



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

## SESSION 106

A GUIDE TO STRATEGIC STORYTELLING

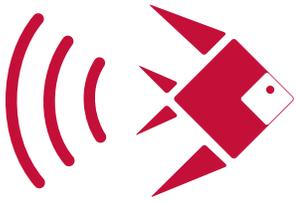
WITH NATION HAHN

**BETH:** Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky, and welcome to Driving Participation. Today I am on with Nation Hahn. Nation is the president of the board of directors at the Jamie Kirk Hahn Foundation, and he's the chief growth officer of an organization called EdNC. I have Nation on today to talk about storytelling, but in a little bit of a different way than we've talked about it before. We're gonna talk about what it's like to tell stories when some of your story is sad or hard or challenging, and Nation has some really deep experience with that. Nation, thank you so much for coming on today with me to talk about this tough subject.

**NATION:** Of course, you're welcome. Thank you.

**BETH:** Nation, why don't you talk a little bit about your story and how you got into this world of nonprofit work and starting your organization.

**NATION:** Yeah, my story really begins, I think, like so many, with asking questions during your childhood. So for me, I was born to teenage parents who certainly were troubled and unstable and I bounced around from family member to family member because of that and because of the instability of my biological parents and so really I found myself sort of adrift at school and was often tardy and really you know not performing to what I even perceived as my full potential. I got to middle school and you know I was adopted by my aunt and uncle and life sort of settled down and it felt secure, I felt secure and my grades went up and my performance went up and I was happier and I was you know, it felt like I was beginning to reach my potential and in eighth grade, I asked my teacher, I said at the time, I said "Mrs. Kane, I don't understand. I don't feel necessarily any smarter than I was three years ago, but my grades in middle school have been so much better. Why do you think that is and how it works and how can I learn from that?"



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

and she said, “Well, you know, Nation, a big part of that is that you are in a stable and secure environment for the first time.” I stopped and I thought about it and I realized that she was right. I was finally sort of confident about where I was gonna wake up and how much food I was gonna have and all those things and it struck me that that was just a critical moment and this lightning bolt hit me and I was like, “Oh, OK. You’re right. My life is more stable and more secure and therefore I’m performing better.” But it struck me that there were so many kids like me because my story was not a unique story in my part of North Carolina or my part of the country and it started bothering me that other kids weren’t as fortunate as I was to be adopted by the aunt and uncle that I was adopted by and so as I asked questions about why our society couldn’t better support all children and support all children’s ability to learn and support all children having a better opportunity, etc., it struck me and I realized through the guidance of my teachers and others that we, that nonprofits and politics, that’s a political process of public policy that nonprofits were perhaps the best way to address that.

**BETH:** Yeah, and I mean it’s so interesting because a lot of people who start in nonprofits, some people start from having no experience with something and seeing a need, but there’s also a lot of people that have direct experience with challenging situations and then jump in to say, “I was benefited by this,” and make a difference and you know from there, you have this impact in this organization that you work with, but you are also somebody that’s created an organization. So I’m curious. In these two worlds in the work that you do, what does the word “participation” mean in a way that helps the work that you do grow and sustain organizations?

**NATION:** You know I think it really begins at the simplest level. It just means showing up and what that means to me is really showing up, not just in body, but in spirit. The question is, how do we fully engage in the political process? How do we fully engage in the public policy process? How do we fully engage in building a brighter, stronger future for all children? I think that when we think about showing up, it means in moments big and small, and I think that was the



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

lesson that my late wife, Jamie, taught us. I mean it was certainly the lesson that we imbued into the foundation, which was that you need to come fully prepared for the task at hand. You need to show up as part of any discussion, any conversation about the future of your community because if we don't show up, then others are making decisions. Oftentimes bad policies happen because of a lack of transparency, because the sunlight is not shown upon the process. Often times bad policy happens because all voices aren't heard and so both the work of EdNC and the Jamie Kirk Hahn Foundation and some of the other things that I participate in and are involved with really flows from this belief that the more voices that are heard at the table when decisions are being made the better the decisions will be. The more information that people have about critical issues, the more likely they are to get engaged and make a choice to participate and so that's really what it flows from for us.

**BETH:** It's so funny. That's something I'm so interested in right now is this concept of the fact that many organizations have either created or have access to a body of knowledge, information that is valuable and could be transformative for people if they learned it, knew it and really took it to heart and embraced the knowledge, and sometimes it's things that people are just interested in and sometimes it's things for say like public health issues that could be really helpful, but there's that, how do you take that information and get it out of the walls of an organization and how do you find the audiences and create it in a way that people have access to it or are receptive to it? Have you struggled with this yourself?

**NATION:** I think it begins with you know, I think it begins with the old lessons of newspaper writing or news writing. Is it something prominent? Is it something timely? Is there a proximity for your audience that they're having in their city or their state, their community? Is there impact? Is there conflict? Is there also emotion? I think if you look at that, then that's a really good place to begin and you know one of the things we try to do is uplift community voices as a way to plug more people in. You know, for EdNC writing about education issues,



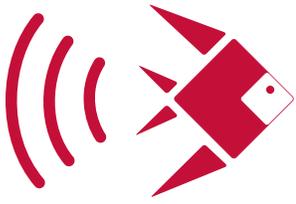
# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

we know that if an educator or principal or administrator or legislator weighs in, people will pay attention because they view those as voices on the ground. I think that that's one of the areas where we always begin as A) like the new sort of pyramid of news, like time wise, is it impactful and so on and so forth and illustrated. B) do we have a community voice so we can uplift? Can we help define someone's role in the community? Can we help elevate them to the role as sort of an every day hero? You know, once we look at those two things, we just also begin to look at the power of story. It's annoying that visuals outweighing that video helps knowing that its story and emotional impact marry with data and facts that help people remember and engage and that's what, that's sort of the way we always begin.

**BETH:** I love that. I'm actually doing a talk tomorrow on just the very specific aspect of telling a story visually of an infographic and that description of telling a compelling story and taking news and information and facts and data and converting them into something that has a point o view and a story behind it is something that's very relevant in that the news does it so well. So why do you think that crafting something as a story is so much more powerful than just communicating facts and communication alone?

**NATION:** Because I think that story, I mean it's been said before by others who are smarter than I am, but story helps us organize the way we view the world. I personally believe that we tend to place ourselves and our friends and our family and our community and our leaders in some sort of narrative. It's how we make sense of the every day happenings of our lives. You know, we tend to think of life and as humans we think of betrayal. We think of love. We think of passion. We think of the pursuit of knowledge and we think of gaining leadership. We think of sort of being in big terms. We think of these big boxes and I think in a lot of ways we just talk about the heroes journey. The truth is we are all the heroes of our own lives and I think that we tend to, that when we embrace I think that's when we really embrace living and so with that in mind, I think that because we tend to think and dream and organize our thoughts in a story, if you think about it, many



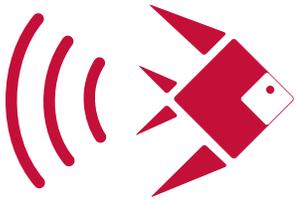
# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

of our civics lessons, many of our battalion lessons, many our lessons about how you live begin with a story. Right? Whether it's legend or religious doctrine, they all begin with stories, whether it's Jonah and the whale or Adam and Eve or you know Everybody Poops or whatever you get when you're potty training.

**BETH:** Right and there's so many kinds. It's interesting. I know there's a lot of debate sometimes in nonprofit organizations of do you show the picture of the abandoned neglected puppy that's such a sad image that really shines the light on the need and the kind of horrors of the world or do you tell the story of the outcome, the success or something in between. So you have a lot of experience. You have had a lot of hard stories in your journey, in your journey and your path. What's your take on using these like difficult, challenging stories when it comes to, this is a horrible thing to say, but you know when it comes to kind of leveraging pain for global gain?

**NATION:** I guess as we contemplated how do we honor someone who lived such a big life in such a short period of time, how do we honor Jamie's legacy and her contributions to the world? How do we carry forth her work? We knew that we really had to begin with her story, but more importantly for us, I mean from an emotional standpoint, we believed deeply that we should begin with the story of how she lived because there was a lot of focus and emphasis I think on how she died, on the final moments and hours of our lives together, on what happened to us together. I mean what we knew and what we believed in our heart is Jamie was a victim of violence, as was I, but her life should not be defined and could not be defined by how she died, nor did I want like our relationship or our relationship with the community to be defined by that, and so for us, it only made sense to begin with the story of how she lived because in the absence of an organization of like her own doing, of her own making, when we were setting up to create something from scratch, the only place where we knew to begin was her story and using her story and her work to explain her values and using those values to guide those decisions that we made. I mean so for us it was only natural to begin there and I think that was really the decision that we made and it was I



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

think the right decision because to this day when we come to hard decisions as an organization, we have an executive director who is really awesome and the program director is really awesome, when we come to these decision points, then we're able to say "What would Jamie have done?" We know that people believed and saw her as someone who was willing to take risks and so we need to have some element of risk taking. Calculated risk, but risk taking in this particular program or this particular idea and even for the idea of being involved in civic engagement for a period beginning with volunteer projects and other things, we knew in our heart that that was gonna be driven by two things. One that Jamie always showed up and believed in showing up, and second, that she and I together always did what we, I don't know how to say, always did a great job; we thought of bringing together people from all walks of life and making everyone feel welcome and we knew that we needed to build a table as an organization broad enough for that to occur for everyone if we really wanted to create impact.

**BETH:** Right and you have all of this emotion that's going on. How has your emotions and the emotions of the people that have been drawn to the organization, how do you utilize that to propel the organization forward in your communications?

**NATION:** You know I think we always walk a fine line between telling Jamie's story, but also making it a story that's inclusive enough for everyone to see themselves as part of it and we're pretty proud of that because a lot of people who are engaged in that work never really had an opportunity to spend any length of time with Jamie. We knew for the organization to last, it just could not be about her story. It had to be about her vision, her values. So as near as possible we try to always first honor her story by elevating it on key days and key moments, but we also use every opportunity that we have to engage in debates and discussions that she would have engaged in and so we tell people sometimes, you know we really have a view of a couple nonprofits. There are those that have a specific problem. They set out to alleviate or work on and there are those who have a specific set of strategies and those strategies can rise to meet whatever issue

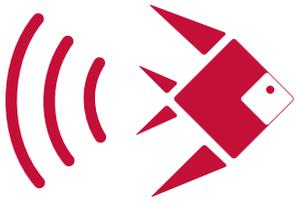


# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

comes up and for us, our instance has always been on meeting the issues that come up with the strategy that Jamie might have used because we know that the issues of today are not the issues that she or I would have predicted three or four years ago and the issues five years from now that are relevant and important may not be the issues of today. So for us, longevity was not this defining our strategies and approaches and values as based off of Jamie's values and vision and the work that she and I did together so that we could build an organization that could rise to whatever challenges our state, our community faces moving forward, and so I think the big answer is how do you build a story broad enough for inclusion and know the story that others can see themselves within because for us, we knew deeply that you know that part of it was even to avoid elevating Jamie to sainthood, because while she was the best person that many of us ever knew, and she certainly was remarkable, we also wanted people to understand that she wasn't perfect because perfection is really something, as my mom would have said, is really the weapon of the oppressor because when you seek perfection or you only see yourself as a leader if you're perfect. How many people are driven away from pursuing their highest goal or their highest opportunity because they're afraid of mistakes that they've made or they're afraid to make mistakes and so we wanted people to know also that failure isn't fatal and that Jamie had failings because it's only when they see her as the imperfect person that she was who was striving every day for a higher level of perfection, a higher level of good, that's the only way they can see themselves within the work and that's the only way they can identify with Jamie.

**BETH:** That's so interesting because I have to say, I wouldn't have thought of it that way because I mean there's so many organizations that are created in honor of somebody, and when I think about it, you're right. That legacy of somebody that's not there to let the reality of them show up. It's so easy to only remember the good things and the perfection, and since perfection is so unachievable, that allowing that to happen over time can potentially drive people away who feel like maybe they're not good enough to be involved or they could never achieve that or they could never be at that level and it would be tough to grow I would



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

think in some ways and have people feel really deeply connected to not just to Jamie, but to what you're trying to do and to believe they can really contribute. I think you're right, to have the organization go forward, it needs to grow. Every organization that's started by a founder, founded by somebody that's had something happen in their life, to sustain itself, it needs to get beyond you and your friends and Jamie's family. So how are you trying, are you at the stage, I'm sure you've probably already transitioned, so I'm sure that a lot of people that are thinking of starting an organization or are in that stage, how do you get beyond just the circle of people that specifically know or knew you and Jamie and maybe start telling that story to people that never have met Jamie about who she was and why this is the work that you do?

**NATION:** So I think that we try to orient our storytelling around briefly always and but usually concisely speaking of Jamie's sort of core values as much as we saw them were humility, sacrifice and service. Knowing that she met the needs of the community with a servant's heart, knowing that she really, which sounds hokey in today's age of dialogue, loved service and loved her community and loved people that she worked with and knowing that humility was a core part of that and we always say it's true that the only thing we've done to date that we believe she would disagree with is naming it after her, but that was important to us. It would not have been important to her, but with that humility in mind, we know that we use her story and her values to quickly pivot to the work that we're doing. The service projects and the innovation challenges and the assessment and the collaborative partnerships and the fellowship program because when we invest in those projects and those things and we see that as sort of Jamie's light sort of reflecting out from the broken places, we see that those projects and those people we invest in, it's a living representation of Jamie here on earth and so we see them as what we define as are we at Jamie's? We see these ideas as ideas that Jamie would have supported and so we think it's important if we talk about the work, which has very imperfect human faces, the very imperfect human failings inherent in them, but it's also work people can see, touch and feel without ever having known Jamie. We know they can both be inspired by her story, but



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

see a pathway for themselves engaging and we think that that's really critically important.

**BETH:** So when somebody starts an organization because of something sad or difficult that happens, I wonder, is there ever any sort of discomfort people feel? Are people maybe not knowing what to say to you or how to broach it or people saying like the wrong thing? You know, is there any advice you can give for other founders of organizations about how to help people get past that? How to help people that they're interacting with? How do they teach people what's OK and how to have the conversation without worrying about whether they're going to upset you, whether they're like "I don't want to bring that up again," or you know, is there things people should or shouldn't say, things that are especially helpful that you could you know tell other founders or even other listeners who are looking to partner or work with an organization that's founder-created?

**NATION:** That's an interesting question. Let me think about it. I think a couple of things. One, when it comes to having conversations about grief, that's a difficult conversation. They are conversations that we as a culture and as a society think have been somewhat trained not to have for better or for worse and some of that is out of a rightful and correct understanding that we don't want to send. I think sometimes where we lose sight as people, and I only knew this honestly because I knew this after my own experience, where we lose sight of things that matter with that is that really people just want to know that you are there to bear witness to them. Not that you're there to fix it, but that you're there, that you're there to bear witness, that you're there to see yes, you can't solve or fix the problem, but that's OK. You'll just hold their hand, you'll drop off flowers, you'll let them know you're there, and I think if we begin there with that understanding, then maybe the conversation will become easier because the conversation is not "Hey, I know this is a tough time so I'm not gonna say anything." The conversation is "I notice you're having a tough time so I didn't know if you want to talk about it. I'm here," or "I know this is a tough time. That's why I brought you dinner tonight." "I know this is a tough time so I just wanted to send you flowers to say



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

I'm thinking about you." Those small daily acts of kindness matter way more than saying the right thing. That's just doing the right thing. That's just showing up and it's not a difficult conversation. It's just bearing witness and I think the question for all of us is can we bear witness to our friends, our family and our loved ones. In the community it struggles and it triumphs alike and knowing that at the end of the day, that is the best part of life. It's the best part of friendship. It's just being there and for me, that was one of my best friends literally staying up every night with me until I fell asleep for weeks after Jamie died. He didn't say anything. He just listened if I needed to talk, but more than that, we just watched crappy movies and drank beer and were just there.

**BETH:** Right.

**NATION:** And I think that's the first important part. You know I try my best to not stamp my feet and throw temper tantrums when the organization makes decisions that are not completely in line with my view on the decision because Jamie was a consensus builder and understood that you have to work with others, and I think we did a really good job of collaborating as an organization. We did a really good job of like building a table that's pretty inclusive and a lot of that says OK, I may not agree with this decision, this particular fellow versus the other applicant, but I trust that the majority of people have Jamie's vision in mind and you know that I think has allowed us to build an organization that's durable. As for me, it's always the bus test. If I get hit by a bus tomorrow, will the organization survive.

**BETH:** Yeah, I always used to use the exact sort of same example and then I realized I should probably go with the lottery. So this is such helpful advice I think for people that have all of it, both in creating a story that is connected to emotion and also how to you know calm emotions when they are high and convert that emotion into something powerful and sustainable because that is some of the tricks is sort of at the beginning there's a lot of emotion in things that can buoy something along, but if you want to create something, I love your word durable.



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

I thought that was, I've never heard anyone use that word before. I think it's a perfect word. If you want to be durable, you need to learn how to channel it into something bigger and productive and inclusive. I think that's such great advice. So if other people are in similar situation to you and they want to build something beyond just themselves using a challenging situation, do you have one, like this is the one thing you need to know? Just a good piece of advice for somebody that needs to take a difficult story and convert it to something powerful and positive and growth oriented?

**NATION:** Man, you know I think first it's probably my advice is really just one piece. It's usually multifaceted. I have a hard time answering short questions.

**BETH:** You wouldn't be the first one.

**NATION:** You know, I think first you just have to trust in the power of your own story. I mean you have to trust that people will see that it will resonate with people who are out there in the world and you have to trust that the story that your loved one, the issues that they cared about, matter to enough people that you don't have to be part of every single meeting, every single discussion, every single aspect of the work and if you build and connect people who also knew and loved your loved one, if you build and connect people who care about those issues and who didn't have a chance to meet your loved one, that ultimately they'll make the right decision. The best thing that ever happened to me in the early days of the foundation was people stepped up to do the work without me having to be involved and I was able to check in and weigh in and then there was a time when I had to get involved daily and then ultimately we've been able to hire staff that have allowed me to help set the vision and to fix stuff and do this sort of values check, but I no longer have to be involved in the day to day. It's taken me a long time to get there, but I have far more say that the organization will be around for a long time to come now than I did a year ago or two years ago. The other thing I think people have to be OK with is understanding like we don't have to build permanent monuments to our loved ones, that their work



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

and their story and their value and their legacy can live on without us setting up a scholarship that lasts forever. You know really what we should seek is to help as many people for as long as we can with as big of an impact as we can and if that means that ten years later we go out of business because we've helped so many people and we've done so much that we've outlived the usefulness of the organization, that's OK because we still have impacted thousands of lives and those thousands of people will know that our loved one existed and that's enough. Right? I mean we don't have to build legacy institutions that will last forever because inevitably those legacy institutions become names on concrete walls or names on pieces of paper anyway. I mean just part of that is having the understanding that it's OK, but if you do your best and help as many people as you can for five years or ten years, that's all you can ask for. I mean, that's all I can ask for. Like if I get hit by a bus on the way out of this podcast today ...

**BETH:** Don't say that!

**NATION:** You know, I want people to go out and carry forth my work, but you know what? I don't need it to be, I don't need to have my name on it for a hundred years, but I hope they go out and solve the issue. I hope they go out and fix it and when they fix it, I say move on and they honor someone else by carrying forth their work. They don't need to honor me forever, but I think that when you begin to embrace that sort of understanding that it actually helps you to honor them better. Then you're less focused on creating something that lasts forever and more focused on having an impact and carrying forth their legacy for as long as you can. I think those are two very different things.

**BETH:** They really are and you know it's funny. I'm self-employed and have my own company and while it's not an organization, I totally can feel that. I understand what you're saying. I think that's really good advice for everyone to like live in the moment, do what you need to do today and spending too much time about tomorrow, it's kind of how I always feel about people that waste their whole wedding making sure that they have a great video of the wedding so that



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

they can remember the wedding afterwards. It's like you ruin today by trying to preserve it for tomorrow and I think that that's really good advice for any people doing anything and there is no such thing as forever. Even if something lasts for a hundred years, that's not forever so you know what's another decade? You're right, if the work can be done now and can have the impact that it's meant to, to make the organization the thing as opposed to the impact the thing, is exactly the opposite of what people want to support. So getting a mindset around dealing with impact today is only going to do things to strengthen and grow what you're actually trying to accomplish.

**NATION:** Yeah, I think that's right.

**BETH:** So this was terrific. It's such good advice. I truly appreciate your time sharing your knowledge and your experience with both me and the nonprofit community of people that are either founders of organizations or trying to connect with people emotionally in whatever work they're doing. So if people had questions for you, is there a good way that they can get in touch with you?

**NATION:** Yeah I think the best way is probably on Twitter. I'm @NationHahn, N-a-t-i-o-n-H-a-h-n and I think that one, I'd be happy to speak with anyone at any time. If they send me a message then we can connect and share. I view it, I view part of my work moving forward as helping people understand both how we sort of view our strategies because we do believe that our strategies are the foundation and the strategy at EdNC.org, our strategy is that more nonprofits need to adapt to meet sort of the changing demands of a new period in time. So I'm always happy to talk about that, but I'm also always happy to connect with people who lost someone they care about and want to honor them because it's not easy, but it's also not hard. It's also not hard to be empathetic and compassionate and caring and loving and strong and resilient and get out and face the world if you have so many people helping you and that was my lesson. As hard as it was, it was difficult. I'm not trying to minimize. There are days when I didn't want to get out of bed or have to put one foot in front of the other. What



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

made that load easier was the sheer amount of people who are interested in helping and reaching out and talking to me and giving me advice and giving me hugs and keeping me company and bearing witness and so for me, I view my job, part of my job as just human, as part of this community, as part of society is to bear witness and to let people know what helps me and what might help them, but more than that just let them know that they might come out the other side and if they want to honor their loved one, here's some advice on how to do that. Not that we're doing everything perfectly, but here's some advice on how to do it. If they're willing to reach out, I'm happy to talk to them at any time. I'd be glad to chat.

**BETH:** Wonderful. Thank you so much. I will make sure that Nation's Twitter address is linked on the show notes page so if you want to find him, please connect with him there and you can also always connect with me on Twitter or on LinkedIn or anywhere online. I am easy to find. So thank you so much for your time. I truly appreciate it.

**NATION:** Thank you.