

CHANGEMAKERS FOR TRAILS SERIES

Making an Advocacy Impact Through Storytelling

July 15 & 17, 2025



RTC's Nebraska Tour of the Great American Rail-Trail | Cowboy Trail

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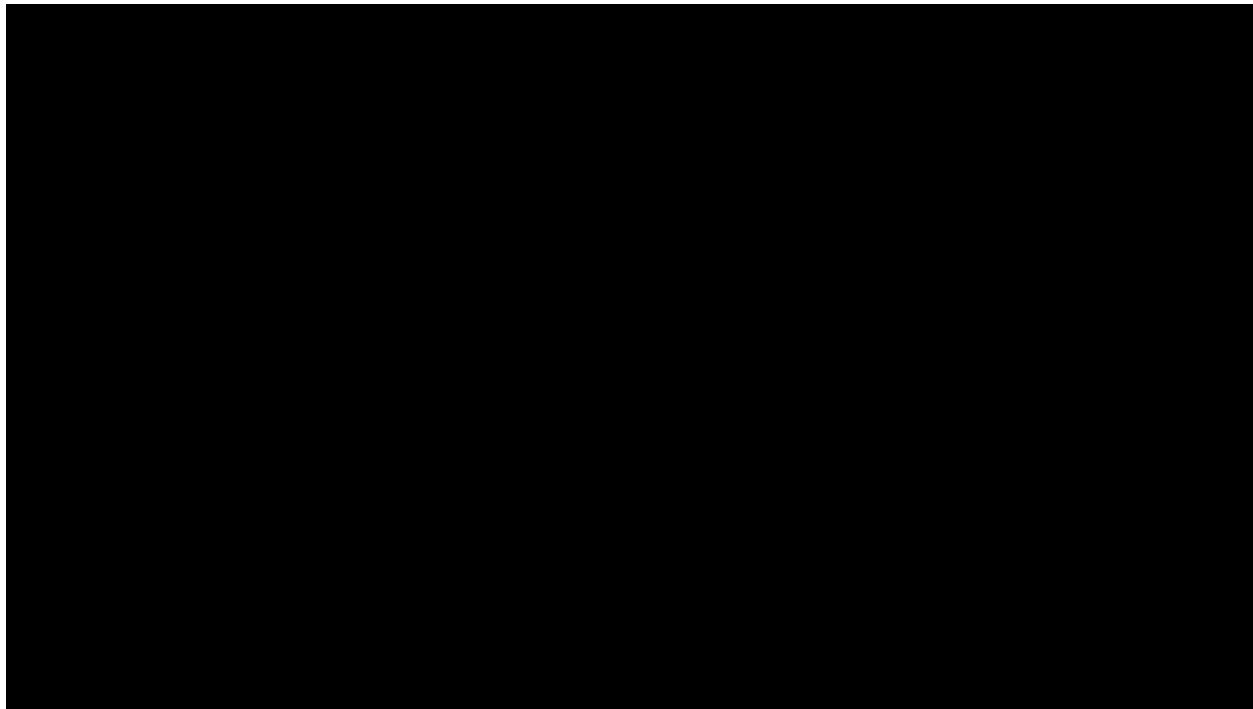
What We're Going to Chat About

Why Stories Matter

- 1. Creating Influence**
- 2. How stories are core advocacy tools**
- 3. The makings of a great story**
- 4. Why our stories matter now more than ever**

**Creating
Influence.**

Why Storytelling Is Impactful



rtc.li/jlg-video



THIS MOMENT IS URGENT

Impact Grows With Distribution

Who wants to hear my story?

- **Your fans and friends!** Think Social Media.
- **Reporters**—They need your stories to personalize issues that are happening in the community (and don't forget online newsletters and forums)
- **Community Organizations**—They're sharing the impact of what matters in newsletters, blogs, on their social channels and your voice matters
- **Elected Leaders**—Your story can anchor your conversation, make the issue meaningful and memorable, and build new champions for trails, walking and biking



Congressman Eugene Vindman (D-VA-7) at Great American Rail-Trail event in Washington, D.C.

**Stories = An Advocate's
Superpower**

What Is Advocacy?

Advocacy can vary from small, everyday actions to larger scale efforts. For example:

- 1) **Everyday advocacy:** introducing your network to trails, sharing on social media, telling your story about why trails matter
- 2) **Community advocacy:** events and activities where you live, organizing supporters (petitions, meetings, etc.), attending community meetings
- 3) **Direct advocacy:** attending meetings with elected officials (city council, county meetings, agency discussions); engaging elected officials (local, state and federal); letters to the editor and press



And Why Do Stories Matter?

Shaping Perception.

Stories give meaning to issues and context for how people might think about the world around us differently.

Creating Shared Experiences.

When we're trying to organize or influence, we need to create common ground. Stories are an entry point to finding similarities and understanding differences.

Being Memorable.

Stories create an emotional connection that makes you—AND THE ISSUE—memorable.

Inspiring Emotion.

Emotions—happiness, sadness, anger, frustration, disappointment—are all signals to our brains to act, regardless of your level of authority. Stories inspire emotion and are powerful in motivating action.

**What makes a
story great?**

Transformational Story Topics

Impact Areas

- Economic Development/Tourism
- Community Empowerment
- Safety for Pedestrians and Bicyclists
- Health/Renewed Health and Wellness
- Remembrance of Loved Ones/Influential People
- Access to Jobs and Centers of Commerce
- Historic Preservation (Local/National)

BUSINESS BOOMS ALONG THE CHARLOTTE RAIL TRAIL

The Charlotte Rail Trail isn't just a hub for walkers and runners. It's also a must-visit destination for the loads of canine friends who call the Queen City home. Just ask dog-lover and small business enthusiast Carmen Larreynaga. She owns Pet Wants, a pet food boutique in South End, just south of the Bland Street light rail station and across the street from the trail.



Between walls lined with toys for pups and scores of dog treats, Larreynaga explains how she moved her natural pet food store from a different location in South End about a year ago. She said the exposure has been incredible. "A lot of people walk their dogs there, so they see us. And, also, the people riding the train."

The rail-trail is a bonafide pooch paradise with water dishes, poop-bag dispensers and plenty of room for pets to stroll with their humans. Larreynaga said another plus to the destination is how accessible it is for all walks, and woofs, of life: "I think it brings people from different parts of town to South End."

The boost in visibility has been a boost to her business, too. "I think we've doubled our sales," she said with a smile. "It's definitely helped a lot."



PHOTO: Rich City Rides, which has a worker-owned bike shop as well as a bike hub along the Richmond Greenway, is one of many local organizations leading efforts to unite residents around the trail.

as a railroad corridor and blighted area. Early championing for the greenway is credited to local community activist Lillie Mae Jones, who recognized the lack of green space decades ago in her Central Richmond neighborhood—a 3-mile area that includes the downtown business district and is known as the "Iron Triangle" for its shape between multiple sets of railroad tracks. In fact, Jones began advocating for a walking trail well before the final freight train ran along the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad line on the

"The bicycle is just the vehicle that we use to unite community members. ... I think our guests and participants are the main ingredients."

Najari Smith,
Founding Executive
Director, Rich City
Rides

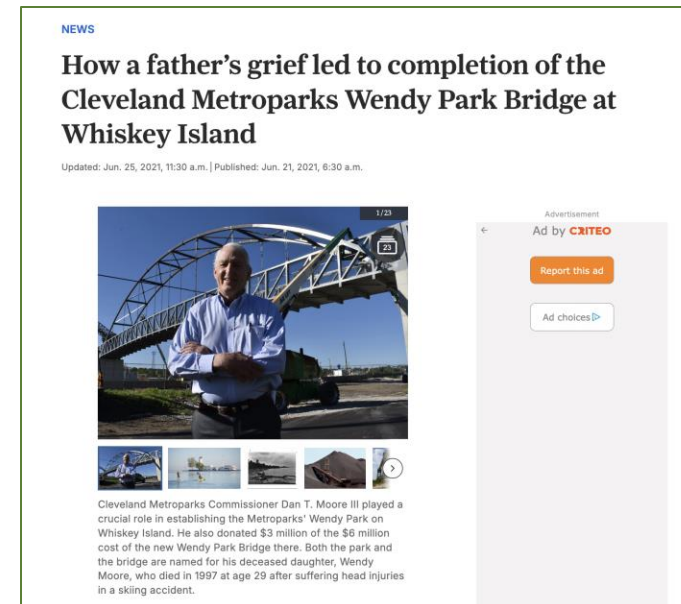


Example: Personal Connections

- Cleveland Centennial Lake Link Trail/Wendy Park Bridge
 - 500-foot connector to Wendy Park/Lake Erie



rtc.li/bridge-to-everywhere



Example: Personal Connections

- Howard's Friend Ride on the Pere Marquette Rail Trail

Howard's Ride
For his 80th birthday in December 2012, Shelley Schoenherr's father, Howard, had wanted to celebrate with an 80-mile bike ride. It would've started on the Pere Marquette Rail Trail, a project he and his wife, Barbara, supported since its conceptual stage.

Barbara, a Midland County Parks and Recreation board member who passed away in 2022, never ran or rode the trail a day in her life, Shelley Schoenherr said. Howard, on the other hand, put in thousands of miles biking it every year. On his 60th birthday, he had convinced three of his five kids, Shelley included, to go on a ride across Michigan. One sibling dropped out after a day. "And then the next year, I was the only one foolish enough to show up," she said.

So an 80-mile, late-December ride for the longtime Sanford resident would have normally been in his wheelhouse, had it not been for the lymphoma. "It came on very quickly," Shelley Schoenherr said.

As he underwent treatment, Shelley offered a compromise: They'd go on the ride, but not in the cold on his Dec. 27 birthday. They agreed to ride instead on April 27, 2013. Howard Schoenherr died in September of 2012; his obituary mentioned he was most at peace when he was physically active and invited contributions in his honor to be made to Friends of the Pere Marquette Rail Trail.

A few months after the funeral, Shelley Schoenherr pulled up a note on her phone shelf saved about that April 27 ride and got inspired. "I called up a couple of his friends and said, 'Hey, you want to do 80 miles for my dad's 80th birthday?'"

"It was special to my dad ... because we rode it from the first time they took the railroad ties up to his last bike ride."

Shelley Schoenherr, Organizer of Howard's Friend Bike Ride, on the Pere Marquette Rail Trail

Connecting the Pere Marquette Trails
To get to 80 miles, the first Howard's Friend ride required

photos (above) The bridge in Midland, (bottom left and right) Images from past Howard's Friend Bike Rides, held in memory of the late Howard Schoenherr

birthday?" And pretty soon, we'd made it into a bike ride."

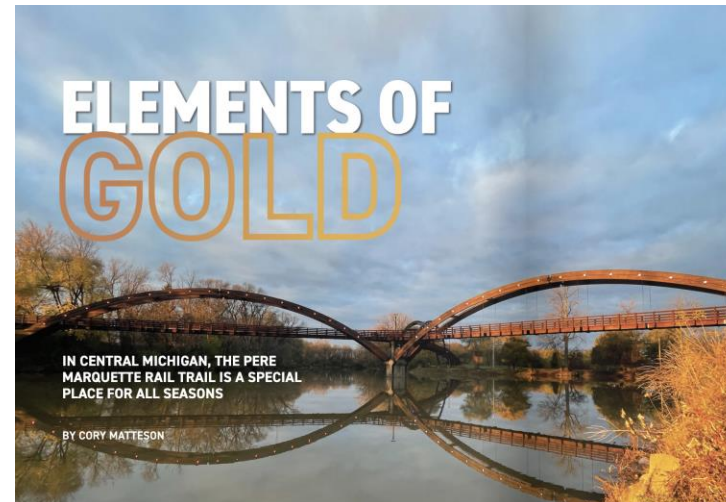
And even sooner, she had calls from people who'd heard about the bike ride from one of the friends she'd invited. They'd say, "Well how do I get to be Howard's friend?"

All of a sudden, Shelley Schoenherr was a bit of an event organizer. "Eighty of us rode the first ride," she said. Every spring since, she has traveled 140 miles from her Fair Haven home to host the Howard's Friend Bike Ride, a fundraiser for Friends of the Pere Marquette Rail Trail. She's joined on ride day in Midland by hundreds of participants who sign up for 5- to 60-mile rides. These days, the Howard's Friend Bike Ride takes place entirely on the Pere Marquette. The next Howard's Friend ride is set for May 4, 2024 (howardsfriendbikeride.com).

"Dad said he wanted two things [if a ride was made in his honor]," Shelley Schoenherr said. "He wanted the race to be affordable to everybody, so it's still only 30 bucks to ride the ride. And he wanted kick-ass shirts. We do long-sleeve microfleece tees with that \$30. You don't have to pay extra. We have somebody provide breakfast. We have food at Sanford, Coleman, Clare—and you can get it on the way back too. It's made to be an event."

And she said a race dedicated to him could only take place on the Pere Marquette Rail Trail.

"Because it was special to my dad," she said. "And because we rode it from the first time they took the railroad ties up to his last bike ride."



MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR: Shelley Schoenherr wants you to hit the trail for Howard's Friend Bike Ride

By Ron Beacom. For the Daily News
Updated March 30, 2023 5:27 p.m.

Shelley Schoenherr, 66, and her husband, Allen Narverus, have three kids and 14 grandkids. They've been married for 20 years.

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Example: Macro Econ./Tourism

- “How Trails Are Powering an Arkansas Transformation” (TrailBlog, Grady Spann, May 2025)
 - Focuses on the Impact Numbers, e.g., “The cycling industry contributed \$159 million to the region’s economy.”
 - Provides Diverse Examples: Tourism potential of 85-mile Delta Heritage Trail and the 65-mile Southwest Trail (est. \$1.2 million in tourism annually).
 - Talks about his own personal connections and motivations for developing the trails.



rtc.li/Arkansas-trails

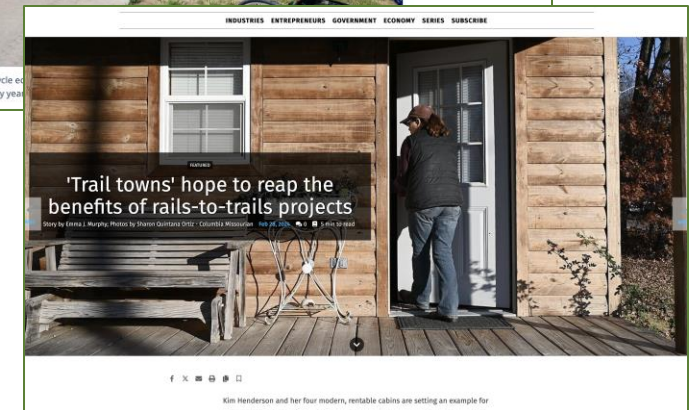
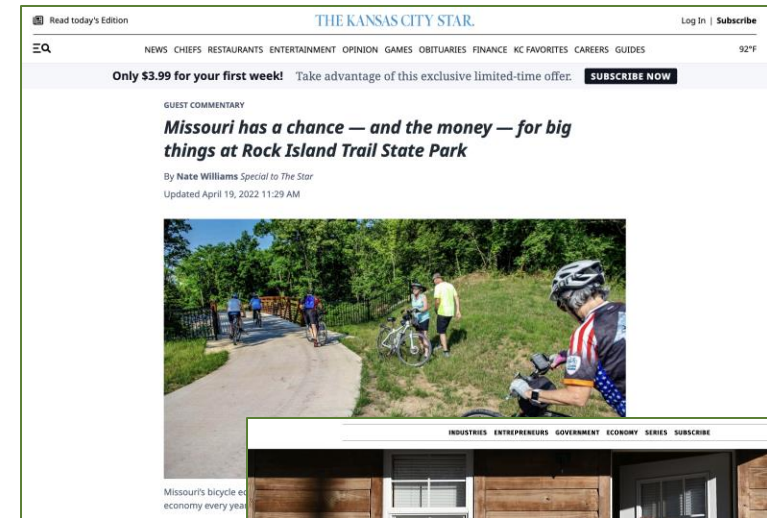
Example: Micro Econ./Business Dev.



rtc.li/piedmont-pizza



rtc.li/appalachian-engine



How Do You Craft/Elevate a Story?

Identify narratives that resonates on a human level—you included!

- You, Volunteers and Program Participants, Former Leaders, Community
- Crowd Sourcing Trail networks in development in hundreds of communities and every single state

Develop the narrative as “storymaker.”

Beginning, Middle and End: Transformation or change with the author, trail or community. Often overcoming a challenge or a roadblock—but the change can be personal or external.

Key Voices lead narrative—they are the “storyteller.”

Package and Distribute

- Videos, Print and Digital Articles (Magazines/Newsletters/External Media), Blogs, Social Media, Photo Essays

How Its Shared Matters

Get In Front of Key Players

**Why does your
story matter
now?**

Opportunity For Generational Impact

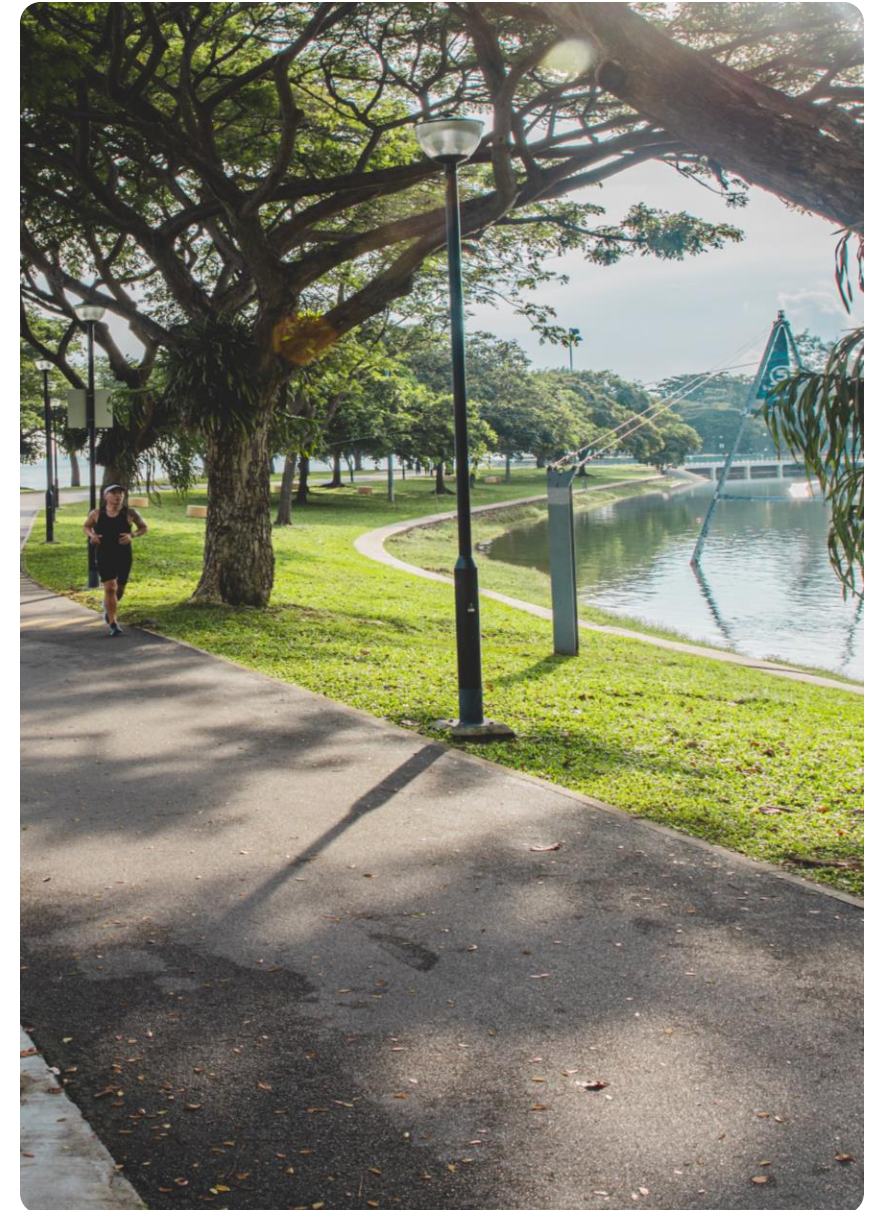
Federal government is largest source of funding for trails, walking and biking—30+ year investment yielded 42,000+ miles of multiuse trails

- A new federal transportation law is passed every 5 years
- The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) is the most recent iteration, doubling funding and investing billions
- Decisions are being made this year that will shape the next federal transportation bill

We continue to navigate a time of uncertainty

- Ongoing threats to existing funding
- Challenges to philosophy of federal funding approach

This is a pivotal moment to influence the priority that federal government places on trails and active transportation—including networks.



Changemakers Action Plan

This moment is unique, and critical—and your voice matters. Here are a few things you can do to share your story.

1. Find the right message for you—write it, speak it, practice it so that you can deliver it with impact.
2. Share your story—on social, with friends, in the press, via op-eds and letters to the editor. Elevate the importance of trails by personalizing their impact
3. Use your story as motivation for why your local and state officials to sign RTC's funding pledge: rtc.li/localpledge
4. Put your story to work in meetings with your federal representatives or their staff in the district (RTC will help!)



An urban trail ride with Latino Outdoors Vamos Outdoors program

What's Next?

Take Action Today:

- Using social media (tag @railstotrails)
- Letters to the editor, op-eds and media opportunities
- Attend community meetings
- Organize events on the trail
- Meeting with elected officials and leaders

Changemakers for Trails:

- Additional trainings and action touch points this year: September, November, plus rapid response call to action.
- Sign up to be part of the team to attend key meetings with elected officials
- Resources and training tools: **[Railstotrails.org/advocate](https://railstotrails.org/advocate)**



Thank You!