

## Stories with Impact

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It was just a tree stump. But it was alone in the middle of a nature preserve high in the mountain meadows. One of the donors along on the field trip hike asked the obvious question, “What happened here?”

“Well, there’s a story about that,” Mark, the preserve manager said. He began telling what happened one August afternoon two years earlier. It began with the sound of a chain saw. The nearest house in the direction of the whining was more than a mile. The sound was much closer.

Getting on a mountain bike he furiously pedaled toward the sound. Two men had just cut down an ancient tree well inside the preserve boundary. They were now cutting it up for firewood and loading it into their pickup.

Mark colorfully described how he put an end to that wood cutting escapade. It probably didn’t hurt that Mark was an ex-Marine and came visibly prepared for any kind of backwoods encounter.

### The Power of Stories

The moral of the story was abundantly clear to all on that hike: without active

protection places like this won’t last long. And, preserving these kind of places is exactly what these donors had in mind for their legacy.

That evening at dinner every one of the donors commented about the story. In its own way it showed commitment of the charity to its mission and core values, highlighted the passion of its staff, and demonstrated the case for short- and long-term financial support. It was a bit of entertainment too.

From the point of view of a planned giving officer I privately thanked the preserve manager for the telling the story – it accomplished more than any brochure or presentation. To coin a phrase, “My work was (almost) done.”

Stories can be more than just stories. What stories are in your repertoire? Do you have a story (at least one) about each of your program areas? If you don’t what can you do to gather or create some? When working for a national conservation organization one of the first things I did as a planned giving officer was visit key staff and a number of beloved nature preserves with the intention of leaving with a story about each.

I used the stories to connect and reconnect donors with the mission, people and places. Vivid stories always worked better than charts and graphs. They provided wonderful opportunities to slip in the latest news about a donor's favorite place too. The listeners responded by telling stories of their own that told me much about their passions and needs as a donor. The conversations always seemed to expand and grow more interesting for everyone.

There is much to storytelling. But the best stories start with your own experience. Painting a vivid picture in

words is powerful. Take the time to harvest your own stories and you (and your organization) will be amply rewarded.

Note: A useful resource written specifically for nonprofit organizations is a recently updated book entitled "Storytelling as a Best Practice" written by Andy Goodman and available at a bargain price at [www.agoodmanonline.com](http://www.agoodmanonline.com).

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\*\* Certified Specialist in Planned Giving is a professional designation awarded by the American Institute for Philanthropic Studies, California.