

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone
Projects

Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone
Projects

Spring 5-1-2011

Dengue Fever: Infectious Hope

Collin Shea

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



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

Recommended Citation

Shea, Collin, "Dengue Fever: Infectious Hope" (2011). *Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects*. 232.

https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/232

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.

So, how did this whole process begin? Well, like any film maker or documentarian will tell you, that precise moment of revelation is usually lost deep within the initial stages of your film. What used to be your big idea or main inspiration gets cut away in the edit room, and sometimes it's even the first thing to go. Whether it flows, whether people 'get it,' and most depressingly whether or not people even find it remotely entertaining, are the real questions that matter. Although daunting, these are the most important aspects of a film's creation; because if people are not willing to watch the whole piece, why make it? This is the first part of the equation that I found myself needing to hurdle, and it came before I even had a remote idea of what I was making.

I have always loved scientific documentaries and foresee myself pursuing a career in their production after graduation. After interning with National Geographic Television this summer, I was able to obtain several DVD copies of their show *Explorer*, with episodes dating back to its inception. The 49 minute episodes capture a variety of scientific and social subjects; ranging from the rescue efforts on behalf of endangered apes to the science behind human emotions on LSD. Regardless of the subject matter of each episode, however in depth or complex the issue, each episode is extremely interesting and compelling. With a subject as obscure as life with two unusual pets, they can dominate an hour of entertainment, keeping it gripping and professional throughout, drawing out a subject that others might have given a mere ten minute slot. The principal reason for this is largely due to how the show is formatted, even though each episode follows the same is arranged virtually the same design, each sticks to a

particular sequence that keeps the show appealing. Simply put, this format focuses first on establishing a mystery; something to get viewers invested in the subject and what will happen to next. Then; by including a secondary, interweaving story; the viewer is provided with breaks in the narrative to keep them interested. This also allows the film to bounce around the parallels of the two accounts, preventing any possible occurrences of repetitiveness or boredom. A perfect example of this is a piece where the *Explorer* team is uncovering an old ship wreck, half the story is covering the wreck being uncovered in current times and half the story revolves around the story of the ship's history. This provides the director of the episode a chance to make a concrete and interesting narrative with a recent story with compelling real characters while simultaneously providing the appropriate amount of scientific facts needed to establish the importance of the find. In other words, it doesn't matter what the story is covering as long as the way it is presented is interesting. That is both the beauty as well as trouble with documentary film.

This being said, my goal for my Capstone was to create a scientific short film mirroring the style of these *Explorer* episodes. Being set on this idea and fairly pleased with myself for thinking it up, I soon succeeded in telling all of my peers and faculty about my grand ambitions whenever asked about it. Surprisingly, one would think that the question, "but what's it actually going to be on?" would spring up in conversations more, but amazingly enough people seem pretty content with a short and simple abstract idea. Sadly though, it became apparent that this golden abstract idea hardly counted as having my Capstone 'planned' out. I came to this realization immediately upon meeting with my advisor Professor Breyer at the beginning of September.

Since an actual topic is integral in creating a thesis, I began looking for ideas everywhere I could. I met individually with each faculty member in the Biology department, seeing what they were doing and attempting to brainstorm how to make an interesting and gripping piece on one of their studies. I discovered some leads but none of the topics would really have any real action shots available, just possible lab shots of students working. While lab shots can make for an interesting five minute piece, in order to create what I had envisioned I would need to construct a story not only with multiple action shots but also with a large amount of re-creation shots. Much of what appeals to people about science issues are the raw visuals, and with nothing but test tubes and beakers at hand, the visual compositional elements of my film would hardly carry me out of the classroom. Although this is possible with big budget networks like National Geographic, nothing that I could create would be up to par with the standard that I had placed upon myself. In addition, anyone can take a camera out in the woods and film wildlife, but it takes a professional to make those shots into something worth watching.

Then, in early October, I had an enormous stroke of luck when meeting with my Honors advisor, Steve Wright. Throughout my time here at Syracuse, Steve has played a pivotal role in my overall development as a student, suggesting certain grants, classes, professors, and most importantly career advice. As I discussed with him my recent speed date with the entire Biology department, Steve suggested putting me in contact with a recent Syracuse graduate, Anna Stewart, who was currently doing her Doctoral research through SUNY ESF in Ecuador. Anna is working with the Ministry of Public Health in Machala, Ecuador, researching and monitoring the recent epidemic of dengue fever in the community. Or that's all I really knew at the time, but I was immediately intrigued by this project. After expressing my interest, Steve was able to put me in contact with Anna on Skype the next day, and after about twenty minutes we had fleshed out

an initial plan for me to travel down to Ecuador over winter break and film my thesis on this increasing problem with dengue. Enthused and reenergized, I began planning the long process necessary to make such a venture viable.

First, although many artists will tell you that their art has no price, this is a false concept. My art's price was approximately \$2,000. The principal problem with getting down to Ecuador was the cost of the plane ticket, and for this I would need help. With Steve's advice and assistance, I assembled all of the materials necessary to apply for the Fall Semester's Crown Award. By asking for \$1,300, I figured that I would have a decent chance of winning at least some funds to support the cause. However, come decision making time, as everyone must experience at some point in their life, I was beaten out. Still without the necessary funding, I decided to seek finances elsewhere and, again with Steve's help, I discovered the ILearn Program in the College of Art and Sciences. Since the project idea was primarily a film piece, and therefore not in the Arts and Sciences immediate purview, I was initially worried about my chances of receiving any sort of grant from them. As the subject matter of the piece would hold true to my other major in Biology though, I ended up successfully connecting back with my Art and Sciences roots and receiving the grant. Thanks to the helpfulness and support of Dean Kandice Salomone, I was even able to buy the ticket and receive funds for living and housing costs prior to the trip. With all my cards in order, all I had to do was wait for January 1st to come around, when I would make my two week trek down to Ecuador.

Within this preparatory phase, however, many things were still quite fuzzy and unsettled. Most importantly, as a result of taking only French in high school, I knew approximately three words of Spanish and was about to be travelling to an entirely Spanish-speaking country. Also, apart from doing some research on dengue, I still really had no idea what I was getting myself

into. Would I even be allowed in a neighborhood where dengue was prevalent? Would I be able to contact people who had been infected? What sort of access would I be given to the Ministry and the local hospitals? What's the story?

What's the story? The question hovering over my head from the moment this plan became a reality. As I mentioned once before, and as my Capstone advisor kept reminding me time and time again, any idiot can walk into a location with a camera but they need a story to make it worthwhile. As much as I could make up my dream plan of how I saw my film playing out, it was hard to mask the fact that he was right. In many ways I was blinded by the exoticism of the idea of travelling to Ecuador and filming a documentary. But what, really, is so special about that? I could technically almost do the same thing by just travelling to Idaho and filming a documentary on sporadic cases of Mad Cow Disease for half the price. So besides the travelling, what use was my film really going to reflect? To be honest, even though I wrote up at least three 'optimal' outlines for what I would do when I got down there, I really had no concrete idea. That's the risk when working with documentaries, its real life. Although you may write up what you want it to be about and what interviews you want to get, the truth is life is never the way you plan it. Life happens, and due to a series of unrelated as well as related events, you get some shots you were banking on that just don't work, and some shots that were entirely unplanned that end up being masterpieces. While difficult for the perfectionist to accept, in many ways this is the beauty of a good documentary and the excitement that you get while watching one. A viewer is not sitting down to watch a documentary that is entirely pre-scripted, pre-shot, and controlled, they want to experience real life as it honestly plays out. The only obstacle is the person behind the camera who chooses to point it at some things, and chooses not to at others.

So four Spanish-To-Go! CD's and one talkative elderly Spanish speaking woman on the plane later, I had the basics of Spanish down as I landed in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Since Anna had been home to the States for the week of Christmas, she had landed just a few hours before me. Equipped with a Standard-Definition camera as well as a small HD FlipCam from the Honors Department, I began my journey, not quite sure when to start filming but certain that it had to be soon. I met with her about 1 AM and we stayed at her cousin's house for a night, and then made the long four hour drive to Machala at 7 AM the next morning. The next day was absolutely crazy, and definitely set the tone for what was to come during my next two weeks as well as for my film as a whole. Immediately after arrival, Anna and I joined several of the Ministry members in the field who were conducting house checks. Each neighborhood has around forty houses that are checked in one day, and in each house every possible water container is checked for larva and mosquito eggs. I hit the ground running, with Spanish being spoken left and right and walking into at least twenty households within the first hour, I knew that I would have plenty to film.

The most incredible surprise, however, was the level in which the Ministry took me under their wing. I am not sure if it was because there aren't many people wandering around with a video camera or because I was just the first to get involved with the Ministry on a multi-media project but they were extremely gracious. As of the first day, with the help of Anna's translating, they had agreed to supply me with transport around the city, allowed me to go in and out of the hospitals with the camera running, attend several focus groups and school sessions; the list goes on and on. It seemed like the second I arrived my two weeks were already tentatively planned out and they were extremely busy. The second day I joined up with a car that was heading two hours out of the city to a town that was more inland. There I was introduced to one of the head

personnel at the Ministry and I interviewed him at length about the town's current problem with dengue. The interview was phenomenal. He showed me slides, talked about the problems with the community, pointed out different dengue-centered areas on a map, everything. Afterwards, we even went along exploring the slum in which the first cases of dengue appeared the year before, meeting and talking with people about what they thought of the problem. I couldn't have asked for more in a first day of interviewing. This was also where I encountered my first few hurdles for the weeks to come while filming the documentary. My initial plan was to literally tape everything I could, planning to piece all the necessary footage together upon my arrival back at Syracuse. However, due to budget restrictions and just straight carrying capacity, I only was able to take 16 tapes. Seeing as these tapes had 90 minutes each, I figured that this would be an adequate amount. After this one trip to the town of Portovello however, I had used three and a half tapes, and at that rate there was no way I was going to make it more than five days. The difficult part was, with no real knowledge of what was actually being said in the interviews, and no concrete idea of what the film was going to contain, I couldn't pick or choose what I wanted even if I tried.

It seemed that every point I thought someone was discussing something important they weren't and every time they were only having casual discussions I had my best framed shots on them. Anna could only really ask the questions I wanted, and then the rest was putting my faith in that what they were saying was relevant. However, when what they were saying would last over an hour, it was always tough to tell when tape was being used properly or when it was just being wasted. If I've learned anything about documentaries over the years, the best answers always come through the questions you don't really mean to ask. If people just answer a question that you set them up for, they will never elaborate. If they, however, elaborate on a question that

originated from a casual discussion, they are much more likely to speak their mind. The best sound bites come from rants, because that is when we truly speak our minds. Unfortunately, when you are listening to a rant that is in an unfamiliar language, a rant can seem a lot like wasted tape.

After a few days of discussions with Ministry of Health officials, it was loosely decided that upon my arrival in Syracuse I would make a both a documentary and an informational short piece on dengue for educational purposes. For the next two weeks I collected all of footage that I could, following Ministry officials in and out of houses during their inspections, interviewing everyone I could, and trying to balance aesthetically pleasing shots that took time with ones that needed to be taken in the moment and with little thought process besides instinct. During this filming process, one principal shot that I wanted seemed to be harder to obtain than expected. Naturally, I needed hospital shots. If I was going to make a documentary about the severity of dengue in an area, I needed shots with people that were actually sick with it. It is one thing to have a narrator or health official tell you that a disease is rampant and another thing to see it for yourself. Since this is the real reason that I think documentaries differ from something you can read in a health census, obtaining these shots was crucial. However, since there was only one hospital that I had access to everyday, and it was fairly secluded from most large neighborhoods, the number of patients with dengue that were admitted to the hospital had not been high or severe enough to catch one while they were there. Until the last few days that I was there, it seemed that I would always get to the hospital when there was a net set up over a bed where a dengue patient had once been. Due to a lack of space, they had already been moved out or moved to another health clinic. While this allowed me to get a lot of ominous net shots, I still needed someone who actually had the disease.

Although I could go on for days about my actual experiences in Ecuador, the real purpose of this paper is to reflect on my creative processes during the development of my Capstone, and those really didn't happen until I got back to Syracuse. After a crazy two weeks of having filmed what seemed like everything possible, I found myself with 17 hours of footage that I was quite proud of. Now that the real hands-on shooting portion of my project was done, I had two large questions to face. What is going to drive this story forward and make it interesting and what in God's name am I going to do about all of this Spanish? As the latter question would require more funds than my already well spent ILearn grant, I decided to once again apply for the Crown Award, but this time for much less money and to support nothing but translations. As the grant proposal lay pending, I directed all of my attention to the remaining and more pressing problem of how my story was going to develop.

In light of my inspiration to replicate a National Geographic *Explorer* episode, I needed a principal character to lead me through the story, a question to be answered, and a way to conclude them both succinctly in the end. Despite all my footage, I never really followed around one principal character consistently besides Anna for the two weeks. Other than her, who I wanted to avoid using, the only other real personable stories took place within the three neighborhoods that I visited the most. The Presidents of these neighborhoods, who were locally elected, each had a compelling story as well as connection to the community. Although they had many functions, they were expected to not only organize the neighborhood together into a cohesive community but also to deal with such issues as health, trash collection, politics, etc. This is a large responsibility for one man who is simply volunteering for the position. That was a possible lead.

Along with these men, I also noticed that a pressing issue that continued to need to be addressed was the lack of general cooperation within the community. Since dengue is a disease that is spread through mosquitoes, whether an outbreak starts or not is entirely dependent on whether there is someone already sick with dengue in the neighborhood. In addition, because mosquitoes don't tend to fly too far from their original breeding area, the infection spreads pretty quickly once these breeding grounds are created. Since breeding grounds for mosquitoes consist mainly of standing water, you can imagine how many of these can be created daily within a household that has a lot of trash or minimal rooftops in their yards. So, this being said, the spread and maintenance of the disease remains dependent on individual household's willingness to cooperate and communicate with one another. Even if every household in a neighborhood is making sure to eliminate mosquito habitats daily, it only takes one house to slip up or be lazy to create breeding grounds that affects the whole neighborhood. This is what the Ministry continued to emphasize over and over again during both house visits and focus groups. When it came down to it though, people kept declaring that they themselves were responsible about preventative measures but when they would look over at their neighbors plot they claimed that their neighbors didn't care at all. With this answer being a common theme, more and more households simply just pressed for the Ministry to fumigate more.

Since fumigation is a very loud and visual method of exterminating mosquitoes, many people in the community see this and want it done in their house, thinking it takes care of the mosquito problems immediately and that's that. The real case, however, is that fumigation only eliminates the mosquitoes in the air, leaving behind hundreds of eggs and larva in the already established breeding grounds as well as distributing harmful chemicals all around the house. In fact, the only time the Ministry will ever fumigate is when there is a known case of dengue in the

immediate vicinity, making it really a measure of last resort. As humans though, we tend to believe in what we see, and that is often the short term fixes. So instead of actually communicating with one another, many of the family's responses in the focus groups were just to increase the amount of fumigation. This is what gave me my principal idea for how to guide my story. If the real issue behind the disease was not reliant on the Ministry's actions but instead on the community's, the most worthwhile idea would be to convey this as well as a presenting it as a goal to work towards. Through my film I would show not only how dengue is a problem but also how the community should work together and unite to prevent it.

As previously stated, to make any story, you need principal characters to help guide you through the story line. These characters needed to be strong, determined, personable and, most importantly, relatable. While the Presidents of the three neighborhoods seemed like ideal candidates, my problem was that I had to use what footage I had available. I had interviews with all three presidents and they were only a half an hour each, half of the conversations consisting of their experiences as Presidents on issues other than dengue. This was hardly enough material for an audience to become invested in them and watch as they develop as characters. They did, however, have some good quotes which were useful to throw on the back burner.

With some brainstorming help from Professor Breyer, I decided that I was going to have to make a fictional character to be the prime narrator for the story. This way, the character would not only be relatable to the audience but also could address all of the main points needed that were missing in the interviews in a short and succinct manner. But how do I show a character that I entirely make up? And how will they know anything about dengue? I came across the solution as I was scrubbing through all my footage early in February. My exhaustive search for a person with dengue in the hospitals had finally paid off. It was a woman that was in her late

fifties who had come in that morning and was staying overnight. Although I had a lot of shots of her, there was one shot in particular where I had the camera laying even with her bed so that all you could see was the silhouette of her body underneath the massive net hanging over her. That's when it hit me. I could use this shot to portray her as the narrator, a woman sick in bed with dengue. In bed, she would be reflecting on how she got there, what she knew about dengue, and what needed to be done to prevent her family and friends from getting in the same position that she was now in. She could quickly explain Machala as a town and her experience within it as a resident. I would make her a genuine, nice local person but have her also be a victim to the constraints of normal life; having to deal with kids, a job, and now dengue, etc. As a result of these constraints, she would admit to simply not having the time to take the appropriate steps for dengue prevention and now as a result thinks that she is feeling the consequences. Due to this reflection, a viewer will hopefully reflect back on their own daily routines. In addition, they will realize that it only takes one person in a community to cause an outbreak, and that that person doesn't necessarily have to be a 'bad person,' just merely someone who meant well but is held up by life's obstacles like any other.

In this way, the audience will not know who the narrator is, and if I was able to get a similarly-aged coastal Ecuadorian woman to narrate the part, then it would convey the feeling of a real testimony. With this testimony carrying the audience through the film and subtly highlighting the key features of my argument, I would be able to include relevant alternative footage as well as several focus groups and Ministry members. A plan was born. After receiving a crucial \$800 from the Spring Crown Award, I employed a total of five student translators to start sifting through what I thought would be the most valuable footage. As for the video itself, I realized that this whole project would be an absolutely enormous task to take on solo so I

recruited two other senior students to assist me. While I still remained the main decision maker for the film as the director, one student took the role as the head writer and another took the role as the head editor. After writing up an outline for all the points I wanted covered, which began as a list of fifteen and progressively was reduced to a list of six, I gave it to my writer to begin building a personable narrative. These six points ended up being trash, fumigation, ‘bad’ neighbors, standing water, community engagement, and education. By giving him cultural pointers on some things that I picked up on when I was down there, like the, “growing up on the taste of bananas and the smell of seafood,” line, he was able to piece together a pretty lengthy but cohesive script for us to start building a story around.

After a read-through or two though, I was having trouble envisioning any footage that would properly establish our narrator as a character. That is when, after discussing it with Professor Breyer, I thought up the idea of having a ‘flashback’ segment in which the narrator established herself as well as Machala as a city at the same time. Picturing the simplicity of a water color image, my writer and I began to envision the flashback narrative and what she would say. I couldn’t help but recall that in a lot of interviews people always stated that Machala used to all be one big swamp, and that they only recently began putting in roads. Picturing this, and using some photos I took from less developed parts of the city, we began constructing this woman’s life and giving her a detailed back story. Then by hiring and paying an artist with the grant money, we constructed a flashback using stop motion. Although it looks basic, I think it portrays exactly what I was hoping to convey. Combined with the music, it gives off the feeling of a memory being reflected on in a kind of fond but quizzical fashion. While she still looks affectionately back to her childhood, she now looks at it through the eyes of an adult, and notices how she never really took mosquitoes very seriously. This shows both her progression as a

character and also introduces Machala as a city and how it has changed over the years, hopefully playing on some of the viewer's own memories.

With my editor, while sorting through the footage to select visuals that work with the script, I attempted to locate ideal interviews and sound bites to use for other real life accounts to accompany the voice of the narrator. Despite complications here and there with vague paraphrasing and conflicting student schedules, after two consistent months of scattered translating I was able to get all the pieces of interviews that I needed. Although much of the explanations from Ministry members were very useful, what I found most intriguing and moving were the accounts from the focus groups. There were several emotional testaments by community members accusing their neighbors as well as themselves. Many of them had quite inspirational quotes about how it was now their turn to unite and stand up for a healthy community. It was really quite moving. After including these in addition to the narration and the flashbacks, the film actually really started to come together. The accounts were poignant, strong, personable, and they really made a lot of the film. To be safe, however, since it occurred to me that maybe some of these community members wouldn't want to be seen in front of their communities on a big screen blaming their neighbors, I doubled checked with the Ministry to make sure that using the focus group footage would be alright. After also reflecting upon this thought though, the Ministry agreed with me, but in a bad way. Even though I was told I would be able to use the footage initially, they claimed that it would taint the Ministry's reputation to use anything that was done in privately run focus groups. While this is understandable, you can imagine it was still rather heart wrenching after finding this out in late March. So it was back to the drawing board.

As we played around with footage, however, this major setback actually turned out to be a small hiccup. Once we added the Ministry's authoritative footage, we realized that the movie would have been much too geared towards talking heads if we had kept the focus groups. In fact, after already having the narrator stating all of the main points, the members of the focus groups that we used were really just repeating the same message but just in different words. So we adjusted to the circumstances. We had also come to the realization that we had spent far too much time making the film cheery and as a result dengue didn't really seem like very much of a problem. To fix this, we used all of the Ministry accounts as the establishers of the trouble with dengue. By placing them in the very beginning to establish dengue as a problem, and then placing them in the middle to use examples of how it's a problem, I hope to portray them as the ones who are currently taking on this dirty burden. Then by also adding the same musically ominous scoring for all of their portions, I hope to make the connection with how important the issue is and how hard they are currently working at it. In addition, by including different depressing musical scoring for all the hospital scenes, I hope to connect the sickness with a feeling of dread or fear. While this sounds a bit intense, I think it is important that this film makes dengue seem as threatening as possible. For a long time I struggled with making this happen but I found that the addition of music in the past few weeks has really helped in giving the sickness a life of its own.

In many ways this is the beauty with documentary filmmaking. You can take a series of real life images seen every day and place them in a different, more meaningful context. Accompanied with music, these images begin to not only tell a story but also infuse that story with emotion and intent. I initially wanted to make this film a documentary, and to be honest throughout the filming and the creative process of putting it all together I never really saw myself

drifting from that goal. On the other hand, I think in my attempt to make it as educational, purposeful, and timely as possible I didn't come out with a documentary but instead it is an educational film. While this was not my original intention, I find myself okay with this. It has helped me understand a concept that I couldn't quite grasp in the beginning of this project when Professor Breyer kept persisting on, "yes, but what's the *purpose* of this film?" This film now has purpose. It will be shown to focus groups and especially in schools back in Machala, educating children on this issue in a new and creative way. They will be reminded not only to be proud of where they're from but also how important it is to work together as a community. This will be a piece that will hopefully be used, and not merely an undergrad's documentary that is left on the shelves collecting dust in some Newhouse or Honors office. To be honest that was always the fate that I thought my thesis would eventually have. Instead I not only attempted to branch out of that routine but I also made an effort at providing what Syracuse University strives for in its mission statement, 'Scholarship in Action', giving back to the community. So if that's not what a Senior Thesis should strive for, I'd honestly be hard pressed to tell you what would. Thanks so much to the Renee Crown Honors Program for assisting me continuously throughout my four years here and I hope you enjoy my final product.