

Developing and Telling Your Personal Story

The purpose of this exercise is to write your story so that we can make it available for others to read at the upcoming conference. But writing or verbally sharing your own story has benefits far beyond our conference in Washington D.C. Stories teach, enlighten, and invoke deep emotions.

An effective story structure is simple. In your own words, explain why you are telling your story (is it cathartic? is it because you don't want others to make the mistakes you made? is it because the world needs to know about the injustice associated with this crime category? Or is it some other reason?).

Tell the details of your experience (where were you, what happened, what were you thinking). Make sure to tell your story in chronological order. The amount of information and the granularity of your story depend on you. Everyone is different. An effective story will be moving and provocative; and if you speak or write from the heart, it will most likely be both. Whatever you consider to be important can be included in your story. This may include the details of your arrest, your state of mind through the years, your successes in overcoming hardships, and so much more.

The end of your story can be a summary. You can talk about how your story impacted your life over time. It can be a place to talk about an old story and how that influences your present day. It can be a plea for change or support to and from others. It can be a place to vent your anger and /or confusion as to why someone who has paid their debt to society with numerous years behind bars, would be subjected to a secondary sentence on the registry. Or it can be about how this state and federal solution is not just a punishment for these individuals but in fact, it is a punishment for family and friends as well. This is your story so there is not an exact template for telling it.

So many stories are dynamic and change over time. It is never a bad idea to rewrite, change, or add material to your story. And don't be deterred if this becomes a difficult task. Sometimes, the right words and thoughts can be hard to find. It might help, in this case, to step away from the task and come back at a later time. While this exercise may seem to call for a long narrative, our advice is to keep it as short as possible in order to hold the attention of our readers. You might also consider reading your story out loud as a way to see if it meets all of your important criteria and flows well.

Please know that if you do a good job telling your story, you are almost certain to be vulnerable to the one hearing or reading it. Vocal stories allow you to connect instantly by reading the body language of your listener. Written stories may offer a delayed reaction (if the reader gets back with you) or perhaps, no reaction at all. There are numerous places to tell your verbal story: to legislators, journalist, long lost family members and friends, and yes, even perfect strangers. Remember that while others will benefit from hearing or reading your story, you - the storyteller - are likely to gain even more value from the experience.

When you finish your story, please sign it with your name, your initials, or simply sign "anonymous." Bring a copy of your written story to the conference and hand it in at the registration table.

Thank you for participating in this exercise.