Every day, we wake up to a world where threats to human rights and dignity are graver and more constant than ever. Immigrant families are targeted and torn apart, white nationalism continues to grow in vitriol and violence, anti-Muslim practices are passed off as legitimate domestic policy, and news media is continually undercut by powerful voices. The horrendous list goes on and on.

Amidst such an onslaught of injustices, we at Voice of Witness could not avoid asking ourselves some big questions.

What does the world need from Voice of Witness right now?

How can we be of greatest service to marginalized communities?

How do we leverage our strengths and expertise?

The journey to find the answer to these questions materialized in our strategic vision planning process, which took place over nine months in 2017 and involved Voice of Witness staff, board, and our extended community of thought partners: funders, educators, narrators (people impacted by injustice who share their oral histories with VOW), and content experts. By the beginning of 2018, we had created a comprehensive strategic vision and implementation plan to chart our growth and goals for the next five years.

At Voice of Witness, our mission has always been to amplify unheard voices, and by doing so, help build agency and power with marginalized communities while advancing social justice. For the past ten years, we’ve worked to explore urgent and underrepresented human rights issues through a truly empathetic approach. But in this time of endless affronts to our progressive values, we knew we needed to infuse our work with even more strategic focus and vigor. As you go through these pages, you’ll see a heightened emphasis on centering the voices of those who are marginalized, including how we go about partnering with narrators, how we create curriculum around their stories, and which schools and community organizations we collaborate with. You’ll gain insight into a few key shifts in our work, shifts that we are making to position ourselves more effectively within the larger ecosystem of human rights, and to better leverage our existing and prospective capacities.

2019 marks Voice of Witness’s 10-year anniversary as a nonprofit organization. Such a milestone fills me with excitement and pride, but even more so, a determination for our work to meet the challenges of our modern world in ways that are rooted in our core values of empathy and integrity. This vision plan is the blueprint for doing just that, and I’m so excited for you to join us in our dream for a more just, empathetic world.

In solidarity,

Mimi Lok, Executive Director

“The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.”  –Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
Voice of Witness advances human rights by amplifying the voices of people impacted by injustice.

Mission
That “voices of witness” become “voices of authority” in mainstream discourse and meaningful reform.

Vision

Focus Areas

Over time, we have organically developed two core areas of expertise: criminal justice, and migration and displacement. VOW’s work in these areas exemplifies the true essence of our mission. The very act, the very desire, to seek out stories from people impacted by these issues—among the most systematically silenced groups in the U.S.—is emblematic of our deep commitment to centering marginalized voices.

Book Series
We produce an acclaimed book series that depicts human rights and social justice issues through the edited oral histories of people most closely affected by them. To date, our series has covered a wide variety of issues that includes wrongful conviction, undocumented immigration, Chicago public housing, post-9/11 backlash, and the experiences of people living under oppressive conditions in Burma, Zimbabwe, and Colombia.

Education Program
We connect educators, students, and members of justice movements around the U.S. with these stories and issues through oral history-based curricula, training, and holistic educational support. Our education team offers standards-aligned curricula through our website, tailored trainings, and year-round site visits and workshops for schools and community organizations.

Our Approach

Over time, we have organically developed two core areas of expertise: criminal justice, and migration and displacement. VOW’s work in these areas exemplifies the true essence of our mission. The very act, the very desire, to seek out stories from people impacted by these issues—among the most systematically silenced groups in the U.S.—is emblematic of our deep commitment to centering marginalized voices.

Theory of Change

Amplifying & Centering Marginalized Voices
- feel heard, validated, & believed
- share with their community & inspire stories
- build empathetic connection

Narrators and Readers
- think critically & challenge assumptions
- develop real understanding of issues

Become Stronger Advocates
- build agency, dignity, & power in community

Who take action to advance human rights
What sets us apart?

Questions can be powerful, but Voice of Witness believes that the most powerful ones—the ones that elicit human stories, the ones that set wheels of change in motion—are those that are rooted in empathy.

Other human rights organizations do incredibly important work to illuminate crucial issues, but they also function on the premise of their own policy goals and agendas. Voice of Witness has no such agenda, and as such is uniquely positioned to catalyze positive change on the terms of the “narrator community.” What does progress look like for the formerly and currently incarcerated? What does progress look like for migrant farmworkers? What does progress look like for a student in an under-resourced school?

These are questions we want answered not by ourselves, but by the people most impacted by injustice. Voice of Witness’s empathetic approach to human rights means that marginalized voices are at the center of everything we do, and they are the drivers of change. Our role is to partner with marginalized communities and help create the experiences and resources that catalyze the change they want, while connecting outgroups to support and fund those solutions.

“'The human soul doesn’t want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed... exactly as it is.'” – Parker Palmer, Educator

Values of Witness

- **Empathy & Compassion**
  Empathy is at the foundation of all we do at VOW. From our internal organizational culture, to our book series and education programming, we believe in holding space for different perspectives with respect, and a willingness to gain further understanding.

- **Equity & Dignity**
  Narrator agency—a narrator’s ability to shape and tell their story in a way that best reflects their truth—is essential to VOW’s work. Our oral history process requires the consent and affirmation of narrators at every stage, from initial interviews to pre-publication.

- **Critical Thinking & Inquiry**
  We do not shy away from nuance and complexity. Our book series and education program are meant to challenge implicit biases and previously held notions. The stories we elevate resist simplicity, and therefore encourage and demand thoughtfulness, critical thinking, and a desire to ask more questions rather than immediately jump to answers.

- **Collaboration**
  Partnership touches every aspect of VOW’s work, and it’s the key to what makes our work important, relevant, and necessary. Equity-based collaboration—with narrators and narrator communities, educators, students, community organizations, and more—ensures that our work continues to center marginalized voices.

- **Literary Merit**
  Our storytelling approach requires a thoughtful consideration of literary elements like voice, story arc, emotional depth, and setting. We consider these elements not to make stories palatable, but so that a diversity of audiences can immerse themselves in, and forge an empathetic connection to, these experiences that might be very different from their own.

- **Integrity**
  In addition to our commitment to empathy, VOW adheres to ethics of journalistic integrity, including principles of objectivity, fairness, and accuracy. We are committed to illuminating hard truths, while maintaining impartiality.

Meaningful collaboration between community advocates, VOW education team, and VOW book editors at every stage of the book project and curricula creation.

Narrator communities become an integral part of the book development, educational resource creation, and outreach process.

Improvements in our online, multimedia engagement, and outreach model of narrator stories.

Stories become situated more widely and strategically in coverage and conversations around our areas of expertise.

Building change at every stage.
This Vision Plan addresses the need for a more nuanced, empathy-based understanding of the most crucial human rights and social justice issues today. This cannot happen without firsthand perspectives from impacted communities, but all too often these are missing from mainstream narratives.

The result is a reductive understanding of some of the most pressing issues of our time, barring the potential for empathetic, solution-oriented dialogue. The Voice of Witness book series—and our ethics-driven storytelling approach—helps build the agency of our narrators, providing a platform to reclaim their stories and identities, and in many cases, use their voices as a force for change.

Our approach ensures that narrators of these experiences are portrayed not simply as victims, but with full voice and context, and in all their human complexity. By engaging with this type of socially relevant storytelling, readers gain a powerful understanding of crucial human rights issues and a motivation to affect change in and beyond their communities. Many of the people we’ve interviewed have said that they found the process of recording and publishing their stories therapeutic, empowering, and even permanently transformative.

AMPLIFYING COMMUNITY STORIES

Often, marginalized communities lack the resources needed to tell their own stories and share them with a wider audience. Our VOW Story Lab and VOW Book Fellowships provide institutional support to community-based storytellers as they create oral history projects that delve deep into issues of injustice and give a platform to voices that would otherwise be unheard. Our support includes oral history training, editorial guidance, and funding to develop these projects into books for the VOW series.

We will deepen community partnerships in the development of projects and ensure community buy-in from the outset by requiring that at least one editor for each future book will be from (or has a deep relationship in) the narrator community.

Future projects will be pursued with consideration of timely events and social justice movements, focusing on two core areas: criminal justice, and migration and displacement.

Our broad-based outreach and coverage will be multi-tiered, strategically connecting readers back to movement efforts while also prioritizing movement-building within narrator communities.

We will improve outreach with narrator communities through the adoption of each title by one regional/national and two local community organizations to use in advocacy, community building, and education.

“Publishing my life story with Voice of Witness gave me exactly that—a voice. Sharing my story made me visible. It made me a real person. I was finally ‘documented’ and accounted for, if only in a book.”

—Lorena, Narrator in Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives
The Voice of Witness Education Program is the most significant conduit through which we disseminate our stories, by bringing the narratives and issues portrayed in our book series into the core curricula of schools and universities throughout the U.S.

The political climate has left many students feeling fearful and hopeless about the future, especially within minority and immigrant communities, where the Trump administration’s rhetoric and policies have broken apart families and impeded the stability of young students’ home lives.

Meanwhile, public school budgets are being drastically cut, classroom sizes are growing, and schools continue to emphasize standardized testing while marginalizing arts and humanities education. As a result, teachers are increasingly in need of the holistic support we offer: trainings and consultation to students and teachers, and curricula that is both intellectually engaging and in line with Common Core curriculum standards.

This is especially true for teachers of English language learners (ELLs). There are over five million ELLs in U.S. public schools, and ELLs account for almost 25% of all public school students in California. These students (and the teachers who support them) lack inclusive, creative, and culturally relevant curricular resources that reflect their backgrounds and experiences. Without access to these resources, ELL students will struggle to develop the literacy and communication skills that are necessary for becoming engaged and empowered members of their schools and communities.

AFFIRMING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

To meet the needs of this growing population, nearly 1.5 million students in California alone, the VOW Education Program has committed itself to developing curriculum that directly supports ELL students. This reflects our renewed commitment to bringing stories and learning resources back to marginalized narrator communities, and to under-resourced and highly politicized public school systems. Our goal is to prioritize the needs of ELL students in order to forge space for their stories and voices to be heard and seen, while we foster empathy, inquiry, and critical thinking in our next generation of teachers, leaders, and history-makers.

We will deepen relationships with and prioritize educators working in narrator communities, adding at least 50 new schools and organizations to our network.

We will collaborate more closely and earlier with community-based activists and key stakeholders to develop educational curricula for each title and ensure our lesson plans best fit the needs of impacted students before broad-based dissemination.

After launching our 2018 ELL initiative, we will ensure that all curriculum will continue to serve ELL students, better addressing the unique needs of ELL and migrant students at a variety of language levels, while providing culturally relevant and responsive content to these communities.

“These oral history narratives provide my students a window to the larger world that validates their own experiences.”

–Sandy Amos, High School Teacher in San Francisco’s June Jordan School for Equity
2019 marks VOW’s ten-year anniversary as a nonprofit organization. We are proud to have grown VOW from an idea for a book series that would serve as a platform for unheard voices, into a multifaceted nonprofit organization with a robust educational program and an acclaimed book series.

“The Voice of Witness series is a megaphone for our country’s most marginalized voices.”

–Van Jones, former special advisor to the Obama White House
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. Voice of Witness stands ready to make a deeper impact in all those areas and more.

But we can only do it with your help.

Join us today and help make our vision for a more just, empathetic world a reality.

We will be growing our staff over the next few years with positions that reflect and support this deepened commitment to marginalized communities. Key roles will focus on community liaison, curriculum expansion, media partnerships, evaluation and learning, and on developing communications competencies at the community level all the way to outreach on the broadest levels.

VOW has experienced steady year-to-year growth since its inception. To achieve our new vision, we have launched an accompanying growth campaign, to raise $4.3 million by 2022 as part of this 5-year vision plan. These investments will ensure that our organization continues to grow at sustainable but ambitious levels, thereby deepening our impact in the work to center marginalized voices.

Total needed to fuel our vision: $4.3 million

$3,100,000 committed from foundations and individuals

$750,000 needed from individuals like you

$450,000 needed from institutional partners like yours

To fully realize our vision plan, “centering marginalized voices” must happen on every level of our organization. It means reflecting this in our leadership, at the board and staff level. It means learning from and collaborating with experts from marginalized communities—advocates, educators, organizers, journalists, among others—to ensure that our work does not co-opt their struggle but lends power to them.
Page 5: ©Yaissy Solis.
Nautica Jenkins (r), Community Organizer at Project South, and Patricia Cipollitti (l), National Coordinator at the Alliance for Fair Food. ciw-online.org.
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PHOTOS

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