



**VOICE OF
WITNESS**



Vision Plan 2022–2026

**A COMMUNITY-LED
APPROACH TO**

**AMPLIFYING
UNHEARD
VOICES**



dear friend,

The past two years have been a time of reflection and transition within Voice of Witness (VOW) as we approached the end of our five-year vision plan in June 2022. That plan emphasized deeper, more focused commitment to centering marginalized voices at every level of our work and created a path for financial and operational growth. VOW added a new community partnership coordinator role to further relationships with organizations and individuals represented in our oral history book series—those impacted by issues of migration, displacement, and the criminal justice system. Curriculum specialists from or working closely with these narrator communities were also hired for each project.

After a generative initial period, the pandemic negatively impacted fundraising efforts crucial to sustaining this work. Other impacts of the pandemic— isolation, exhaustion, grief, racial trauma—on the VOW team individually and collectively catalyzed necessary conversations around how we care for ourselves and each other. The ongoing racial violence in the US during recent years had disproportionate impacts on our BIPOC team members, narrators, and partners.

Entering into the 2021–2022 fiscal year, we wished to explore equity more deeply, with a greater balance between internal and external solidarity and empathy. As we began our vision planning process, while acknowledging the ongoing uncertainty and fatigue from the pandemic, we identified the need to reflect and explore some important questions:

- + How do we build deeper relationships and stronger community-led processes with partners in order to more strategically amplify the voices of those at the intersection of injustices?
- + How may it be more impactful, humane, and innovative to change the pace of our production cycle in order to prioritize wholeness, spaciousness, responsiveness, and depth over relentless productivity moving forward, for both VOW staff and partners in our network?
- + How might we redefine sustainability in human terms, as well as in financial and programmatic terms, recognizing that people need care and solidarity in order to support well-being and sustain the work?

These questions informed the nine-month vision planning engagement that we subsequently undertook. We took a deep look at our programs, operations, and culture, and identified areas where we can further embody our values internally as well as externally—articulating not just *what we want to do*, but of equal importance, *who we need and want to become*.

Through this process, we have added **wholeness** as a core value, alongside our longstanding values of: empathy and compassion, equity and dignity, integrity, critical thinking and inquiry, collaboration, and literary merit. This new core value represents our commitment to providing care and solidarity to our staff, partners, and narrator communities, and it acknowledges that our work can't exist without community-led collaboration at all levels of our programming.

This Vision Plan will serve as our guide over the next four years. We will begin by holding a series of deep listening sessions and convenings with our community partners to identify the urgent stories that *they* feel must be lifted up. We stand ready to build on this community-driven approach that began with our last vision plan, working with narrator communities to make an even deeper impact through ethics-driven oral history storytelling.

We hope you'll join us in amplifying unheard voices to create a more just, community-powered future.

In solidarity,

Mimi Lok and the team at VOW



About Voice of Witness

Voice of Witness advances human rights by amplifying the voices of people impacted by—and fighting against—injustice

mission

“Voices of witness” become “voices of authority” in mainstream discourse and meaningful reform

vision



OUR FOCUS AREAS

OUR APPROACH

Over time, we have organically developed core areas of focus: migration, displacement, and the criminal justice system. Supporting people impacted by these issues—among the most systematically silenced groups in the US—to tell their stories is emblematic of our deep commitment to centering marginalized voices.

Our work serves as an essential storytelling tool in the broader ecosystem of human rights, creating opportunities with communities to heal and strengthen through the oral history process, and forging space for these voices to be heard as a part of efforts to dismantle systems of oppression. Through our programs, we conduct and support oral history projects, develop educational resources, teach ethics-driven storytelling, and partner with on-the-ground advocates to support their work.



Book Series:

The Voice of Witness Book Series depicts human rights issues through the edited oral histories of people, VOW narrators, who are most deeply impacted and at the heart of solutions to address injustice. We use an ethics-driven methodology that combines journalistic integrity and a humanizing, literary approach. The series explores issues of race-, gender-, and class-based inequity through the lenses of migration, displacement, and the criminal justice system.

Education Program:

The Voice of Witness education program brings unheard stories and our ethics-driven oral history methodology to classrooms across the US, connecting students and educators with training and tools for storytelling in order to advance social change. Addressing the need for inclusive and culturally relevant learning opportunities, our educational resources and services nurture empathy and develop vital communication, critical thinking, and social-emotional learning skills in classrooms and communities.

Partnerships & Services:

Through our partnerships and consulting, Voice of Witness offers expert storytelling and program support to nonprofits, community advocates, schools, foundations, and more. These customized projects and workshops use VOW's award-winning approach to promote empathy, build relationships, and amplify unheard voices.

Refreshing Our Theory of Change

OUR VISION FOR A MORE JUST FUTURE

Social justice cannot be achieved when the firsthand perspectives of people (“narrators”) marginalized by systems of oppression are decentered or missing from mainstream narratives, or are gathered through unethical, extractive processes.

We updated our Theory of Change to clarify and outline these primary challenges that the organization addresses within three areas of focus: **narrators and communities**; **educators and classrooms**; and **narrative contexts** (the spaces and institutions that create dominant narratives, e.g., media, academia, politics).



Our key strategies include:

- + working with communities to conduct ethics-driven oral history projects;
- + building partnerships and supporting grassroots organizations;
- + developing curricular resources and providing educational support;
- + facilitating capacity building and trainings; and
- + forging space for unheard voices within institutions and platforms that create dominant narratives.

The transformative power of our work lies not only in *what* stories we tell, but **how** we tell them—via our ethics-driven, narrator-first approach that recognizes “voices of witness” as voices of authority.

Together, these strategies are not just about resistance, but also creation and healing. We aim to transform the mainstream discourse by centering marginalized voices within education, media, movements, and policymaking. We also strive to equip students and communities with the tools and training to tell their own stories through oral history, and to support practitioners and institutions in using ethical storytelling methodologies.

theory of change

THE CHALLENGE:

Social justice cannot be achieved without deep **listening and learning** from the stories of people (“narrators”) marginalized by systems of oppression.

Too often, these **firsthand perspectives** are **decentered** or **missing** from mainstream narratives, or are gathered through **unethical, extractive** processes.

This results in a **reductive understanding** of society’s most pressing issues in narrative contexts (school curricula, media, political discourse), **barring the potential** for in-depth engagement, healing, and nuanced, solution-oriented change to advance **human rights**.

STRATEGIES:

Narrators & Communities

Ethics-driven Oral History Storytelling Community Partnerships & Advocacy

Educators & Classrooms

Curricular Resources & Educational Support

Narrative Contexts

Capacity Building & Trainings Forging Space for Unheard Voices

OUTCOMES:

Voices of marginalized and silenced communities are **centered** in narrative contexts (education, media, movements, and policymaking).

Students and communities have the **tools and training** to tell their own stories through **oral history**.

Storytelling practitioners and institutions use **ethics-driven methodologies** to gather narratives.

TRANSFORM THE DISCOURSE



Putting Our Vision into Practice

PROGRAMMING

Going from a product-oriented approach to a values-oriented and community-led approach

The ongoing racial violence during the past two years—from George Floyd and continued police brutality to increasing anti-Asian violence and inhumanity at the US-Mexico border—has reinforced the need for deeper care and collaboration, both with the communities that we are part of and those with which we are in ongoing solidarity.

In 2020, what began as a simple act of checking in with VOW narrators revealed experiences that were not often being reflected in news media coverage of the pandemic. This evolved into the *Unheard Voices of the Pandemic* project, which, through partnership with former and current VOW narrators and editors—and media outlets like the *Guardian*, *Salon*, the *Nation*, and *Prism*—brought these urgent stories from the margins into the mainstream. Being responsive to community needs without the constraints of our typical oral history book production cycle created space and freedom to reconceptualize our processes for developing new projects.

With this new Vision Plan, we recognize an opportunity to formalize and further prioritize structures that are relationship and journey-oriented rather than product-oriented. We commit to ensuring processes are community-driven and place narrators and community partners at the center of our work even more deeply and proactively, from conception to completion.

This shift will also lead to more timely and effective programming; by focusing on the issues and stories narrator communities identify as most pressing, the resulting projects will be more impactful.

This Practice...

Becomes...

Producing one print book every 12–18 months along with educational resources via an open call for proposals



Engaging with narrator community organizations and individuals through listening sessions and convenings to support them in envisioning, proposing, and initiating VOW oral history projects that focus on critical social justice issues they're facing; responding to their needs on a collaborative timeline; and creating space for more flexible storytelling project formats in addition to print books

Supporting projects with post-launch outreach, partnerships, and resources



Building in time and space for community partners and practitioners to collaborate and lead on project development upfront and throughout, so that relationships and impact strategies are well established before post-launch outreach and advocacy

Partnering with curriculum specialists from the narrator community when the book is near completion



Developing relationships with educators and specialists from the narrator community at the beginning of an initiative and including an educational lens throughout the project

Creating broad oral history resources for a variety of classrooms



Narrowing and deepening the focus toward Ethnic Studies to respond to the growing needs of classrooms seeking these resources

Conducting capacity-intensive, tailored oral history project consultancies with nonprofits and school districts



Offering consultancies that impact the spaces and institutions that create dominant narratives, and developing capacity-building workshops and trainings that emphasize the ethics-driven practices of oral history beyond just story creation

Producing generalized communications and marketing



Designing more targeted communications and outreach to community-rooted, value-aligned media outlets and organizations in addition to mainstream narrative platforms

ORGANIZATIONAL CARE

Advancing empathy and solidarity

Impacts of the pandemic on the VOW team individually and collectively, along with ongoing racial violence in the US during recent years, catalyzed necessary conversations around how we care for ourselves and each other.

We identified the need for more structure and support for the VOW team, which is half-BIPOC and majority women, recognizing that the people doing this work need care and solidarity in order to sustain and extend that care and solidarity to our broader communities. In our new Vision Plan, individual development focuses on embodying “wholeness” and care for staff through increased mental health, wellness, and professional development resources while creating clear structures for setting boundaries (personal, professional, and workload). We will also continue to utilize and iterate on recently developed resources, including individual staff well-being plans and our BIPOC Crisis Response and Care Protocol.

We will update our performance management and review system to shift from being product-oriented to values-oriented and formalize ways to increase collaboration, collective feedback, accountability, and transparency across teams.

This Practice...

Creating staff resources reactively as needs arise



Becomes...

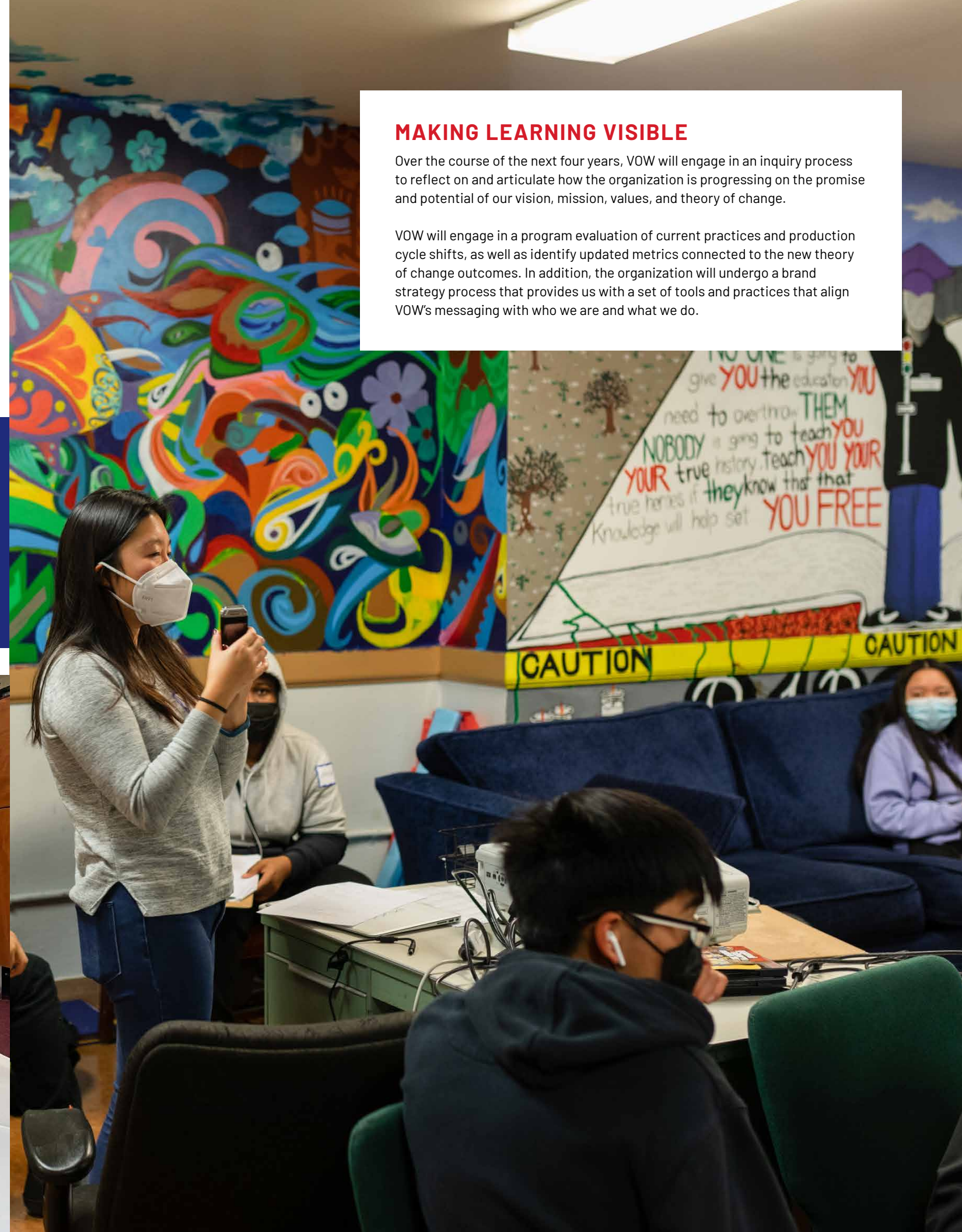
Developing an organizational infrastructure with clear access to care and wellness guidelines, professional development opportunities, and maps that outline growth in roles



MAKING LEARNING VISIBLE

Over the course of the next four years, VOW will engage in an inquiry process to reflect on and articulate how the organization is progressing on the promise and potential of our vision, mission, values, and theory of change.

VOW will engage in a program evaluation of current practices and production cycle shifts, as well as identify updated metrics connected to the new theory of change outcomes. In addition, the organization will undergo a brand strategy process that provides us with a set of tools and practices that align VOW's messaging with who we are and what we do.



Our Timeline

	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
Exploring, Reflecting, Reconstructing	Making Learning Visible	Implementing Learning	Reflecting and Planning	
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VOW Theory of Change update Identify and adjust metrics tied to updated Theory of Change outcomes Share Vision Plan with existing and prospective funders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brand strategy and website redesign Reflect on and reevaluate the Theory of Change and new metrics as informed by program evaluation process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure internal practices and external partnerships reflect the Theory of Change and the mission, vision, and values of the organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment of 2022-2026 Vision Plan to begin developing the next cycle
Programmatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New community-led project listening and exploration phase New program evaluation practices Sustainability matrix work planning for individual and inter-departmental teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New project development following the exploratory process incorporating community needs and feedback Communications campaign focused on brand updates, production cycle shifts, and new projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation of new community-driven projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balance new projects and practices with team capacity and resources
Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare for staff transitions (departures and onboarding) Review performance management practices and project reflection process Practice care and wholeness by increasing mental health and wellness resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New process- and values-oriented performance management and review practices Potential restructuring of positions or departments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on individual, relational, and collective wholeness through new performance management and review practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate areas of needed growth to pursue new programmatic and organizational goals



Fueling Our Vision & Growth

The budget to fuel our four-year Vision Plan is **\$5.7 million**, an approximate organizational growth of 38%.

VOW will add new staff positions to deepen our programmatic capacity across the book series, education program, and community partnerships, and allow for more inter-departmental collaborative opportunities.

The amount envisioned for expansion of staffing is \$517,899, covering:

- ✦ A full-time Community Engagement Assistant in FY23
- ✦ A full-time Finance and Operations Manager in FY25
- ✦ A full-time Facilitator and Assessment Coordinator in FY25
- ✦ A part-time Managing Editor in FY26 (the current Managing Editor becomes Editorial Director)

Other new expenses include:

- ✦ \$200,000 for the creation of a VOW Community Story Project Fellowship to begin by FY25
- ✦ \$100,000 for a program evaluation engagement throughout FY23–26
- ✦ \$50,000 for brand strategy and website redesign consultants
- ✦ \$15,000 for increased wellness services for staff

To achieve our vision, we're embarking on an accompanying growth campaign to raise \$5.7 million by 2026 as part of this four-year vision plan. These investments will ensure that our organization continues to grow at sustainable but ambitious levels, thereby deepening our impact in our work to center and amplify unheard voices.

While news of injustice floods the mainstream media, so rarely do we get to hear from the people most impacted. There are so many stories that need telling, so many people that need to hear them, and so many students from impacted communities—our next generation of leaders and changemakers—who crave to see themselves reflected in their learning.

Our work serves as an **essential storytelling tool** in the broader ecosystem of human rights, creating opportunities with communities to heal and strengthen through the oral history process, and forging space for these voices to be heard as a part of efforts to dismantle systems of oppression.

Voice of Witness is ready to make a deeper impact, but we can only do it with your help. Join us today!

Contact us at dev@voiceofwitness.org.





VOICE OF WITNESS

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PHOTOS:

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