Frank Warren

Founder and editor of PostSecret, the anonymous postcard art project

Frank Warren is the American founder and editor of PostSecret, an art project in which strangers put an undisclosed secret on a handmade postcard and mail it to him. He selects cards for a Sunday website, books, exhibitions, and live presentations. It began around Washington, D.C., in 2004, when he was a forty-year-old businessman living with his family in Germantown, Maryland. He later moved to Laguna Niguel, California. [1]; [2]; [3].

Warren supplies continuity and editorial judgment; contributors provide the words and images. His working life includes reading mail at home, editing books, and standing before audiences who sometimes tell their own secrets. The Sunday page remains accessible, and physical and digital collections preserve earlier material. [4]; [5].

The life before PostSecret

An Arizona native born in 1964, Warren grew up in California and Illinois. His parents divorced when he was twelve; he moved with his mother and brother to Springfield. He recalled depression and seeking connection at a Pentecostal church in high school. [6]; [7]; [8].

He studied social science at the University of California, Berkeley. Copying library journal articles helped support him as a student; after graduation he made a business out of similar work. His route into self-employment began with a useful service he already knew how to provide. [9].

His company, Instant Information Systems, preceded PostSecret. Its document-delivery work involved copying journal articles for pharmaceutical companies, law firms, and nonprofits. [10]. He told Mediabistro he had owned the business for about twenty years and was then its absentee owner. [11]. In 2016, he credited his dull but lucrative business with giving him time to experiment on weekends. An established livelihood provided room to try an invitation whose response he could not predict. [12].

His Maryland household included his wife, daughter, and dog; the family also fostered children for short stays. [13]. His wife and daughter later became the first people with whom he shared a childhood secret recalled through the postcards. [14].

A friend’s suicide led him to volunteer on a prevention hotline. Training taught him open questions, nonjudgmental listening, and patience with silence. [15]. When PostSecret attracted attention, he directed support toward a service he already knew through volunteering. [16].

These experiences suggest preparation rather than a predetermined path. Business ownership gave him room to experiment, and hotline work gave him habits of listening. PostSecret emerged in an established household. The inference is modest: the person who answered the first postcards brought experience and resources as well as an interesting concept.

Postcards, small experiments, and the first invitation

As a child away at camp, Warren received three self-addressed postcards from his mother. He mailed the last one before returning home, then arrived before it did. Receiving his own delayed message made him wonder how he had changed since sending it. A familiar object could bring an earlier version of himself into the present. [17].

He made two postcard projects before PostSecret. One arose in Paris from a lucid dream. Another, Reluctant Oracle, involved mysterious bottles at Clopper Lake in Maryland. Warren described it as a project about wonder and later linked to its television coverage. The Digital Museum preserves these experiments in the history of his practice. [18].

He had no formal art training. He later situated PostSecret within mail art, reaching back to Dada and circulation through the post. This was a lineage he identified retrospectively. His beginning was practical: an amateur designed an invitation and carried it into public places. [19].

In November 2004, Warren printed 3,000 self-addressed cards, distributing them on Washington’s streets, in galleries, and in library books. The request was broad: tell something true that had never been shared. Regrets, fears, desires, and humiliations all qualified. His directions asked for brevity, legibility, and creativity, while leaving the emotional tone open. [20].

Around one hundred of those initial cards came back. Warren had imagined a modest annual project—roughly 360 secrets—but the returns did not stop when he stopped distributing cards. People began supplying their own materials and passing the idea along. By October 2007, he reported receiving about a thousand cards a week. The change was not merely a larger audience for a finished object: strangers had begun perpetuating the work’s production. [21].

The early display at Artomatic, a Washington arts event, put the cards before visitors in physical space. Online publication then allowed people outside the city to encounter the invitation and participate by mail. In his first book, Warren described cards made from cardboard, old photographs, wedding invitations, and other personal materials; some arrived in Portuguese, French, German, Hebrew, or Braille. The postcard format stayed recognizable while its senders changed its appearance. [22]; [23].

Warren’s explanation of his motivation developed after the experiment began. A stranger’s card recalled a childhood humiliation he had never discussed. He made a

postcard, showed it to his wife and daughter, and mailed it. In his 2005 introduction, he interpreted PostSecret as helping him approach something he could not initially face alone. His retrospective explanation sits alongside the documented sequence of experiments and invitations. [24].

A local project becomes a career

Several channels converged during 2005. The All-American Rejects used PostSecret cards in the video for "Dirty Little Secret." Warren said that instead of taking a $2,000 payment, he asked the band to direct the money to the National Hopeline Network. The video carried a recognizably handmade visual form into popular music and helped make the project discoverable by people who were not looking at art exhibitions or blogs. [25].

The Washington Project for the Arts exhibited the originals alongside the video's six-foot-by-four-foot images. The venue was a former Georgetown Staples store; the show ran from December 15, 2005, to January 8, 2006. Its archive records Warren meeting contributors face to face. His father attended and shared a childhood memory that changed their relationship: the public project was also affecting its maker's family. [26].

The first book, PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives, appeared in 2005. By early 2006, Warren reported about twenty thousand cards, including mail from Hong Kong, Afghanistan, Australia, Ireland, and India. A project started by handing out paper in one metropolitan area now circulated through a combination of web links, music, books, exhibitions, and the postal system. The different media did different jobs: a video could attract attention quickly; a postcard still required a participant to make an object and send it. [27]; [28].

Warren gave his name and home address as part of the trust he asked of anonymous contributors. His wife questioned the household's exposure: the invitation affected other people at home. [29].

How the weekly work works

The routine is demanding to repeat: receive, read, retain, select, scan, and arrange. In 2007, Warren described spending forty hours a week on PostSecret. He compared his work to film editing—choosing surprising material and arranging a larger narrative. His author credit primarily recognizes selection and composition of the collection. [30].

In the early Mediabistro interview, he described choosing twenty cards from roughly a thousand weekly arrivals, without a committee. He sought authenticity, freshness, and emotional range, arranging the sequence to end with hope. The numbers describe that period. [31].

The submission process is part of the method. Participants make a card, choose words and images, pay postage, and let it leave. Warren argued that this ritual asks for more attention

than a text or email, while images can express what words cannot. Limited space still accommodates collage, handwriting, and drawing. Brevity can hold considerable effort. [32].

The encounter begins before Warren sees a card: postal workers handle it without a concealing envelope. He spoke of his Maryland carrier Cathy’s involvement in the routine. The NEA later emphasized the trust connecting postal workers, website readers, and museum visitors. Even the first circulation is modestly public. [33]; [34].

Warren used Babelfish to translate some submissions and recalled a Hebrew card he could not read. International participation did not remove the editor’s language limits. What arrives, what he can understand, and what he chooses all shape the collection. [35].

Anonymity is a practice with limits. In the 2006 Wikinews interview, Warren recalled removing a card after its sender said friends had recognized her handwriting. In a later interview, he described withholding an identifying family photograph attached to a secret about someone else, because the people in the image had not consented to that disclosure. A sender’s willingness to reveal something does not give the editor unrestricted authority over everyone implicated in it. [36]; [37].

Warren does not independently verify every card. [38].

Chicago police called a supposed body-dumping confession published by PostSecret in 2013 a hoax. [39].

The distinction between an affecting artwork and a documented event remains essential: the page can make a statement emotionally legible without establishing that the statement is factually true.

Six books, six editorial frames

The books give the project an enduring form and give Warren a commercial publishing career. They also let him regroup cards by age, relationships, belief, or the history of the project rather than relying entirely on the weekly sequence. Publisher descriptions and his interviews establish the following progression:

Year / Book / Editorial emphasis

Year: 2005
Book: PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives
Editorial emphasis: The first collection and Warren’s account of the invitation and his own participation.

Year: 2006
Book: My Secret: A PostSecret Book
Editorial emphasis: Previously unpublished postcards from teenagers and college students; a compact illustrated object that also included decorative stickers.

Year: 2007
Book: The Secret Lives of Men and Women
Editorial emphasis: A new collection organized around the private lives of men and women.

Year: 2007
Book: A Lifetime of Secrets
Editorial emphasis: Cards from people aged eight to eighty, arranged in loose chronological order to show both changes and continuities across a life. [40].

Year: 2009
Book: Confessions on Life, Death, & God
Editorial emphasis: Death, faith, doubt, and belief, including people with no religious affiliation.

Year: 2014
Book: The World of PostSecret
Editorial emphasis: A larger, 288-page collection incorporating archived app submissions, foreign and puzzle secrets, controversies, and text from the stage adaptation.

My Secret brought a particular audience into focus. Its publisher presented the book as a view into teenagers' and students' lives, addressed to younger readers and their parents. That is consistent with the campus circuit that became central to Warren's public work, but the book's form still depended on the participants' own illustrations, photographs, and collage. The second collection did not simply increase the number of cards available; it changed who the collection was about and who might read it together. [41].

In A Lifetime of Secrets, age became a narrative device: readers could follow changes across a life while noticing recurring experiences. Warren also included his own secrets in the books, comparing these appearances to Hitchcock's film cameos. The editor placed himself within the work he assembled. [42].

The fifth book's religious range and the sixth book's incorporation of app and theatrical material show further changes in his editing. A failed platform could become a source for a later printed archive; a performance could re-enter a book. The publishing series thus records the project's changing media as well as changing subjects. The publisher's descriptions establish these contents; they do not establish therapeutic outcomes for their readers. [43]; [44].

Earning a living and funding the public project

In the early Mediabistro interview, Warren distinguished royalties and speaking fees from charitable fundraising: PostSecret was not a nonprofit organization. His business income enabled him to refuse website advertising. The free page belonged to a practice with paid books and appearances. [45].

The fundraising record grew with the audience. The Washington Project for the Arts

archive reported that his partnership with the Kristin Brooks Hope Center, associated with the Hopeline network, had raised more than $500,000 by early 2010. In a 2016 National Endowment for the Arts interview, Warren put the total raised for suicide prevention above $1 million. Those are dated reports about fundraising; they are not figures for his personal donations, book profits, or current annual income. [46]; [47].

The website now invites Patreon support, offering museum passes, a signed book proof, and event material. [48]. Public sources do not provide a complete account of income, costs, staffing, or contractual revenue divisions.

Participants give their material freely; Warren’s name and editorial labor anchor the books and speaking career. That arrangement draws criticism, but publicly identifiable revenue channels do not establish his private wealth.

[External image / 外部圖片] PostSecret exhibition entrance, with a tall column of stacked postcards and framed displays.
The PostSecret exhibition at the Museum of Us, San Diego. A column made from stacked postcards makes the scale of the received mail visible beside individually displayed contributions. Museum of Us; photographer not named on the exhibition page · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

Exhibitions and the work of keeping the mail

Exhibiting postcards is a different task from displaying scans. International Arts & Artists circulated a ready-designed PostSecret exhibition of more than four hundred cards. The package included fifteen wall-mounted and five freestanding units, enlarged images, and audiovisual material. Host institutions could add a book talk or signing and collect local secrets. Its itinerary joined art museums, a public library, and university galleries: Winnipeg in 2007–08, Minneapolis in 2008, Walnut Creek and Syracuse in 2009, and further American venues through 2011. A relatively small object could travel as a complete public exhibition because an organization supplied the apparatus and relationships needed to host it. [49].

The exhibition network gave the project settings with different audiences and sources of legitimacy. At MoMA’s 2011 Talk to Me exhibition, PostSecret appeared in a catalogue of communication and interaction design, classified under “Life” and tagged with communications, networks, and interactions. The listing named Warren as the maker and described variable materials and dimensions. That context placed the invitation and its circulation alongside the postcards themselves: the way the work connected people was part of what the museum presented. [50].

The Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum exhibited more than five hundred cards in PostSecret: The Power of a Postcard. The NEA’s 2016 account described originals held between Plexiglas, where handwriting, collage, and the physical postcard remained visible. [51]. A contemporary report gave September 2017 as the scheduled closing month. [52].

The large pyramid of stored mail became another exhibition object. Warren’s Digital Museum describes its movement from his Germantown basement to the Smithsonian and then to the Museum of Us in San Diego. The accumulation makes visible something a weekly website cannot show at once: the proportion of received cards to a small published selection, and the physical work involved in keeping a long-running correspondence. An individual postcard and the mass of mail convey different aspects of the same practice. [53].

The Museum of Us now displays thousands of originals, Warren’s original mailbox, and examples of “naked mail”—objects sent without packaging. Visitors can also read local San Diego submissions and make a card themselves. Its presentation consequently combines an archive with a continuing invitation. Institutional supporters include family foundations and individual patrons, making this public setting possible through resources beyond Warren’s home operation. The museum also warns visitors about potentially difficult content and asks that younger children be accompanied by an adult. The encounter is organized and mediated, even though the source objects arrived through an open invitation. [54].

Digital preservation has developed alongside those physical collections. The Digital Museum of Secrets organizes themed exhibitions and links to a screening room and searchable archive. It credits Fireman Creative and WordPress. [55]. Its early collection returns to cards sent in 2004 and 2005, giving historical selections a setting beyond the current Sunday page. [56].

The Voicemail Secrets exhibition collects recorded messages, stories, and photographs, and invites contributions. PostSecret credits curator Savannah Morin, WordPress, and Patreon supporters. Another curator and a technical partner help carry the invitation into a different medium: recordings preserve a voice’s tone as well as its words. [57].

On campus and on stage

Warren’s speaking career brought him into institutions already responsible for student life and mental health. At East Stroudsburg University in 2015, counseling director Linda VanMeter arranged his visit as part of programming intended to reduce stigma and encourage students to seek help. The lecture was free to attendees and followed by a book signing. The announcement also recorded his 2011 HopeLine Lifetime Achievement Award. This is a concrete example of how his work entered a campus: a counseling service selected a recognizable cultural project as a way to begin conversations that a clinical office might struggle to initiate by itself. [58].

His speaker website describes appearances with Active Minds, To Write Love on Her Arms, student organizations, and orientation and leadership programs. It also places him on a wider speaking circuit including TED, PopTech, SXSW, the Kennedy Center, and Mexico’s Ciudad de las Ideas. These promotional records identify the adjacent worlds in which the career operates: campus programming, mental health advocacy, cultural presentation, and

conferences interested in technology and participation. Their undated counters should not be taken as current audience measurements. TED's own record dates Half a Million Secrets to its February 2012 conference. [59]; [60].

The talks also change the meaning of anonymity. Warren can display a card whose writer remains unknown, tell a story about his own life, and then invite someone in the room to speak. [61]; [62]. A person stepping to a microphone becomes visible to the assembled audience, even if no surname is announced. The event can turn solitary reading into recognition among people who occupy the same place; it also asks more of the participant than mailing an unsigned object. The apparent continuity between a card and a live confession should not obscure that difference.

PostSecret: The Show made another translation, from Warren's presentations into a staged production. The 2014 Charlotte version, presented at the Booth Playhouse after workshops in Cincinnati, combined projected cards and animation with three performers: JR Adduci, Birgit Darby, and Kerry Ipema. Warren was one of four script collaborators; TJ Dawe co-wrote and directed. The performance used material from the community's exchanges as well as postcard texts, allowing longer stories and responses to become dialogue. [63]. Performer and writer Kahlil Ashanti also receives a co-writing credit in Blumenthal Arts' account of his career. [64].

By its 2016 tour, the show used recorded voices, film, projections, and live music; some cards from each tour location were incorporated, and audience members could write new ones at intermission. At Proctors in Schenectady, advertised tickets cost $20–$30, while Warren separately gave a free University at Albany lecture during Sexuality Month. Those arrangements illustrate the variety of hosts and transactions within one public career. [65].

Adaptation introduced questions that a silent postcard page does not have. Tannenbaum admired the 2014 production's capacity to produce recognition but criticized its rigid direction. After attending twice, he also questioned a purported audience-submission segment because some cards repeated. His observation concerned that particular production, not proof about every subsequent tour stop. It nevertheless identifies a real tension in dramatizing PostSecret: a repeatable script and a spontaneous contribution may look similar on stage, while asking the audience to believe very different things about where the words came from. [66].

Warren said in 2016 that the production had gone through dozens of versions. Its development was an iterative collaboration, with theatrical labor added to the original editorial labor. Interviews around the tour also show an approachable promotional routine: in Toronto, he met a journalist at a hotel, carried a case of example cards, and used a dollar he kept in his wallet as a small emblem of connection. These ordinary encounters are part of how the project travels. A postcard idea becomes accessible to a new reader through an object shown across a table and a conversation, as well as through a large auditorium. [67]; [68].

The phone app and a limit to expansion

In 2011, Warren tried to make the exchange immediate. The PostSecret iPhone app let users combine photographs with 140-character messages, respond to posts, and attach a nearby location. It cost $2 and offered flagging and deletion functions. He told WIRED that the new form might supersede the blog; the possibility of bullying was already part of his thinking before launch. This was an attempt to change the project’s pace and distribution, not simply move scans to a smaller screen. [69].

The experiment lasted only a few months. In his January 1, 2012, closure statement, Warren reported more than two million submissions and a persistent malicious minority. Volunteers worked around the clock, and an attempt to prescreen thirty thousand secrets a day still failed to produce an environment free of bullying. Users complained to him, Apple, and the FBI; threats reached moderators, users, and his family. He had already removed the app from his daughter’s phone. Taking it out of the App Store and withholding the Android release cost money, he said, but he concluded that closing it was necessary. The postal project continued. These figures and explanations are Warren’s account of the failure. [70].

The practical difference is clear from those accounts. The postal project selects before publication; the app admitted responses and abuse at a scale volunteers could not manage. Its anonymity also frustrated efforts to exclude determined offenders. The closure exposes an operational limit: Warren could sustain a selection of submissions more successfully than an immediate, continuously open exchange. [71].

The app was not wholly erased from the project’s history: archived submissions later appeared in The World of PostSecret. Its termination was a failure of a particular live platform, while some of its material could survive under the selection and pacing of a book. [72].

Listening, responsibility, and criticism

Warren’s hotline experience helps explain the tone he seeks, but receiving postcards is not the same service as answering a crisis call. In 2016, he said that the cards themselves still delighted him, while emails could be difficult to handle. A message from someone who had just written a suicide note raised immediate questions about urgency and referral; even with his volunteer experience, he felt responsible and could struggle to keep up. The project’s reach could make him the person someone contacted without giving him the capacity to provide continuous individual care. [73].

His more careful statements describe disclosure as a beginning. In 2007, he hoped mailing a card could be a first step toward healing, while acknowledging that some things might wisely remain private. That qualification leaves the outcome open to what happens afterward. [74].

The most substantial criticism concerns that interval after disclosure. In a 2016 essay, writer and teacher Erik Anderson described a campus event where a painful revelation was followed by applause and another speaker. He questioned whether this form offered the sustained relationships and meaning-making that trauma might require. He also challenged the commercial asymmetry: contributors supply personal material freely, while books and speaking engagements support Warren's livelihood. Anderson's account is an argument from an observed event and his own understanding of writing and therapy; it is not an audit of Warren's finances or evidence that every participant experienced harm. [75].

The criticism asks what the format can carry. A postcard can express a feeling; a reader or an audience can respond with recognition. That encounter need not supply a continuing relationship or make a dangerous situation safe, though it may still have value. Warren creates occasions for expression, while much of what follows remains outside his reach.

His relation to younger readers is also generational. In the Toronto interview, he described young people as more willing than earlier generations to discuss mental wellness and sexual assault. In 2015, he called PostSecret an "anti-Facebook," contrasting selected private admissions with carefully presented social profiles. These are Warren's interpretations of his audience and contemporary communication, not findings that all young people behave alike. They help explain how he understands the need the project answers. [76]; [77].

California, a long correspondence, and the present practice

Bernhard's April 2024 portrait, based on a visit the previous August, found him in Laguna Niguel, cycling, bodysurfing, and monitoring sleep. He described exercise as relief from difficult reading, was doing fewer events, and said he had finished writing books. [78].

The project's geography remains wider than his residence. Early mail from distant countries became a touring exhibition in Canadian and American institutions, international speaking appearances, and digital material that can be encountered elsewhere. In the NEA interview, he named postmarks from Beijing, Warsaw, Auckland, Iraq, and Dublin alongside American locations. What links those places is an accessible invitation routed through one editor and several partner institutions; it does not erase differences of language, postal access, or local expectations about disclosure. [79]; [80].

On October 3, 2026, the public sites still offered Sunday Secrets, the six books, the Museum of Us exhibition, and themed digital collections. PostSecret also linked to a full Australian event made available online in May 2024. New submissions and preserved selections now sit alongside one another: the continuing invitation has acquired an archive. [81]; [82]; [83].

Warren's work is sustained by ordinary repetition and changing public settings. He remains recognizable as the recipient who made himself available, the editor who chooses a small portion of a much larger correspondence, and the speaker who can turn the invitation toward an audience. Other people create the material, institutions help it travel,

and neither publication nor Warren himself can determine every consequence of telling a secret.

Sources and reading

The profile draws on public interviews, reported biography, institutional archives, publisher descriptions, and contemporary reviews. Older numerical claims are dated in the text; promotional totals are not treated as audited current figures. Mediabistro displays 2015 publication and 2026 update dates, but Warren's answers describe a project three or four years old. They are used as early testimony; the interview's original date remains uncertain.

- Formation and personal history: Meg Bernhard, "Dark Matter", Hazlitt, April 3, 2024; Jane Bao, interview, The Varsity, June 11, 2007; Phyllis A. S. Boros, Connecticut Post profile, 2009.
- Working method and early career: Rebecca L. Fox, Mediabistro interview; Wikinews interview, January 7, 2006; Guy Kawasaki, "Ten Questions", October 8, 2007; Chad Cid-Hogan, interview, The Mass Media, November 27, 2007; Ben Huberman, "The Art of Authenticity", Longreads, February 19, 2015.
- Exhibition histories and current collections: Washington Project for the Arts archive; International Arts & Artists; MoMA's Talk to Me catalogue; Rebecca Sutton, NEA interview, August 19, 2016; Museum of Us; Digital Museum of Secrets.
- Performance and responsibility: Perry Tannenbaum, theater review, Creative Loafing, May 1, 2014; Patrick Rapa, interview, Philadelphia, March 16, 2016; Jen McNeely, interview, April 29, 2016; Erik Anderson, "Secrets for Sale", Literary Hub, November 2, 2016.
- The app experiment: Angela Watercutter, WIRED launch report, September 1, 2011; Frank Warren, archived closure statement, January 1, 2012.
- Further institutional and contemporary records: East Stroudsburg University announcement, April 15, 2015; PostSecret Live, undated promotional site; TED, Half a Million Secrets, February 2012 conference; Joseph Dalton, Proctors touring report, Times Union, January 27, 2016; Blumenthal Arts, Kahlil Ashanti career profile, January 27, 2020; Gillian Brockell, Postal Museum event report, The Washington Post, August 1, 2016; Erin Donaghue, hoax report, CBS News, September 3, 2013.
- Books: The six collections are listed above with links to publisher descriptions and product records. These establish publication and contents; the profile does not claim to have examined every page of the books. The description of A Lifetime of Secrets comes from Warren's 2007 interview, rather than an inaccessible product page.
- Continuing project: PostSecret; Digital Museum, "The Early Days". These complement the museum pages listed above; present availability was checked on October 3, 2026.

Sources accessed October 3, 2026.

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