Dear Friends,

Our work at Voice of Witness is rooted in the belief that it’s not enough to simply bear witness. We must turn to those most impacted by injustice and listen to their stories with rigorous empathy and inquiry. Without their wisdom, how can we participate in meaningful dialogue and solutions around the most crucial human rights and social justice issues of our time? The answer, simply, is that we can’t.

When talking about the importance of amplifying rarely heard voices, we often turn to the words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

We live in a time where pushing against the single story feels more important than ever. Mainstream media coverage of injustice is increasingly consumed in simplistic, rapidly digestible bites, and it seems that, on an almost daily basis, we see the people at the center of these issues dehumanized by politicians and by the media, reduced to such labels as “refugee,” “criminal,” or “illegal alien.”

In response, Voice of Witness has established the VOW Story Lab. Under this initiative, we're supporting urgent human rights storytelling projects and training a greater number of journalists, advocates, scholars, and writers in our empathy- and equity-based methodology. Our 2015-2016 cohort of Lab participants includes a Pulitzer-winning journalist aiming to highlight the experiences of youth migrants from Central America, an ACLU attorney working at the forefront of solitary confinement reform, and an award-winning author and journalist facilitating stories about and by the community of Ferguson. The Lab is supported by a dedicated VOW Story Fund that we're growing with help from funders and community partners.

This past year, we also established the Sharing History Initiative to broaden our education program’s reach and serve a greater number and diversity of educators across the country—many of whom are fighting to serve their communities in the face of inadequate pay and resources, and rising gentrification. We’re thrilled to have put free VOW books and curricula in the hands of almost 8,000 additional students and educators, and to have welcomed them into our national network of teachers and learners.

We’ve seen incredible work and deeply inspiring stories come out of these two new initiatives, and we’re excited to continue this work into the future. These accomplishments are possible thanks to the tremendous support of the Voice of Witness community. We are deeply grateful to our donors, volunteers, advisors, and friends who have generously dedicated their time, wisdom, and resources to this effort. Thank you for joining us in this work, and for your commitment to being a voice of witness.

Warmly,

Mimi Lok
Cofounder, Executive Director
MISSION

Voice of Witness (VOW) is an award-winning non-profit that transforms the way people report, consume, and engage with contemporary human rights and social justice issues. Our work is driven by the transformative power of the story, and by a strong belief that an understanding of crucial issues is incomplete without deep listening and learning from people whose lives are most directly impacted by injustice.

We further our mission of promoting human rights and dignity through our core programs: (1) Our oral history book series, which amplifies the voices of individuals most directly impacted by injustice using a humanizing, literary approach, and (2) Our education program, which provides training and curricular support to educators and invested communities—fostering empathy, critical thinking, and a participatory vision of history.

HISTORY

Voice of Witness was founded by internationally acclaimed author Dave Eggers, award-winning writer and educator Mimi Lok, and physician Lola Vollen. Eggers and Vollen established the VOW oral history book series as an imprint of McSweeney’s Publishing in 2005. In 2009, founding executive director Lok transitioned the series to a 501(c)(3) organization and established its education program.

Since then, Voice of Witness has amplified the voices of hundreds of individuals impacted by human rights crises. Through our education program, we’ve served tens of thousands of students, educators, storytellers, and advocates throughout the U.S. and globally.
For over ten years, VOW has illuminated human rights crises in the U.S. and globally.

"If my story touches someone's heart—maybe yours—if it lets another woman who has faced exploitation and repression feel that she is not alone, and even encourages her to speak up, then it is worth it."
— Kalpona Akter, Narrator, Invisible Hands: Voices from the Global Economy

"Having my story published by Voice of Witness led me to my justice work. It helped kick-start my spirit."
— Beverly Monroe, Narrator, Surviving Justice: America’s Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated

"After sharing my story through Voice of Witness, I am no longer afraid to speak about what I went through. The experience empowered me to advocate for reproductive justice, and I even started working with SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW to advocate for an anti-shackling bill in Georgia. I realized, standing in front of the capitol in Atlanta, how powerful my voice was."
— Ashley Jacobs, featured in VOW’s book Inside This Place Not of It: Narratives from Women’s Prisons. While she was pregnant with her youngest son, Ashley was serving a six-month sentence for embezzling money to pay her bills. Before her due date, she was chained to an operating table and forced to undergo a medically unnecessary C-section.
THE VOW BOOK SERIES

Over the years, the VOW Book Series has amplified hundreds of voices from vulnerable and underserved populations, including wrongfully convicted Americans, undocumented immigrants, and people living under oppressive regimes in Burma, Sudan, and Colombia.

VOW narratives meet a high editorial and literary standard, are rigorously fact-checked, and are supported by appendices that provide contextual information on key structural and systemic factors that influence the issues at hand.

Our books are read by readers of all stripes—from students to policymakers—and are taught worldwide in courses as disparate as social studies, constitutional law, comparative literature, Middle Eastern Studies, and restorative justice.

THE VOW STORY FUND

After ten years of amplifying unheard voices, we established the VOW Story Fund to expand and deepen our support for rigorous and empathic human rights storytelling. We aim to help human rights-focused storytellers who have urgent, inspiring projects realize their visions and maximize the impact of their work. Projects are chosen from submitted proposals, or developed as collaborative projects with funding partners.

Our goals are to:
1. Promote ethical, empathy-based storytelling to illuminate human rights crises
2. Ensure quality, innovation, and diversity in the stories VOW tells
3. Ensure swift and reliable funding support for promising projects

The VOW Story Fund allows us to incubate four to six projects each year by offering VOW Story Lab Fellowships. Story Lab fellows receive oral history training, editorial guidance, peer support, and a small project stipend to develop sample narratives during a three-month pilot phase. Participants who have successfully completed the Story Lab phase receive VOW Book Fellowships to support the development of their project into a book for the VOW series.

Thanks to the ongoing support of our donors, we look forward to growing the VOW Story Fund in the coming years.

INCUBATING IN THE VOW STORY LAB

Scheduled for release in 2017 from Verso Books:

- LAVIL: Narratives of Post-Earthquake Port-au-Prince
- CHASING THE HARVEST: Migrant Workers in California Agriculture

THE FERGUSON MOMENT: Stories from the People of Ferguson, Missouri

SOLITO, SOLITA: Youth Migrants from Central America

HOW WE GO HOME: Native Voices from North American Reservations

HOLDING OUR GROUND: Voices for Food Sovereignty in Zimbabwe & South Africa

"In a time when history is told in cheap television re-enactments, if at all, and personal tragedy is gobbled up in rapidly digestible magazine photos and reality shows, this project goes against the grain."

— The Guardian UK
THE VOW EDUCATION PROGRAM

The VOW Education Program brings the narratives and issues portrayed in our book series into the curricula of schools and universities throughout the U.S. We serve over 20,000 people annually, and our oral history pedagogy has also been used to train a broad range of advocates for human rights and dignity, including educators, writers, journalists, attorneys, and medical doctors.

Our work with students is rooted in the belief that long term, positive change can only be achieved if we foster empathy, awareness, and engagement in young people—our next generation of teachers, artists, community leaders, policymakers, and movement builders.

Teachers often voice concern that their students are becoming increasingly disconnected and disengaged—from their communities, and from socially relevant issues and events around the world. Our experience shows that through reading compelling, first-person stories and using oral history to enable others to speak for themselves, young people discover their own voices, their capacity for authentic, compassionate listening, and their own relationship to social justice issues in their communities and around the world.

Education Program Offerings and Services:

» Year-round site visits and workshops for schools and community organizations
» Amplifying Unheard Voices, a summer intensive oral history training
» Free Common Core-aligned curricula through our website and publication The Power of the Story: The Voice of Witness Teacher’s Guide to Oral History
» Free books, curricula, and access to a nationwide learning community through the Sharing History Initiative
» Tailored consultancies for individuals and organizations

THE SHARING HISTORY INITIATIVE

Last year the VOW Education Program launched the first annual Sharing History Initiative, which provided over 1,500 copies of our anthology The Voice of Witness Reader to 60 schools and non-profits around the country, with an estimated reach of 8,000 students.

96% of teachers who participated in the Sharing History Initiative reported that their students improved in critical thinking, communication, literacy, and global citizenship after engaging with VOW stories and curricula.

WHO WE SERVE

47% of teachers identified as people of color

70% of teachers identified their classes as majority underserved in some way

23.5% Asian American/Pacific Islander
23.5% Hispanic/Latinx
17.6% Black/African American
11.8% Middle Eastern/Central Asian
8.8% Native American

50% worked predominantly with students of color
38% worked predominantly with low-income students
18% worked predominantly with first-generation immigrant students
15% worked predominantly with English language learners

*Participants identified multiple demographic categories
Empowering Students and Educators

EDUCATORS

EXCELLENCE & QUALITY
93% rate VOW trainings and curricula as “excellent” and “of a unique and high quality”

COMMUNICATION & LITERACY
90% reported noticeable improvement in student communication and literacy skills

CRITICAL THINKING & GLOBAL AWARENESS
87% reported greater student capacity for critical thinking and global awareness

STUDENTS

COMMUNICATION & LITERACY
88% reported improvement in their communication (speaking and listening) and literacy skills

PERSONAL RELEVANCE
85% agreed that VOW books and curricula were “relevant to their lives”

EMPATHY & OPENMINDEDNESS
80% saw an increase in their own empathy and willingness to explore multiple perspectives

"The gift of sharing and hearing someone else’s journey changed the way I looked at things. Fifth period English became a source of enjoyment, intrigue, but most importantly, it was a safe haven. The environment took a sharp turn... I watched jocks talk to nerds. The next day the jocks were laughing with the nerds... Labels had slowly been peeled off, worn away by a simple English project.”

— Praveena Fernes, Student, Mission San Jose High School, Fremont, CA

Partnering with Schools and Non-profits

SUPPORTING EDUCATORS, STUDENTS, AND ADVOCATES
Books in the VOW series are taught in schools, universities, and advocacy groups all across the U.S., including the Alameda County Office of Education, Refugee Transitions, San Francisco State University, Aim High, Haverford College, University of Chicago, University of Dayton, Oakland International High School, 826 Valencia, the New Americans Museum, Columbia University, University of California Berkeley, Oberlin College, and the University of San Francisco Graduate School of Education, among others.

Special Partnerships

UCSF MAC HELLMAN ARTIST RESIDENCY
As the 2016 Hellman Artist in Residence at the UCSF Memory and Aging Center (MAC), VOW is helping the MAC team collect and share stories about dementia from the perspective of patients, caregivers, health care professionals, family members, friends, and artists. The project will gather stories that illustrate the wide range of experiences of people living with dementia.

USF HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION
VOW has partnered with the University of San Francisco’s School of Education to offer a semester-long Human Rights Education course. Designed for students pursuing a master’s degree in human rights education, the course explores the use of oral history, literature, visual and performing arts, interactive curriculum, and community activism as pedagogical tools for teaching human rights.
VOW has experienced steady year-to-year growth since its inception. We are entering fiscal year 2017 with a projected budget of $788K—$1.3 million due to the new opportunities presented by the VOW Story Fund.

**FINANCIALS BREAKDOWN**

- **PROGRAMS:** 72%
  - Organization expense total: $424,066
    - **35%** EDUCATION
    - **37%** BOOK SERIES
    - **11%** OPERATIONS
    - **5%** FUNDRAISING
    - **12%** ENGAGEMENT

- **FOUNDATIONS:** 77%
  - **16%** INDIVIDUALS
  - **7%** EARNED/OTHER

Over the last 3 years, the VOW Education Program has maintained a 65-70% retention rate with its partner organizations.
As a small non-profit, Voice of Witness relies on the support of individuals, organizations, and foundations to make our work possible. We would like to thank the following donors for the generous support they’ve given us, and for their dedication to amplifying unheard voices everywhere. We are delighted and truly grateful to have such incredible allies.

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Our work would not be possible without the tireless dedication of our network of volunteer researchers, interviewers, transcribers, translators, grant writers, photographers, and designers.

We’re always looking for people who are willing to donate their time and skills to the project. If you would like to contribute to an upcoming Voice of Witness project, please visit: voiceofwitnes.org/volunteer.
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