

**PRACTITIONER Q&A**

# **A PLACE AT THE TABLE: A COMMUNICATION MODEL FOR ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY**

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## *Practitioner Q & A*

A Place at the Table: A Communication Model for Addressing Food Insecurity

Interview with Maggie Kane

*Founder and Executive Director, A Place at the Table*

## Biography

Maggie Kane is the founder and executive director of A Place at the Table, Raleigh's pay-what-you-can nonprofit café. She graduated from North Carolina State University in 2013 and began working for Love Wins Community Engagement Center, a nonprofit serving people experiencing homelessness. By befriending people living on the margins, Maggie saw the challenges of food insecurity as well as the importance of providing dignity to those in need. In February 2015, A Place at the Table started as pop-up meals throughout the city. Since opening a physical location in January 2018, Table has served affordable meals to thousands in Raleigh while treating them with dignity.

## Description of Project

Food insecurity, defined as limited or uncertain access to adequate food due to lack of money or other resources, affects 12.5% of North Carolina households, higher than the national average (Feeding America, 2020). In Raleigh, the capital city, a unique project is making waves in the battle against this pervasive issue: A Place at the Table. This initiative challenges the traditional cafe model by operating on a pay-what-you-can basis, part of a small but growing trend of eateries across the United States aiming to make nutritious meals accessible to all (One World Everybody Eats, 2023). Opening its doors in January 2018, A Place at the Table contributes to a

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movement toward a more inclusive, equitable community where everyone, regardless of financial means, has a place at the table and access to healthy food.

A Place at the Table is notable for its commitment to dignity and choice, ensuring that every visitor is treated with respect and has the opportunity to enjoy a meal in a welcoming environment. This nonprofit cafe embodies the philosophy that everyone deserves a seat at the table, making it a beacon of hope and community in Raleigh. “Café [Table Raleigh] is just so much more than just a food source. It’s a gathering of community, a gathering of necessities, and it just offers so much more than just a meal,” said Shelby Mathews, a resident of Apex, North Carolina, who has been volunteering at A Place at the Table for two years. The cafe sees about 80 volunteers a day, with as many as 40 to 60 volunteering for their meal (Butera, 2023). It’s a place where statistics on food insecurity transform into stories of individuals and families, each unique but united in their search for a sense of belonging and support.

Research has shown that restorative narratives - stories that highlight how people recover from adversity - can be a powerful way to share difficult news without overwhelming audiences (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). Through the lens of public interest communications, A Place at the Table showcases how effectively framed narratives can transform public perception and mobilize community support. The cafe’s storytelling strategy centers on amplifying the voices of those it serves, moving beyond mere statistics to share personal stories of resilience, hope, and community. These narratives are carefully crafted to respect the dignity of individuals, avoiding sensationalism and instead highlighting shared human experiences. This approach demonstrates how telling stories about individuals overcoming adversity can be a powerful and positive way to convey information about hardship and rally support for solutions.

A Place at the Table offers valuable insights for public interest communicators. It underscores the importance of narrative in shaping public discourse, the potential of strategic communication to drive social change, and the transformative power of community engagement. In essence, this initiative demonstrates that when communication is rooted in genuine connection and shared values, it can indeed be a force for good, creating ripples of change that extend far beyond the confines of a single cafe.

**Question:** “A Place at the Table” is a name that carries a lot of weight and meaning. Can you share how you decided on this name and how it reflects the cafe’s mission and values?

**Answer:** The name “A Place at the Table” perfectly encapsulates our mission and values as a pay-what-you-can cafe (Holman, 2024). We wanted a name that was welcoming, inclusive, and would make people curious to learn more. As fate would

have it, while brainstorming names in our office, we noticed a songbook opened to a piece titled “A Place at the Table.” It immediately clicked—this name signified that everyone has a place at our table, regardless of their means. It’s an invitation.

**Question:** The concept of dignity and choice is central to A Place at the Table. How have you used storytelling and public communication to emphasize these themes and connect with the community?

**Answer:** As an organization fighting food insecurity, it's tempting to focus solely on numbers—how many meals served, how many people in need. However, Ken Booth's concept of 'emancipatory realism' frames food security as protecting vulnerable populations from the structural violence of hunger, reminding us that our mission goes beyond feeding numbers (Shepherd, 2012). Recognizing food insecurity as a significant human security concern, we understand the imperative to elevate our message beyond transactional metrics.

From the start, we knew that to truly uphold dignity and choice, our storytelling had to be about more than statistics. By centering the strength and progress of individuals, these narratives offer a path forward (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). We faced the challenge of elevating our message beyond the transactional to convey the transformational power of a shared meal in a welcoming space. Our approach has reflected that, encouraging individuals to speak for themselves, with our organization helping amplify the voices of those we serve (Bryan, 2023).

On any given day, you'll find 200 unique individuals at our tables, each with a story to tell. With their permission, we feature their first-person narratives on our website and social media channels, providing a platform for them to express in their own words what this community support means to them. Ultimately, the story of A Place at the Table is one of dignity and choice in action, of a community coming together to break bread and break down barriers.

It's not about numbers, but about the immeasurable impact of affirming each person's humanity, one meal and one story at a time. That's the story we will keep telling as we strive to set a bigger table for all, aligning with the understanding that addressing food insecurity is fundamentally about protecting human dignity and agency in the face of structural challenges.

**Question:** *Facing the unique challenge of communicating about food insecurity, how do you balance raising awareness and advocating for change without co-opting or sensationalizing the stories of those you serve?*

**Answer:** At A Place at the Table, we walk a delicate line when communicating about food insecurity. It's a challenge faced by many organizations working with vulnerable populations: how to tell stories that inspire action without exploiting or sensationalizing the lives of those in need (Dutta et al., 2016). We know that every person who comes through our doors has a unique story, filled with complexity and humanity. We want to honor each person, while still shedding light on the larger issue of food insecurity in our community.

Our approach is rooted in respect and dignity. We never share someone's story or image without their explicit permission. If a media outlet wants to take pictures inside the cafe, we allow photos of the food and space, but not of individuals' faces unless they've consented to be featured. Schraedley et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of ethical communication in addressing food insecurity, highlighting that empowering individuals to share their own stories ensures

their voices are not manipulated (Bryan, 2023).

When we do share someone's story, it's always with the individual's participation and approval. We may change small details to protect their privacy, but we always seek to preserve the essence of their narrative. It's their voice, their experience, and their truth. By giving them agency in the storytelling process, we aim to avoid reducing people to simplistic narratives or stereotypes (Schraedley et al., 2020).

The power of a story's ending is not to be underestimated. Just as Fitzgerald et al. (2020) found that restorative narratives may need to maintain a positive trajectory and end on an uplifting note to maximize their prosocial impact, we believe that the most powerful stories are the ones individuals tell about themselves—stories of resilience, hope, and community in the face of adversity (Schraedley et al., 2020).

Research by Cassidy-Vu et al. (2022) shows that food insecurity is linked to various health outcomes, highlighting the importance of dignified storytelling to raise awareness while focusing on positive community impacts instead of dramatizing hardships. By holding space for these personal stories and sharing them responsibly, we strive to change the conversation around food insecurity from one of stigma and shame to one of empathy and empowerment. It's a delicate balance, but one we must strike to create real change.

**Question:** *Public interest communications often involves changing narratives to inspire action or change perceptions. Can you*

*discuss any specific communication strategies you've employed to shift the narrative around food insecurity and community support?*

**Answer:** When we first started, it was challenging to convey why a pay-what-you-can cafe was so important. People struggled to understand the concept and its potential impact. We knew that before we could tell people about our mission, we needed to show the community the transformative power of a shared meal in a welcoming space.

From a communications strategy perspective, we recognized that to truly shift narratives around food insecurity, we had to engage people on multiple levels—cognitive, emotional, and experiential. This involves engaging audiences cognitively by aligning the message with their aspirations, evoking relevant emotions that resonate with their experiences, and creating interactive experiences that mimic interpersonal interactions, thereby making the communication more impactful and memorable (Oatley, 2009).

Cognitively, we needed to provide information and statistics about the issue in our community. However, we also understand that facts alone rarely change hearts and minds. From a neuroscience perspective, compelling stories can significantly alter our brain's chemistry, triggering the release of oxytocin, which enhances empathy and cooperative behavior. This neurochemical change is crucial because it influences not only our understanding but also our emotions and behaviors, making us more likely to act in

accordance with the narrative's moral (Zak, 2015). Therefore, while it's important to inform and educate with facts, integrating them into narratives that resonate emotionally and experientially is essential for truly impactful communication.

Emotionally, we turned to the power of restorative narratives. Research has shown that stories highlighting how people recover from adversity can be an effective way to share difficult news without emotionally overwhelming audiences (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). By focusing on the strength and progress of individuals impacted by food insecurity, rather than just their hardships, we aimed to elicit a sense of moral elevation in our supporters.

But perhaps most importantly, we needed to create opportunities for experiential learning. Social psychology research shows that attitudes and behaviors are more likely to change through direct experience and interaction. Russell H. Fazio's (1981) work indicates that attitudes formed through direct, personal experiences are significantly more likely to influence behavior than those formed through indirect methods. This phenomenon occurs because direct experiences enhance the congruence between one's attitudes and subsequent actions, effectively embedding these attitudes within the individual's behavioral framework. By inviting people into the cafe space, they can witness the impact firsthand, engage in dialogue with people from different backgrounds, and feel the intangible sense of community that emerges around a shared table, thus fostering a

profound and personal connection to the cause.

By creating a space that embodied our mission and inviting people into it, we were able to gradually shift the narrative around food insecurity from one of individual shame and scarcity to one of collective dignity and abundance. This shift took four years.

***Question:** How have you leveraged strategic communication to confront and transform public perceptions about food insecurity, particularly addressing common misconceptions and skepticism regarding the capabilities and dignity of those experiencing it?*

***Answer:*** The foundation of our strategic communication lies in fostering authentic relationships and trust. We understand the importance of moving beyond surface-level interactions to deeply engage with those whose stories we aim to tell. Here's how we do this:

**Active Listening and Trust Building:**

- **Strategy:** We start by deeply listening to individuals' stories, engaging in multiple conversations before considering how to share their narrative. By prioritizing relationship-building, we earn trust and ensure authentic storytelling. This process involves co-creating understandings through storytelling and listening, a dynamic interplay where both speaker and listener actively participate to negotiate meaning.

- **Impact:** This approach ensures that individuals feel heard and respected, laying a solid foundation for narratives that resonate deeply with audiences and accurately represent the storyteller. It helps in creating a listening culture that supports open systems thinking, allowing for the exploration and sharing of contextually dependent understandings (Bednar & Welch, 2013).

#### **Story-Driven Content Creation:**

- **Strategy:** Our content focuses on compelling storytelling through interviews, written articles, and video testimonials that highlight resilience, hope, and the community's strength. We emphasize relatable, uplifting themes rather than just statistics. By harnessing the power of narratives, we tap into the complex layers of human experience and emotion, which can be more effective in conveying the gravity of human rights abuses than traditional logical argumentation alone.
- **Impact:** This strategy humanizes food insecurity, making the issue more relatable while countering common misconceptions by showing real people with diverse stories. By prioritizing stories of resilience and agency, we move away from portraying individuals as merely passive victims, thereby fostering a deeper connection and understanding

amongst Raleigh's housed community (Meyers, 2016).

#### **Empowerment-Oriented Messaging:**

- **Strategy:** We emphasize language that highlights the inherent dignity and potential of those experiencing food insecurity, avoiding patronizing or sensationalizing tones. Instead of focusing solely on need, we present the capabilities and strengths of individuals.
- **Impact:** This messaging shifts the narrative from helplessness to empowerment, encouraging the audience to see individuals as resilient and resourceful rather than defined by their struggles. By fostering a narrative that emphasizes strength and resilience, we aim to build moral understanding and empathy, moving beyond simple sympathy (Meyers, 2016).

#### **Experiential Engagement:**

- **Strategy:** We invite community members to visit our café and participate in events where they can directly interact with our mission. This direct exposure not only helps to break down biases but also facilitates open dialogue, crucial for genuine understanding and community building. Experiential engagement in communications and personal interactions enhance emotional understanding and foster genuine connections between individuals (Oatley, 2009). By creating opportunities for community

members to engage in the daily activities of the café, from preparing meals to serving them, we provide a tangible experience that aligns closely with our mission.

- **Impact:** The firsthand experience of the café environment allows participants to witness the practical implementation of inclusivity and mutual support. This immersion into the café's operations and the visible impact of a shared meal elucidate the tangible benefits of social inclusion and community support. According to Oatley (2009), such direct experiences not only enhance empathetic understanding but also lead to more robust and enduring emotional connections. This deeper emotional engagement is critical as it transforms passive supporters into active advocates and contributors, fostering a community that is more cohesive and supportive. By integrating these experiences, we not only educate but also inspire and empower our visitors to take meaningful actions that contribute to the broader goal of reducing food insecurity.

These specific communication strategies enable us to reshape public perceptions about food insecurity. Rather than positioning ourselves as external narrators, we facilitate the process for individuals to narrate their own experiences, thus reinforcing their inherent dignity and dispelling myths around food insecurity (Meyers, 2016). This allows us to humanize the issue and dismantle misconceptions by

highlighting the common threads of hope and community that connect us all.

Ultimately, our communication mirrors our mission. Just as we bring people together around the table, we also aim to bring them together through the stories we share. Our approach focuses on revealing the humanity that often gets overshadowed by statistics, encouraging others to challenge their biases, and actively participate in building a more compassionate and inclusive society. Every story and every meal offers a step toward changing perceptions and fostering empathy.

***Question:** Public relations and social media are powerful tools for public interest communications. How has A Place at the Table used these tools to engage with the community and spread your message?*

***Answer:** We've been fortunate to gain significant media attention and community engagement organically, without relying heavily on traditional PR strategies or press releases. Our approach has been to consistently tell authentic stories that resonate—stories about dignity, choice, and the power of community.*

When we first started in 2015 we focused on sharing the story that inspired our mission—the story of my friend John who experienced homelessness and the lack of dignified food options. As we shared this story and our vision for a pay-what-you-can cafe, people in the community started listening and spreading the word. This grassroots, word-of-mouth approach led to initial local media coverage (Jackson, 2017) before we even had a physical cafe space.



The opening of our cafe was a turning point. We reached out to the local contacts and supporters we had built relationships with, and they helped amplify our message through local news stories. Somewhat unexpectedly, this local buzz caught the attention of national media outlets like the Kelly Clarkson Show (The Kelly Clarkson Show, 2023), and USA Today (Butera, 2023) and Good Morning America (GMA Team, 2019), who both came to Raleigh to feature our story.

Interestingly, while the national coverage was exciting, its biggest impact was actually driving more local engagement. Each time a major network spotlighted us, it spurred a new wave of local media attention and community interest. It was a cycle of national coverage leading to increased local awareness, which in turn attracted more national interest as our community impact grew.

The cafe's pay-what-you-can model, a central part of its story of dignity and inclusivity, has resonated with the community and nearly 300 patrons a day. Guests who can afford to pay a little extra do so knowing they are helping to cover the cost for someone who may not be able to pay. Over the years, this spirit of generosity has allowed the cafe to provide meals for those in need, with over \$100,000 contributed to pay it forward for another guest.

**Question:** *In the realm of public interest communications, storytelling is a powerful tool to engage, educate, and inspire action. From your experience, what key insights or strategies would you recommend to*

*communicators aiming to craft compelling narratives that not only inform but also motivate public engagement and drive change?*

**Answer:** Empower others to be storytellers and ambassadors. Identify the “eagles” in your community—the passionate supporters who will spread your message far and wide. Equip them with the tools and stories they need to be effective advocates. The most compelling narratives often come from those directly impacted by your mission.

The social issues we tackle are too big for any one organization to solve alone. Seek out partnerships and opportunities to uplift the work of others. When you collaborate and share each other's stories, you expand your reach and impact. There's power in showing a united front and demonstrating that we are all working towards a common goal.

Prioritize relationship-building and trust. Compelling stories emerge from authentic connections. Invest time in getting to know the people and communities you serve. Earn their trust by consistently showing up, listening to their needs, and following through on your commitments. Only share stories you've been given permission to tell.

Ultimately, crafting compelling narratives is about honoring the humanity in every story and inviting others to be part of something bigger than themselves. It's about recognizing that we all have a role to play in shaping the stories of our communities and our world. And it's about leveraging the power of storytelling to not just reflect reality, but to change it for the better.

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