

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects

Spring 5-1-2013

Smart Kids The Documentary

Hannah Louys
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Television Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Louys, Hannah, "Smart Kids The Documentary" (2013). *Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects*. 18.

https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/18

This Honors Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Smart Kids The Documentary

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Hannah Louys
Candidate for Bachelor of Arts in Television, Radio and Film and Psychology
and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2013

Honors Capstone Project in Television, Radio and Film

Capstone Project Advisor: _____
Professor Tula Goenka

Capstone Project Reader: _____
Professor Richard Breyer

Honors Director: _____
Stephen Kuusisto, Director

Date: 5/7/2013

Abstract

Smart Kids was a program, started in 2009, that was created as a joint venture between the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and the School of Education at Syracuse University. Professors and students from these two schools worked with kids from Syracuse elementary and middle schools, teaching them how to use cameras and video editing software to tell their own stories. The goal of the program was to aid urban education reform, but more so than that, to truly give kids a voice when it comes to their education.

My job, when it came to this project, was to create a documentary explaining what the Smart Kids program was, and what impact it has had on the kids. I spent countless hours going through footage of the kids and editing it together in to a cohesive documentary.

This paper contains reflection upon how I went about creating my project, why I thought it was an important project, and why I made the creative choices that I did.

© Hannah Louys May 2013

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Chapter 1: Finding an Idea for My Project.....	4
Chapter 2: What is Smart Kids?.....	6
Chapter 3: Artistic Choices.....	11
Chapter 4: Inspiration.....	13
Chapter 5: What the Smart Kids Documentary Means to Me.....	14
Chapter 6: Smart Kids Timeline.....	15
Chapter 7: Acknowledgements.....	17
Summary of Capstone Project.....	20

Chapter 1

Finding an Idea for My Project

When I first heard about the possibility of doing a Capstone project with the Syracuse University Honors Program, I knew that I wanted to do something that involved making a video and involving helping people out in some way or working with kids. The first project I chose to do was make a documentary on the Youth Mentoring Program in Los Angeles, California. This organization pairs underprivileged youth with adults in full-time jobs, who are willing to be their mentors, both inside of the workplace and out. I was excited for this project, however, I ended up being unable to go to Los Angeles for the summer as I had planned, so I had to find a new project.

My next plan was to work with the Big Brothers Big Sisters Organization in Syracuse, following one young boy and his mentor as they got to know each other and taught each other life lessons. The goal of that video was going to be to inspire more male mentors to volunteer for the program, as BBBS was in a desperate need for male volunteers, however, very few people in the BBBS program felt comfortable being filmed during their interactions.

When I faced dead ends in both of those projects happened to be when I heard about the Smart Kids program, and the opportunity to make this documentary. I was approached by Susy Benaim, who had been working with the Smart Kids program for over three years, and she told me about what the Smart

Kids program was, and how the people who had been working with the program had been looking for someone to edit a documentary about it. I was very excited about this opportunity and started right away.

Chapter 2

What is Smart Kids?

When I first started working on the Smart Kids project, I knew nothing about what the program was. Therefore, my first step in the process was research. I learned, through talking to many people involved in the program and watching many videos of the program, what Smart Kids was, and what the program was really about. So what is Smart Kids exactly?

Smart Kids was a program, started in 2009, that was created as a joint venture between the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and the School of Education at Syracuse University. Professors and students from these two schools worked with kids from Syracuse elementary and middle schools, teaching them how to use cameras and video editing software to tell their own stories. The goal of the program was to aid urban education reform, but more so than that, to truly give kids a voice when it comes to their education.

Michael Schoonmaker, Jason Kohlbrenner, Sari Biklen, Heidi Pitzer and Natalia Berrios are all Syracuse University staff who were heavily involved in the project. All of these people would meet with the children frequently, either at local elementary schools or at Syracuse University, to help them achieve their goals. Michael Schoonmaker was involved mostly by meeting with the kids and really informing them how they should tell their story. He would encourage them to talk about their lives, and help them realize what some of the most important

events were, and then give them advice on how to show those issues with a video camera and editing software. He also assisted in the teaching of some of the technical aspects, such as showing kids how to use different functions on the camera. Another person who was very involved in the technical aspects of this project was Jason Kohlbrenner. He not only showed kids how to film and edit, but he also showed them how to use the audio studios in the Newhouse School to record their own song.

Many Syracuse University students also volunteered in those aspects of the project, such as Susy Benaim, who had suggested the project to me. Sari, Heidi and Natalia were all more involved with the education side of the project, often meeting with the kids and interviewing them, either in small groups or individually, about what the kids thought of school, what was going on in their lives, what frustrated them about education and what they liked about it. All of these people truly understood the idea that kids have a lot to say, and not just silly, nonsensical, childish things, but also deep, important ideas, that adults should really listen to more often.

The Smart Kids program was originally started at Levy Middle school with fourth, fifth and sixth grade students. Each of the aforementioned volunteers would go to the Levy School with video cameras, laptops containing the program iMovie, and snacks, and engage in an after-school program with the kids.

One of the main parts of the project was focus groups. Focus groups were small meetings, of three to fifteen people, where kids and adults would discuss their education, and other aspects of their lives that were important to them.

Essentially, this forum was a creative outlet where each of these young people could express their feelings on many different topics, and feel like they were truly being listened to, and heard.

Another main part of the project was time spent making videos or photo projects. During the block of time after school, the adult volunteers showed the kids how to use the video cameras available to them, and how to edit using iMovie. Volunteers would walk around with the kids, aiding them in filming their friends, their school, their teachers, or anything that the kids felt was important.

One of their first projects was to take photos of different things they thought were important about the Levy School, and then the whole class would put all of the pictures together in to a video, called the “Photo Project”. Kids took photos of many different people who were important to them, as well as things they enjoyed, such as a playground, or grass and trees on a sunny day.

Next, they made a video called “What's Important to Me?” in which they talked about on film the things that were most important to them; such as family, friends or a particular sport that they love.

Only a couple months in to the program however, the Levy School closed down. The students who had once all come together to do this project at Levy were now dispersed in to many different elementary and middle schools. Still, the leaders of the program wanted to keep the program going, so they continued to meet with all of the kids that they had originally met with, even though they now attended different schools.

The kids would then go on to film their new schools, comparing them to

Levy, and talking about how the change made them feel. For many of them, this change was a positive one, though for some, it was a very disappointing change, as they missed their old friends a lot.

The kids continued to meet to film, edit, and speak in focus groups from 2009 to 2012. During this time, they engaged in many Smart Kids field trips, such as going to watch a baseball game together, and filmed many of their fun activities, such as an “egg drop”. They also were able to use the cameras not only when the Smart Kids adult volunteers were with them, but whenever they wanted to: so in school, at home or wherever they happened to travel.

In 2012, the funding for the program ran out, and the kids stopped officially meeting under the heading of “Smart Kids”. However, the Smart Kids influence still pervades many of the Syracuse City School District schools. There are still video cameras being passed from kid to kid, on loan from the Newhouse School, that allow kids to continue telling their stories. One person, Ronnayeshia, is currently using the camera to tell a story about gay and lesbian people, and how they are treated unfairly and shouldn't be. She has been inspired by what Smart Kids showed her that she could do, and now she is motivated to make a difference on her own.

Many kids have been affected in this way. Overall, they feel like they have been listened to and heard, and that they have learned how to use valuable tools to tell their stories. Many of them commented on the fact that they feel like Smart Kids has helped them also in being sure they are prepared for the years to come, and having hope for a bright future. Frequently meeting with a group of people

who believed in them and had confidence in their abilities made them realize just how much they could truly do.

Chapter 3

Artistic Choices

In creating my project, I was making creative choices each day that I worked on it. Every edit was a different creative choice: I would decide that one particular section of video was good enough to be included in a film, and another was not.

One of the biggest creative choices I had to make in the film was what footage to include. This consisted of many difficult decisions, as there were over 400 hours of footage that I had to go through, and so little footage that would actually make it in to the twenty-minute film.

The footage that I thought was the most important was the kids talking today about their experience in Smart Kids, reflecting on their past. That segment of the video was actually the only segment that I filmed, as I had available to me a lot from their past, but not too much saying how Smart Kids has affected them all over time. Therefore, a lot of that footage was included. I originally created a piece that was almost completely made up of recent footage, because there were so many important things that the kids had to say about their experiences in the program, however, I quickly realized that though the kids had many great things to say in that piece, it did not accurately reflect the project as a whole: I needed to show what the kids had been doing for four years more. I then ended up putting in a lot of b-roll, almost completely covering up the students' faces talking

altogether. Even though I did put in a lot of b-roll, I still had to exclude a lot of events altogether. I did not include any of the fun activities like the egg drop or baseball game, and there were few focus group clips that I put in, just because I wanted to focus more on the kids' projects and their reflections on their projects. I deemed these parts to be most important because I wanted to show just how much the kids were capable of doing, and show the insightful opinions that they had to offer, and I felt like their projects and reflections best convey those ideas.

Though this video seemed to convey what Smart Kids was about, it was suggested to me by Professor Goenka that I let the faces of the three students that I chose to interview to represent Smart Kids show more during the video in order to let the audience see their emotions and connect with them and their story. Therefore, I ended up taking out more of the b-roll, and think that the film looks better that way.

Another artistic choice that I made was to let the kids tell the majority of the story. Almost all of the speaking that occurs is kids voices. I did use a couple adult voices to explain exactly what Smart Kids was at the very beginning, however, for the most part, I wanted it to be from the kids' perspective because I knew that the story was really all about the kids and just how much value they have, so having to have adults explain what they did would be undermining the theme that I was trying to create, which was that kids have a lot of value, and can often do more than we give them credit for.

Chapter 4

Inspiration

My inspiration in this piece came mostly from my desire to help others and my recognition of the importance of kids. I have worked with kids in many capacities, and I am always struck by just how many intelligent, thought-provoking statements come out of their mouths. Therefore, in this piece, I really wanted to convey this intelligence to viewers, making them realize that kids, though they can be immature at times, really have a lot of important things to say. I guess that you could say, overall, my inspiration was really the kids.

Another form of inspiration however, was film clips from organizations involving community service. I looked at many different videos from programs like Big Brother Big Sister, or any other organizations that dealt with kids, in order to see what editing techniques that they used or what type of music was effective in movies about kids.

Chapter 5

What the Smart Kids Documentary Means to Me

Smart Kids is a project that I had a great time working on, because it really does mean so much to me. It is important to me that kids have the best education that they can get, so that they can learn to grow and become confident, talented adults. Smart Kids is one way of making that transition happen, and I think that transition was able to be seen in many of the kids who were in the Smart Kids program. All three of the students I interviewed said that they felt like Smart Kids had changed them for the better, giving them more confidence, and encouraging them to follow their dreams. Ronnayeshia was particularly inspired by it, saying that because of the Smart Kids program, she really wants to work in the film industry and become a producer.

I was passionate about making this film because I was able to see just how much Smart Kids helped and influenced these kids, and I want other people to be able to see that. I particularly want people to be able to see it because if people understand just how much of a positive effect programs like Smart Kids have, more programs of that nature will be implemented. When more programs of that nature are implemented, there will be more fulfilled, confident and happy kids. Overall, making this documentary was a way for me to help adults to understand the value of children and what children have to say, and to inspire more programs like Smart Kids to be developed.

Chapter 6

Smart Kids Timeline

The first step in my project was talking to Susy about the Smart Kids program, and seeing if making the Smart Kids documentary was the right fit for me. We then went on to meet with the head of the project, Michael Schoonmaker, so that I could better understand what they were looking for.

After that, I received four hard drives with all of the video footage since the start of Smart Kids on them, and started looking at the footage. The first couple days I looked at the footage I just clicked on one thing and then the next, not writing anything down, but just looking at what the Smart Kids program was really all about.

Then, for about a month and a half, I watched all of the footage and took notes on it, so I would know exactly what I had access to when it came time to edit. Susy also assisted me in watching footage and gave me notes.

During this time, Susy and I also set up interviews with, and filmed, three students who had been involved in the Smart Kids program since it first started. We met Levonn, Katya and Ronnayeshia in Newhouse and interviewed them about the program, their opinions on it and what they had learned from it.

My next step was importing footage. I tried to import the files that I wanted to use in to Avid many times, and many times I failed to be able to do so. Eventually, after some help from Jason Kohlbrenner, I was able to import a lot of

the footage, and link the rest to AMA format, so I was able to edit the clips without importing so long as the drive was plugged in.

After that, I created a timeline. As I mentioned before, my first timeline consisted of almost entirely footage from the 2013 shoot. This was able to help me form a story arc. Then, in my next cut I tried to incorporate more of the old footage, and ended up with a very disjointed piece that didn't seem to make much sense.

After that, there were many subsequent cuts showing the students' projects, the focus groups, and their reflection, which I spent many hours editing. It was very difficult to form a fluid story when there were so many disjointed elements, so that was one of my main goals when working. After that was completed, I worked on making sure that each clip was shown for the right length. Sometimes, when showcasing the kids' projects they were not shown for a long enough period of time or they dragged on for too long, and with other clips as well, it was difficult to find a way to let each person fully express an idea, without letting the story become slightly boring.

After I had completed the story, I looked through many CDs in the sound effects library, found appropriate music, and added it in. I also adjusted sound levels so that the audio wasn't substantially louder at some parts than others, and did color correction. When all of this was done, I had multiple meetings with Professor Goenka, Professor Schoonmaker, Sari Biklen, and my Capstone advisor Professor Breyer, in order to finalize the film.

Chapter 7

Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge Michael Schoonmaker for starting up the Smart Kids program, as well as taking me on to the project. He always had great suggestions as to what was important in the movie, as he knew the story so well.

I am also very appreciative of Sari Biklen for meeting with me multiple times to discuss the project, giving me lots of information on it and helpful input as to what should be included in the film.

Jason Kohlbrenner was also tremendously helpful, in copying all of the footage to backup drives for me, helping me find certain video footage whenever I couldn't locate it, and answering many questions about the timeline of the project as he had been involved the entire way through. He also watched rough cuts to give suggestions and assisted me with computer problems many times, as I was working with 5 hard drives at once, and thus the computer often got overloaded.

Tula Goenka was also incredibly helpful, giving me feedback each week in class and always volunteering to help in any way she could. She gave me a lot of advice, particularly concerning story arc, which really helped my project turn out well.

Dan Cheng was also very helpful in making sure that I had all of the files that I needed, and that I understood the project, as he had been working on it for a while before I started.

Another person who was of great help to me during this project was my audio person, Seth Colton. He helped to equalize my footage and get rid of white noise, which was very helpful because so much of the footage was filmed by the kids with the audio which was just built in to the camera and therefore not of very good quality to begin with.

Furthermore, the person I worked the most on this project was my producer, Susy Benaim. She was the person who informed me about the Smart Kids project, ran all of the meetings between Michael, Sari and myself, and also set up our meetings with kids and their parents so that we were able to film the kids reflecting back on the project today. Susy took on the tremendous task also, of taking one of the terabyte drives and looking at and taking notes on footage from it, so I could know what was on the drive and use her notes to find the footage that I really wanted to, without having to look through every minute of it. Susy made my credits and lower thirds that were used in the video as well. Lastly, she also watched my video and gave me helpful notes many times throughout the filmmaking process.

I would like to thank all of the Smart Kids program participants for enabling me to create an interesting documentary and for reminding me just how important kids really are.

I would especially like to thank Ronnayeshia Goodwin, Katya Greene, and Levonn Owens for taking the time to meet with me and be interviewed about the Smart Kids program, and being willing to be featured in the documentary. I am also thankful for the parents (Tracy Cerati-Owens, Gertrude Greene, and

Kanaisha Paige) who were willing to take time out of their busy days and bring their kids to Syracuse University to interview with Susy and I.

Next, I would like to thank a few organizations. I would like to thank the School of Education at Syracuse University and the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications for coming together to create the Smart Kids program, and thus giving me a great Capstone project to work on. I would also like to thank the Renee Crown University Honors Program and it's staff for encouraging me to do a Capstone project and helping to answer my questions and encouraging me along the way.

Summary of Capstone Project

My Capstone project is an eighteen-minute video about the Smart Kids program that took place in Syracuse's elementary and middle schools. In this project I explained what the Smart Kids program was and how it helped people as my main story, however, in doing so, I was able to show the innate value that kids possess, and just how important it is to listen to them and give them a creative outlet so that they can grow.

My video opens with a collection of short clips from a Smart Kids field trip to the Newhouse. These show kids having fun learning how to use video and audio equipment, which is what they spent the majority of their time doing while in the program.

Next, there are three shots of little kids, who were in fourth and fifth grade at the time. Their names are Ronnayeshia, Levonn, and Katya. These three kids are the kids whose stories I followed when editing the documentary. Directly after the older footage of them, there is newer footage of them, which I filmed this year. They introduce themselves to the audience.

Subsequently, we see the kids entering Newhouse in order to watch the movies that they made. They have a lot of enthusiasm. Then Heidi Pitzer and Natalia Berrios explain what Smart Kids is: a program that helps kids to have a voice in urban education reform through video production.

After that we see students working with Michael Schoonmaker to make their first project: the photo project. Excerpts of the photo project are then shown, highlighting what is important to these students, such as their friends and teachers. Ronnayeshia and Levonn then further explain what Smart Kids really is, and just how great of a program it is, mentioning that their friends are jealous that they get to participate.

Furthermore, they discuss focus groups and what those are: a place to discuss anything you want with your peers and the adults in Smart Kids. The kids often feel like they are not listened to, so these meetings provide a creative outlet for them.

Next, it is explained in text and through video that Levy closed down and therefore, the kids had to move to new schools. Michael Schoonmaker then talks to them about how they are going to continue to work on video projects even though Levy shut down, and particularly that they can do a story conveying the defining features of their new school.

Levonn then discusses the fact that he interviewed students about what they thought about their new school, and we see an excerpt of his project, with student interviews. He then mentions that when dealing with adults, they will try to help you solve problems, but also do so in a way that is only appropriate for younger kids.

Children are then shown talking and laughing, while Katya tells us that adults see “jobs and money and houses” while kids see “playing, weird stuff and childish things”. Ronnayeshia again mentions how many other kids say that they really wish they could be in Smart Kids.

Next, the kids discuss field trips that they took with the Smart Kids program, particularly to Newhouse. Ronnayeshia talks about how she had a lot of fun creating and recording a song, “Cheese Jerky” with her classmates.

Levonn then tells us about his experiences with teachers and how he is not always able to trust them, and they are not always able to delve in to deep conversations with them: however, in Smart Kids, they are able to talk about just about anything, while really trusting one another.

Katya then talks about how there is a lot of drama that goes on in elementary school. To further explain this point, a piece of one of her video projects was shown. The piece was entitled “Drama”, and was a reenactment of a scene that took place in Katya’s classroom. Essentially, the kids insulted each other, there was a misunderstanding, and one boy ended up having to get kicked out of class. This was a good representation of what Katya’s life was like on a daily basis, and she explains that to her audience.

Next, Levonn explains his trials and tribulations in school. He tells us that he was in an advanced reading program, Avid, but even though he had very good grades in the class, the administration at his school made him switch in to the

lower level reading program, Wilson. He was frustrated by the fact that he felt the administration wasn't paying enough attention to giving him the academic challenge that he desired.

Ronnayeshia then talks about one of her video projects, which was about bullying. She explains that she wanted to understand why bullies do what they do, and in order to figure that out, she interviewed people in her school who were known as bullies. She and three of her friends are then shown walking in to their school cafeteria and pointing at so-called bullies, and then interviewing them. They then speak about how they learned that just almost everyone is a bully in some point in their lives.

Next, Ronnayeshia speaks about a current video project that she is working on, even though Smart Kids is over. She is making a film about how homosexual people are not treated with the same respect heterosexual people are, but they deserve the same amount of respect. She speaks about one of her friends, who is not sure if he is gay or straight, yet his peers don't even want to let him sit with them at lunch because they think he is gay and disapprove of that.

Katya then talks about a young man named Shalik, who has become a kinder and more helpful person since starting Smart Kids, and she believes it is due to the influence of the program.

The next video piece shown is Shalik's video "School Lunch is Nasty". In this video, he goes behind the scenes in the cafeteria to show how their school

lunches are made. He then really engages his peers in interviews about how they feel about the food.

The kids then give final reflections on how they feel about the Smart Kids program. Ronnayeshia then expresses her overall feelings on working on video projects for the Smart Kids program: they worked really hard to put the projects together, and once the program finished, she felt empty inside. Levonn spoke about how much freedom the program gave him and how it helped to prepare him for college. Katya mentions that it was cool to see how kids' brains were able to work together with technology. Ronnayeshia says that she wants people to be able to know what she thinks and what her peers think, so therefore she wants her videos to be able to be shown to the world, and that overall it was just a great experience. Levonn then expressed his sentiments about how adults too often think that children's opinions are less important, however, within the Smart Kids program that was not the case. The film ends with Ronnayeshia saying "It only takes one person to make a big change."

Besides the film, the other aspect of my Capstone project was the reflective essay. In the reflective essay, I discussed how I came up with an idea for my project, what my project was, why I made the artistic choices that I did, the inspiration behind my project, what the project means to me, the timeline of when I completed different portions of the work, and acknowledgements to thank all of the people who helped me with my project.