

# **NSN Storytelling in Organizations SIG**

## **Stories from the Field**

### **“The Power of Story Magic”**

(Susan Osborn and Gene Edgerton conducted the following interview with James Nelson-Lucas at the NSN 2005 National Storytelling Conference in Oklahoma City.)

James serves as the nexus of storytelling in a 397 bed medical facility. In collaboration with the hospital administrators he’s following in his great-great-grandfather’s storytelling footsteps by incorporating story into myriad projects and activities that involve staff members, patients, and the community.

James shared details about his background: “I come from the position of a platform performer. I have been a platform performer since the age of six. On my fifth birthday a magician came to my party. I remember thinking, ‘How cool this is...a grown man gets to stand up there, do stuff, play, and get paid for that.’ I also come from a very open-minded, theatrical family. I told my mother, ‘I got to do that.’ So, she talked him into mentoring me. I was his apprentice for a couple of years. I began hiring myself out for money as a magician at the age of six and I did that until I was about fourteen. Then I decided I wanted to be a filmmaker and I spent the next 20 years studying to do that. What’s important in filmmaking is learning to understand the structure of stories.”

James continues, “When I stumbled across storytelling I realized I had been doing that since I was six. Anyone can learn to do magic tricks. What makes magicians successful are their stories. They use a manipulative storytelling process but you know you’re going to be manipulated when you walk in. So, at an early age, I started learning how to change an organizational system, even if it’s only an audience. You change a

system by changing the people's understanding, their perceptions, and their expectations.”

When asked how he found work at a hospital, James replied, “I ended up there by happenstance. I was managing movie theaters for several years. I left that job and went to a temp agency to bring home some bucks while I was looking around for something else to do. They sent me to this hospital where I was hired as a file clerk. There was very high turnover in the customer service representative position so I had an opportunity to switch jobs. In the first 18 years of the institution's history they had about a dozen people in that position. Most people came to the job with an adversarial perspective. I took the job with the idea of listening to people's stories and have been doing that for the last 16 years...almost half of the life of the hospital.”

“I like the people,” he explains. “I like doing customer service, which is really all about listening to people's stories and educating them in a personal way. You can't be didactic about it. Most of the stuff that angers people comes when they don't understand something. Once you let them know what the story is the tension level drops, the frustration level drops. It's very important in the customer service area to be a good listener.”

James reflects on the way storytelling gradually became a crucial aspect of his work at the hospital: “I came to understand I'm a storyteller about six years ago. Although I'm in charge of the customer service section, I started asking if I could share motivational and team building stories at meetings and hospital-wide events. In the process of identifying myself as a storyteller I began to receive requests to share stories at team and department meetings.”

He continues, “It’s amazing to see the power of storytelling at work in the organization. I’m up there telling stories to people and I see them go into that storytelling trance. Their resistance drops, they let go of their inhibitions, they relax, they become open, they listen, and they learn. When you use specific stories they always find a place to connect. They come up afterward and say, ‘I had that happen in my life’ and they tell you their story. As it turns out, it’s nothing like the story you told. It doesn’t matter. When they see a connection it opens them up.”

James points to the use of storytelling in training at the hospital: “When I saw a chance to be a trainer I used that as an excuse to tell stories. I come at it with all my own material. Right now we’re in the fourth year of training trainers on how to develop personal anecdotes and stories so they’re more powerful and effective when they’re training the rest of the front staff. They’ll be able get that buy-in by saying, ‘I’ve had these personal experiences and you’re having similar experiences, so you can trust me.’”

James recalls, “I became involved in the continuous improvement process we have going on at the facility called ‘service excellence.’ Outside presenters are brought in to teach a core group of the front line employees who then go and share that information with the rest of the people in the facility. I noticed that what really sold the front line employees and the rest of the staff and kept the continuous quality improvement process moving along was how the front line staff were sharing their stories of what really goes on in this organization. People trust that. It was the personal stories that were getting buy-in and compliance with the issues at hand.”

## Plans for the Future

This insight prompted James to explore new applications of storytelling: “I started using stories based on a broader perspective and came across the idea of sharing patient stories. We have long-term patients who have cancer and heart problems. Learning their stories is a very powerful thing. I’m working on creating a story listening program so we can make biographies that will be part of all the patients’ charts so that every time a caregiver comes to see a patient, he/she will know exactly who that patient is. This way you get an immediate family connection...an instant tie-in. It indicates each patient’s value and increases each caregiver’s level of satisfaction. The administration is pleased as punch that this is coming down the pike.”

He points to the importance of learning about the employees’ stories: “Another project I’m getting involved with is learning the stories of the employees in the organization and sharing them some way like in a newsletter. These would be stories of pain, valor, courage, success, and failure.”

He goes on to say, “I have a whole list of other ways to use storytelling that I want to get implemented. For example, we’re suffering from a brain drain. A lot of experienced folks are leaving. I want to mine the stories of the older generation of employees and make them part of the institution.”

James acknowledges, “I’m lucky because the administration recognizes storytelling is an important tool and there’s a commitment to using it. I’m working on getting them to focus in some kind of clear way. We’ve got six to eight different people working in different departments at different levels creating stories. I’m working with the administration to bring that into a focal point with me, ideally, as the corporate

storyteller. As a professional storyteller, I would be someone people could come to for information...a resource tool.”

He points out, “We’re just now starting to develop a ten-year plan. I have been asked to assist in creating a narrative to go along with the usual charts, graphs, and metrics, largely because we’re going to be dependent on the community to get this project done. They realize they have to use stories to connect with the community.”

James reveals, “I had been planning to quit and be a full-time storyteller until I began to appreciate the sea-change that’s taking place in this organization. Storytelling is a very important factor here, so, I’m going to stay. Rather than gripe about the changes I want to see made in the institution and leave, I’m now committed to being a force for positive change by using the tools that I have. I have a checklist of goals I want to see completed before I leave.”

He says, “One of the attractions of being a storyteller is not having to convince a bunch of people to invest money in your project. You don’t have to deal with a big monolith of people. Now, I find myself back in the position of having to go to committees and convince them there are projects we need to do. That’s an interesting cycle I’ve been in. “Always As It Should Be” is one of the stories I tell. You find out all these disparate, disconnected events that have occurred funnel down to one laser-focused spot. Then you go, ‘Now I see why this happened, that happened, and that happened. They weren’t random events, after all. They were all part of one story.’ You have to see the full story to know how all the pieces fit into place.”

## Words of Wisdom

When asked about tips he has to pass along, James responded, “I disarm people by telling them I’m not going to teach them anything. I’m like an exercise coach. I say, ‘I’m not here to tell you you’re doing things wrong and here’s how to do it right. You know how to do it right. You may learn a few skills along the way that you weren’t aware of. I’m here to help sharpen the axe.’ That lowers people’s resistance a lot.”

He continues, “In my introduction to the trainer’s session I say, ‘I know this sounds scary. I know this sounds frightening, but you are already storytellers. All of us are hard-wired to communicate through stories.’ I give this example: ‘If you come home late and your wife asks what happened, you could tell her you got caught in traffic. That means either that you’re mad at her or you’re too tired to talk about it right now. What your wife is really expecting you to share is a story, not an answer. If you give her an answer, you will make her angry. The answer is of no use. It doesn’t mean anything to anybody.’”

James emphasizes, “The main thing I want to get across is, ‘You already know how to do this. What I’m here to do is give you a couple of little pointers about some things you may not have thought about before.’”

“Information is like bricks lying around until a storyteller puts them together,” he observes. “In almost every gathering where there are new people I tell the story of bricks and a cathedral. It’s from Annette Simmons’s book, *The Story Factor*. If you turn the cover just right and catch the light you can see this story is printed on the front cover.”

A man came upon a construction site where three people were working. He asked the first, “What are you doing?” and the man answered, “I am laying bricks.” He asked the second, “What are you doing?” and the man answered, “I am building a wall.” He walked up to the third man, who was humming a tune as he worked and asked, “What are you doing?” The man stood up, smiled, and said, “I am building a cathedral.”

James admits, “That’s one of my favorite stories to tell in organizations. The third man is creating something larger than himself. I say, ‘Don’t come to work if all you’re trying to do is pay the mortgage or just finish a project. Come because you’re working for a larger purpose and the money will come and your projects will get finished. If you’re working for this larger, beautiful goal you’re also going to feel a lot less tired at the end of the day.’ That’s the story I tell myself every day I go to work. I’m working for a larger purpose that will go on after I’m gone.”

James offers observations about motivational speaking: “I have seen speakers and presenters who have a script they follow. After a while you realize they’re using a script. They’re not engaged with you. Some people try to motivate an audience when they aren’t even connected with you. I have been working with motivational speakers. The main difference between a motivational speaker and a storyteller is the motivational speaker almost always tells you what to take away from the story. The storyteller almost never tells you what you’re supposed to take away. (The other difference is the motivational speaker gets paid more money.) I use mechanisms like, ‘That makes me think of a story...’ or ‘That reminds me of a time when...’ That way, it’s clear I’m making this connection. I’m suggesting they follow me down this path. I’m hoping they’ll make the same conclusion and have the same feeling as I do.”

About working with children and adults, he says, “I was expecting grown-ups to be different from children but they’re not. They’re just big kids. You can’t shut them down and say, ‘That’s wrong. I’m not going there. I have my prepared notes. Shut up!’ You have to acknowledge what people say and work it into what you’re doing. It’s the same with kids and grown-ups. If you shut one person down, everybody shuts down.

You never say ‘no.’ You always say ‘yes.’ You take it in and move from there. And, in the process, you might learn something.”

He concludes, “To convince people that storytelling is important, you have to *do* it. That’s what I did. Anytime I saw a group of people together I would go to whoever was in charge and say, ‘Let me come and tell some stories.’”

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