

*Edited by*

RON SCHULTZ

CREATING  
GOOD  
WORK



THE WORLD'S LEADING SOCIAL  
ENTREPRENEURS SHOW HOW  
TO BUILD A HEALTHY  
ECONOMY

*Foreword by* CHERYL L. DORSEY

# Chapter 20

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## VIDEO ADVOCACY AT THE LEADING EDGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

*Jenny Coco Chang*  
Witness

THE IDEA FOR WHAT WOULD BECOME WITNESS emerged from a very personal experience of singer Peter Gabriel, back in the late 1980s. He had gone on an international world tour with Amnesty International, and carried with him a Hi8 camera, the state of the art at the time, so he could capture and film the stories people were sharing of imprisonment, torture, and violence. He realized then that if people could meet and hear the stories that he was hearing, it would be hard for them to deny these things were taking place, and they would be moved to act to right these wrongs. Peter recognized, even then, the power of the visual image to create change.

Then in March of 1991, the Rodney King incident took place in Los Angeles, California, and the world watched in shock at the video proof of police officers overreacting to a situation and helplessly beating a man lying on the ground. When those officers were acquitted of the charges that they had used excessive force, it sparked national outrage, a riot in the

streets of Los Angeles, and, ultimately, sparked a dialogue about racism in America. It was not until the footage of the Rodney King incident became widely distributed that funders really understood what Peter Gabriel already knew—visual images can catalyze discussion, understanding, and create change.

But where did that video of Rodney King being beaten come from? It came from a bystander named George Holliday, who happened to have a camera, was at the wrong place at the right time, and caught it all on video. He then shared it with the media.

Peter's vision had inspired the birth of WITNESS. And when The Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights (now Human Rights First) and the Reebok Human Rights Foundation joined forces with Peter and provided the seed money to launch the program, WITNESS became a reality, in 1992.

Today, and for the last 20 years, WITNESS has focused its work on empowering people to transform their personal stories of abuse into powerful tools for justice, as a means of promoting policy change through public engagement.

Human rights work is based on personal values. Our funders, and for that matter, everyone who is involved with WITNESS, is here because they personally believe in and have a deep desire to stop human rights abuses wherever they are occurring. They also know that video is an incredibly powerful tool and vehicle to be able to accomplish that objective.

To give you just one brief example, one of my colleagues and a good friend, Bukeni Waruzi, who is now WITNESS's program manager for Africa and the Middle East regions, had previously served as executive director of one of our partners, AJEDI-Ka. This is an organization that works on the issue of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. While he was with AJEDI-Ka, he spent several years documenting the stories of child soldiers that were forced to be in the army of former rebel leader Thomas Lubanga Dyilo. Bukeni produced several videos about these children, one of them called "A Duty to Protect." This film was eventually submitted to the International Criminal Court (ICC) as evidence against Lubanga. The video explored the complexity of the war, the issues confronted by girl soldiers, including rape and sexual exploitation, and the critical importance that the ICC end the rampant impunity reigning

in the Eastern DRC. In 2005, Lubanga was arrested, and in 2009, the ICC began its first ever trial focused on child soldiers. Then on March 14, 2012, the ICC found Lubanga guilty of using children in armed conflict—a war crime. The ICC judge said at the end of the trial, “[U]nable to dispute visual images and deny the sound, the video evidences presented to us were credible and outstanding.”

### ADAPTING TO THE NEED

When he founded WITNESS, Peter’s goal was to distribute video cameras to human rights activists on the ground, so they could document human rights abuses. We soon realized that it wasn’t enough to just distribute cameras—our partners needed both technical training in how to use the cameras, and, most importantly, strategic training in using video as part of a campaign to create change. What that meant was teaching people how to get these videos in front of people who can make a difference.

Since this became our model, WITNESS has trained hundreds of human rights activists in 80 countries to use video as a tool in their human rights campaigning. We call this “video advocacy.”

Today, technological advances have caught up with Peter’s original vision to give video cameras to the world. The use of mobile phones has proliferated at astounding rates across socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural boundaries, revolutionizing the way we interact with each other. This offers the potential for anyone, anywhere, to become a human rights defender and a video maker. Capturing evidence of abuse has never been easier. In some ways, Peter’s vision has become a reality.

The challenges we face today are still many. Finding forums or places to share footage of those abuses and finding the online tools to create context for the footage is an ongoing challenge for grassroots activists and the growing number of citizen activists that are turning to video to demand social change in their countries. We need look no further for evidence of this than to the Arab Spring and Syrian uprisings and the dramatic footage coming out of these events.

But now that cameras are everywhere, we are finding there are unintended consequences that human rights defenders and WITNESS hadn’t

counted on. Safety and security issues are now on the rise. Activists in Syria, for example, are risking their lives to share with the world, through media and social media, the recordings of killings, abuses, and atrocities happening at the hands of the Syrian security forces, as an appeal for the international community's help. However, as their pleas are being distributed, their identities are also being collected by the Syrian authorities, who are now using facial recognition technology to target activists and track them down.

Today, the focus of WITNESS's work is shifting to deal with these challenges by looking for opportunities to use video and existing digital technology more safely, securely, and effectively for anyone who wants to turn to video to defend human rights.

We are building digital tools that will help blur people's faces. We are putting all our training resources online, from basic camera work training to strategy on messaging and distribution. We are also making those resources available in different languages and actively engaging with commercial technology companies to find new opportunities in which they can make their products more beneficial to human rights defenders. For example, after working with Google for many months, we were able to launch a Human Rights Channel on their YouTube platform. This is a place where activists that are uploading their videos on YouTube can alert us to the existence of the footage; we can then work to verify the authenticity of that video with our partner, Storyful. Once we have that authentication, we begin distributing it to the media and the public.

#### FLEXIBLE YET FOCUSED

The process of getting to the point where our work and films are now respected around the world was not always a linear pursuit. We were established in 1992, but we didn't actually have a fulltime executive director until 1998, when Gillian Caldwell came on board. WITNESS also didn't become incorporated until 2001 when we had a staff of only four people. In those early years, WITNESS relied on established foundations within our founding organizations to move forward with our work and mission.

The year 2005, however, was a turning point for WITNESS. The Omidyar Network gave us a \$1.7 million grant over three years, which

allowed us to scale up and shift from being a small organization operating with limited resource to a larger one, with more employees and a new office space. This too had unintended consequences. It turns out that it was challenging for an organization to shift from a grassroots-like operation to one that runs as an organization in which there are suddenly many new people now responsible for running various programs and projects.

In the early years, WITNESS was often equated as Peter Gabriel and Gillian Caldwell's project. Today, WITNESS is known as a human rights organization that uses video advocacy to advance human rights campaigns. WITNESS = WITNESS. Nonetheless, Gillian Caldwell and Peter Gabriel are still very much a part of the organization, although they are no longer at the center of every project.

One of our greatest internal cultural adjustments was to be able to shift our leadership from a top-down approach to one in which leadership was exhibited throughout the staff. Today, everyone in the organization has to undergo a leadership course and build their own leadership skills around the areas for which they are responsible.

It was also important for us to become more transparent within our organization, which included relationships with staff. This was a conscious effort to do things a bit differently than other organizations. At WITNESS, the executive team makes presentations to the staff. For example, the organization's budget, priorities, and goals are all presented to the staff, not as a way of simply sharing the information, but also to get feedback and buy-in from the staff as to the direction in which we as an organization will be traveling. We recognize that that alignment is central to our moving forward.

#### DEVELOPING AND CONTINUING THE WORK

From a funding perspective, we get support from a mixture of foundations, major gifts from individuals and family foundations, and our annual gala. Currently, about 41 percent comes from foundations, but we are finding that we have reached the limit on those resources, having tapped into all the foundations that fund organizations involved in human rights. Now, we are focusing on securing more major gifts, which currently provide only about 16 percent of our funding.

On a practical level, we are always researching and reaching out toward new opportunities for funding, through personal introductions, via email, social media, and through events. The fact is that our supporters love physically meeting us and coming to our work space. They like seeing where we work, how we work, and who is doing the work. In making the trip to our offices, however, they are always quite impressed by how small our space actually is. We seem so big because we are able to do so much. That is a trait that runs through the entire organization, and is really a reflection of the personality of every single staff member. We know we are doing work that needs to be done, and there is a lot to do.

We are also an organization that has a very diverse staff. There are people working here from all over the world. On our staff we have people who speak Spanish, Portuguese, French, Swahili, Turkish, Chinese, Russian, Arabic, and that just names a few. We are also a staff made up of a lot of young people, volunteers, and interns. So there are always young and fresh ideas flowing through the organization. It is also imperative that we are nimble and flexible, able to shift gears if we need to. That is both a characteristic and strength of our organization. Many of our staff members are fearless in what they are willing to try as well as the issues they are willing to confront. If an idea seems good and there is something we feel should be done, it doesn't usually take long for us to get behind it and get it off the ground.

The challenge is always one of sustaining new ideas, as well as finding the funds to continue what we have built. Our reputation has been built on empowering people on the ground and balancing that with the human resources we need to develop new tools. In addition, we now manage a Human Rights Channel and must continue to engage with technology companies, who are considered the new human rights players, so that we can continue to work together to develop tools that better serve the human rights community.

Our vision, today, is far greater than when we started our efforts, and trying to juggle it all with a staff of 30 and a \$5 million budget requires ingenuity and dedication; but I think it's clear, we are getting there.