

There
ARE AS MANY
PATHWAYS
AS THERE ARE
PEOPLE



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There Are as Many Pathways as There Are People

We're sharing Roadtrip Nation's approach for capturing authentic stories and voices that can illuminate systemic issues and drive narrative change

How can you bring storytelling practices into your own organization—from capturing and sharing stories that communicate your mission's impact, to ensuring that the voices of the people you hope to serve are heard and centered in the work you do?

When you center the voices of the people at the heart of a story, you can shift narratives; show the need for specific support, action, and change; and demonstrate the real community-level impact of the work you do. With this toolkit, we're sharing the principles and practices that Roadtrip Nation leans on in our documentaries so that other mission-driven organizations can humanize their work and impact and build a culture of storytelling.

Throughout this toolkit, you'll see three Story Spotlights from Roadtrip Nation's public television series. Each of their stories is a way of going deeper into a bigger issue or theme through one individual's experience in order to portray the complexity and emotion that might not be apparent in high-level headlines or data points. In our series, we put these learners in conversation with inspiring people whose stories and experiences can help give them perspective and new insights about their own paths.

Shyane was 19 and working two jobs in food service and retail when she joined us for a series about pathways that don't require a four-year degree. She shared why traditional ideas of college didn't work for her, and met the executive chef who runs the biggest buffet in the world, whose career training began with an associate degree in culinary arts.

Taiheem's story is from a series about opportunities made possible through workforce development programs. When his first child was on the way, he snapped into action to find a path that would help him support his family. He sat down to talk to Anel Perez, a solutions architect at Amazon, who leveled up in his career with a workforce development program. Melanie's story features in a series about community college. She was experiencing a lot of success and getting promoted in her retail jobs, but looking for a career more in line with her aspirations and searching for the right educational path to support her goals. She sat down with NASA's Diana Trujillo—who worked multiple jobs in food service and hospitality to get herself through community college and to NASA, where she led the Mars Curiosity rover mission. Each of their stories helps add more nuance to these complex, multilayered topics about the experiences and dreams driving people who are seeking out non-four-year degree paths, community college, and workforce development programs.

No matter what big ideas you're working on, you can tell these kinds of stories too, in a format that meets your audience where they are. Whether you work directly with the people and communities you serve, or your work addresses solutions at a systems level, cultivating a culture of storytelling in your organization to share more of the stories behind the top-level messages and data can help rally your organization and wider community around your purpose by creating more engagement and emotional connection to the outcomes you hope to achieve.



These stories can be shared in a variety of ways, depending on your objective and audience. For example, you might:

Share stories internally to create a culture of storytelling within your organization

- Center the experiences and voices of the people you serve within your organization
- Create a two-way exchange and engage with your community and audience more deeply
- Keep your team connected to the real, tangible impact of the work you do
- Stay connected to the concerns and experiences of the communities you aim to serve
- Celebrate the impact of the work your team is doing

Share stories externally to shift narratives, communicate impact, and humanize systemic issues

- Personalize the impact of your organization
- Support narrative change work
- Create more awareness around an issue or need
- Persuade or inform key stakeholders
- Engage communities in conversations around important issues that impact them

How to use this toolkit:

There are many ways to capture a story, this is just how we do it at Roadtrip Nation. We tell stories through videos and documentaries, but you can apply some of these same practices and principles to many facets of the work you do, whether that's bringing the voices of the people you serve closer to your internal teams, promoting your work and impact externally to engage a wider community, or, of course, capturing and sharing videos or stories in any format.

The guidance we share here comes from our work on our documentary series, but we've also adopted these practices in more abbreviated forms when we only have a short amount of time with someone. The most important thing, in our experience, is listening, staying open, and remembering that your main job is to facilitate and create a safe space for someone to tell their story.



Roadtrip Nation

Storytelling Fundamentals

Collaborative storytelling that centers the voices of the people at the heart of the story

What follows are practices you can use in your organization to center the voices of the people whose experiences and stories you're representing and amplifying. The principles we outline here are intended to position the people who are sharing their stories as co-creators and collaborators.

The first step, before you go any further, is to recognize your own role in this process. There are lots of storytelling formats and methods that benefit from careful scripting and planning and knowing exactly what you're going to capture—it can be an excellent and appropriate approach for some projects. We have a slightly different objective—learning what people at the center of an issue are actually thinking and feeling—so we have a different approach.

As you can see, this more free-flowing approach, centered on making room for what the people who are closest to the story want to share, still requires a lot of preparation and thoughtfulness—but it also means your role in this process is more that of a facilitator.

This approach requires you to let go of some control of the outcome and the narrative. Remember, you're not bringing people in to say what you want them to say. You're bringing them into this process to ask them about their experience, to listen closely and make this a conversation, and to create the right situation and environment for someone to feel supported and safe being open and vulnerable about their story.

This might all seem a little overwhelming to incorporate into the work you already do, but even using a handful of these principles and practices can be impactful. As someone who's deeply knowledgeable about the work your organization is engaged in, and who cares deeply about impact and the people you serve, you're the right person to champion the importance of centering these voices and stories.

Step 1: Getting Started



What story are you telling, and who should tell it?

What story—and why?

To get started, you'll need to have a clear understanding of what kind of story you're trying to tell, and why. We usually begin with a document called a creative brief. This kind of documentation doesn't need to be so formal, or be an intimidating and intensive project—it's simply a document that captures the essence of the project and can serve as a guiding light throughout the process, as well as a great onboarding tool for anyone who will be joining or contributing at any stage.

For your purposes, you might start by answering or discussing these questions:

- **Why are we doing this?**
- **Who are we trying to reach and represent in these stories?**
- **How and where will this story be shared? What do we want people to feel or learn?**
- **Is there any relevant research or data we should be aware of?**
- **What narratives or biases should we be aware of or avoid?**

Identify the people at the center of the story

In general, Roadtrip Nation tells stories about what it's like to find your path in life, so we look for people who are at a decision point or moment of change and transition. Their voices drive the story, because the story is theirs—we can't know what they're experiencing, but we can help create a space where they're supported in sharing about it.

You may be telling a different kind of story with a different purpose and a different audience, but you can still use this approach of centering the voices of those who are most affected to humanize a big issue, bring data or research down to a more individual level, or show the community-level impact of the work you do. You may have an idea of what you think the story is, or what you want it to be, but this is a good moment to think about whose voice should be centered, find them, listen, support, and be curious.

Here's what we keep in mind when considering who might be best to drive the story we're exploring:

We look for real people who aren't public figures; we're not "casting" or looking for a spokesperson →

We're not looking for an actor or influencer, a camera-ready spokesperson, or someone who has it all figured out—but we are looking for someone who is engaged, open, and able to communicate their story in a compelling way.

We're also looking for someone who comes across as real and relatable to the specific audience this story represents—will they see something true or familiar about their own story represented here? Even if the people you're ultimately trying to reach are not part of the same community or audience as the person in the story, this point should still hold true.

Does this story or issue matter to them or have a real, tangible impact on their life? →

This story should have some urgency or importance to the person you're looking for—the key goes back to authenticity. We are looking for the people who genuinely embody some elements of the story we're hoping to convey—the people who are currently living the experiences we're hoping to bring to the center of a project or initiative. We may have goals and key messages and research to back up our plan, but only the actual people living these things can shed light on what it's really like, what they're feeling, what their story is, and how they share it.

Find them!

Once you generally know who might be at the center of the story, how do you find them? We tend to find people through a robust and long-established application process, but we also have a team of producers dedicated to this work. You likely won't have the same time and resources to commit, so our most important tip is:

The best candidates tend to come through a referral from a personal, trusted relationship.

We've found the most success in reaching out and finding community members and connectors—the people who have relationships with the communities you want to reach. That might look like talking to an educator at a local school, or someone who runs a local outreach program, or a program or outreach lead in your own organization.

Explain the opportunity, why you're doing this, what it's for, and the kinds of stories and experiences you're looking for. Ask if they know who might be a good fit and could be open to sharing their story, and if they'd be willing to share this project with them. When that trusted mentor or connection reaches out personally to potential participants, it tends to lead to the most meaningfully aligned relationships and stories.

Know what value you're providing to participants who share their story

This experience shouldn't be one-sided, so make sure to plan for how you will compensate or provide value to the people who are sharing their time and experiences with you. Figure out the right, equitable approach for your organization. Remember to work with your organization to consider details like tax implications for yourself and especially for the person you're collaborating with, and plan for those.

Compensation: We've compensated participants in a variety of ways, depending on the kind of project and how involved it is, but you might consider:

- **A generous day rate, hourly rate, project rate, stipend, or other mode of compensation**
- **A scholarship or other educational benefit**
- **Gifting laptops or other items that someone might need for educational or other purposes**
- **Providing other supportive resources, mentorship, or benefits like coaching and access to programs**
- **Or a combination of these things**

Accessibility: Also consider what supportive resources you might provide to make this opportunity possible for a wide variety of people with varying life situations—support for childcare, transportation, specific aids or services, or other needs. In order to discover what's needed, you can discuss this with them to explore what would help them participate and find a way to provide it.





Watch Shyane's
Roadtrip

**"I feel like I want to do
more with my life—
something I really
enjoy doing rather
than doing stuff
because I have to."**



Shyane, 19

Splendor, TX

Working two jobs in food service and retail, and trying to figure out where her interests can take her next

Becoming my own person

I'm from a small town called Splendora, Texas. There's not much to do here. We have a water tower, a few restaurants, nothing big. In the blink of an eye, you can see the entire town.

But I started off in Missoula, Montana. My dad is Sioux Native and we lived on a Native reservation. It was very full of culture. We used to go to powwows a lot when we were younger, which was kind of cool.

I didn't want to become like my parents, because they were alcoholics. That's what I thought was normal. Watching them take that path helped me be more motivated to want to try with my life, have a little bit more ambition.

School hasn't really worked for me

I wasn't a huge fan of school. Pretty much what they preached about in school was either you had to go to college, you had to join the military, or you're gonna be stuck with a dead-end job. They never even once brought up the option of trade school.

So after high school, I took a small break, but quickly decided I wanted to do something with my life.

Before Hurricane Harvey, I had enrolled into Lone Star College. I was going to go be a paralegal. **I was looking forward to going to college.** At the time I didn't have anything else planned—I was just trying to figure out any direction to go.

Where I'm at right now

One of my jobs is at Pump It Up. It's an inflatable bouncy house place for children. I've been working there for about two years. It's really entertaining.

And then I also have a second job at Panda Express, which I've been working at for a few months.

It's not really the work made for me, or the type of environment I want to work in long-term. I just really like to be busy, have something to do.



But then the flooding ruined a few of the buildings, and that was going to hinder my learning experience.

I dropped out because I didn't feel comfortable taking online courses and I didn't feel like I was going to get the education that I paid for. I prefer there to be somebody helping me out, and I like having mentors to help me out along the way.

I had to find out a lot of things on my own and try to work things out myself. And I really learned from other people's mistakes.



Looking to the future

I do feel stuck. I've been here for a long time and I want to go have my own journey. I don't feel like Texas is the place for me. I really want to change and pursue my own dream.

I've been kind of curious about the trades. But I just didn't know which one was the fit for me.

And I've been falling for animals a little bit. Getting to work with animals all day is something I'd be interested in doing in the future.

I'm also interested in working on a cruise ship. That would be very entertaining because you get paid to travel, see new exotic places, meet fun people from around the world, and get to see things differently from other people's point of view. I'd like to see everybody else's view of normal and see which one fits.

What I really want to pursue is something that makes me happy. Making money off of it would be a blast because it would feel like I was never working. It would mean a lot to feel like I actually built something that I was proud of.



Candid Conversations: Leticia Nunez

In the food industry, hands-on experience is everything—and the smallest tasks can often teach you the most important skills.

As part of our “Skill Powered” project—spotlighting education paths outside of the traditional four-year degree—Shyane interviewed Leticia Nunez, executive chef at Caesars Palace Bacchanal Buffet. Chef Nunez started out peeling carrots and now runs the biggest buffet in the world. She immigrated to America at age 17 to learn her craft at Napa Valley College, a community college that offers an associate degree in culinary arts. But in this conversation, she showed Shyane that while formal education is important, paying attention to the small potatoes (literally!) can give you the skills you need to succeed in the food industry.

Can you tell us about your upbringing and how you got into being a chef?

Well, I grew up in Mexico, and in my family, it's all about food. Those traditional Sundays of cooking and everybody gathers around. My aunt would always come with moles and tamales and this beautifully crafted food that everybody would just smell it as she walked through the door. And so I started to just fall in love with it. I realized food was my passion when I was about 8 years old.

What kind of schooling did you do to get to the point where you're at now?

So in the Napa Valley, there is [Napa Valley Cooking School at] St. Helena. I studied for two years back in 1983. So it was a little while back! But cooking is something that you develop the skill throughout the years. And you keep getting better and better at it, and it becomes a part of who you are. So schooling is important to a certain degree, but then it's practicing and going out and doing something with it.

So I started in Napa, at a place called Mustards Bar and Grill in Yountville. And I was only 17 years old, so I was doing pantry work. And just seeing Alice Waters and these famous chefs come through there and being excited about fresh cooking—I knew early on that there would be nothing else for me out there.

Did you have any struggles getting into the career? Or anybody saying you couldn't?

It's a little bit of a challenge because you're entering into a world that is more male-oriented. So you have to be able to keep up with them, especially when you're young. In my younger years, I had to do the broiler and saute, and do it better than they could. So it's a little bit of competition. I worked with some very tough chefs, that all I could do was peel potatoes, or carrots, or maybe learn how to turn the vegetables. So there wasn't a lot allowed for me. And so sitting in the background, I would say, someday, I am going to be a very good chef, and all the naysayers will see that I can do it just as well as anybody else.

How do you deal with the stress of running a buffet this size?

Life prepares you for everything, one step at a time. 32 years has prepared me to deal with 124 cooks, thousands and thousands of guests. It really comes easy for me now. Because your toolbox is filled with more tools for the things that come in. You know, you know how to fix things. You react quickly and efficiently to the challenges that come your way, because you have the experience behind it. But it comes with time. So it's not stressful anymore.

How did it feel being voted the best buffet in the world?

How does that feel? Amazing. (laughs) I'm glad and honored to be a part of it, for sure. But it's definitely not just my doing. It's everybody doing their part.

Step 2: Prep Work



Building relationships and preparing everyone for the interview

Remind the person you're talking to why they're here: not to play a role, but because of who they are

Unavoidably, anyone sharing their story may feel a pressure to perform a certain role, or live up to perceived expectations of what they think you may be looking for. We've found it is important to transparently bring them in as a partner to any broader objective or project their story is part of. That objective might be something like bringing more awareness to what people from a similar background are experiencing, or sharing the impact of a program in their life in order to help others find the same opportunity.

Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone has experiences others can learn from. There's a long-held understanding in storytelling that the more specificity you share, the more universally relatable the story actually becomes. Whether a person's path has been straightforward, or full of twists and turns, there is value to be found in the unique

set of hopes and fears, risks taken, regrets carried, roadblocks faced, and successes achieved. Remind them that part of the point of sharing their story is so that other people who might be experiencing or feeling something similar don't feel so alone.

That is why, explicitly and often, we will reassure those sharing their stories with us that their primary role is to simply be exactly who they are.

There are no wrong answers when someone is telling their truth. We're not looking for them to play the role of someone who is perfect or has everything figured out. They will also be co-creators in this process (more on that in a moment), and we're not going to do anything that embarrasses them or makes them look bad—this isn't a gotcha interview. They're in control of what and how they share, and the more open and honest they are about their real feelings during certain moments, the more others will connect to what they have to say

Build a relationship outside of official or filmed moments

We're not just trying to drop in, capture someone's story, and then disappear when we've got what we need. This really is an investment of time and care, getting to know someone first and foremost and really understanding where they're coming from. If you show up and create space for genuine connection, people can tell.

It all starts off camera. We usually spend whatever time is available simply getting to know each other and developing a level of trust and comfort through free-flowing conversations in low pressure environments. Take them out for a meal; have them show you around their neighborhood, school, or town; just sit down casually and chat. Pay attention to what lights them up and lean into those topics. Essentially, what we're doing in these initial conversations is listening, asking questions, and allowing people the space to tell us their story and find their voice, and to ask us any questions they have as well. We'll often also spend time with people's family and friends if they're around and the person we're working with initiates or supports it.

We're assuming that because you're in a line of impact-driven work, you do genuinely want to build relationships with and support people—so you're really just tapping into your natural interests, empathy, and skills for connecting with someone new. You're showing that you are invested in them and care about them, and that you don't have an agenda.

Be co-creators and collaborators, and invite them into the process, because this is their story

As mentioned before, you're a facilitator of this experience, and part of your role is to involve the person you're working with in planning and creating the experience and story.

Share WHY you're telling this story and what you hope it will achieve: The first part of bringing someone into the process is explaining what this project is for and what you're hoping to do—let them be collaborators in thinking about how they might fit

into that, or how best to tell their story to achieve that. For us, the objective is often to inspire or help other people who might have similar experiences recognize themselves in the story or feel less alone—knowing that that’s our aim helps the people we’re talking to get excited about proudly showing parts of their lives that they know other people will be able to relate to.

Next up, we try to gain an understanding of what their daily life is like. We’ll usually ask them some of the following:

- **Talk us through what a normal week looks like.**
- **What are you doing and where do you go day to day?**
- **Who do you spend the most time with?**
- **What do you do to unwind or have fun?**

We do this because quite often, people’s lives and activities might seem mundane to them and not worth sharing—which means they might never think to share something that’s actually a huge and important part of their life! Starting with just hearing what their days are like helps us identify what some possibilities might be for filming or capturing certain parts of it.

Here are some of the ways we bring the people we’re working with into the planning process for interviewing and filming:

- **Planning story points:** The questions above help us begin this conversation about what they believe to be the most important parts of their story. This conversation is ongoing throughout the process and we’ll touch on more of what this looks like during the prep and interview process in upcoming sections.
- **Planning filming locations and brainstorming places to capture:**
 - Questions that can help spur this conversation:
 - Where do you spend the most time?
 - Where do you go to get perspective or clear your head?
 - Is there a place you like to hang out, a walk you go on?
 - Do you have a job or regular activity we could follow you on?
- **Self-filmed footage:** This is footage that the person you’re working with films themselves on their phone. It’s for capturing short scenes of where they go, random or silly moments, or talking directly to the camera vlog-style in order to capture more candid narration and natural first-person scenes of daily life. This is a really wide open creative space for them to experiment because it’s completely in their control and voice.
 - Here are some go-to ideas, but you can brainstorm together to think about what they might want to capture:
 - Home tour
 - Daily moments at school or work
 - Show us some objects that are meaningful to you and why
 - Walk us through getting ready for the day

Establishing boundaries and talking about what they do and don’t want to share:

This is also a natural time to understand their comfort level with talking about or sharing certain parts of their life, and reminding them that they can adjust or voice these preferences at any time, including during the interview and after (more on this later).

- Are there any parts of their life that they don’t want to include or talk about?
- Remind them that they can change their mind at any time.
- Check in often to make sure they’re still feeling OK, especially if anything feels sensitive.
- A general note on navigating sensitive or difficult topics: If you learn that the person you’re talking to has experienced any kind of trauma or past difficulty that might come up or be hard for them to navigate, consider obtaining additional professional guidance about how to proceed or navigate that topic; our default assumption is that unless it’s relevant to their story in some way, or it’s something they’re eager to share, we aren’t looking to unearth painful topics that might be upsetting to discuss.

Don’t script, but do prepare

We regularly put people who have zero media training on camera. Understandably, there might be a temptation to script, rehearse, or read from a teleprompter. But unless you’re really working with an actor or trained host, that approach typically results in a distant, inauthentic, or even robotic delivery.

But, it’s still on us to make sure people feel comfortable, supported, and prepared. For most people, being on camera is a little bit nerve-wracking and intimidating. So we’ve developed other ways to prepare and support people through the on-camera experience that foster thoughtful and spontaneous-feeling insights, while still maintaining a natural tone.

How we prepare:

Journaling: We like to prompt people to reflect on the subjects we’ll be talking about ahead of time, whether in a journal or however they’re comfortable capturing their thoughts. Prompts will depend on what story you’re focusing on, but we’ll give people a general sense of the topics we’ll be covering and what they might want to think about, such as important life milestones or anecdotes.

Even though they won’t be referencing these journals directly once the cameras are rolling, this preparation serves as a foundation of thought for what they will ultimately express in the moment.

While we don’t want the tone of the final interview to feel over-rehearsed, we do hope to facilitate thoughtful and articulate insights, so we’ve found it’s best for them to have considered what they hope to say ahead of time, then find the actual wording in the moment. We’re aiming for a balance of thoughtfulness and spontaneity.

Pre-Interview: We also want to establish clear expectations of what we'll cover on camera so they feel comfortable and know what to expect. One way we do this is with a more formal pre-interview—this is like a rehearsal for the real on-camera interview, but we treat it a little differently. The pre-interview is where you both discover together what you want to talk about.

- The pre-interview is a bit of a longer, more meandering exploration about their life to get their thoughts out so we can focus in later on.
- As we talk, we'll often note out loud if something we're talking about is something we think will be good to talk about in the interview.
 - Another thing we may or may not do is take notes and share those back with the person to reflect and confirm what we heard from them. If it all sounds right, we'll use that as a foundation to build from in the real interview.
 - This experience is new to them, so part of your role here is helping them by creating an environment where they can work through their story out loud.
- We keep the pre-interview a little more surface level—we're exploring lots of things but not necessarily going all the way into each one.
- At the end we usually remind them that in the real thing, we're going to cover stuff like what we covered today, and there won't be any gotcha questions or surprises; they know all of the answers.

A note on preparing and using a list of questions during the interview: All of this preparation above is as much for you as for the person you're talking to. We tend to not work off of a questions list because we want this to feel natural, like a conversation—but do what helps you stay on track, too. If you need a list or some notes to make sure you cover everything, that's OK, but try not to read directly off of it, instead using it like a guide.





Watch Taiheem's
Roadtrip

"I was able to take everything that I learned—all the negative lessons and the positive lessons—and put them into everything that I'm doing today."

Taiheem, 18

The Bronx, New York

Working in IT and wondering how to advance in his career

Finding my way to the positive

When I was young, my mom was a single mom. Then we moved in with my brother's father. It was nice...until things didn't get so nice.

When relationships don't work out, sometimes you can become displaced. And that's what happened to us. So a large part of our adolescence was spent moving around different shelters. I was mad because I was poor. I was mad because I felt like I wasn't doing enough to help my family.

I had negative and positive ways of expressing that. Like, I would skip school and hang out with the wrong crowd, just for that sense of belonging.

But I also channeled it into music—I was that kid making beats on the lunch room tables. I didn't know what a producer was, but I knew I wanted to make music.

Music led me to tech

I moved back into my mom's house after a foster care stint. She had a very old desktop that had a demo version of FL Studio 4. So I started to mess with that day after day.

They eventually released FL Studio 6, and the computer wasn't compatible with it. So I was like, OK, how do I make my computer compatible?

Once I learned how to do that from watching YouTube videos, I was like, **man, I can actually go get certified for this** and get a job in something I wouldn't mind doing every day.

An unexpected pivot

Around that time, my girlfriend tells **me she's pregnant**. I was doing security and going to school at the same time. There's no way I was going to be able to support a child.

I Googled "free IT training" and I found this program, Per Scholas, that is willing to train you for IT support—and I applied.

In 16 weeks, my life changed. I graduated, I had a job, and I felt proud of myself. I felt like I was able to support my family, **and that was the start of my career in the tech industry.**

I even had a 101 degree fever when I took my Network+ exam and I passed! **So it all comes down to finding things that interest you.**

Right now I'm a help desk specialist at 2U, which is a digital education company.

The job has benefits and there's space to move up, so I'm actually happy at this company.



Family is everything

Being a father is one of the greatest things that ever happened to me. Two little ones loving me even when I do wrong. They're sponges and there's so many lessons that I can teach them.

I could be seen as successful, but it's not very easy to support a family on your own. Rent plus two children plus your partner's needs, plus your own needs...

At work, people talk about going to the Netherlands and Japan—and I'm just swimming as hard as I can to keep us above water. It's not like we aren't doing well! It's just, **I worry about it a lot.**

I work so hard. So I don't spend a lot of time with my mom and my little brother like I should. I want to get better at that. **I'm going to get better at taking the time to appreciate them.**





Candid Conversations:

Anel Perez

Two fathers find new stability through workforce development programs and certifications

On our “To Be Determined” road trip—exploring the power of workforce development programs—Taiheem had the chance to sit down with Amazon solutions architect Anel Perez. Both are fathers, and both reached a point in life where they had to pivot their career paths. Anel was working in retail and Taiheem was working as a security guard when their life circumstances sparked a change. To make that transition, they leaned on the workforce development programs Year Up and Per Scholas to help them learn new skillsets in information technology.

Can you tell us a little bit about your background and the environment you grew up in?

I grew up in Providence, Rhode Island, and graduated from high school in 2006. The economy took a pretty big downturn in 2008. I had just had a baby girl and people were getting laid off from work, including friends and people that I knew. I was working retail and struggling to make ends meet. I was trying to figure out, what’s my next move, what am I going to do? I had a friend who was in Year Up, and he ended up getting a job after his internship. So I decided, I could see myself doing something like that—let me take a chance on this.

Year Up was great because it opened up doors I had no idea existed. And even after getting a job there, I recall wanting to do more for myself and my family. It took me pushing myself outside of my comfort zone and realizing that I have to put myself out there to make it happen. Gaining certifications helped me get my foot in some doors and get in some conversations, but it took a lot of attempts, a lot of trial and error.

So in Per Scholas, coming from a low-income household, I didn’t have money to get lunch most days. Most of the time, I had ramen noodles, and I would drink water to keep myself up during some of the lectures.

Yeah, that resonates with me significantly. I was getting an educational stipend from Year Up and going to class Monday through Friday, but even that wasn’t enough. So every day after Year Up, I would go into my retail job, and Saturday and Sunday, I was pretty much there most of the day. It was like, the worst thing ever. It feels like no matter what you do, like you never have money. And ultimately at that point in your life, if you make one mistake, one wrong move, it’s game over.

But I remember shortly after I got hired in my internship, feeling like, oh man, I’m finally doing something great. I went from working 80 hours a week to 40 hours because those two jobs equal this one job. So that was the game changer for me.

Sometimes I give my resume to people and they see all these certifications and work history and experience...but I have no degree. What could you tell someone that’s in my position?

We need to make sure that our young people have the opportunity to pursue jobs, and that a degree isn’t a requirement. I definitely feel that a certification should be an entry way into any entry-level job. If you’re able to learn a set of skills, and prove that you have this particular skillset, why not work in that particular career field?

As we leave today, what’s one thing you would like us to take with us?

When you’re young and you’re trying to figure it out, know that you’re not alone. There’s plenty of other people out there who still don’t have it figured out. Even adults don’t have it figured out! But if you keep working hard and follow your ambitions, things will change for you.

Step 3: The Interview



How to set the tone and capture the story

How to set the tone

Being on camera can be a nerve-wracking experience. Our goal is always to create casual, nonjudgmental, light-hearted environments where people are not only able to relax, but feel safe and supported to be themselves.

Icebreakers: We'll often start off with an icebreaker question, even though this isn't anything we'll use in the final edit. You're just trying to loosen them up and make them a little more comfortable. (Feel free to insert these types of icebreaker questions throughout the interview too, whenever the mood could use an injection of light-hearted energy!)

- One go-to we use: Tell us what you had for breakfast.

Model the energy you're looking for: Speaking of energy, remember that a basic tenet of human behavior is that people match the energy of those around them. As an interviewer behind the camera, what you bring to the table will also be conveyed onscreen by how the person you are interacting with reflects the energy you're

putting out. If you're energetic and engaged, they'll be more lively, too. If you're deeply empathetic and emotionally present, they may feel more comfortable taking their story to more emotional places. Be present and in this with them!

- Also, remember everything doesn't have to be serious the whole time!

Create a nonjudgmental space: The number-one thing we care about is creating a kind space of understanding, where the person we're talking to feels safe and supported. Come to this conversation with compassion and empathy, and try not to bring any judgment—they should feel like they can say anything without fear of a negative reaction. To that end, continually validate their answers, especially if they've just shared something vulnerable.

- For example:
 - "It's impressive that you accomplished that."
 - "That must have been difficult."
 - Or simply: "Thank you for sharing that."

Treat this like a conversation: listen, let it flow, and be curious

It's also a little intimidating to be the interviewer! The key here is to continue building the rapport you've already developed with the person you're interviewing, and treat this like a two-way conversation.

Especially now, after all the preparation you've done, you might really think you know where the conversation will go, which means now's the time to be even more ready to shift and adjust to what you'll discover together as you talk. Stay open to some spontaneity and allow for the magic of seeing what emerges in the moment.

Here are some other important considerations to make this feel more like a conversation and less like a one-sided interview:

Active listening: Make eye contact, listen closely to what they're saying, and indicate support and understanding through your facial expressions and other affirmative visual cues like nodding. You want to create a space that feels open and welcome, so lean in and keep your body language open (for example, avoid crossing your arms).

- Ask follow-up questions: These help focus in on details and important parts of their story. For example:
 - Can we go back to when you said...
 - I'd love to hear more about...
 - So what did that feel like when...
- Even better if you make the direct connection for them of why you're asking:
 - I've heard a lot of people say something similar, can you tell me more about how...

Leave some empty space! Make space to ensure that they've finished their thought or answer. Try not to cut them off when they're talking, but go even further, and try to leave some space after they finish answering a question—oftentimes, they'll keep going if you give them a moment to reflect and continue. Some of the most profound things we've heard in interviews come after those reflective pauses.

Interview basics: questions, tips, and what to capture

Capture the basics

- To get started, ask them to state the basic info:
 - Their name
 - Age
 - Where they live
 - And a little bit about themselves and where they are in life
 - Anything else that's needed to frame up why you're talking to them

Remind them to rephrase questions in their answers

- An example to help explain why we do this:
 - The interviewer's voice will be cut out in the edit, so if I ask, "What's your favorite color?" And you answer, "Blue," we won't know what you mean.
 - Rephrase → "My favorite color is blue."

Ask open-ended questions

- Ask open-ended questions that can't be answered with yes or no, for example:
 - Tell me about your interests growing up—what were you into as a kid?
 - To rephrase yes/no questions, try → "Tell me about..."
- Keep Asset Framing in mind
 - We want to make room for people to define themselves by their aspirations and strengths rather than making assumptions or projecting certain narratives or ideas onto them through questions we ask.
 - Try to keep questions somewhat neutral and don't assume what parts of a person's life or experience have been positive, negative, or a challenge.
 - Avoid: Tell me about the challenge of growing up with a single parent.
 - Rephrase → What was your upbringing like and who were the important supports in your life?

Emotions drive the story—ask questions that capture those feelings

- How did that make you feel?
- Can you tell me about the emotions you were feeling when that happened?
- Can you describe what that felt like?
- What was going through your mind when...?
- What did that mean to you?

Questions that bring the story to life

- Our goal is to get someone recounting the story of the memory they're sharing with rich detail, emotion, and immediacy—if you get them telling you the situation beat by beat, that's great! And you can use questions like these to draw out more detail:
 - What was that conversation like with your dad?
 - What was that day like?
 - What did it feel like to do that?
 - What were you thinking/feeling in that moment?

- Sometimes you'll notice someone you're interviewing talking in generalities or in the second person instead of the first person—for example, saying "when you go through something like, you're not sure what to do," instead of, "When that happened, I wasn't sure what to do."
 - You can ask them to retell it once more from their own perspective.
 - But also note that sometimes they might be distancing because they're not comfortable talking about their feelings around this topic—if you think that might be the case, you can ask if they'd rather change the subject or talk about something else!

And, finally, a great last question to end on: Is there anything else I haven't asked you that feels important to mention or talk about?

Give the person you're talking to space to work through answers and restate

Another key to alleviating pressure in the moment is to let people take their time, stop, reiterate, or scrap a train of thought entirely whenever they need to. Create a safe space to explore thoughts by encouraging them to stop, rethink, and rearticulate anything they're trying to work out. They can do different takes of a whole sentence as many times as they'd like!

Be patient and allow them to search, circle, and lay out their thoughts in however much time they may need. Sometimes we'll film for 10, 20, or 30 meandering minutes before someone is ready to articulate that perfect sound bite that sums up what they're trying to say succinctly—but all of that preparation and patience is often necessary to get there. Your job is to create an environment where they can work through that thought out loud.

One last helpful tip: It can be a great exercise after 10-20 minutes to have them summarize the big idea of what you've been discussing by asking, "Now how would you summarize what we've been talking about in just a couple sentences?"

Make sure they understand the process and give them ultimate control, during the interview and after

We usually remind the people we're interviewing:

- **How we'll be using this video and what it's for**
- **Messing up is OK!** This will be edited, so they don't have to say things perfectly—it will all come together later in the edit. They have freedom to mess up and restate as much as they want to get it right!
- **They can take a break whenever they want!** We can pause any time if they need a moment to step away, especially if they're a little emotional and want to reset.

- **They can guide the conversation.** They can direct the conversation if there's something they want to talk about, or let us know at any time—even mid-thought—if they don't want to talk about something.
- **They have veto power at all times.** Make sure they know they always have the power to veto something that was captured after the fact (or even right when they say it during the interview). We develop an understanding that if the person we're talking to shares something, and then decides later that they'd rather not have it be part of the story, they can tell us at any time, whether it's a sentence, a scene, or an entire storyline. (This vetoing of certain parts of what we've discussed happens with some regularity, and it's important to give the people you're interviewing that space to safely find the boundary of what they're comfortable sharing, or reflect on what they've shared and reconsider, without worrying we'll use something they're not comfortable with).
 - **Check back in:** Sometimes, if we do know something is sensitive, we may proactively check in about including it in the edit. We may also send a rough cut of the video to make sure they're feeling OK about how something is represented if we're unsure.





Watch Melanie's
Roadtrip

“I understood that I have a great work ethic, I have this great personality...that’s when it clicked for me: Why can’t I just apply that to school?”

Melanie, 24

Queens, NY

Attending community college while working as a retail supervisor

Making my way in NYC

I grew up with my mom and dad in Brooklyn. When I was 10 years old, my parents got a divorce. I have one older sister and one younger sister, and it was hard for us. We kind of rebelled.

Young Melanie was a duality. I was a happy girl with a great personality, but at the same time, I had a lot of stuff on my shoulders.

I was a good student who didn't wanna hang out with the good kids because I couldn't resonate with them. I stayed with people who were getting into fights or hanging in the streets.

So I went to four different high schools and had to get transferred four times because I got into a fight at each school that I went to.

College was never an idea for me.

It was like, I can go, but it's not too important. So after high school, I got a job at McDonald's—that was my first job. And then after that I got another job. **I was just working, job to job.**

I finally settled down at a store called Uniqlo, and became a supervisor there. **I learned a lot of skills that humbled me.**

I currently work at Ann Taylor. I started as a sales associate, and then **I got promoted within six months to supervisor.**

I feel most inspired by:

- Tupac Shakur
- Cornel West
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- Maya Angelou
- Ralph Waldo Emerson

But I felt incomplete. I knew I needed to go to school because I had a purpose in life, which was to help people. So I can't just keep working these jobs. Yes, I'm doing really good. Yes, I'm getting great pay. They even want to make me manager! **But is that the route I wanna take?**

I didn't think I could be full-time at school and full-time at Ann Taylor. I needed to make that decision in my life: Am I gonna pick money over education? And you know what? I decided to pick education.

But Ann Taylor was awesome about it! So my job is supporting me, I finally know what I want to do, and I finally know where I need to go in my life.



I go to Queensborough Community College.

Even though I applied late, the application process went smoothly and **I got financial aid.**

When I started going to school, I didn't have a major. I knew I needed to go to school, but I didn't know what for. I love helping people—especially minorities—but I don't really know how.

I ended up taking classes such as speech and sociology. It helped me realize that this is what I enjoy doing. So going forward, I have an idea of what I wanna major in, which is probably **English or political science.**

I've been taking winter and summer classes so I can transfer to a four-year school. **I'm realizing that I made the right decision going to a community college** because it really helped frame my understanding of how to move forward.





Candid Conversations: **Diana Trujillo**

Prioritizing your education isn't always easy, but it pays off in the long run.

For a current community college student like Melanie, Diana Trujillo's story is one to aspire to. After coming to America at a young age, she got by working multiple jobs as a house cleaner, at Pizza Hut, and as a cashier at a corner store, where she'd drink free Cuban coffees to help her focus on finishing her community college homework. Today, Diana works at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, where she recently led the Mars Curiosity rover mission. Even though the two work in very different fields, Diana's story helped Melanie see all the places community college could someday take her.

Could you speak about growing up in Colombia and your transition to moving to the United States?

It was tough. I came to the U.S. when I was 17. I had \$300 in my pocket. I didn't know any English. I didn't have any skills whatsoever. I don't speak the language. And so for me, it was tough to try to figure out how to survive. I started working in pizza. And so, and you mentioned now that you are working at Ann Taylor, and you said you are...?

A supervisor.

Yeah. So the best thing I did is I became shift manager at a Pizza Hut, right? So you feel like, I'm gaining some responsibility. But it's not the job I want.

There came a point where I understood, I need to put my education first. But for a lot of people, that's not a priority. How does that relate to you and how did you handle that?

I hear you because, oh man, there were opportunities where I could say, well, if I don't go to college right now, I can work more hours! And you tell yourself, I'm making five bucks an hour, and if I get more hours, I can buy those shoes! So maybe I don't have to go to college! Right?

The thing is, I understood the type of impact I wanted to make in the world. The impact that I wanted to make in the world was not gonna be an impact that I was gonna do in five hours of work, or in a day, or in a month of work. I wanted people to sit down in school in the future, and read a textbook that says, "Curiosity Mars rover discovered X, Y, Z" ... and then my name is written there. And it was obvious that I'm not gonna do that if I don't go to school.

I'd love to hear about your community college experience.

When I went to community college, I loved it because the classrooms were small, and the professors actually developed a relationship with me and were more interested. Community college made me believe that I could do it. It made me believe that I could do it because it was tailored right for me—it was tailored for where I was coming from, what I was struggling with, and my own indecisions.

Can you sum up everything you've said into advice for anyone who doesn't know what they're gonna do?

My advice is, figure out what type of person you want to be. That's gonna help you realize what excites you, which then ties into what type of work you're gonna do. Think, what's the end goal, what's the finish line? Come up with the plan that you need to design to get to that goal and stick to it.

It's not gonna be easy, but honestly, nothing that's worth it is easy. It's your life you're designing! Put everything on it and take it seriously.

Step 4: Filming Basics



How to capture video, even if you're new to it

Where to Start

Don't be intimidated by picking up a camera, even if it is your first time! Here are a few basic tips to consider—but overall, focus on the message and messenger, and lead with empathy and authenticity.

Quiet on Set! Clean audio is key. Perhaps even more so than a good looking visual, because if the shot is flawed, people can forgive and continue watching, but if they cannot understand what is being said, they will not be able to connect to the message of the interview at all.

- Find a quiet area for your interview. (Pay close attention to subtle background noises— you'll be surprised at how much your microphone picks up!)
- Inside is better than outside (outdoors is full of variables like traffic sounds, unexpected lawn work machinery, airplanes overhead, etc.)—but if you'd prefer to shoot outside, try to find an isolated place shielded from the wind.

- If you start filming and get interrupted by noise, don't panic! Just take a pause, apologize to the person you're interviewing, then ask your question again.

Lights! Professional lighting is great, but not required by any means. In fact, typically anywhere from 50-75% of what you see on our long-running, award-winning documentary series is shot in natural lighting. When harnessed well, natural lighting has a look and feel of its own that organically conveys an inviting look and feel.

- The light from a window is typically nicer than a building's lights (especially try to avoid fluorescent and direct overhead lights).
- A light source directly in front of your subject, or to the side are great, and it can be a nice effect to have additional lighting behind them to create a separation from the background, but avoid the person you're interviewing being completely backlit or darkened to the point of being a silhouette.
- Test it out! Set the camera where you're planning to put it, and film some test footage to see what the lighting looks like before you move on.

Camera!

- Steady is better than handheld. If you don't have access to a tripod, no problem! This can be really basic—just set up your phone or camera on a stable shelf or table, or get creative and build yourself a rig out of whatever you've got lying around (backpack, stack of books, etc., we've done it all!)—to keep your shot steady.
- Use the rule of thirds to frame your shot. Divide your frame into thirds both horizontally and vertically, and align your subject's eyes around the intersection of one of the upper corners
- Scan the scene and make sure everything is looking right. (And look out for the best interests of the person you're interviewing—that is, tell them if their hair is sticking up in an unintentional way, if there's something in their teeth, if their glasses are askew!)
- Shoot some test footage before you start rolling—and be sure to shoot horizontally or vertically based on the platform where you're planning to share this video.

A note about releases: Since we're filming for a television series, we have a model release form that people who are featured sign. Depending on how you're using what you're capturing and what its purpose is, you may want to find a basic model release form online that you can use. And if you want Walmart to feature images or video you've captured on their channels, you'll need to use the Photo and Talent Release form found in their [Grantee Communications Toolkit here](#).



One last word of advice...

The content and emotion of your story is more important than a flashy video

Finally, let's talk about production techniques and production value. This is typically the starting point when someone is embarking on making a video. What camera should I use? What's better for audio—boom microphones or lavaliers? Do I need professional lighting equipment?

We're here to tell you: it doesn't actually matter. Or, well, it kind of does. You want your video to be clear and understandable—but looking professional isn't always as important as you think it is. Everyone on the production team at Roadtrip Nation has heard this analogy during their onboarding: You can't ice a cake until you've baked it.

Production value, great cinematography, advanced stylistic techniques—these are like the icing on the cake, but first you need to bake the cake. That is, you have to make sure that all the elements of your story are there, and that you've approached them with care and intention.

If you prioritize getting epic establishing shots with a drone, filming your interviews in a professional studio setting, having a hair and makeup station to ensure everyone looks flawless, and filling every edit transition with expensive motion graphics, you may run the risk of making something overly sweet, but with no substance. We've seen it a hundred times. Production value is great as long as it serves the story you are trying to tell, but it's totally possible to become overly focused on the technical aspects and miss the heart of what you were hoping to convey in the first place.

More important than slick production value, especially for work that centers impact, is to follow the guidance we've laid out in steps 1 through 4. Approach the story thoughtfully and with intention, foster relationships with the people whose stories you're capturing, create spaces where people feel safe being vulnerable and authentic—and you can trust that you're doing the work of baking the cake.

