By Anne Phillips, Executive Director

I first learned about Jane Van Galen’s work with digital storytelling at the inaugural First Generation College Student Summit, where, as our keynote speaker, she discussed the power of telling our stories. After seeing what influence and intimacy these stories could pack into just three to four minutes, I knew it would be powerful to partner with UW Bothell in bringing this work to first-gen college students around the country.

After nearly two years of planning and crowdfunding our mobile storytelling lab, we launched our first workshop in May 2015. My goal was to shadow Jane and to learn how to be her assistant in using this new medium. At that very first workshop she asked me, “So are you going to tell your first-gen story, Anne?” I deflected, focusing on learning the technology and shadowing Jane’s incredible teaching style.

Each Story Is Spectacular

Each time I was moved to see participants culling such meaningful stories from the broad experiences that are first-gen. I admired their bravery and honesty to confront their obstacles and put them out for others to see. And regardless of artistic or poetic know-how, the self-narration becomes spoken word, and explain economic differences among us.

The story of deservedness – the belief that people are economically where they deserve to be – is one of the most culturally powerful narratives. Wealthy people are wealthy because they get up early, work hard all day, work smarter and take risks. People are impoverished or middle-class because of personal deficiencies. They didn’t get up as early or work as hard.

Class Action works to build a counter-narrative that reflects the real complexity of people’s lives. We also supply real tools to help people navigate interpersonal conversations and public dialogue.

On an interpersonal level, the “myth of meritocracy” suggests that someone we judge as a “go-getter” deserves more money than someone deemed a “slacker.” But three hundred times more? Or a thousand times more? These simplistic stories prevent us from understanding the deeply systemic nature of the inequalities of income, wealth and opportunity in the United States.

Some people hear a statistic about inequality – say that the wealthiest 1% has 42% of all the private wealth – and they immediately project simplistic narratives of deservedness onto those facts. “Oh, some people work harder.” Similarly, take a statistic about the racial wealth divide from a new report I co-authored. The median white household has 86 times more wealth than the median Black household and 68 times the median Latino household.

These differentials cannot be explained through the narrative of deservedness. Only through an exploration of the multi-generational legacy of racial discrimination in wealth-building can we explain this gap.

continued on page three
A friend, a former employee of an international animal rights organization, told me that he wished the leadership loved admins as much as they loved animals. He had left, because he was expected to work 12-hour days for a salary that required him to have a weekend gig to pay the rent and buy Ramen noodles.

Too many nonprofits focus on making the world a better place but overlook how systemic inequality has quietly crept into its own workplace. Class Action's Staffing the Mission explores how nonprofits can work toward economic justice internally. The project aims to collect ideas, experiences and lessons learned from organizations that have made changes toward greater wage and decision-making equity in order to help other nonprofits take the same journey.

Is Flat Fair?

In our initial survey of 35 organizations, we learned that even well-intentioned leaders don't necessarily have a shared definition of what fairness looks like. Most survey respondents described as "fair" or "very fair" a tiered salary structure, where those with more authority and decision-making power get higher wages. But even a flat structure does not always achieve equity.

The survey showed how inclusive decision-making is very connected to equitable wage structures. Respondents reflected that organizations might be more likely to prioritize changes toward equitable pay if the lowest paid employees were regularly included in decision-making. Others described how increasing transparency and participation in decision-making hit roadblocks when the organization's leadership realized that increased participation might lead to line staff advocating for a fairer distribution of wages. A more even distribution of decision-making power and wages go hand in hand. And it's hard to pursue either of them without being fully committed to both.

In a series of follow-up interviews, one trend that emerged revealed that most organizations doing well at internal equity were built that way from the ground up. Most nonprofits that were founded with hierarchical decision-making and a steeply tiered salary structure have found it difficult to push past impasse to transform in really significant ways toward greater pay equity or more inclusive decision-making.

**Share Your Story, Expertise and Resources**

Staffing the Mission continues to seek success stories – as well as stories of partial successes or even well-intentioned failures – and to connect with other organizations doing similar work. Do you have a story to share about how your organization moved toward greater internal equity? How about a time when your organization didn’t move in that direction, but you gained insights into the barriers?

If you're interested in contributing to Staffing the Mission with your expertise and/or resources, get in touch at davey@classism.org, subject line: StM, or call 617.477.8635.

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The image compilation and juxtaposition become art. Once again, at our June 2017 workshop with University of Washington graduate students, Jane nudged me again, "Are you going to make your story?" I reflected on my hesitancy, "There’s nothing spectacular about my story." Nonetheless, I set out to write.

To my surprise, creating my story unearthed newfound pride in my own first-gen experience, even if it was 23 years ago. The time and distance from my first-gen experience really changed how I reflect on the two decades since I went off to college. I had increased appreciation for my journey and accomplishments.

I also was not expecting to gain much from sharing my experience with the other participants. I knew intellectually and emotionally the power of seeing others’ stories, but not in my own “nothing spectacular story.” But the acknowledgments, nods and appreciations that we all shared with one another affirmed our similar challenges and victories, as well the uniqueness of our parallel paths.

While it can be quite a commitment to come together for three days to create these beautiful stories, I highly recommend it. Please reach out to me at workshops@classism.org for more information. You can check out my story and others at firstinourfamilies.org.
Time to Change the Narrative

These stories are not benign. They serve the interests of the unequal status quo. The role of the right-wing commentator is to redirect concerns about rules-based inequality into interpersonal classist narratives that justify inequality.

Real wages for the bottom 50% of U.S. households have stayed flat or fallen for the last four decades. But instead of understanding this as a result of larger economic forces and policy decisions, the explanation becomes that a low-wage earner “deserves” their low wages because of a personal failing, character flaw or lack of education.

A key step in disrupting these stories of deservedness is to tell true stories about the help and advantages that flow to some people. Talking about family help or government subsidies demystifies how people attain higher incomes and wealth. By omitting these forms of help from our stories, we perpetuate the classist myth that the rise to the middle-class or to great wealth is entirely the result of individual achievement.

*An explanation of a situation or events, using verifiable facts, half-truths, and/or misinformation to promote a particular ideology or point of view.

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Helping Children Grow

Steeped in a culture of anti-bias work at the Peabody Terrace Children’s Center, Kendra Pelojoaquin realized two years ago that she wanted to add a class lens to the work that the teachers and administrators were doing with the internationally diverse infants, toddlers and families.

The Harvard-affiliated independent nonprofit is built on four pillars. It teaches children to feel positive about themselves, feel positive about others, to see injustice and want to end it. Kendra knew that helping the staff and administrators understand class and classism would be central to helping the children in their care achieve these outcomes.

Read the full article at: bit.ly/CA_ChildrenGrow

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Preparing the Next Generation of Service Providers

Josephine Kim, lecturer on education with a dual faculty appointment at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Harvard School of Dental Medicine, brought Class Action in to provide workshops and discussions with students at the university’s education, dental and public health schools. “I wanted students to know that classism is alive and well,” she explains, “and there are systems in place that keep it so.”

“It is important for people who are service providers to understand the roots and effects of classism so they do not perpetuate it, especially with vulnerable populations.”

Read more at: bit.ly/CA_NextGen

Building Community

The Winchester Multicultural Network promotes the recognition, understanding and appreciation of diversity within the affluent town of Winchester, Mass. The organization looks at diversity through a multifaceted lens. But each year, it chooses an issue, as part of the program Winchester in Transition, that it will focus on deeply. Issues have included immigration and other hot topics.

“The organization had been talking about exploring class and classism for a long time,” shares Aba Taylor, WMN executive director (and Class Action board member since 2017). And the members decided in 2015 to begin working with Class Action to create a yearlong, perhaps even multi-year thematic focus on class.

Read more at: bit.ly/CA_Building

Class Action works with a range of organizations and institutions to tailor a training or series of trainings and discussions that help staff, students, constituents and others examine the issue of class and address classism at the individual, organizational and systemic level. Contact Anne Phillips at workshops@classism.org or 617.477.8635 to discuss how we can help your group or institution do this critical work.
6th Annual First-Gen College Student Summit

Can you believe we are headed into our 6th year of the First-Generation College Student Summit?

The impact of the skill sharing that’s happened over the years is inspiring, and we hope to continue to build our networks to learn more. This year we’re headed back to Western Mass to the lovely campus of Mount Holyoke College. If you’re interested in presenting a workshop or attending the summit, please email us at:

INTERN@CLASSISM.ORG

Welcome New Board Members

This past year, Class Action expanded our Board of Directors from six to nine to improve our capacity. We are excited to welcome Aba Taylor, Tanya Williams and Zoë Williams to the team. These incredible folks bring a breadth of knowledge, experience and commitment to our mission. We asked them each, what excites you most about joining the Class Action Board?

Aba Taylor
“I came to know Class Action through my role as Executive Director of the Winchester Multicultural Network and our collaboration with the organization. After being involved in social justice work for nearly 20 years supporting immigrants, people affected by HIV/AIDS, LGBTQI communities, women’s rights, and racial justice, I am deeply honored and excited to support Class Action’s work as a board member and help the organization bring the much-needed perspective of class and classism to the discussion and education of social justice issues.”

Tanya Williams
“After being a trainer for Class Action for a number of years and having experience with a number of organizations that do the work of social justice, I wanted to give back to the organization in a different way. Class Action has offered me many opportunities to grow and develop in my thinking and work, and I want to help forward the work of the organization to reach more people.”

Zoë Williams
“As a disabled, gender-queer, and working-class parent, I am excited to join Class Action to build solidarity across classes in a time where solidarity and collaboration is essential. As a working-class organizer, I am excited to affirm the leadership of poor and working-class people in academia, social justice communities and other sectors.”

You can find and read their and other board members’ bios at bit.ly/CA_Board