The Colorado Health Foundation™

Narrative Power in Action: Why Stories Matter in the Movement for Health Equity

From the main stage of this year's Colorado Health Symposium, I shared a simple story:

I grew up in Pueblo, Colorado. And when I tell people that, especially those from the metro area, I sometimes get that look. A raised eyebrow. A surprised, "Oh. Really?" As if that place, and by extension, the people who call it home, don't quite fit into someone's preconceived idea of what matters or what's possible.

But Pueblo is where I learned to show up for others. It's where I found pride, resilience and community. And every time I get to speak up about my hometown, I see something shift.

That, right there, is narrative power in action. It's a small but important example of what it means to challenge stereotypes—to interrupt a prevalent story that diminishes certain communities and replace it with one rooted in truth and connection.

At the 2024 Symposium, we began a conversation about narrative change and how stories shape our understanding of the world and influence everything from public perception to public policy. This year, we built on that conversation. Because if we want to advance health equity, we can't just reform systems. We have to reshape the stories that uphold them.

At this year’s Symposium, Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist and founder of Define American, Jose Antonio Vargas, offered a powerful framework: “Narratives are systems of stories.” Not just one story. Not even a handful. But a web of stories that collectively define what’s seen as normal, desirable or inevitable, and what isn’t.

Think of the stories we’re told about who deserves housing, economic opportunity and other important facets of health. We’re also told stories about who is trustworthy and who gets to belong. These stories don’t exist in a vacuum, they’re baked into our media, our laws and even our daily conversations. Too often, they reinforce inequity and invisibilize entire communities.

But here’s the good news: we can work in concert to create a different system of stories. One that reflects the truth, complexity and dignity of our lives. One that makes health equity not just possible, but inevitable.

And we’re not starting from scratch. Every time you share a lived experience that challenges a stereotype, every time you amplify voices that have been silenced, you’re contributing to that new system of stories. You’re helping to create a culture where policy is shaped by the people it impacts, where media reflects the full richness of our communities, and where health outcomes aren’t determined by your ZIP code, race, immigration status, gender identity or who we love.

This work isn’t always easy, especially when so many of us are carrying the weight of targeted attacks on our communities. But as Joy-Ann Reid reminded us during the Symposium, we can build a community of care, fight back together and project forward what a just future looks like.

That vision isn’t abstract. It’s already in motion. So let this be a call to action:

> Keep using your voice and make space for others to use theirs. Challenge harmful narratives and lift up stories of dignity, justice, belonging and hope.

Because in the fight for a healthier, more just Colorado our stories are an important strategy. And the more we tell them, the more powerful we become.

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