

Ethical Storytelling

In videos, reports, and end of year appeals, nonprofits have become accustomed to displaying images of those in need in order to encourage donors to give to help these individuals. It's a trend that was popularized in the 1980s during the severe famines in Ethiopia and other countries. Photos of starving children—referred to as “poverty porn”—became the norm. But these practices disempower the very people organizations strive to lift up by portraying them as helpless. We should aspire to achieve our goals in a way that inspires, supports, and preserves the dignity of those we aim to help.

Organizations like OAR and Doorways for Women in Families—local nonprofits that have long been upfront and forthright about their philosophies on telling client stories—inspired Arlington Free Clinic to review our values and develop guiding principles for our practices going forward:

- Nothing about them without them
- Start with their strengths, not their weaknesses or dire needs
- Don't define a person using tragedy or trauma
- Focus on empowerment

We are not a success if we marginalize, stereotype, or otherwise minimize the full story of who our patients are—no matter how well we do everything else. We will avoid perpetuating the myth that the people our organization serves are helpless and somehow less valuable. All their stories make them who they are—not just the fact that they can't get healthcare. Arlington Free Clinic simply provides care to patients so they can continue on their paths to building good lives for themselves and their families. We will put our mission before our marketing.

Practically speaking, this means that we'll be thinking a lot differently about how we use or don't use patient faces—we'll often photograph from behind or make other design choices. We will be more responsible and commit to being sensitive, selective, and intrinsically positive about depictions of patients. In addition to operating from the principles listed above, when a patient's story is shared, names will be changed. In this year's Gala video, we've turned the camera on volunteers and staff instead of putting our patients up on the screen.

The people we serve are assets to our community because of who they are. It is my hope that the stories we share will help our supporters connect with patients on a personal level and better understand their individual strengths and resilience.



Nancy White
President