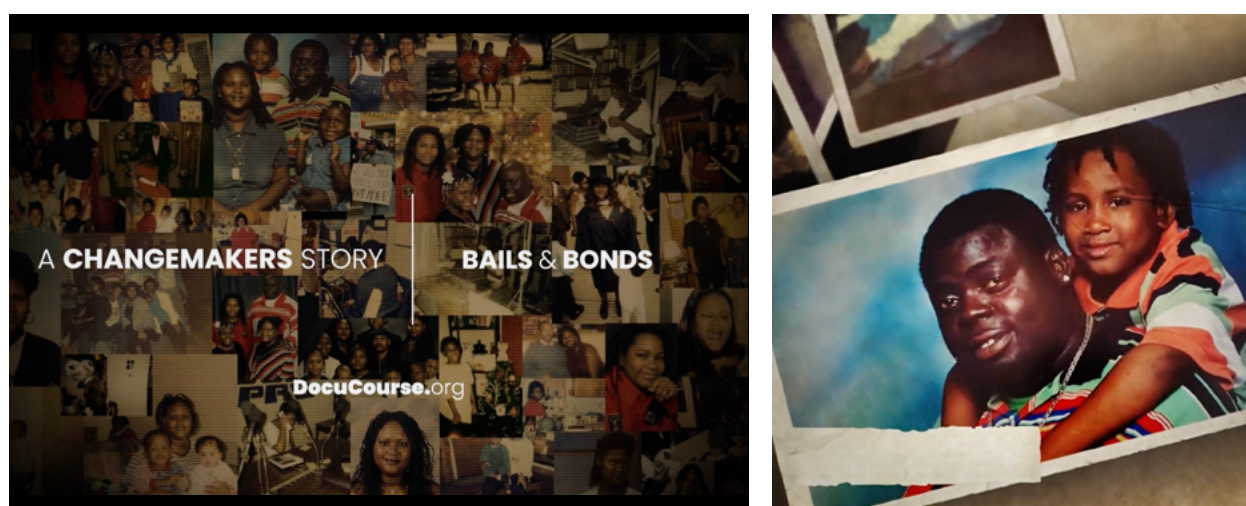
## Introduction

In Kansas City, Missouri, the education advocacy nonprofit BeGreat Together was eager to use storytelling as a way to build community narrative power in Black and Brown communities. That drove them to launch DocuCourse. It currently offers four courses, broken into categories: Arts, Justice, Family, and Health. Each course shares a common structure. At the center is a feature-length documentary film starring a community changemaker who tells the story

of how and why they became advocates. A series of shorter videos lays out the ways in which community members can join in their efforts, as organizers, advocates, and storytellers. Finally, there are additional first-person stories from members of the community who are impacted by the issue at hand.

**DocuCourse creator Avrell Stokes describes its approach in three parts. “This is what's going on in the community. This is how people are making a difference. This is how you can get involved.”**

**This case study focuses on one DocuCourse film, *Bails & Bonds*. The changemaker at the center of *Bails & Bonds* is Justice Gatson.** Gatson is an advocate for “Black mamas” caught up in the criminal justice system. In the film, she tells her own story, starting as a high school student skeptical of women who remain in abusive relationships, through her own struggle to escape an abusive partner, and along the way getting a first-hand look at how the justice system fails Black women like her. Gatson also narrates several short videos explaining how members of the community can join this work on behalf of Black mothers who are facing incarceration, currently behind bars, or reentering their community.



Screenshots from the *Bails & Bonds* DocuCourse film.

## Method: DocuCourse

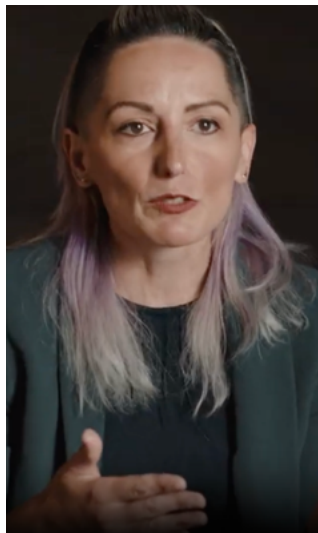
The feature film *Bails & Bonds* is built around one woman’s story. Justice Gatson is the primary storyteller, beginning when she is in high school. She gets involved with the school radio station, where she works on a story about domestic violence.

She later ends up in what becomes an abusive relationship, feeling unable to leave after becoming pregnant. Years of system failures resulted in a traumatic and unjust separation from her children and inspired her to work helping victims of domestic violence. She recounts how women are often caught in a cycle of poverty, including the loss of benefits, which makes going back to jail more likely for them. Gatson decided to provide support for

those out on bail. Eventually, this led her to an organization that helps secure the release of Black women by posting their bail.

In the final segment, she confronts the far-reaching consequences of incarcerating Black mothers, including long-term harm to employment, housing, and family stability. Gatson highlights how community members support Black mothers in the criminal justice system, primarily through fundraising efforts to secure their release. She states, "Black people have always had to purchase our freedom."

The film features several other people that add texture and depth to her story. We also hear from several experts in domestic violence and mass incarceration, and read quotes from other experts. Both usually appear to explain or contextualize a part of Gatson's story; in other words, the experts and slides provide evidence to her anecdote.



Images from the DocuCourse film *Bails & Bonds*, featuring Tricia Rojo Bushnell, Executive Director of Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice at University of Pennsylvania Carrey Law School; Cecil E. Wattree, Licensed Specialist Social Worker and Executive Director of Radical Empowerment Services; and, Justice Gatson, Founder & Director, Reale Justice Network.

Following the film, Gaston narrates a series of short videos. Each explains to viewers how they can build their power through storytelling, relationship building, and community-based organizing. These are explainer videos, so they don't use storytelling. Instead, they leverage the stories told elsewhere to inspire people to build their own power through organizing and storytelling.

DocuCourse is deliberate about how it seeks to build narrative power and create narrative change. These are decisions BeGreat made in creating this tool:

**Centering a story.** As we know, narratives require stories, and there is no narrative change without storytelling. As noted above, the core of the film is a story, told in the first person, filled with compelling and memorable details.

**The storyteller.** The second key choice DocuCourse makes is selecting the storyteller. The principle that impacted communities should tell their own stories—often expressed as “nothing about us without us”—is well known across social movements. Choosing Gatson to tell this story is therefore essential. Her narration deepens the impact of the film, drawing from her own lived experience strengthens her role as a storyteller. In doing so, the film amplifies her narrative power, and by extension, the narrative power of her community of Black mothers.

**Data and story.** The third choice—emphasized by Avrell Stokes, the program’s creator and director—is the deliberate intertwining of analysis and data with story. Stokes draws the

**The intended effect is for audiences to connect with the story emotionally, while also trusting its broader representational truth.**

distinction between subjective and objective truth: the former is conveyed through Justice’s personal narrative, while the latter is introduced through supporting data. His method, Stokes explains, is to “back up the stories with data,” so that “each statistic follows what could be seen as a subjective truth.” The intended effect is for audiences to connect with the story emotionally, while also trusting its broader representational

truth. His approach offers a powerful response to a common challenge faced by advocates: harnessing the emotional resonance of storytelling without abandoning fact-based reasoning.

**Creating a moment.** Beyond creating the *Bails & Bonds* content, DocuCourse has been intentional about how and where it is used. To bring stories into community spaces, they host “bridge events.” For example, the content was featured at a public health department event focused on domestic violence that centered healing and thriving, not only survival. At the event, Gatson proposed organizing a purse donation drive for women reentering the community after incarceration. The Reale Justice Network brought this idea to life last fall during Domestic Violence Awareness Month, in partnership with the Kansas City Public Health Department.



# Narratives

After reviewing all of the materials, we compiled some of the key narratives we found, as well as some of the harmful narratives the filmmaker avoided.

## Narrative of systemic failure

Through the stories, we come face to face powerful institutions that should have offered support—but failed to do so. These include schools, law enforcement, the courts, even trusted individuals like friends and community members. This is often a challenging narrative, one that can provoke either cynicism or a call to action. Does a story of systemic failure teach us to abandon trust in institutions altogether, or does it deepen our urgency to build systems that truly serve and support all?

## Narrative of false choices

Many mainstream narratives place blame on individuals for making poor choices that shape their life outcomes. *Bails & Bonds* challenges this framing by showing the limits of individual agency in the face of structural barriers. The stories make clear that no amount of personal responsibility can fully protect someone or their family from unjust external forces. For example, the film illustrates how people can be forced into impossible decisions—between homelessness and committing a crime, or between subjecting an abusive partner to a broken criminal justice system and living in fear of retribution. On a broader level, the film pushes back against dominant narratives about bail, revealing it is not a neutral system, but a tool that needlessly separates mothers from their children.

## Narrative of resilience

Amid so many stories of tragedy, it's essential that the film also highlights Gatson's strength and resilience in navigating—and ultimately overcoming—her experience. In fact, all three stories featured in *Bails & Bonds* showcase resilience, each concluding with the protagonist stepping into community leadership and helping others build power to confront these systemic issues. Absent this narrative arc, such stories risk being demobilizing, breeding cynicism rather than inspiring action.

## Narrative of mutual aid

What are our obligations to others in the community who are in danger or suffering? Gatson's story offers one answer: she felt compelled to support other incarcerated "Black mamas" not out of charity, but out of solidarity. Her story reflects a form of mutual aid—a practice rooted in community care, where people come together to meet one another's needs through shared resources and support, especially in the face of systemic neglect or harm. Gatson's story centers on helping people heal and survive. It stands as a powerful counter to a dominant narrative on individual responsibility, and instead uplifts collective care as a pathway to justice.

## Avoiding right-wing tropes

There are many moments in which a story like this, especially when told by a well-meaning individual, can unintentionally reinforce harmful right-wing tropes that hijack the narrative. *Bails & Bonds* avoids that trap. We never learn whether Gatson relied on government assistance, used drugs, or completed college. The film does not imply that she was promiscuous or irresponsible. By presenting an asset-based narrative, DocuCourse makes a deliberate and strategic choice: to signal that these details are irrelevant. Their absence is an intentional choice made by both the storyteller and the editor to keep the audience focused on a narrative grounded in dignity, strength, and shared values.

# Key Takeaways

Our goal is to understand how the course contributes to building community narrative power. Earlier, we examined DocuCourse's overall approach to narrative power. Now, let's take a closer look at each of its key elements.

1

**Keep narrative control rooted from community, for community.** When asked how he chose which issues to explore through DocuCourse, Avrell Stokes explained, "We weren't looking for topics, we were looking for people." By turning to the community and asking who inspired them, the team was led to Gatson—a trusted and respected leader. This approach centers lived experience over titles, ensuring narrative control and power remains rooted in the community rather than extracted by outsiders. Gatson not only has a powerful story, but she's also a gifted storyteller—clear,

compelling, and emotionally resonant. With the support of a Black filmmaking team led by Stokes, she is empowered to tell her own story with care and intention, reaching wider audiences and creating new opportunities for advocacy and impact.

2

**Often the message is the messenger.** All storytelling draws from broader narratives, but first-person accounts—when told effectively—carry a unique power: they deliver both the message and the messenger. In Gatson’s case, she shares a deeply personal story about domestic violence and the criminal justice system—topics that are often silenced or spoken only in whispers. Simply choosing to tell this story breaks a cultural taboo, which makes it all the more compelling and credible to audiences. Her vulnerability and honesty are not just courageous, they are what give the story much of its force and impact.

4

**Even powerful stories can do harm, narrative change requires intention.** As discussed in the earlier section on narrative, *Bails & Bonds* takes a thoughtful approach to storytelling—intentionally reinforcing positive narratives while rejecting harmful tropes that often undermine them. One of the core challenges in narrative change work is that even a powerful story, told by a compelling narrator, can still unintentionally advance harmful narratives. That is not the case here. By framing the story around themes like systemic failure, mutual aid and resilience, *Bails & Bonds* effectively supports narrative shifts that challenge dominant assumptions and opens space for deeper understanding and action.

5

**Bridge grassroots energy with policy and public influence.** According to Stokes, *Bail & Bonds* was designed for two key audiences: local decisionmakers and members of the community at-large, both locally and nationally, who are seeking deeper purpose

# Spotlights

## Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability

Not far from California’s wealthy, well-traveled coast lies the San Joaquin Valley, often called “the food basket of the world” for its agricultural abundance. Yet behind that abundance is a stark contrast: wealthy landowners and underpaid workers. It is a region with underfunded public services and infrastructure that often deepen existing health, economic, and racial disparities.

One of the region’s key sources of public revenue is a transportation sales tax, set to expire in 2027. Historically, these dollars were typically used to expand and update Fresno County’s highway system, and the tax was promoted as such. In a sprawling region where driving is a necessity for most residents, this message resonated deeply—reinforcing dominant American narratives of individualism and self-reliance, where cars and roads symbolize freedom and opportunity.

In advance of the tax measure’s scheduled 2026 renewal, Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability—a statewide advocate for sound policy that secures equal access to opportunity regardless of wealth, race, income, and place—launched an effort to counter these narratives and shift public opinion toward a broader vision for the tax revenue that encompassed community priorities like air quality, transit, and housing, rather than limiting it to road projects. This was in part a response to a proposal that sought to advance the renewal by four years, effectively locking in the current emphasis on highways.



Community leaders and residents rally for critical investments in communities that have historically been overlooked, such as streetlights, sidewalks, and reliable public transit.



**To challenge these mainstream narratives, Leadership Counsel focused on elevating stories from those failed by the outcomes of the initial transportation tax. They built a diverse coalition that included unusual allies such as labor unions, and gathered stories from residents across the Valley.** Residents shared accounts of long waits for infrequent buses, worsening health from truck pollution, lack of union jobs despite \$3 billion in tax revenue, and children who were injured while walking to school. Even drivers spoke about the high costs and time burden of car dependency, expressing a desire for more reliable public transit.

**They created systems for collecting and amplifying local stories—ensuring the narrative was shaped not by disengaged media, but by the people most impacted. With strategy, persistence and intentionality, they reclaimed the narrative—and changed the outcome.**

To bring these stories to the forefront of public attention, Leadership Counsel forged a strategic relationship with the Fresno Bee. As a result, the paper ran 19 articles on transportation over two years—highlighting community engagement and featuring regular op-eds from community allies. After sustained engagement, the editorial board published three editorials supporting Leadership Counsel’s alternate narratives of interdependence and mutuality, and the importance of co-creating an expansive use of the tax prior to its renewal.

**The stories published in the Fresno Bee—and many more—were amplified across coalition members' social media channels, painting a fuller picture of who lives in the region and how poorly the system serves them. A new narrative began to take hold: one rooted in interdependence, not just infrastructure.**

Leadership Counsel leaned into a powerful slogan: “Broken Roads. Broken Promises.” Longtime residents recalled what they had been promised by local officials and how those promises went unfulfilled. The proposal for early renewal was ultimately defeated. Presumably this was in large part due to these narrative shifts and subsequent perspective shifts for residents, understanding of the ways in which they have not been served by the tax.

Through this effort, Leadership Counsel built lasting community power. They created systems for collecting and amplifying local stories—ensuring the narrative was shaped not by disengaged media, but by the people most impacted. With

strategy, persistence and intentionality, they reclaimed the narrative—and ultimately changed the outcome.

*Disclaimer: No lobbying was supported by Convergence Partnership funds. Convergence resources were explicitly used to support Leadership Counsel's coalition and community narrative power building efforts. All efforts explicitly connected to the early renewal ballot measure were supported by other resources.*



## Hutch in Harmony

Hutch in Harmony began as #HutchAgainstHate—a vigil in response to the violence and bigotry of the “Unite The Right” rally in Charlottesville. Over time it has grown into a sustained grassroots effort tackling the social, racial, and economic challenges facing communities in Hutchinson, Kansas—a prairie city of 40,000 on the Arkansas River. Alongside this work, Hutch in Harmony has quietly pioneered new ways to build community narrative power.

Organizers and residents realized through dialogue Hutchinson's unique history—both real and imagined—had been neglected. The city is, after all, the site of Smallville, the hometown of Superman, but its factual history includes episodes of racist violence against Black, Latine, and Native American residents. To uplift this part of its history, Hutch in Harmony has sought opportunities to use art as a vehicle for truth-telling.

### Do we downplay the role and impact of race in America's story or use it to counter the whitewashed version of our past?

A great example of a national effort to shape narratives around the American story is the 1619 Project, and the backlash response, the 1776 Project. National debates over how America's history is told have played out under the brightest lights, with national media coverage and expensive documentaries lifting up these alternative stories.

**The city's efforts to tell the full story mirrors similar national narrative battles but on a much smaller scale, grappling with the same core question: Do we downplay the role and impact of race in America's story or use it to counter the whitewashed version of our past?**



Hutch in Harmony celebrating and honoring the contributions of Black Hutchinson residents during Black History Month, Feb. 2023.



Staff showcasing Hutch in Harmony's Reading Rendezvous, a monthly book club that select literature themed around social justice.

Hutch In Harmony has centered its efforts on two artist-driven storytelling tools: large murals and small, community-distributed coloring books. In 2020, Hutch in Harmony supported two murals by local artists, Brendan Martinez and Jocelyn Woodson, depicting Chester I. Lewis, a civil rights activist and attorney with the NAACP who championed desegregation and economic justice in Kansas. The murals are both a celebration and a provocation, pairing vibrant artistry with hard truths about institutional racism in a conservative state.

In a city with only 1,700 Black residents, it is easy to erase Black history from the historical narrative, pretending that Kansas was untouched by racial justice struggles of the 20th century. **By securing spaces for these murals—literally embedding them into city property—Hutch in Harmony strengthened its community narrative power, by claiming public space to tell the community's story and reshape how the public remembers is racial history.**

## Ujima Company

Buffalo, NY is known for its old houses. Many of those homes contain lead-based paint, widely used in houses before it was banned in 1978. More than 90% of homes in Buffalo were built before that year. Over time, exposure to lead causes severe and irreversible health problems, particularly children, including permanent memory loss, hearing damage, developmental delays, learning disabilities, and behavioral disorders.

Buffalo's lead paint crisis sits at the intersection of two deeply engrained—and racialized—narrative currents: one about parenting, the other about homeownership. **The dominant narrative about parenting and the “home” frames both as private domains that must be shielded from outside interference. At the same time, anti-Black narratives rely on and reinforce myths of Black parental neglect, while Black neighborhoods and homes have long been sites of exploitation by outsiders.** Together, these narratives breed shame and suspicion, making Black parents less willing to accept outside help for lead abatement.

CoNECT (Community Network for Engagement, Connection and Transformation) is a Buffalo-based non-profit whose mission is “to build relationships, trust and power for healthier individuals, organizations and communities.” They house several networks, coalitions and collaboratives, including the Community Health Worker Network of Buffalo. A key priority of the Network is to support those most impacted by the overlapping lead paint and housing crises. Early on, they realized that fear-based messaging was ineffective. One public service ad, for example, warned of “a monster lurking in your home and then zoomed in on a little baby” an approach that triggered trauma, deepened mistrust, and led to inaction instead of action. Fear of eviction if landlords were called upon to get involved with abatement efforts only exacerbated the problem.

Instead, they turned to story-based communication, partnering with Ujima Company, a local multicultural theater. The seven-minute play, called “Legacy of Lead,” was created by drawing from stories collected in housing court by Orlando Dickson—a community member who had himself once been evicted and unhoused. Cast



*Legacy of Lead* is a short play that shares a day in the life of a single mom with a child affected by lead exposure. It was made in conjunction with Healthy Homes Task Force and Ujima Theater to discuss the impacts of lead exposure in Buffalo, New York.

members were local residents, who played roles drawing from their own lives: a lawyer portraying a lawyer, a teacher playing a teacher, and a woman with lead-poisoned children told her own story. The play was designed for easy performance, community centers or churches, sparking discussion with the audience. Directed by Marissa Biondolillo, the script wove together several real-life accounts into a single narrative that audiences could see themselves in.

**At the heart of this storytelling was a radically different narrative about the community impacted by lead paint poisoning.**

**The work with Ujima was unusual. Its artists were invited into policy conversations from the start, and impacted residents were brought into the production process—placing artists, community members, non-profits, government, and business leaders on equal footing.** As Maria Ta, Ujima’s Chief Executive Director shared, “We were a part

of those policy conversations...in order to inform how we can best serve the goals that we have as a coalition, of what we want to change and how we want to inform what people are doing and thinking around the issue.”

**The deep integration of artists and impacted individuals with the production and the campaign built real community narrative power.** Ujima gained new funding, audiences, and community participation in the storytelling process. Together, this demonstrates one way to measure community narrative power building. The power of these storytellers was also strengthened through their inclusion in the coalition work, which reached power holders in non-profit, government, and business sectors.

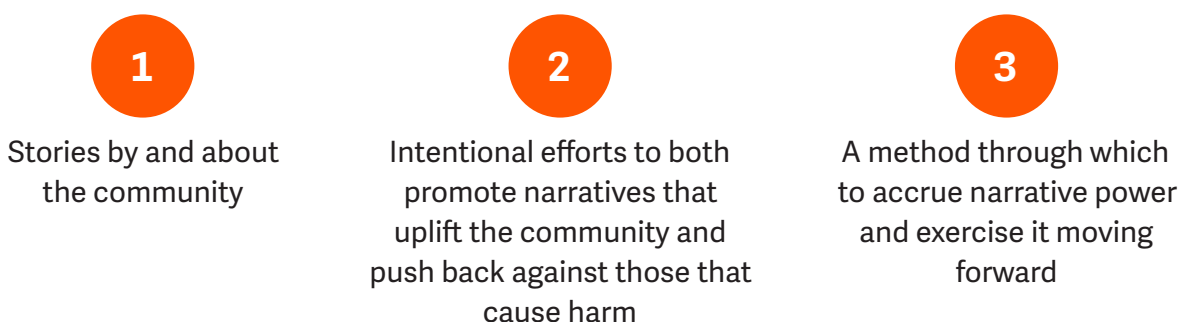
At the heart of this storytelling was a radically different narrative about the community impacted by lead paint poisoning. Most importantly, Ujima shifted the prevailing narrative. Rather than blaming residents and demanding personal responsibility, the stories destigmatized the presence of lead paint and advanced a narrative of collective responsibility—building trust in local institutions and government, who were responsible for engaging community members around abatement efforts.



# Insights & Recommendations

The purpose of these case studies and spotlights is to better understand how movements and organizations are building community narrative power. We did our best to draw on a diversity of approaches, which shared a desired narrative outcome around building power but differed in their methods and goals. So, what did we learn?

**We identified three key components that make up community narrative power:**



The most effective projects excelled in all three areas. For example, Elevated Chicago's TikTok account created and shared stories by members of the community, rooted in the neighborhoods they call home. The effort had a clear sense of narrative purpose—both countering harmful narratives (i.e., Black people don't care about transit issues) and advancing positive narratives (i.e., it's possible to be for development and against displacement). The account's followers and engagement grew, it became a powerful tool for shaping and shifting public narrative and advancing advocacy efforts for equitable transit and development.

## Recommendations for Funders

Narrative change is not and never will be instantaneous. It takes sustained commitment, resources, and time to take root. To build and maintain narrative power in communities, funders play a critical role in enabling persistence, consistency, and strategic weaving and strengthening efforts over the long term.

When funders invest thoughtfully in this work, they help strengthen the narrative ecosystems that move us closer to a just and equitable society. The following recommendations offer concrete ways funders can support narrative power-building, ensuring that these initiatives remain sustainable, impactful, and rooted in communities.

## 1. Back community control and ownership of production.

Building narrative power requires consistent creation and distribution of stories, and it is far more effective when the community controls both. We found that exercising community narrative power is often easier than building and maintaining it. Without ongoing commitment, investment, and ideally ownership of the assets, the reach and impact of community narrative efforts remain limited.

Three of the examples we explored—Elevated Chicago’s TikTok series, BeGreat Together’s DocuCourse videos, and Ujima Theater in Buffalo—demonstrate the advantages of community control over the means of cultural production. While not feasible for every organization, this is the optimal approach for ensuring narrative power stays rooted in the community. It is akin to the difference between owning and renting; if you can afford it, owning ensures that your investment and its growth benefit you, rather than someone else.

Community ownership creates lasting assets that can be leveraged for advocacy, engagement, and sustained change. Funders and organizations can strengthen community narrative power by prioritizing investments in cultural tools and platforms that remain under community stewardship.

## 2. Start with the narrative, not just the story.

We found that while storytelling is a requisite for building narrative power, it must be anchored in intentional narrative strategy that is distinct from

strategic communications. Even before collecting or identifying stories, aligning around the desired narrative is critical; without this, it is possible to create a robust communications infrastructure that fails to build narrative power. Organizations need funding for this proactive planning, to intentionally assess the narrative landscape they operate in and clarify their goals.

In the projects we examined, the most effective efforts incorporated narrative goals from the outset. In both case studies, storytelling was designed to serve clearly defined goals and narratives. For the DocuCourse *Bails & Bonds*, one goal was to pair a narrative of resilience with one of mutual aid—encouraging action by survivors of domestic violence without implying they must shoulder the burden alone. For Elevated Chicago, content creation was shaped by the organization’s narrative priorities, including shifting perceptions about how development can benefit communities of color.

### 3. Break the competition cycle, fund collaboration.

Some of the most impactful efforts, such as Leadership Counsel successfully defeating the ballot measure, relied on forming strong coalitions. Broad coalitions amplify narrative impact by bringing together diverse perspectives and stories, extending a campaign’s reach and deepening its impact. Collaboration also enables resource-sharing, sparks creative content, and increases visibility across sectors.

Funders can play a critical role in fostering these partnerships, especially with unlikely allies. Providing long-term, collaborative funding—and making it clear that the goal is resource the whole network—can reduce competition for resources and encourage alignment. Building networks among funders, organizations, and communities helps pool resources, coordinate strategies, and ultimately, build and sustain long-term impact.

#### 4. Narrative power is the long game, so fund it to last.

Community narrative power cannot be built, exercised, or sustained through one-off initiatives or short-term projects alone. It requires stable funding, consistent leadership, and a commitment to building on early wins over time. Short-term victories—like defeating Measure C or passing the Connecting Communities Ordinance—are important, but they are only the beginning. Lasting change depends on long-term strategic storytelling, capacity development, and the structural support to keep these narratives alive. Without sustained investment, the infrastructure and relationships that make narrative power possible will erode.

In the projects we studied, costs varied widely, but the real determinant of impact wasn't the price tag. What mattered most was the availability of funds to sustain the work. Funders should prioritize multi-year commitments and capacity-building grants over single-year projects. They should encourage organizations to plan for maintaining and scaling narrative efforts over a five-to-ten-year horizon, and then match those plans with the funding to realize them. Narrative change is a long game. We don't stand a chance if we don't stay in it together.

## In Closing

While we would like to offer definitive conclusions on how to grow community narrative power, important questions remain, particularly around impact and scale. By design, community-based initiatives operate on the community level. Their strength lies in authenticity, grounded in the storyteller's presence among the people they seek to reach. Yet this local focus means even the strongest projects, like those featured in this report, can only go so far in shifting deeply entrenched narratives. Achieving scale will require a sustained, coordinated effort across communities nationwide to build and wield community narrative power.

This report captures only a snapshot in time for each project. They demonstrate what is possible, but do not show what sustained work over a decade or more could accomplish. How does a mural in a neighborhood park influence people over time? Does it fade into the background or seep into the community's collective consciousness? Can ongoing educational programs fundamentally shift perceptions and behavior? These questions of long-term impact are beyond our scope.

We do know that shifting narratives at scale demands more than good intentions—it requires bold investment, imaginative strategy, and long-term resolve. Our hope is that this report contributes to accelerating progress toward a future where communities lead their own stories, control the platforms to tell them, and shape the future they deserve.







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