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Being Somali Bantu in the City: A look at the life of a Somali Bantu student in the Syracuse City School District

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

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and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2013

Honors Capstone Project in Television, Radio and Film

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Date: 7 May 2013

Abstract

“Saturdays with Egal” is a documentary for the Capstone thesis “Being Somali Bantu in the City: A look at the life of a Somali Bantu student in the Syracuse City School District. The film focuses on Egal Adan, a Somali Bantu, fourteen-year-old refugee. It is a story about my relationship with Egal as a tutor and mentor. “Saturdays with Egal” also delves into the adversity he has had to overcome and his accomplishments in school, sports, extracurricular activities, and at home despite his hardships.

I chose to create a documentary because of the organic relationship it creates between viewers and the subject. I filmed on my own such that each scene was created with my subjects, a camera, and me. This allowed the characters to feel more comfortable opening up, especially in interviews, and allows the audience to feel as if they are apart of the family and friends with the characters, rather than just observing a staged production. I used a combination of cinema vérité and journalistic styling. The film is also driven by my voiceover narration, which provides background and additional insight into Egal’s life and our relationship.

The film presents the themes of perseverance and determination. My goal is to inspire people and teach them about the Somali Bantu refugee population as well as necessities for students to succeed in urban school districts. One of my passions is urban education reform, and this is my first step in bringing attention to the help we need for our schools. The film focuses on a student that self-sufficiently has taught himself and succeeded in the Syracuse City School District, but he lives in poverty. Other students do not have the same drive that Egal has and thus struggle because they do not receive proper help. By highlighting a student that has surpassed expectations in Syracuse schools, we see what works and is needed in order to help other students reach the same level. The film shows that with proper support and funding for classes and extracurricular activities, students are more apt to devote themselves to their schoolwork and achieve high grades. “Saturdays with Egal” taught me, and will teach the viewers, about our relationship as teacher and student, the Somali Bantu community, and urban education through the life of a refugee student.

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My honors reader, Professor Lawrence Popielinski as well needs to be thanked for his voluntary assistance throughout this process. He has been a fantastic professor at Syracuse and I value his honest feedback that helped my documentary take shape.

I also must recognize Ms. Gwendolyn Maturo-Grasso, Egal's engineering advisor, for helping me gain access to filming in Lincoln Middle School, assisting with release forms, and having confidence in both me and Egal and the work we do together.

Coach Kevin Ryan, as well, has helped me. As Egal's wrestling coach, he helped me gain access to Danforth Middle School and gave me complete creative control when filming wrestling matches or practices.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The first time I stepped off the eight o'clock bus to see my students' faces, partially covered by hijabs, waiting patiently as if they would rather be at school on a Saturday than playing outside, I knew. Something clicked inside me and I as well forgot it was a Saturday morning and instead not only felt an overwhelming sense of belonging, but knew this is what I was meant to be doing. I had to teach. My experience working with Syracuse University Literacy Corps and the Somali Bantu Community in Syracuse has forever changed my life. I have become inspired to combine my Television, Radio, and Film and Mathematics majors to alter urban curriculum to include the arts and use film when teaching math by pursuing a graduate degree in Teaching and Curriculum: Mathematics Education. It is because of the beautiful inspiration from the Somali Bantu Community and my work in the Syracuse City School District that I chose to devote my final project at Syracuse University, my Honors Capstone, to something so meaningful for me. "Saturdays with Egal" is a documentary about the most important student in my life thus far, Egal Adan, a Somali Bantu student with whom I worked from 2009-2011 at the Saturday English as a Second Language Tutoring Program. Before analyzing the creative process of my project, complications I encountered or what I learned as a result, it is important to understand the "why" associated

with my project; why and how I determined I needed to focus not only on the Somali Bantu Community, but specifically Egal Adan.

I first met Egal my first semester at Syracuse, in the fall of 2009. I joined the Literacy Corps in September and was assigned to tutor at the, then entitled, Somali Bantu Community Saturday Program. Egal was assigned to my group and I worked with him one-on-one on the daily lesson plans that encompassed science, math, reading and writing. Egal was talented at all the subjects. He surpassed all of the students in his class, especially in math, which was incredibly impressive considering his background.

Egal's family escaped Somalia before his birth because of the oppression against Somali Bantus. Somali Bantus historically have been slaves in Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries. Due to their association as slaves or servants, Somali Bantus had trouble getting the same rights and acceptance as other Somali groups. As a result, the majority of Somali Bantus have limited reading and writing skills or are completely illiterate. In the 1990s, civil war broke out in Somalia and different clans began fighting. Somali Bantus were considered lower class citizens, so they were attacked in the form of rape, torture, and murder. Many Somali Bantus escaped and took refuge in Kenya. Egal's family, like many others, went to Dadaab, also known as Dagahaley, Refugee Camp in Kenya. This is where Egal was born. The Adans then relocated to Kakuma Refugee Camp and were then transferred to the United States. They were relocated, like many others, to Syracuse, where the Somali Bantu Community of Syracuse was formed.

Egal was born in Kenya, so his first language was Somali, not English. His mother, with whom he lives, speaks little to no English, so learning from home was not an option. Egal thus had to depend on his older brother and the city of Syracuse to learn to communicate and survive. His father, who has more than one wife and is a Somali Bantu community leader, is barely home. He is still a father figure but is not substantial enough to help with the learning process. As a result, Egal and his seven siblings primarily depend on each other. I was therefore surprised that Egal, who has struggled so much in his life and who has had little support in terms of learning English at home, is so advanced in his schooling.

Egal opened up to me the first time when we did a poetry unit. Each student and tutor created a square, filled with their own poetry, to add to a quilt that represented the class. He wrote half of his poem in Somali. The part in Somali was about the death of his brother, which stirred emotions he had not shared in awhile. We presented the full quilt to the SCSD. The following semester, I was promoted to program coordinator and was put in charge of formulating the math lesson plans for the classroom and teaching the students.

When we returned to the program in the fall, Egal was so far advanced from the other students that I created a separate algebra workshop for him. I was able to work more closely with him than the other students to advance his mathematics practice and push him to go even further than the students in his classes during the week. Although my experience with the Saturday Program up to that point showed me I wanted to teach, my one-on-one algebra work with Egal

convinced me to add math as a second major and pursue education after graduation.

When it came time to decide what to do for my Capstone, I thought back to my experience at Syracuse. Before working at the Saturday Program, I felt lost and unsure of what to do after graduation. Egal and my Somali Bantu students helped me find myself and my career path. I knew I wanted to pay homage to something that gave so much to me while also representing both of my interests: education and film.

I had to then decide what would best represent my interests. I knew I wanted to make a film and highlight Egal and his relationship with urban education, a topic I feel passionate about, in the purest form. Documentary shows truth. Even more than that, I chose to use a combination of cinema vérité and journalistic styling for the documentary. Cinema vérité shows the subjects of the documentary in the truest form while journalistic styling involves my voice when appropriate for questioning. The combination presents Egal exactly as he is in real life. His emotions and daily activities are relatable, despite how different his background may be from ours. The point of the documentary is to enlighten viewers about the Somali Bantu community, the Syracuse City School District and a student that has succeeded through his relationships with both.

I chose Egal as the focus of the film not only because I have worked with him, but because he is a success story. Egal's story is inspiring to all who hear and watch it. He came from a difficult past and home life, knowing little English, and

managed to surpass his peers in education so much that he now takes advanced classes as an eighth grader.

Chapter II

Production

The film originally began with his engineering robotics club. The film commenced with his engineering robotics club loss at the Vex Robotics Competition downtown Syracuse at the MOST. Egal is extremely distraught over the fact that his team not only loses, but does not even get recognized for a teamwork award. Egal overcame so much adversity and is successful at school, in his extracurricular activities, and is a phenomenal athlete as he recently was asked to practice with the high school soccer team. He also was able to create a working robot that got him to the semi-finals of the competition. Somehow he still is disappointed at not winning. Despite all of his accomplishments that are seen as amazing to the rest of the world considering how much he has overcome, he still is disappointed when he loses. He then devotes himself to the next competition, the school science fair, to prove to himself and others that he can win.

After working on the film for weeks, I still did not feel satisfied with the results. I sequenced the film around the robotics competition and science fair, but, as my advisor could attest, the film was flat. Egal was an intriguing subject, but you were still disconnected from the story. Something was missing. After meeting with my professor multiple times in order to solve the problem, we finally realized it was the story that was the problem. Egal was still an interesting subject

and necessary to focus on, but we needed to add to it in some way to attract viewers. We then decided the best decision for the direction of the film was to completely rework not only the sequence and outline, but the story. The reason Egal is so appealing as a character is because of what he went through and my experience working with him. Very few Syracuse University students have had a relationship with someone in the community like I have had. In addition, Egal was one of the reasons I decided to completely change my career path. What better way to attract viewers than telling a personal story and enlightening others about something few people have experienced?

The documentary then became a sort of memoir. I focused on the four years of college and the time I spent developing my relationship with Egal. It is chronologically sequenced on our history and carried by my narration. The opening contains old footage from when Egal was in fifth and sixth grade. My sophomore year, we created a film about the students of the Saturday Program to introduce an alternative way to motivate them to learn. We interviewed each student about what they like about the Saturday Program, but never used the interviews. I add part of these in my opening, in addition to old photographs of Egal at the program. In the film clips, you can hear my voice speaking to Egal and in some of the pictures, I am working with Egal. This thus establishes my relationship with Egal for the viewer to understand that we have worked together since he was young.

The film then transitions into the opening credits. They begin with more shots from the Saturday Program from 2009 and 2010 and blend with recent

footage to show how long I have known him and that we are still in touch. He is in a car driving through Syracuse, which establishes the setting and gives us an idea about where he lives.

The documentary then introduces Egal's personal history and everything his family has gone through. My narration, which provides the facts about the war in Somalia, is interlaced with Egal's depiction of what happened. This part of the film is symbolic not only for being informative, but because it establishes us as teacher and student.

During this time we are also introduced to Egal's family. He presents each of his siblings. This shows how difficult it is for him to be home, since so many people are living in such a small house. It also shows, however, that his family is extremely close and despite all the adversity they have overcome, they have stayed tight-knit and supportive of one another. Egal is very independent and has to babysit his younger siblings because his mother is so busy, but his mother, brothers and sisters are supportive and push him to be as smart and devoted a student as he can be.

We also observe an interview with his mother, for which Egal translates. I introduce her, so my voice again is established in the film, but we see how close he is with his mother and how much he respects her. She speaks about the importance of schoolwork and how difficult it has been because she cannot help him since she knows little English.

We then see the robotics competition. This is our main opportunity to see how devoted a student Egal is. Previously, we get an idea because of how he

speaks and his family interactions, but now it is explicit and we see just how intelligent and special an eighth grader he is. Egal presents the themes of perseverance and determination in a new way, but in a way that still will inspire viewers. Egal's success at the science fair as well is shown and it shows his success as a student. This also displays his relationship with his advisor, and how she is another support system in his life.

The film ends with Egal and my reflection. Egal openly speaks about growing up in a difficult neighborhood and how everyone thought he would fail. He speaks about being a refugee and how no one thought he would make the sports teams or grades that he has, but that he proved everybody wrong and has been a success story out of the Syracuse City School District. I then summarize my relationship with Egal by speaking of the impact he has had on my life. Egal has inspired me to be a teacher, and I wanted to reflect that in my film.

Chapter III

Choices

I had to make many important stylistic choices when filming and editing my project. I wanted to make the film as authentic and personal as possible, so I filmed alone. The documentary is a relationship between Egal, and me and the camerawork reflects this for although it is sometimes shaky, it is more intimate than perfect, staged shots. It is just Egal, the camera, and me, which is more representative of our relationship than if I had a team working with me.

The first choice in editing was music. I wanted to represent Egal's African background as well as his life as a Syracuse student. I thus decided to feature both Somali and Somali Bantu music that is more traditional and instrumental. I also feature music by K'naan. K'naan is a Somali musician who moved to the United States and then to Canada at the start of the Somali Civil War. His music is inspired by Somali and world music and is a unique modern blend of rap and hip-hop. K'naan's music is fitting for the film because he as well is a Somali refugee. He represents peace and often sings about hardships in Africa. K'naan is a successful refugee that came out of Somalia and is doing great things in the world. Egal, like K'naan inspires people, even if it is on a smaller scale, so K'naan's music is fitting for many of the scenes in the documentary.

I also had to decide what transitions to use. Seeing as I wanted to make sure the style is cinema vérité such that we feel more connected to Egal and less like we are watching a film, I only used cuts and cross dissolves. The film flows better with the lack of fancy, technological additions.

Another edit I took into account was when I was working with old footage from 2009 and 2010. The clips were caught on an inexpensive, handheld camera. They are thus inferior in quality to the footage I collected this year. I kept them, however, as they bring out the fact that it is old footage and brings us back in time that much more. Even the fact that they are somewhat blurry adds to the film for it shows my inexperience as a filmmaker and how much I have grown since then.

Chapter IV

Problems

I faced many problems when planning and making my film. One semester was entirely devoted to preproduction. Because I worked with students and had to film in the schools, I faced many challenges getting approval. For weeks, principals and teachers ignored my e-mails, messages, and phone calls, and I started to worry I would never be able to complete the project. Egal and I kept trying to get in touch with people, however, and finally his engineering club advisor, Gwendolyn Maturo-Grasso, contacted me. I explained my story and what it is I wanted to accomplish. Finally, I began speaking about my relationship with Egal and my passion for teaching. Once she learned of how much support I have offered Egal, she wanted to do anything she could to help me. She invited me to attend their daily meetings, shadow her class, and even talked to the Lincoln Middle School principal for me. I then began attending morning meetings, despite the fact that they began at seven in the morning. She had me present to the class about my project and I spoke with them about the importance and excitement of education and college. I exchanged helping out in the classroom with approval to film and work with her on my capstone. She shares a passion for urban education with me and we were able to bond and help each other because of it.

Another problem with preproduction that I faced was getting approval by Newhouse to film. My capstone advisor thought it best to do an independent study and have him grant me approval to rent equipment. My regular Newhouse advisor, however, wanted me to take a specific thesis class that would have presented far more work than necessary. In order to take the independent study, I needed my Newhouse advisor's permission. I finally convinced her the independent study would be the best option for me, especially because that was the only way I could work completely independently. After my months of planning, I finally had approval to rent equipment and film.

One problem that did not arise, which surprised me, was with Egal's family. Due to their reserved nature and the language barrier, I expected it to be more difficult to get permission to film them and their home. His parents, however, were beyond excited that I was doing a project on Egal. They knew about me from the stories he had told about the Saturday ESL Tutoring Program, so they welcomed me into their home with excitement. His mother, who is usually shy, even agreed to do an interview with me without hesitation and opened up more than I ever expected her to. This project allowed me to become close to Egal's family, as well as Egal, because of how much assistance they provided me.

The next problems that arose were during production. Because of my relationship with Egal, I wanted to complete my project completely on my own. I did not want a production crew, artificial lighting, or fancy editing. I wanted my film to be simple: just me, Egal, and a camera. Seeing as I conducted all of the interviews and had to often walk while holding the camera and talking to Egal,

much of my filming was inconsistent and shaky. This is not representative of the work I usually do, but it was necessary in order to provide the cinema vérité and intimacy for my story. I solved this problem while editing during postproduction. I cut parts that were too disoriented and replaced them with transitions or still images. Some shots, however, I left as unstable because it provides texture and sometimes feels like the viewer is actually in the house observing what is around them, rather than just being presented with images which they know are removed from them through a television screen.

The rest of the problems that arose came in postproduction. I thought I finished the rough cut of my film, but when I watched it, I felt disconnected. The film, as my advisor blatantly put it, was flat. The story in theory was interesting but we were not invested enough in Egal, me or the plot. For weeks I was frustrated and would stare at my film, unable to figure out what it needed or where to go without having to go back in to the schools to collect more footage. Focusing on the science fair and robotics competition was simply not enough. I had to find something else that made viewers want to keep watching. After several meetings with my advisor, we realized the only way to fix the problem was to make the film into a memoir about Egal and me, and tell the story through voiceover and narration. I normally do not like voiceover narration in films. I feel that it too explicitly tells the viewer what the story is and does not leave room for imagination. Seeing as my film was flat, had no direction, and I was unable to come up with a solution, it seemed applying narration was the only way to solve the dilemma.

I then drafted a potential narration. I do not enjoy writing, so trying to put my four-year relationship with Egal into words was a painstaking process. I finally came up with a written story and submitted it to Professor Breyer for his approval. I then went ahead and completely restructured my film to fit the narration. A week later, upon seeing the new documentary, however, Breyer felt it still was not a decent representation of my work and did not go deep enough into my relationship with Egal. I thus had to start again.

Four drafts later, I finally mastered a narration that presented Egal and me as interesting characters. I provide insight into our lives through facts and stories the viewer does not know simply from watching the film. Although I still am not completely used to the narration, nor do I think it stylistically loyal to my filmmaking, I realized it was the only way to save my film and therefore am satisfied with how it fits.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Overall, I am proud of my documentary. I originally wanted to make the film have a stronger focus on the problems in urban education, but with the limited amount of time I had, I found myself reworking it to focus on something even more closely connected to me: my relationship with Egal. The Syracuse City School District has countless problems, including graduation rates as low as 32% in some high schools. My work with Egal's family and school through this project did not just show me the problems with urban education. It also showed me how to fix them. Egal is a student who has a natural devotion to school and a drive to be successful, which many students lack, especially at such a young age. In addition, Egal has always had a strong support system. Even though his family forces him to be independent, his mother has huge dreams for him and pushes him to try hard and make her proud. He also has had amazing teachers, such as Ms. Maturo-Grasso, his engineering club advisor. In addition, Egal has had Literacy Corps tutors enter in and out of his life that have pushed him to do as much as possible with his education. I have remained a steady force in his life for four years, and he knows I will always be here if he needs me. The most important piece of education is support. Children, when supported by friends, family or teachers, will realize people want them to succeed and will be proud of them for

their work. No matter how much money a school district does or does not have, if we install devoted educators and support systems for our students, they will soar.

This project has made me value my relationship with Egal more than ever before. I have also realized that teaching is the best career path for me. I want to continue working on film, especially in terms of using it as a teaching tool. I will take this project and my history with Egal into my future.

Capstone Summary

I first met Egal Adan in September of 2009. I had just started as a Literacy Corps tutor at the Somali Bantu Saturday Program, and was not yet adjusted to waking up every week at seven on Saturday morning. I was assigned to work with him one-on-one and quickly realized just how brilliant a student he is. The following year, I became the program coordinator for the Saturday Program and created the math lesson plans to teach the class. I had to create a separate lesson plan for him because he was so far ahead of the other students.

Egal is a Somali Bantu refugee student. He came to the United States with his family when he was five. He is now in eighth grade. His parents' lives were threatened during the Somali Civil War so they escaped to Dagahaley Refugee Camp in Dadaab, Kenya, where Egal was born. Shortly after, they were relocated to Kakuma Refugee Camp and were then approved to move to Syracuse, away from the conflict and danger of Somalia.

The Saturday Program started as predominantly Somali Bantu refugee students. Most students, like Egal, did not learn English until well into elementary school, and many of them struggle because their parents do not speak English. Egal is an anomaly. He taught himself English with the help of his older brother and is now taking advanced classes. He also participates in track, wrestling, basketball, high school soccer, and engineering and robotics club. Despite

everything he does and his success at school, he still spends most of his weekends babysitting his six younger siblings since his mother is so busy.

As soon as I began working with Egal, I knew he was special. We formed a close bond and have stayed in touch and worked together for the past four years. After working with him for a year, I knew I had to change my career path. I added mathematics as a second major so that I could pursue education after graduation and become a middle school math teacher.

When deciding what to do for my honors thesis, I immediately knew I wanted to devote it to the Somali Bantu Community and Egal, who has forever changed my life. I thus decided to combine my Television, Radio, and Film major and my passion for education into a documentary that presents my relationship with a student that has managed to overcome extreme adversity to become a phenomenal success.

My documentary is approximately fifteen minutes long. It originally focused on Egal's robotics competition and his science fair to show his devotion to school and ability to succeed in the Syracuse City School District against all odds. The film fell flat, however, and lacked substance and intimacy. After working with the rough cut of the film for weeks, my advisor and I finally realized it is because the significance of Egal in my life is not apparent. In order for the film to attract viewers, I had to manipulate it to focus on both Egal and me, and highlight his life and adversity through my experience working with him. By talking about the significance of having him as a student and mentee, the audience is better able to relate to Egal and realize just how special he is.

The film is styled as simple as possible. My goal was to not make it feel like a film, but rather a meeting with Egal. By filming simply with me, Egal, and a camera, and doing all of the work on my own, I was able to extract more information out of interviews, make him feel more comfortable, and create raw footage that is more personal, even if it at times is shakier.

The film tells the story of me and Egal, almost like a memoir. We learn Egal's story, what he has had to overcome, and how he gets by on a daily basis through my narration. I am also present in interviews with him through my voice, and I am seen in photographs.

The film also shows his culture. We are introduced to his family which consists of seven brothers and sisters, his mother and father all living in a small, three bedroom home the size of a Syracuse University South Campus apartment. The medium of film allows us to connect with the family and observe the Somali Bantu culture in a way no other medium can. It is as if we are quiet observers in their living room. The techniques I used when filming as well to make it more natural and intimate help us further connect with the family. It allows us to see them in a casual setting and they are able to open up more about their past hardships and future plans.

One of the main reasons I wanted to focus on Egal was to show the Syracuse City School District and the problems of urban education. One of my greatest passions is urban education reform. I want to change curriculum, especially for mathematics, to better reach students and improve statistics nationwide. My goal of this film was to highlight some problems of the Syracuse

City School District and how we can improve them. I failed to do this. Egal is such an intelligent student and so devoted to his sports, schoolwork, and clubs, that he attracts friends and teachers want to help him wherever he goes. It was difficult to find problems in the schools because all I saw was supportive teachers, tutors and friends. I know problems still exist all over the school district, but I was unable to show this in my documentary. I was able to show, however, how influential support from family, teachers and friends is to students. Although Egal is very independent and had to grow up fast because of his past, his mother still supports him and pushes him to do well in school. In addition, he has a devoted engineering advisor, Literacy Corps mentors and is close with his older brother, who also does well in school. By having people push and support him, Egal is able to do well even if his school does not have the proper funding or classes to help him succeed.

I created a documentary on Egal not just because of the impact he has had on my life, but so that I can teach others about a student in the Syracuse City School District who has overcome more adversity than we could imagine and still manages to succeed at everything he does. The film teaches about refugees and the Somali Bantu community, a lesser-known population. We see the themes of determination, perseverance and support.

My goal for this film is to have an impact on at least one person. If someone watches “Saturdays with Egal” and learns something about refugee populations, or the Syracuse City School District, or are simply inspired by Egal and his story, then I will feel successful. Although my capstone is considered a

creative project, it is academic in its life lessons. Through this experience, I have learned more about myself and have reflected on my relationship with Egal. My work in the community and with the Somali Bantu community has shaped my experience at Syracuse and has provided as much education as the university has. I hope my film, which shows my work in the community through learning about a student with whom I have become close, will inspire others to give back and make a difference.