

PRACTITIONER Q&A

BEYOND BARS: CRAFTING FREEDOM STORIES WITH THE SEATTLE CLEMENCY PROJECT

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Beyond Bars: Crafting Freedom Stories with the Seattle Clemency Project

Interview with Brooke Kaufman and Jennifer Smith

Seattle Clemency Project

Description of the Seattle Clemency Project

The Seattle Clemency Project increases access to justice by connecting people seeking early release from prison and those facing deportation due to old criminal convictions with free legal representation (Seattle Clemency Project, n.d.-b).

The organization represents individuals who committed crimes decades ago and have changed their lives for the better. Washington state abolished parole in 1984, leaving the public with a prison system that fails to recognize and reward redemption (Braveman et al., 2022). Washington is also home to many immigrants who qualify for post-conviction relief but lack access to affordable legal representation (McQueeney & Lavelle, 2015).

To date, the Seattle Clemency Project has had a substantial impact. The organization has helped 102 people secure freedom from life or long sentences, worked on 22 cases preventing deportation and permanent family separation, matched 275 clients with pro bono attorneys, and generated an estimated \$11 million dollars in free legal services (Seattle Clemency Project, n.d.-a).

Brooke Kaufman's Biography

Brooke joined the Seattle Clemency Project as a Communications Specialist in 2022 after graduating from the University of Washington with a degree in Law, Societies & Justice. Prior to joining SCP as a full-time employee, Brooke was a volunteer with the UW Juvenile Parole

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Project, providing advocacy for petitioners going before the Washington State Indeterminate Sentence Review Board. She previously worked with the Human Rights Defense Center as an independent research contractor and has published writing in *Criminal Legal News*. During her time at UW, Brooke served as Editor-in-Chief of the student newspaper and published articles on access to justice, identity and relationships, abortion access, outdoor recreation, and the arts. As the communications lead for SCP, she is responsible for writing and developing content to raise awareness for the organization and its clients. Her goal is to raise the visibility of SCP's mission to assist persons seeking early release from prison, prevent deportations and permanent family separation, and support the reentry of people returning to the community. Brooke is also the communications lead for the Redemption Project of Washington, a partnership between SCP and the Washington Defender Association (Seattle Clemency Project, n.d.-c). Brooke published her first book, *On Redemption: Second Chances and the Post-Conviction Landscape in Washington State*, in 2024.

Jennifer Smith's Biography

Jennifer is a Co-Founder of the Seattle Clemency Project and has served as the Executive Director since 2016. Jennifer began her legal career as a public defender in San Francisco and worked in private criminal defense for several years. Her commitment to ensuring those who have been impacted by the criminal justice system have a voice and second chance is grounded in a deep belief that we are all fallible and capable of reform, and a healthy legal system must account for that. Jennifer is a graduate of the University of California San Francisco College of Law and the University of San Diego (Seattle Clemency Project, n.d.-c).

Question: *Can you share an overview of what the Seattle Clemency Project is, the work you do, and how strategic communications play a role in achieving your mission?*

Jennifer: The Seattle Clemency Project's mission is to fill a critical need for free legal services for people with decades-old criminal convictions. We help individuals seek early release from prison and prevent deportation triggered by old convictions. We recruit volunteer lawyers from the private

legal community to fill this gap (McQueeney & Lavelle, 2015).

Most of the private lawyers we recruit don't have direct experience with the criminal justice system, but many are concerned with how the system operates and disproportionately impacts communities of color and economically depressed communities (Braveman et al., 2022). Our strategic communications play a crucial role in drawing these lawyers into the work. We do this by highlighting how people in need of free legal representation have weathered

the criminal justice system with extraordinary resilience and grace. We show lawyers how their legal skills can be used to advocate for people impacted by the criminal justice system.

Question: *What unmet need was the Project trying to fulfill in Washington's criminal legal system?*

Jennifer: Before we started, there was no mechanism in the legal system to get people a free lawyer for clemency cases or post-conviction relief for immigrants facing deportation. Washington state abolished parole in 1984, leaving us with a prison system that fails to recognize and reward redemption (Braveman et al., 2022). This has had profound impacts. People who have transformed their lives while incarcerated had no way to have their growth recognized or to seek early release based on their rehabilitation.

For immigrants, old convictions were triggering deportation proceedings and tearing families apart, even when these individuals had long since turned their lives around (McQueeney & Lavelle, 2015). We wanted to create a bridge between those needing legal representation and private sector lawyers willing to volunteer their services. Our goal was to fill this critical gap in the justice system and provide hope for those who had been left behind by the abolition of parole.

Question: *Who had to act or do something differently for you to achieve the goals of your project?*

Jennifer: We needed private sector lawyers to step up and volunteer their time and skills. This was a big ask because many of these lawyers had no experience with criminal law or immigration law. They had to be willing to step outside their comfort zones and learn new areas of law. But we also needed to change how we talked about these cases. When we first started the project, it was two lawyers, me and another lawyer, and one non-lawyer. Our initial idea was to focus on the injustices of extreme sentences like the three strikes law. We thought we'd get lawyers to go in and make arguments about how unjust and unfair these sentences were. However, we found that sharing stories of transformation and resilience was more effective in engaging volunteers and supporters (Clark, 2020).

Brooke: For example, when we started visiting prisons and meeting with people, they didn't want to talk about the injustice of their sentences. Instead, they wanted to share stories like, "Can I tell you about how 20 years ago, 10 years into my sentence, I got a letter from my daughter, and it changed my life, and I've been sober ever since after a lifetime of addiction and negative patterns?" Or, "Can I tell you about how I had a teacher in here who told me that I was smart for the first time as a 40-year-old man, and I went back to my cell, packed up my TV, picked up a book, and I've never been the same since?" These stories of personal growth and transformation became our most powerful tool for engaging volunteers and supporters (e.g., Clark, 2020).

Question: *What did you think would motivate individuals to engage and participate in this project of restorative justice?*

Jennifer: We believed in the power of personal stories. When we started going into prisons and meeting with people, we were struck by how much they wanted to share about how they had changed their lives, even under these hopeless circumstances. It wasn't about the injustice of their sentences; it was about their personal growth and transformation. We found these stories incredibly motivating, and we believed others would, too (Clark, 2020). For example, we met individuals who had committed serious crimes in their youth but had spent decades turning their lives around. They had earned degrees, mentored other inmates, and developed profound insights into their past actions and their potential for positive impact in the future (Jones, 2022).

Brooke: We believed that sharing these stories of transformation would not only motivate lawyers to volunteer but also change public perceptions about the potential for rehabilitation. It's one thing to argue abstractly for second chances; it's another to meet someone who has profoundly changed and see the potential impact of connecting them with that second chance (Clark, 2020; Clough et al., 2023).

Question: *How did you get that message in front of them?*

Brooke: We use various communication channels to share these powerful stories. Our

newsletters have been a key tool. We create success stories that are about 1,000 words long, focusing on how a person is doing since their release—what school they're attending, their job, their family life, and a bit about how they connected with Seattle Clemency Project and their earlier life (Mcqueeney & Lavelle, 2015).

We also use social media, although we're very careful about how we present stories on these platforms to avoid exploitation (Clough et al., 2023). Direct outreach to the legal community has been crucial, often involving in-person presentations where we can share these stories more fully.

This fall, we published a book project that shares more in-depth stories of our clients' lives and transformations. This project allowed us to dive deeper into people's experiences to provide a more comprehensive look at their journeys. Our approach to capturing and sharing stories centers on finding the right balance between showcasing these powerful narratives and respecting our clients' privacy and dignity (Jones, 2022).

The book includes professional photos to give our clients a memento of their participation. It's taken over a year to put everything together, with a big part of that time dedicated to building trusting relationships with the participants. It's crucial that they have full agency over what they put out there, especially since the stories include insight on their families and other personal relationships (Bryan, 2023).

Question: *What are the unique challenges you face when communicating about issues*

of injustice, and how do you navigate the balance between raising awareness and advocating for change without sensationalizing individuals' stories?

Jennifer: It's a delicate balance. We feel very protective of our clients' stories and very fortunate to be hearing them. We need to share these stories to recruit volunteer lawyers and raise funds, but we're always cautious about not exploiting our clients' experiences (Jones, 2022; McQueeney & Lavelle, 2015).

There's a risk of sensationalizing these stories or creating a sort of trauma porn that doesn't respect the dignity of the individuals involved (Clough et al., 2023). We're also aware that once a story is shared publicly, it can't be easily retracted. This could potentially impact a person's life after release by creating an unfair expectation for them to live up to a certain narrative (Clough et al., 2023).

To navigate this, we've developed a lived experience compensation model to pay people for sharing their stories, and we always ensure they have control over what's shared. We want to honor their experiences without putting them under a microscope or creating unrealistic expectations for their lives post-release (McQueeney & Lavelle, 2015).

Brooke: We're very conscious of not overexposing people who might be vulnerable. We take time to build trust and make sure our clients understand they're under no obligation to share their stories.

There have been times when we've started interviews and then realized that the

person wasn't comfortable or ready to share their story publicly. In those cases, we respect their decision to step back and refrain from sharing their story (McQueeney & Lavelle, 2015).

It's about honoring their experience and navigating the process respectfully. We've learned to be patient, to listen, and to always prioritize the well-being and comfort of our clients over our communication goals. It's a constant learning process, but one that we believe is crucial to maintaining the integrity of our work and the trust of those we serve (Jones, 2022).

Question: *In terms of communications, what strategies have been most effective in gaining the trust of incarcerated individuals and encouraging them to engage with the project?*

Brooke: Building trust takes time, and we've learned to be patient and adaptable in our approach. We've changed our interview styles many times, adapting to the different comfort levels and needs of the individuals we work with (Jeung et al., 2018). For our book project, we did introductory meetings before any interviews, gave people control over what they shared, and involved them in the review process (Bryan, 2023).

We've found that face-to-face meetings are incredibly valuable. I've made it a priority to meet people in person, visit their homes, and attend their photo shoots. This personal connection has brought out more honesty and openness in our conversations (Paxton et al., 2020).

Question: *How do you navigate the complexities of communicating with a*

diverse stakeholder group, including victims' families, community members, and the legal system, while ensuring all voices are heard and respected?

Jennifer: This is a challenging aspect of our work, and we're always striving to balance different perspectives and needs. While our primary focus is on our clients, we're aware that their stories impact many others. We try to be mindful of all stakeholders in how we frame and share these stories (Braveman et al., 2022).

With the legal system, we focus on the transformative power of second chances and the potential for rehabilitation. We use our clients' stories to illustrate how people can change and contribute positively to society if given the opportunity (Clark, 2020).

For community members and the broader public, we try to humanize our clients and show their growth and potential. We're careful not to minimize the impact of past actions, but we emphasize the possibility of change and redemption (Paxton et al., 2020).

Regarding victims' families, we approach this with great sensitivity. While we don't typically engage directly with victims' families in our communication efforts, we always keep in mind the impact of crimes on victims and their loved ones. Our goal is to promote healing and restoration for all affected by the criminal justice system (Clough et al., 2023; Jones, 2022).

Question: *How have you used communications strategies to address public skepticism or opposition to clemency,*

especially for individuals with long or life sentences? Could you provide an example of a campaign or message that significantly impacted public opinion?

Brooke: One of our most effective strategies has been to focus on personal transformation stories rather than abstract arguments about justice. When we share stories of individuals who have profoundly changed during their incarceration—earning degrees, mentoring others, developing deep insights into their past actions, and rebuilding relationships with family and community members—it challenges people's preconceptions about those serving life and long sentences as somehow irredeemable or incapable of change (Clark, 2020; Paxton et al., 2020).

For example, we had a client who committed a senseless act of violence when he was 19. He shared with us that his decision was motivated by immaturity and a warped desire to provide for his girlfriend and young son. He spent nearly 40 years in prison, and during this time, he found mentorship and grace from other men who were incarcerated. Through positive influence and renewed faith, he accepted responsibility for his actions and committed himself to a higher purpose.

After successfully petitioning for clemency with the aid of Seattle Clemency Project volunteer attorneys, he returned home to his family. He upheld his promise to live a life of purpose and became the program director and pastor for a nonprofit ministry that connects people released from prison with transitional housing and community support. When we shared his story, focusing on his growth and his

contributions to society, it resonated with people who might otherwise be skeptical of the rehabilitative potential of someone with such a long sentence.

More and more, we're seeing support from diverse quarters, including prosecutors and judges, who recognize the value of second chances when they're earned through genuine transformation.

Question: *What role has the legal community played in the Project's communication efforts, and how do you leverage their expertise to foster continued volunteer engagement and public advocacy?*

Jennifer: The legal community, particularly private sector lawyers, is a key audience for our communication efforts. We share our clients' stories to inspire these lawyers to volunteer their time and expertise. Many of these lawyers have never had direct experience with the criminal justice system, so these stories serve as a powerful introduction to the realities faced by our clients.

We also educate lawyers about the intricacies of the criminal justice system and the impact they can have through pro bono work. We've found that once lawyers engage with our project and meet our clients, they often become passionate advocates themselves. We leverage their expertise in multiple ways. Some volunteer lawyers write op-eds or speak at events, sharing their experiences and insights gained from working on clemency cases. Others help us refine our legal arguments and strategies, which in turn informs our broader communication efforts.

The involvement of respected members of the legal community also lends credibility to our work, helping to shift perceptions among other legal professionals and the broader public.

Question: *In what ways have you adapted your communications strategies over time to ensure your messaging remains impactful, engaging, and aligned with the public interest?*

Brooke: Our communications strategy has evolved significantly over time, adapting to the needs of our clients, our volunteers, and the broader public. Here's a breakdown of how we've changed and what we've learned:

1. **Shift in Focus:** We started with a focus on legal injustices, but quickly realized that personal transformation stories were much more impactful. This shift allowed us to humanize the issues and connect with people on an emotional level.
2. **Expanding Content:** We've moved from short "success stories" in newsletters to more comprehensive, person-first storytelling methods.
3. **Collaborative Storytelling:** We've developed a much more extensive process for building trust, conducting interviews, and reviewing content with our clients. This ensures that the stories we share are authentic and respectful.
4. **Ethical Considerations:** We've implemented a lived experience compensation model, recognizing the value of our client's stories and the

emotional labor involved in sharing them.

5. Diversifying Platforms: While we still use newsletters and direct outreach, we're exploring how to effectively use social media and other digital platforms while maintaining our commitment to ethical storytelling.

Our interview process for the book project illustrates many of these changes:

1. Initial Outreach:

- We reach out via email, text, or phone call to potential participants.
- About 60% are people we've worked with before, while others are new clients or referrals. The qualifying factor is incarceration experience and/or experience with the post-conviction review and relief process.
- We hold focus groups with potential participants to get their input on the interview process and project purpose.

2. Project Introduction:

- We have an introductory meeting or call to share project documents and answer questions.
- We provide a participant agreement that outlines the conditions of participation.

3. Two-Part Interview:

- Each interview is limited to two hours to prevent fatigue.

- The first part covers early life and adolescence, focusing on the participant's mentality and motivating factors at different life stages.
- The second part focuses on the incarceration period, the turning point toward transformation, and life after release.
- Interviews are structured by the writer, but the participants are encouraged to discuss whatever topics and experiences they see fit.

4. Post-Interview Process:

- We create a chronology after the first interview to guide the second interview.
- We conduct a draft story review with the participant.
- We get final approval from the participant before the story goes into the manuscript and is sent to the copy editor.
- Participants reserve the right to cut their story from the project at any point if they are uncomfortable or unsure about moving forward.

5. Ethical Storytelling Approach:

- We emphasize that this isn't just a book of success stories, but a nuanced look at struggle, dedication, and overcoming adversity.
- We encourage honest depictions of the ups and

downs of reentry and other life periods.

- We focus on relatability, showing that extraordinary stories are often extraordinarily relatable.

For organizations looking to implement a similar process, here are some actionable steps :

1. **Develop a Clear Agreement:** Create a participant agreement that outlines the entire process, including how the stories will be used and the participant's rights.
2. **Implement a Multi-Stage Interview Process:** Break interviews into manageable parts and allow time for reflection between sessions.
3. **Prioritize Participant Review:** Build in multiple opportunities for participants to review and approve their stories.
4. **Create a Compensation Model:** Recognize the value of lived experience by compensating participants for their time and emotional labor.
5. **Focus on Trust-Building:** Allocate significant time to building relationships with participants before diving into their stories.
6. **Embrace Complexity:** Don't shy away from the nuances and contradictions in people's stories. These often make the narratives more relatable and impactful.

7. **Continually Seek Feedback:** Regularly ask participants and your audience for feedback on your storytelling approach and be willing to adapt.

Remember, this process is as much about respecting and empowering the storytellers as it is about creating impactful narratives. It requires time, patience, and a willingness to continually learn and adapt.

***Question:** What advice would you give to someone interested in starting a similar initiative, particularly regarding developing a strong communication strategy to engage the public and stakeholders?*

***Brooke:** Take the time to build trust with the people whose stories you're sharing. This isn't a process that can be rushed. It takes time and emotional labor for people to feel comfortable enough to share their stories openly and honestly (Jeung et al., 2018; Mcqueeney & Lavelle, 2015). Give people control over their narratives. Make it clear that they can decide what to share and what to keep private. Involve them in the review process and be willing to make changes based on their feedback (Clough et al., 2023).*

Ultimately, this work should elevate the voice and perspective of the person with lived experience. It should honor the bravery that is required of someone who is sharing the complete truth of their life (Clark, 2020).

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