

There
ARE AS MANY **PATHWAYS**
AS THERE ARE
PEOPLE



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There Are as Many Pathways as There Are People

How can you bring storytelling as a practice into your own organization—whether that means capturing and sharing stories, or just making sure that young people’s voices are heard and centered in the work you do?

Roadtrip Nation’s storytelling work is focused on creating greater exposure to a range of life and career stories—especially stories that challenge common narratives around what kinds of pathways are possible, and who they are possible for. Early on in our journey as a public television series and a nonprofit creating programs for career exploration, we realized that the most powerful thing we could do as storytellers was to be careful facilitators of the storytelling experience, so that the people at the center of the story felt a sense of safety, control, and agency. This shift helped ensure that the stories we amplified were real and authentic to what people were truly feeling and experiencing—and that authenticity created a stronger sense of recognition, connection, and understanding in the wider audiences who ultimately encountered these stories.

Storytelling that centers the voices of those who are closest to the story—and who are most affected—can be powerful in shifting narratives; in showing the need for specific support, action or change; or in demonstrating 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 and video-based work so that other impact-driven organizations can incorporate storytelling approaches that center young people’s voices into what they do.

Storytelling principles in practice: student spotlight videos

This year, as part of the Possible Dreams, Possible Paths storytelling initiative, fueled by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, young people from Texas are [sharing what’s driving their education decisions beyond high school](#) and exploring the full range of postsecondary paths that can support their goals and dreams in Texas. The intention of this initiative is to center the voices of young people—especially Black and Latinx young people, and young people experiencing poverty—in conversations that deeply affect them and the trajectory of their lives, and to connect them to supportive resources.

In centering these stories, our aim is to shift systems and solutions to support better transitions between high school and postsecondary education—and promote more equitable opportunities—so that young people can confidently pursue their aspirations and goals. Throughout this toolkit, you’ll see case study spotlights of three of the young people featured in Possible Dreams, Possible Paths: Texas as they talk to near peers to gain insights for their path forward and share their vision and ambitions for their future.

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 simply working with the young people you support in more informal settings, to preparing young people to be included in events or conferences where they might speak or participate, and, of course, if you’re capturing and sharing videos or stories in any format.



Roadtrip Nation Storytelling Fundamentals

Telling stories that center
young people's voices

What follows are practices that you can use in your organization to center young people's voices and make them co-creators and collaborators in crafting stories that drive narrative and systems change.

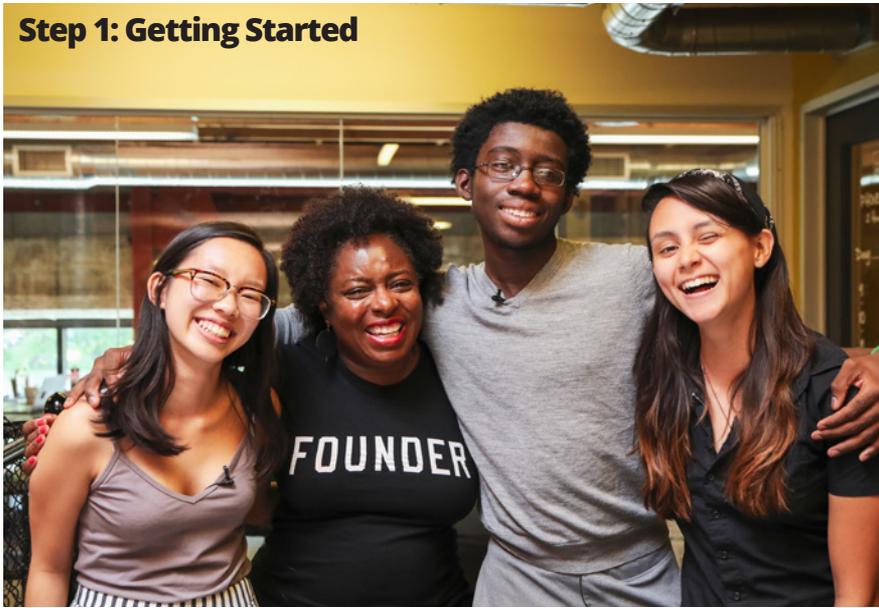
The first step, before you go any further, is to recognize your own role in this process. There are lots of storytelling formats and methods that benefit from careful scripting and planning and knowing exactly what you're going to capture—it can be an excellent and appropriate approach for some projects. We have a slightly different objective—learning what young people 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 that 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 supporting young people and their ambitions, you're the right person to champion the importance of centering young people and their 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 to 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.

...OK, but what does this look like more concretely? →

For example, for Possible Dreams, Possible Paths: Texas, which is where the student spotlights in this toolkit come from, we wanted to find stories of young people in Texas, specifically Black and Latinx young people and young people experiencing poverty, who were navigating the transition from high school to a wide variety of postsecondary paths and hear what's driving their decisions.

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 or young people 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 any young people 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 young people who are sharing their time and experiences with you. Figure out the right, equitable approach for your organization (and remember to work with your organization to consider details like tax implications for yourself and especially for the young 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 young people 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, accessibility, 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 Sobeida's
video

**“There’s definitely
some doubt about
graduating and
what I’m going to do
after—I know what
I want to do, it’s
about getting the
experience.”**



Sobeida, 21

Austin and Galveston, TX

Majoring in Marine Biology, with a Minor in
Diving Technology and Methods

Working in marine biology is my dream

I grew up on land [in a more rural area] for half of my life. We had some animals—I've had parrots, fish, bunnies, chickens, goats, horses. I was really, really in love with all my animals. At some points they were like my best friends. **So I definitely fell in love with animals at a really young age**, and I think that's where the passion for nature and animals came from.

My **dream job** is working with animal rehabilitation and husbandry. In particular, **marine mammals**.

I mean, have you seen a Hispanic woman in marine biology? I haven't seen many, if I'm being honest. It's definitely very difficult to move around that, 'cause sometimes I feel like I don't fit in, but **I've made it this far**. I'm doing internships and I got an offer for another internship in the ocean field—so **it definitely brought some hope that I would succeed in this career path**.

I got offered the **Nature Conservancy Texas Conservation Internship** at the Davis Mountains Preserve. I am here **helping with the elk population estimate** project on the preserve.

Having this paid internship has been really important to me. Money has always been really tight in my household. So I do not have the luxury to not work during the summer—usually I work summers to save up all my money and that's what I use to maintain myself during school. **So this internship is really, really helping me by giving me experience in something that I'm interested in while also getting paid for it**.

I currently hold six certifications:

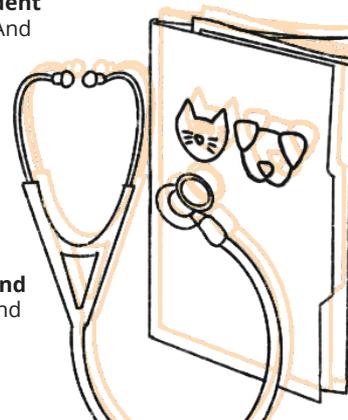
- SDI Open Water Scuba Diver
- Nitrox Diver
- Advanced Adventure Diver
- Rescue Diver
- Underwater Photography Diver
- SDI Full Face Mask Diver



College has been my plan since middle school

College was always in the plan. My mom wanted me to succeed in life and not have to go through the same thing she had to go through. **In middle school I joined a first-generation college student program. It was definitely a lot of pressure**. And sometimes I felt like it was something I wasn't going to achieve, because there's a lot of things that could potentially not let me go to college—like money and transportation, and choosing my major.

I am super blessed and grateful because I am able to pay for school with scholarships, grants, and FAFSA. **I have basically a full ride. And so I'm really, really grateful that I was able to find that opportunity and go to school for free**. And to have my mom not worry about having to pay anything.





Watch their conversation

Hello, my name is Sobeida. I'm an undergrad student at Texas A&M University at Galveston and I'm really interested in the ocean, and marine mammals in particular, and taking care of them and the rescue and rehabilitation part of that.

My name's Johanna. I started working at a vet clinic around 15. So I got to learn how to do some basic lab work, to observe lots of surgeries, and see how to draw blood. I started out doing lots of care and behavior, very hands-on. And then over time I've moved up into medical and more into a management position. So I'm not just doing the procedures myself. I'm also delegating that to other people and communicating with the vets, and really just ensuring everything moves smoothly.

I think a cool thing is you got a lot of hands-on training at such a young age—what did that training look like? Any certifications or any kind of schooling or kind of path that got you to this point?

So I do not have any certifications in this field. I would be considered a vet assistant. I'm working on getting my vet tech certification—that's an associate degree. And then after that you have licensing. The primary form of education that I've had has been finding very dedicated mentors. I've been fortunate enough to encounter a number of people who have been willing to teach me and understand that what I want is that hands-on experience. So when I was starting, I got to observe—and observing those procedures for years was the most important factor in me getting trained to do this. I know everyone learns differently, but for me, I need to do it. I need to see it first and then I need to do it.

I literally told people I'm gonna go work at the animal shelter instead of going to college. And that's what I did. In hindsight, I think that it is 100 percent true that I have gotten an immense amount of experience by opting to go into this kind of field with hands-on experience. But then, once you have that experience, it's important to back that up with your education.

Would you say that brought any self-doubt or fears for you?

When I was younger, there was that doubt there. When you've been doing something for a number of years, you can see the patterns and the changes. And as long as you are diligently self-evaluating and self-reflecting, confidence comes in and that self-doubt diminishes. And just finding good mentors, finding people who see your value, see your strengths, and then work with you on that. Mentorship is one of the most important things that has happened in my professional life. This is a field that, to be truly excellent in, you have to really be aware of what your strengths and weaknesses are. So being able to learn that hands-on has given me enough skills that I could do just about whatever I wanted given enough time and dedication.

Near-Peer Conversations:

Sobeida & Johanna

How does hands-on experience further your education? Sobeida talked to a vet-tech-in-training whose main education has been on the job.

Sobeida is nearing the end of her degree program in marine biology, and to work in this field, she's beginning to pursue internships that can give her experience working with the animals she ultimately wants to rehabilitate. To dive into the helpful interplay between education and experience, she met Johanna, a vet assistant who went straight to work with animals right out of high school and is now reinforcing that hands-on learning and experience with education to get her vet tech license.

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, such as bringing more awareness to what young people now are thinking about, 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 a 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 also 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 young 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 young 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 young 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 the young person you're profiling 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 kids 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 young 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 young person 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 that later on we can focus in.
- 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 young person to reflect back 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, and use it as a guide for what we'll ask and elaborate on.
 - This experience is new to them, so part of your role here is helping them by creating an environment where they can talk out and find what their story is.
- 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 young 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 what you want to cover, that's OK, but try not to read directly off of it, instead using it like a guide.





Watch Zion's
video

**“The creativity I
have, I express it all
the way through my
music. I’ve always
been involved in
music since I was
really young.”**

Zion, 19
Houston, TX

Completed the Recording Connections
Audio Engineering and Music Production
program through Studio 713

Navigating big changes in high school

Houston, I would say, is a great place to come. If you're creative, the art scene out here is amazing. Everywhere you go there's art, especially in the East Downtown area. And there's so many people out here just doing their own thing and just thriving, helping each other out. It's a good place for anything creative, anything artistic, anything that's out of the box, you know, if you're looking for something out of the norm.

I came here three years ago in the middle of my junior year of high school. What sparked the move was just, **I was going through really bad depression in the middle of my junior year.** I realized that I wasn't happy and that something inside of me was broken. This was me thinking you go to a different place and it's gonna fix everything. It's gonna make you happy again. It's not true, but I tried it, and I'm glad I did. **I feel like the most important lesson I had to learn was that it's not where you go, it's who you are. Your situation won't change unless you change.**

One thing that I realized is you never really get those bonds that you have in your hometown. It's hard to replicate that somewhere else. And that's something that really bothered me. **Music really helped me out.**

Choosing a different path

The school that I was going to in Hartford was college preparatory—you couldn't graduate if you didn't get accepted to college. It was kind of like a mental thing,

leaving that, 'cause the thing about that school is they had everyone kind of on a straight and narrow, you know, so me leaving like that, it took me out of that straight and narrow. It's like, damn, I just moved. I'm dealing with my emotions, dealing with everything. **All my friends are going to college, and it's like, I'm not doing the same thing.**

Right now I'm taking this audio engineering [and music production] program. I've already gotten my certificate. I've completed all the coursework, but that's only the beginning.

When I go to the studio where I record, it's a great place for artists to come in and get their feet wet. I go to learn to audio engineer. After the original coursework that you do, **it's very hands-on and kind of self-taught—you come in, you observe, you ask questions and you just try to get your feet wet in whatever field you're studying,** whether it be beatmaking or engineering.

Aside from the artist aspect, **I just want to be a great engineer—sound engineering is something that's always been cool to me.** I want to be able to engineer other people, engineer my own music, and get paid for it.



Music keeps me grounded

I've always been involved in music since I was really young. **What being creative means to me, I would say, is just finding a way to reach people in a way they can relate to and have fun with me.**

Whenever I'm recording, whenever I get on that computer, nothing else matters. I can sit there for hours and hours and hours. I'll have my phone going off, things like stressing me out, and then nothing else matters. I can't give my attention to that right now because **this is what makes me happy. It's how I recharge.**

I want people to be able to look at me and see themselves. I feel like a lot of people who go through any sort of mental distress, they're looking into a mirror and they see a broken version of themselves. I want to be able to change that for people. **I want people to be able to see like, dang, he's going through this, I can too—I can get through it 'cause he did it. And he's still here.**





Watch their conversation



Near-Peer Conversations: **Zion & Sergio**

In an industry like music production, mentorship, education, and hands-on experience mix—but dedication is the most important variable.

Zion and Sergio have both gone through the same audio engineering certification program in Houston. It's a unique apprenticeship-like approach to getting a certification that combines online learning with mentorship from a working music producer or audio engineer and unlimited studio time to start recording and building their portfolio while they're still in school. In their conversation as part of Possible Dreams, Possible Paths, they touch on what it's like to go through a different kind of program like this, and what you need to bring to the table.

So, I'm Zion. I graduated two years ago and since then, I've gotten involved with this program to learn how to audio engineer. I'm an artist, but I wanted to get a better feel for the engineering point of view

I'm from Stockton in the Bay Area of California. I came out here because I knew that in my environment, I couldn't make it out without any connections to the industry, because I knew that it was also a crab bucket—everyone else wants to see you kind of stay in the same thing 'cause they don't want to move their life forward. And so that's why I came out here, to make a better life for myself despite the hardships of that.

Yeah. I definitely understand where you're coming from when you say like the crab bucket mentality of where you're coming from. I definitely felt that in Hartford. Tell me a little about your musical background.

I went to college for [music] about two years ago. So I was in Delta Community College and I studied music theory, but it wasn't the same as music production, especially nowadays. It was mostly classical violin, like piano stuff. You know, things you wouldn't usually hear now on the radio. So I switched from playing guitar to producing.

What would it look like for a student just coming in?

You get in where you fit in. You have to come in; they give you all the tools. Everything you need is here. You got the best state of the art compressors, equalizers, everything you could want. But in order to use that, you have to know how to. So that's why the course comes in. The course is the online part of the program. You're gonna have a mentor who's already in the industry. The certificate is an audio engineering certificate. And so that certificate can get you in the door to a studio. So that certificate is very, very useful in that sense—at the same time, it doesn't mean anything if you don't have any work to show for it. You gotta record artists. You gotta have work to show 'cause the people want to see your portfolio. So it's all a big package—it comes together. That's where hard work comes in. How bad do you want it? If you suck, you be like, OK, I'm not good at it yet. Let me get better. You learn from those failures, you learn from those mistakes—you learn from that and then you get talented.

What I'm hearing is, don't be afraid to start off sounding bad—just get your hands on whatever you can, however you can.

Yeah. Our mentor engineer told me you have to lose your pride and ego. A big part of music and growth is losing your ego. And so I feel like that comes with knowing your mistakes. Instead of being like, "Oh, I'm good," you have to be ready for the truth. I used to be afraid of the truth. Now I look for advice, like, OK, tell me what's wrong with this beat. Tell me what's wrong with this sound. Like, why am I not making millions?

You gotta be hungry.

Gotta be hungry. It really is about that.

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, likely they will take 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 that we care about is creating a kind space of understanding, where the young 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 young 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 from young people 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 young 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 young 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, and creating the environment and space to work through that thought organically out loud.

Another tip we use often is, after a long period of circling around what they're trying to say together (say, we've spent 10-20 minutes building up to it), it can be a great and helpful exercise to say, "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 that we'll use something they're not comfortable with).
 - **Check back in:** Sometimes, if we do know that 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 Brittney's
video

“When I think of the future, I feel really hopeful and bright. That’s the only way to describe it. I feel like the future holds so much joy and potential to come.”

Brittney, 18

Odessa, TX

Permian High School, Class of 2022

Odessa is home

I'm a born and bred, raised Odessa Texan, and I **love it**.

My parents both own small businesses. My dad with his trucking company and my mom with her gift shop. And I **wanna open my own small business one day**, a flower shop of my own.

I've been working since I was around 14. I've had a handful of different experiences.



College isn't really on my list of things to do

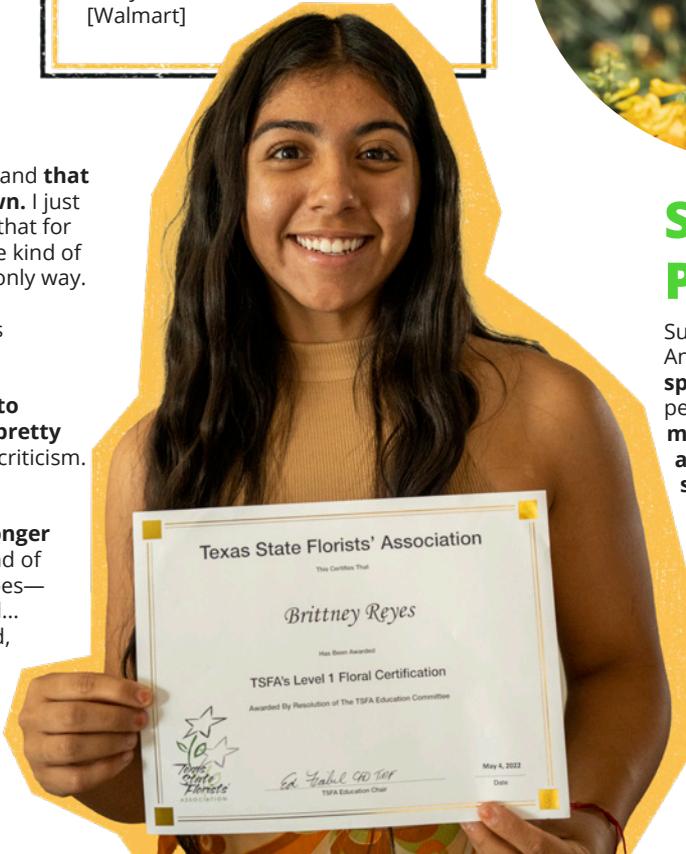
We filled out some **FAFSA applications** and **that just wrecked enough nerves on its own**. I just couldn't imagine having to worry about that for the rest of my life. And so since then, I've kind of relaxed a bit and learned that's not the only way.

Getting certified in my flower class was something I was really **excited** for.

Telling my parents that I didn't want to continue my educational future was pretty difficult. I've definitely received a lot of criticism. But it hasn't really broken my stride.

Since graduating, I definitely have a **stronger sense of freedom**... I feel like school kind of boxes you into these idealistic stereotypes—what you have to do in order to succeed... And I feel like you can just turn it around, change it, make it so much more beautiful and **get the same result, the same success, just fueled by passion**.

- Dressing up in costumes for little kids' birthdays and parties ("Being Elsa, my little wig almost fell off and I was so embarrassed because the kids were scared, but I just had to go with it!")
- A trampoline park ("That was pretty fun, but you kind of get tired of it pretty quick!")
- Curb Side Bistro ("Which is what I had for lunch today...")
- My mom's gift shop
- And I've worked at Wally World [Walmart]



Success = Passion + Peace of Mind

Success is measured in so many different ways. And personally to me, I **hold success at a more spiritual, inner value**. As long as my mind is at peace, I'm happy. I'm **successful as long as my mental health and my ambition and my drive and everything is running and operating like it should be**—that makes me feel good, that makes me act good, and do my best good—so I feel like prioritizing myself and how I'm feeling.

I feel very grateful that I **have the opportunity to not only educate myself from here on out, but learning what makes me, me, and what fuels my creativity, my passion, my ambition, my hard work ethic**. What forms, and what I could become with all this drive and ambition and motivation, **it could form something much more meaningful and much more beautiful**.





Near-Peer Conversations:

Brittney & Fernanda

Two young women from Odessa, who graduated two years apart, on the forces shaping their post-high school decisions.

As part of Possible Dreams, Possible Paths, Brittney interviewed Fernanda, who graduated just two years ahead of her. Both of them want to own their own businesses one day. Brittney's just at the beginning of her journey. Fernanda is working as a customer service representative for Workforce Solutions Permian Basin and studying at Odessa College to be an occupational and safety specialist. Fernanda's plan is to use her training to build a business that works on occupational safety in the local oil industry.

Watch their conversation

Hi, Fernanda. I'm Brittney. I just graduated two weeks ago. Right now I'm at that point in my life where I'm about to start making important decisions about my future and what I want to do next.

My name is Fernanda. I graduated from Odessa High School in 2020, two years ago, while I was pregnant. Yeah, my life started after I graduated, because they don't tell you how life after high school is gonna be. They just say, here's your diploma. Figure it out. You know what I mean?

Did you have some mentors within the school?

No—it was during COVID and we were all isolated. You just had to do your part and pull your own weight. They would mail our packs to our home and just turn it in on Monday and keep going.

You mentioned you have a son and you weren't expecting to graduate high school or go to college. You know, these are unexpected twists that happen in life. And how do you just push forward with that?

Growing up, I wasn't always like a straight A student. When I went into [Odessa High School], there's a lot of freedom. So if you wanna go to class, you go to class and if you don't, you don't. In the summers I would have to go and make up those hours. I would always leave it till the last minute. So my senior year I was like, I'm not gonna graduate. And then I got pregnant. I was like, OK, now I have to graduate. I have no option. I have to. And it was hard. I know being a teen mom is hard, and doing it during COVID was a little bit worse. I had a lot of extra struggles that I really don't talk about. It was a lot of fear till the day I gave birth. But that's made me a stronger person, I believe.

How did you hear about the resources [for getting into the program you're in now]?

My mom was telling me, what are you gonna do? Don't you want to have more education? I was like, no mom, I haven't even saved, so I'm not gonna pay for college. And she was like, well there are opportunities here that can help you. And I was like, OK, if you look it up and you tell me that it's true, then I'll give it a try. And she actually made the appointment with the workforce and that's how it started. I knew I wanted to do something, but I didn't have that push until my mom was like, all right, I made your appointment. You just have to go and show up. And I did.

What's something you'd tell your 16-year-old self?

I never saw myself being a mom, first of all. And to be honest, I never thought I was gonna graduate, and not even go to college. College was just not even in my plans, but here I am. Now, I'm just like, why would I think like that? Everything that I've had and thought, it's all the opposite—and I feel blessed because when you're young, you really don't know what you want or how it's gonna be. You just gotta get open—do it!

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 young people or their guardians 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.



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.

