



# CREATING AN ECOSYSTEM FOR NARRATIVE POWER

By Jen Soriano, Joseph Phelan, Kimberly Freeman Brown, Hermelinda Cortés, Jung Hee Choi

In November 2018, women of color won 43 House seats in the midterm elections, and voter turnout reached a 50-year high. What compelled these women of color to run, and what motivated millions of people to vote them into office?

To answer this question, we have to look back to other turning points in history. We also have to ask: What compelled sharecroppers in 1960s Alabama and Mississippi to risk their lives for the ballot box? What stirred people of all colors – and from around the globe – to join the movement to abolish slavery?

Something motivates people across time and against all odds to take bold steps to make the impossible possible. That something is a special alchemy of who we

are told we are in the world, who we want to be in the world, and the conditions of family, time, place, cultures, economics and politics in which we live and evolve through.

No matter this imperfect equation, history tells us one thing for certain: part of that something is organizing, the process of taking action with others to change conditions through collective power. As movement strategist Makani Themba writes, “History teaches us that change is

often made when an organized segment of those most affected, leading in solidarity with allies, disrupt business as usual.”

Much like our personal motivation to action, organizing happens within a larger context, an amalgam of understanding and meaning informed by everything from ideology to religion and spirituality to mainstream media and pop culture. Social movements have historically understood that this web of meaning-making aids or abates long-term goals of making change, influencing and building power. From the “I Am A Man” posters of the civil rights movement, to songs from the picket lines of Appalachian coal fields, to the public art protests of organizations fighting the AIDS crisis in the U.S.; organizers, culture workers and communicators have worked to shift society’s broader understanding of itself, its values and its future, by folding meaning-making into change-making strategies of the time.

This speaks to another part of the something that motivates people to action: narrative. For many of us, the use of narrative as a term is new, but the concept itself of meaning-making has (as noted above) a long history. Narrative is

in dynamic relationship to other concepts such as frame, hegemony, meta-stories, myth, common sense, etc. We use the term “narrative” to ground it in relationship to organizing and power building, two important pieces of the strategy puzzle that we’ve seen left out in recent conversations about narrative.

Narratives explain how society should work. Narratives use values to establish norms and compel people to either enforce these norms or to change these norms. Narratives shape reasoning and response, common sense and consensus. They shape and reshape the boundaries of what is possible.

When narrative strategy is integrated into organizing, impacted communities can expand the public notion of what is possible. Larger narratives, in dynamic relationship with individual stories, help people see personal experiences as part of a larger arc, inspiring collective action and building consensus and power toward social change.

### Narrative by the People

ReFrame helps organizers develop narratives that can change norms from

## REFRAME:

Imagine a world where the slamming of prison doors is ash on the tongues of all people, cracking the land for oil is bodily nightmare that makes adults shudder in their sleep, where sexual assault something remembered from times past when power was all wrong.

ReFrame is building an infrastructure that will contend for narrative power, and create a common sense where the

structural forms of society can’t be anything but liberatory.

At the center of this infrastructure are hundreds of thousands of networked strategists, artists, organizers using innovative technologies to tell, place, create, curate culturally grounded stories that point back to a North Star narrative lighting the way to justice and freedom for all people and the Earth.

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the ground up. We are a movement-building institution that develops the next generation of strategic communicators across social justice movements and organizations. These strategists integrate organizing and communications as core strategies for progressive change. We also build grassroots infrastructure that links people across campaigns, sectors and regions to build narrative power.

At ReFrame, we affirm what leaders before us have long known: that social movements must contest with dominant narratives in order to transform inequitable conditions toward justice.

But dominant narratives are dominant for a reason. Namely, they are created and reinforced by those already in power. It is always an uphill battle for social justice narratives to gain widespread traction on hostile terrain. This means that progressives need to work together in a more strategic and sustained way to address narrative inequities within progressive sectors, and to build the alignment and infrastructure we need to contest for meaning over the long haul.

In *Changing Our Narrative About Narrative*, Rashad Robinson explains, “Narrative power is the ability to change the norms and rules our society lives by. Narrative infrastructure is the set of systems we

maintain in order to do that reliably over time.”

Building narrative power for our movements requires a healthy ecosystem combining leadership development, relevant infrastructure, sustained financial resources and organizations working across sectors. We firmly believe this ecosystem must be led from the ground up, so that narratives can gain widespread traction and so the process of narrative development can model the power shifts we need in our society at large.

At ReFrame, we develop new meaning makers from communities whose stories have traditionally been silenced, misrepresented or ignored. These leaders begin the process of narrative development at bus stops, in churches and mosques, at schools, and at community centers, beauty salons and barbershops (see ISAI AH’s Barbershop program).

By investing in these leaders, we are investing in narrative equity and in new narratives of possibility. For inspiration, we just need to look to Minnesota.

Minnesota is Greater than Fear

On Nov. 7, 2018, many in Minnesota celebrated. The midterm elections produced the highest voter turnout of any



ReFrame Mentee JaNaé Bates, right, of ISAI AH.

The “Greater Than Fear” narrative helped unite otherwise disparate campaigns, and produced a slate of victories that challenge inequality and model an upswell of progressive values while combating narratives that rely on heightening fear as a strategy.

state in the nation, and yielded significant state victories. Our Minnesota Future (OMF), a coalition of 22 progressive organizations anchored by ISALAH, a nonpartisan multiracial coalition of faith communities, advanced voting rights for disenfranchised residents, protected the dignity of Muslims and immigrants, expanded health care access, and achieved statewide paid family leave and driver’s licenses for all.

JaNaé Bates, an alumna of ReFrame’s mentorship program, played a key role in these campaign victories – connecting each to a larger narrative about Minnesota’s future. As ISALAH’s communications director, ReFrame supported JaNaé as she worked with multiple stakeholders to connect values-based messaging and individual campaigns to a larger narrative.

“We are in a battle for the soul of Minnesota,” JaNaé said. “Are we going to live in a state where we agree to be divided by what we look like and how we worship? Or, are we going to fight for a state that is greater than fear, a state that creates policies and practices based on dignity and the interdependence of our liberation? These are the questions we asked ourselves.”

JaNaé, of course, is committed to the latter, and the goal is no less than a

revolution in which progressive values govern policymaking for all Minnesotans. Working in partnership with Anat Shenker-Osorio of ASO Communications and Sharon Goldtzvik of Uprise Communications, JaNaé and other communications strategists brought to life a campaign called “Greater Than Fear,” holding a mirror to the divisive tactics of political opponents, while offering an affirmative vision that “in Minnesota, we’re better off together.”

Greater Than Fear was rooted in the race-class narrative research undertaken collaboratively by Anat, Ian Haney López (author “Dog Whistle Politics”), public-policy organization Demos and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). This original research was done in deep partnership with coalition members and base leaders, alongside organizers, communications strategists and everyday people. Because both the narrative and the campaign to implement it invited active participation from a number of stakeholders, it gained traction with their networks. In this way, the narrative transcended common divisions along lines of race, class, geography and religion, and set a high bar for policies that would benefit all Minnesotans.

The Greater Than Fear narrative helped unite otherwise disparate campaigns,

and produced a slate of victories that challenge inequality and model an upswell of progressive values while combating narratives that rely on heightening fear as a strategy. After using the midterms to test and advance this narrative, ISAIAH is now working with a larger set of stakeholders on strategy development for the 2019 legislative season and beyond.

### It Takes a Symphony

Identifying the Greater Than Fear narrative was important, but values and messages alone don't propel structural change. Strategic communications, when integrated into organizing, can adapt and move narratives by engaging the right group of people in the right discussion at the right time, over a sustained period, to achieve concrete goals.

In Minnesota, JaNaé was trained to assess the conditions (time, place, terrain), identify values, shape a narrative and implement it strategically. Working with organizers, policy directors, member leaders and other communicators, JaNaé likens her role to a conductor of an improvisational symphony, where each player has sheet music that they co-create and adapt to their own style of expression.

At ReFrame, we work to remove traditional barriers between organizing

and communications. We train strategists who play both roles, building bridges within and across organizations, coalitions and sectors. We train leaders to conduct symphonies.

For JaNaé and ISAIAH, this meant starting the work long before the elections. In many ways, the groundwork for greater state alignment had been laid over the course of a decade. For 18 months before the midterms, ISAIAH and the other groups in Our Minnesota Future, built upon this foundation of alignment by working with Grassroots Policy Project to create a set of core values for an inclusive Minnesota.

JaNaé brought these collaborative values together with wisdom from ISAIAH's base. She started the process of narrative development with member-led visioning. "Before we developed Greater Than Fear, we had intentional conversations with our members," JaNaé said. "How could we create the world we deserved? For our members, the answer was only when we embodied and operated in abundance. This led us to deep discussions on the myth of scarcity. Through this we arrived at an aspirational vision: When we come back to the abundance and care that is present among us, and when we step into it courageously, we can create this better world."

“Moving a participatory narrative that brought organizing together with narrative research helped us win clear electoral victories. Leaders were energized and engaged when they saw the power their stories had in dynamic relationship to each other, and to a larger narrative ... This new leadership is key as we lean into the ongoing and long term of shaping our state to be Greater Than Fear.”

## JaNaé Bates

ISAIAH

Building on this collective visioning work, JaNaé and other members of Our Minnesota Future partnered with Jacob Swenson-Lengyel at the Narrative Initiative to design and lead a daylong training for more than 75 coalition members on narrative as a power-building strategy. (Jacob is also a ReFrame alumnus.) JaNaé, Jacob and the coalition team drew on approaches from the Narrative Initiative, Grassroots Policy Project and ReFrame to provide participants with tools and approaches for integrating communications, organizing and narrative strategy.

Using the Greater Than Fear branding and messaging guide together with this understanding of narrative strategy, JaNaé trained “authentic messengers” from their base to discuss campaigns with voters. Through 10,000 door knocks and more than 26,000 conversations, organizers talked with real people in real time about what Minnesota needed to become greater than fear. As voters began talking, electoral candidates took note and so did the media. Each began speaking more directly to the issues people cared about. JaNaé also led five trainings for hundreds of members, including more than 300 clergy. In the lead up to the election, JaNaé adjusted campaign messaging to reflect participants’ way of speaking with their congregations, while also ensuring

that messages could be adapted to echo the Greater Than Fear narrative.

JaNaé’s role was key. She, along with other coalition communicators from Take Action Minnesota and SEIU, took advantage of the election to turn a visioning and values alignment process into increased engagement and advancing an emerging narrative. She engaged everyday people in adapting research-based narrative and messaging, and translated the narrative into immediately useful tactics and material. JaNaé also took advantage of rapid response moments. For example, when one of their leaders was kidnapped and detained by ICE, JaNaé supported leaders to communicate the narrative that Minnesotans can demand better solutions that lead to a dignified democracy for all.

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## Decolonizing Communications

The Greater Than Fear campaign illuminates what Rashad Robinson of Color of Change describes when narrative power is paired with narrative infrastructure. And it's what ReFrame means by building equitable narrative infrastructure from the ground up.

Makani Themba writes: "Although we all have the right to communicate, historic patterns of privilege, injustice and marginalization mean that we have inequitable access to the tools and resources necessary to fully exercise this right. Bottom line: no change communications strategy is complete without investments in communications and organizing infrastructure that address these inequities."

Rather than investing solely in polling, big data analytics, sweeping academic projects, high culture and firm-driven narrative reports, we must expand our investments to include the very people impacted by the conditions we are trying to transform.

This is a decolonized view of the narrative ecosystem, one that sees the narrative landscape as populated by grassroots leaders and organizations who have long grappled with the strategic process of meaning making in their communities. It

disrupts the assumption that narratives are created only by elites – who have recently "discovered" the concept of narrative change – thinking together in a closed room.

In a decolonized narrative ecosystem, grassroots groups and their members are not only end-product consumers of narrative; they are essential creators and drivers of narrative change.

But grassroots groups like ISAIAH need to be better resourced to play this role. With increased investment in leadership, institution-building, and relevant infrastructure, groups like ISAIAH can implement strategic and participatory communications integrated with organizing, that when sustained over years, can lead to significant shifts in the public narratives that affect impacted communities the most.

This concept of decolonizing communications is not new. It comes from a lineage of women and people of color who have spearheaded effective change campaigns for racial, gender, economic, health, and environmental justice. These leaders include Makani Themba, Malkia Cyril, Alicia Garza, Charlotte Ryan, Lori Dorfman and Linda Stout, as well as institutions like Southerners on New Ground, Center for Media Justice, The

Something motivates people across time and against all odds to take bold steps to make the impossible possible. We believe we can make the right choices now to ensure this new era of narrative development contributes to shifting power both inside and outside of our movements. It's not only necessary, it's possible.

Praxis Project, the Black Lives Matter Network, Media Research and Action Research Project, Miami Workers Center, Indigenous Environmental Network, Forward Together, the Berkeley Media Studies Group, Progressive Communicators Network and the Center for Story-based Strategy, among others.

These visionary communications leaders and institutions have never seen narrative as separate from the daily work of organizing. They have also never seen narrative or framing work as a frontier to be discovered or owned, instead recognizing the hard work and leadership that has come before. Through campaigns, policy work, advocacy and training, each has advanced structural change through organizing meaning at local, regional, national and international scales.

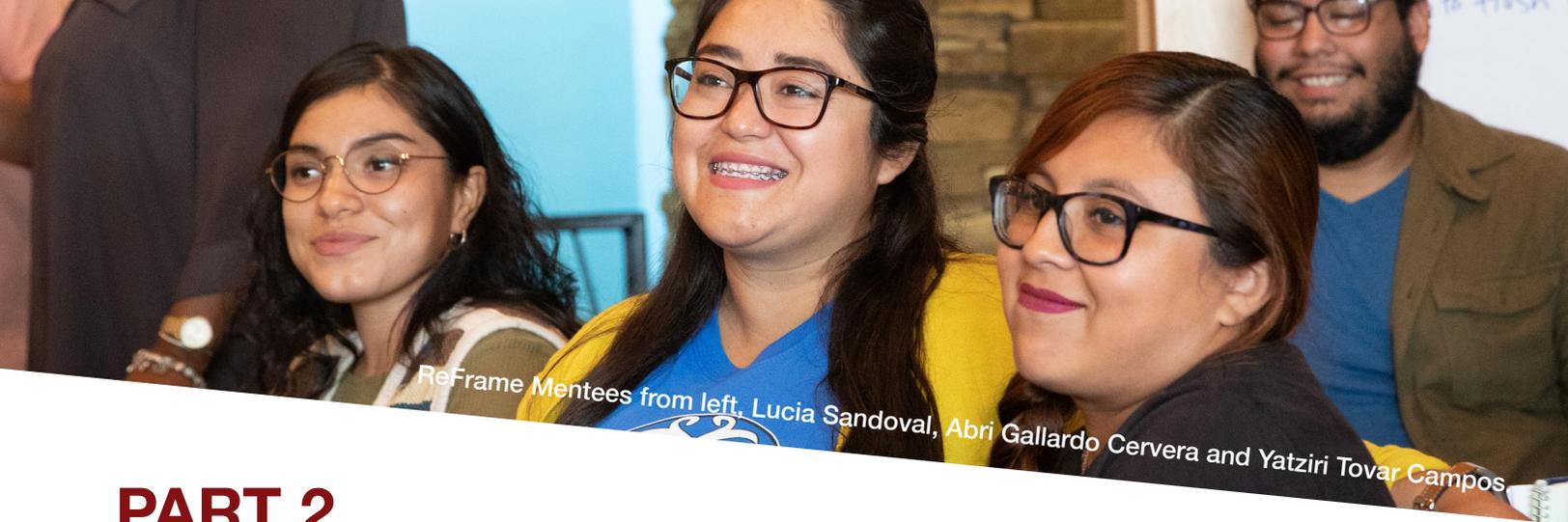
At ReFrame, our leadership team has had the privilege of working with the leaders and organizations who constitute this lineage of justice communications. Together we have more than 60 years of experience working within and alongside social movements as strategic communicators, narrative strategists, movement builders, organizers, campaign leads and creatives. We seek to continue this lineage and to evolve it to meet the unique challenges and opportunities of this political moment.

ReFrame, emboldened by the work of our predecessors, has confidence in the potential of grassroots forces to develop and move visionary narrative for wide-scale change. We have seen, as ISAI AH demonstrated in 2018, what is possible when we coalesce around an approach to narrative that is based on movement-building principles including leadership development, political education, power analysis, coalition building and collective action – all led by people impacted by the issues and best positioned to name not only short-term solutions but also long-term visions for structural change.

We have a new opportunity to get this right. We have a new opportunity to make the long-term financial commitment to resourcing organizing, communications leaders and sustained infrastructure necessary for building the narrative power we need to effect long-term change.

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**Find out how in part two of ReFrame's series: The VISION Framework for Building Narrative Power**



ReFrame Mentees from left, Lucia Sandoval, Abri Gallardo Cervera and Yatziri Tovar Campos

## PART 2

# THE 'VISION' FRAMEWORK FOR BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

“Knowledge production comes from the ground up. The idea of the expert who can dictate what should be said is so last decade. Effective change communications requires listening and learning that builds from the day to day reality of change work as well as our highest vision and aspirations.”

– Makani Themba, “Communications as if Movement Mattered”

At ReFrame, we envision a leaderful movement of narrative strategists deeply connected to grassroots organizing. We envision a world where Black people, Indigenous people, queer and trans people, people of color, poor people, people with disabilities – all those who have been disenfranchised by our current system – are not only represented in narratives, but are also creating and moving them in equal partnership with others.

We envision a network of leaders equipped to develop, test and apply a praxis of culture change and policy

change, while building the public voice of communities most impacted by dominant narratives. This is part of how power will shift.

In “Creating an Ecosystem of Narrative Power,” we make the case for investing in grassroots leaders, institutions and infrastructure over the long term. To build power, narratives need traction. To build traction, narratives need power. This traction and power are generated by a robust grassroots sector that is strongly connected to other sectors that have traditionally had more access to resources and political power. There are no magic

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bullets for building narrative power, nor is it a linear process. Instead, we need smart leaders resourced to center narrative strategy in their day-to-day work and sharing lessons, developing models and iterating on success and failure.

Grassroots forces like ISIAH and the Our Minnesota Future coalition can be our narrative development labs. These groups have a strong vision informed by members' real-life experiences. These groups also understand the organizing and network development required to create narratives with traction.

They know that change takes more than one election season. But they need sustained leadership, capacity and infrastructure to build power for the long haul. So, how do they keep the momentum going?

### Understanding Narrative

Writer and activist Rebecca Solnit recognized the long trajectory of narrative change when she wrote, "Ideas at first considered outrageous or ridiculous or extreme *gradually* become what people think they've always believed." (emphasis added)

We need to understand that narrative is a process and not a product. At ReFrame, we help strategic communications leaders understand some basic principles:

First, narratives turn explanations into norms. Different from a literary narrative or a personal story, the cultural narratives we need to shift inform people's values, reasoning, behavior, and choices. A narrative, in this context, is a commonly understood idea or belief that is reinforced over time through a matrix of related stories. By shaping how people conceive of societal problems, narratives create the conditions for the feasibility or even conception of solutions. Whether you agree with a particular narrative or not, one hallmark of a narrative is whether or not it is commonly understood. For example, when a public figure talks about bloated budgets and "the Fed," or "not letting the government get between you and your doctor," a larger narrative is at work. These messages or talking points trigger a deeper narrative for audiences, consciously or subconsciously, about "Big Government." The Big Government narrative blames state and federal government for "overreach," which creates much of society's ills. This narrative very clearly defines the only possible solutions for a multiple of problems: the free market and individual participation in it. Any solution outside of those prescribed by the narrative, when the narrative gains enough power, are simply not possible, they are ludicrous and ridiculous, nonsensical.

Second, narratives are slippery. They do

not “stick,” as some have suggested. In fact, narratives are constantly evolving and competing for traction in the public sphere. A narrative, therefore, must be constantly assessed and developed in real time. The Big Government/Free Market narrative may appear to be static in its dominance, or “stickiness,” but when we pull our view back we can easily see narrative challenges. These challenges are often backed by social movements that advance and recede, gaining and losing traction, while Big Government/Free Market maneuvers to maintain dominance. Policy and cultural shifts only result when the power struggle between these narratives and others reaches a tipping point. This tipping point is never accidental. Rather, it is accomplished by leaders using institutions and infrastructure to leverage narrative power along with economic and political power to tip the scales and shape society’s named and unnamed rules.

Narratives only appear to “stick” when a narrative infrastructure, which includes mechanisms for aligning political, economic and narrative power, is aligned behind a narrative for a sustained period of time. Assuming that a narrative has some inherent “stickiness” only sees the trees, not the forest.

Therefore, metrics measuring narrative

traction must also measure leadership capacity, infrastructure development and policy change as well as comprehensive media analysis. In this way, some narratives slip in and out of public consciousness, reemerging in moments of convergence. During the civil rights and Black Power movement, for example, we saw a renewed race-class narrative during the sanitation workers campaign, and a rising narrative of multiracial working-class unity during the Rainbow Coalition years (from the late '60s to the early '70s). We are fighting to regain some of this narrative ground today.

Finally, stories only become narratives when people build power. It is true that stories populate narrative, and everyday people can shape the most visionary narratives for change. A story, however powerful, is most often episodic. A narrative, on the other hand, merges with public consciousness in such a way that its meaning can be triggered by a simple phrase, symbol or even a sound. One example of this quick trigger is #BlackLivesMatter. While the statement “Black Lives Matter” on the surface holds a very clear and straightforward meaning, when tied to stories of police murders of unarmed Black people, these stories create a larger narrative of systematic and



ReFrame Mentee Renee' Mowatt.

“We can build narratives across racial lines by building relationships across constituencies. If we could host a series of ongoing member meetings with our Black and Latinx membership to challenge underlying assumptions in our base around anti-Blackness and xenophobia, we would be able to broaden not just the concept of community across race by uniting along lines of class, we would be able to do this in practice, too. This would lead to generating stronger joint visions, narratives and actions.”

**Jasmine Leeward**

National Women’s March

violent oppression of Black people in the U.S.

A story can be told. Narratives are understood and embodied. Narratives begin to emerge when enough power is built to carry frames and messages across multiple forms of cultural communication: curriculum in classrooms, sermons in churches, lyrics in songs, stories in stump speeches, features on the nightly news, jokes at kitchen tables and in comedy acts.

Almost universally, this process takes time. It took more than 30 years, hundreds of millions of dollars, and thousands of leaders, for the Right to turn an ideological viewpoint into a Big Government/Free Market narrative with traction. Stories about the good that government can do become almost irrelevant once a narrative like this takes hold. This same infrastructure has also advanced and gained traction for other narratives that do very real damage to impacted communities, such as “Family Values” and “Citizenship Nationalism,” both closely tied to right wing populism. Only visionary new narratives with power, people and sustained infrastructure can inspire public imagination toward different solutions.

Resisting Magic Bullets: Investing in Narrative as Process

There’s an unspoken assumption that grassroots work is strong in heart and passion, but lacking in vision and impact to scale. Those of us who have worked to build grassroots power for decades know, however, that the greatest vision often comes from those with direct experience, such as people within the prison system, immigrants who’ve been detained or denied, workers excluded from labor protections, and so many others impacted by structural oppression.

We also know that our ability to achieve impact at scale is directly related to the amount of resources we have to act on these ambitious visions.

The narrative change we seek requires patience and dedication. It requires a long-term vision and approach rooted in communities whose wisdom and longing for change comes from necessity in the face of adversity.

Jasmine Marie Leeward, former communications manager at New Virginia Majority, (NVM), social media manager at the National Women’s March and 2017 ReFrame Mentorship alumna, knows this firsthand. Jasmine sees narrative as inseparable from day-to-day organizing. She also acknowledges that implementing a narrative development process among

NVM members would require a larger team resourced to put long-term strategies into action.

Jasmine personally knocked on hundreds of doors in the lead-up to the 2018 midterm elections. Household after household, she found people eager to talk about a long-term vision for change. In fact, NVM found that people who have been locked out of the system the longest are more engaged by conversations about the difference they can make over time, rather than the immediate impact of voting. “I talked through the in-between with folks,” Jasmine said. “Not just what happens at the ballot box, but what happens afterward, and in the lead up to the next election, and how in five to 10 years – if we stay involved – we can think of ourselves as people who have an impact on the democracy all the time.”

Jasmine sees potential for this approach to help people envision where they fit in the movement, and to bridge divides. “I want to do a similar thing in our membership meetings,” Jasmine said. “We can build narratives across racial lines by building

relationships across constituencies. If we could host a series of ongoing member meetings with our Black and Latinx membership to challenge underlying assumptions in our base around anti-Blackness and xenophobia, we would be able to broaden not just the concept of community across race by uniting along lines of class, we would be able to do this in practice, too. This would lead to generating stronger joint visions, narratives and actions.”

The process that Jasmine describes is ultimately what building narrative power should be about. It starts and ends with conversations. Investing in the vision of organizers like Jasmine can help turn strategic organizing conversations into kitchen table conversations. The need is urgent. But we can act now, with the understanding that sustainable transformation takes time.

To support the growth of this narrative process, ReFrame offers our VISION model for investing in a grassroots-led ecosystem for building narrative power.



ReFrame mentees, mentors and staff.

# VISION in the Narrative Ecosystem

## VISION:

**V**isionary leaders **I**ntegrated into  
**S**trategic formations with the **I**nfrastructure to  
**O**rganize meaning to build  
**N**arrative power.

### Visionary Leaders

At ReFrame, we specifically prioritize leaders from impacted and disenfranchised communities, including Black, Latinx, Native American, LGBTQ, women and femmes, and poor and working-class leaders. These are the “million raindrops” Rashad Robinson talks about in *Changing Our Narrative About Narrative*: “People equipped, talented, motivated and networked to effectively spread new and compelling stories throughout their networks and subcultures.”

### Integrated

These leaders cannot make change alone. They must be integrated or at least in deep relationship to formations made up of impacted members who are poised to make collective change.

### Strategic Formations

Strategic thinking is nothing without a strategic formation that can turn the strategy into action. These formations can be organizations, alliances, networks, tables, cooperatives, hubs, affinity groups and more. What is more important than a formation’s structure is that the group embody a “culture of strategy.” This culture of strategy is defined by clear indicators of impact, a clear theory of change to achieve the impact, and the ability to shift tactics based on an evaluation of work and an analysis of changing conditions.

### Infrastructure

Infrastructure is the connective tissue necessary to bridge the grassroots with other sectors. These other sectors include academia, government, entertainment and more. Infrastructure is also the shared technology to conduct narrative research, the protocols around equitable access to this technology and research, and new formations for bold but grounded narrative experimentation, learning and evaluation.

### Organize Meaning

Organizing meaning requires what Robinson identifies as follow-through. Follow-through can only be implemented through organized forces with the means to align around common values, explanations and solutions. This alignment allows groups to use disruptive moments to not only react to dominant narratives, but also to sustain the development and engagement of emerging narratives.

### Narrative Power

Narrative power is a prerequisite for narrative change. This power to shape meaning is what gets built incrementally when we invest in a narrative ecosystem that prioritizes economic and political power.

In Minnesota, JaNaé Bates is one visionary leader integrated into the strategic formations of ISAIAH, Faith in Minnesota and Our Minnesota Future. She was empowered to develop the coalition infrastructure necessary to organize meaning toward narrative change. In Virginia, Jasmine is doing the same. There are dozens of other leaders doing this work with them. These leaders, their organizations and their coalitions must be resourced to sustain the work described by this framework. The time is now to invest and to do the work of building connections and sharing resources with grassroots groups. This shift is critical to realizing the progressive sector's potential for narrative change.

### VISION Puts Narrative in Context

Investing in narrative strategy requires a basic understanding that narrative shifts take time — not two or three years, but five or 10, and even a generation. As Makani Themba writes, “there are no shortcuts.” We should not be daunted by this long-range commitment. Given the potential impact, we should be inspired by it.

Different vehicles for narrative change have emerged over time — frames and meta-frames, narratives and meta-narratives — but the core concept is the same: we seek to shape meaning. Shaping meaning requires a diversity of tactics and strategies, as well as the flexible capacity to experiment and learn. Critical to the project of making meaning is it MUST be in relationship to power-building efforts that are grounded in winning greater rights, opportunity

and democracy for all. But, as history has also shown, we need smarter and more sustained investment in leadership and in infrastructure to do this better.

There is work to do now to set the stage. We can identify and leverage disruptive moments like the #MeToo movement, which became a cultural tipping point only after decades of strategic communications work integrated with on-the-ground organizing by Tarana Burke and others. We can also train strategists to see the difference between a disruptive moment and an opportunity to coalesce new narratives that shift societal norms. Coalescing a widely-held narrative on norms of gender justice — such as, a vision of a world without sexual violence — requires increased investment in the on-the-ground work of developing visionary narrative strategy.

To maximize the effectiveness of narrative strategy, we should:

- Invest in narrative as a process, not a product
- Rightsize our expectations about what narrative can and can't do; and
- Apply an equity and justice lens as we grapple with questions like: What are our assumptions about who gets to drive narrative work? How much narrative power can be built across differences in ideology and how? What are the opportunities and limits to narrative power-building over the next 10 years?

**GOT GREEN AS THE GREEN ARROW**  
A Story about communication Strategy



ReFrame Mentee Hodan Hassan of Got Green.



Narratives are only effective when they are integrated into a holistic, comprehensive strategy that includes organizing, legal work, direct action and other tactics. With these considerations in mind, we stand the chance of creating a narrative infrastructure that puts progressive values into action.

By developing a visionary ecosystem of narrative power – one that is focused on building long-term power by and for the impacted and disenfranchised – we can create the conditions for more narrative disruptions, more tipping points, and more sustained work toward deeper shifts in societal norms and common world view.

Ultimately, ReFrame envisions a world where structural power has shifted toward equity, justice and interdependence. We believe the narrative development process must model these values. We believe impacted communities can and will move us closer to a world organized around these values.

We must invest in their leadership now. If we don't we'll end up in the same place we've been for decades – on the defensive, fighting for reforms. If we do, we have a chance to create narratives that are more than trickle-down commodities. We have a chance to create narrative convergence that builds power, shifts norms and propels ordinary people to join movements for transformative change. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### JEN SORIANO

*ReFrame Co-Founder & Chair of Advisory Committee*

Jen Soriano is a Pinay writer and communications strategist originally from Chicago. She is a leader in progressive communications, with more than 17 years of experience building the power of social justice groups across the country. In 2002, Jen co-founded the Center for Media Justice in Oakland, along with CMJ's Executive Director Malkia Cyril. In 2011, Jen joined RoadMap Consulting as its Strategic Communications Coordinator.

### JOSEPH PHELAN

*ReFrame Co-Founder & Director*

Joseph Phelan (he/his) is a creative strategist grounded in modern social movements for justice and liberation. With over two decades of experience – from direct actions in the '90s global justice movement, to the deep power building organizing of the Miami Workers Center and New Florida Majority – Joseph finds inspiration in the simple moments of a shared story and excitement in big strategy. He is the Co-Founder and Director of ReFrame.

### KIMBERLY FREEMAN BROWN

*ReFrame Senior Advisor*

Kimberly Freeman Brown is President of KFB Consulting, LLC, a boutique organizational development and strategic communications consulting firm that supports some of the foremost progressive leaders and advocacy, organizing and political organizations in the nation. Previously, she served as Executive Director of American Rights at Work, a labor policy organization that merged with Jobs with Justice under her leadership in 2012.

### HERMELINDA CORTÉS

*ReFrame Program Manager*

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### JUNG HEE CHOI

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For over 20 years, Jung Hee has been designing and leading strategies that help organizations win campaigns, change narratives and lift community voices. She is currently the Associate Director, Communications and Policy Strategies at Power California. From 2006-2014, Jung Hee was the communications director and chief architect of the communications program and strategies at Community Coalition in South Los Angeles.