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Weight the Week

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Film is an art form that is unique in the way it involves as few as one person, or as many as hundreds to create. A masterpiece film starts with the tiniest of inspirations then grows to become something capable of mass influence itself. This is why I chose this art form as a career. Film production is an exciting, collaborative and expressive way to create art as well as entertainment.

This past summer I embarked on a year-long feature length film project. I decided that I was going to go above and beyond the requirements of a senior film, and push my own limitations to see what I am capable of. I was not doing this to complete an assignment; I was creating an independent film.

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The film, entitled “Weight the Week” is a social and psychological examination of a college student during the weeklong waiting period for the results of an HIV test. My own life experiences were what motivated me to create a narrative on this topic, as I felt that I had a story that was incredibly important to tell. Not only is HIV an extremely relevant subject, it is also a very heavy-handed topic that is not fully explored due to the weight of the discussion.

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I started writing the script for “Weight the Week” during the last semester of my junior year. I had a great deal of help from my good friend, Brendan Mack, who was then a senior in the drama department. He lived with me over the summer and we spent every day revising the script.

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Brendan was also the art director for my film, and he created hundreds of props and art pieces for use in production.

Brendan was integral in helping me find assistant directors, crew members, costume designers, set artists and many other skilled students at the university who just wanted to get involved. Together, we made it a collaborative project, it was not just my own. Everyone who was involved had an important role in making this film come to fruition. Because of this, everyone was able to take a piece of ownership in the project.

As people began to sign on to the project, I started networking my way through the University and eventually was awarded the right to cast out of the General Auditions of the Drama Department. This is a privilege that has never before been extended to a student. The actors I cast were able to use this as a fulfillment of their performance requirement, which is usually only allowed for stage-syndicated productions.

This unprecedented acknowledgement of student professionalism by the University gave me a great sense of pride and motivation to complete this project. With this opportunity in hand, I began to bring together the divergent paths of the drama and film programs at the University. Over one hundred and twenty five students were committed to the project from both the Film and Drama Departments, and this

collaboration triggered both departments to enact policies that never before had been considered.

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These students also helped raise over \$10,000 for the project. This was in addition to a \$5,000 grant awarded by the Renée Crown Honors Program here at Syracuse. I also received over \$8,000 of professional film stock from the Kodak Motion Picture Company in the form of a grant as acknowledgement of my accomplishments thus far and in anticipation of the impact of the final outcome.

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It is important to recognize that I felt so confident in my own ability that I opened up a credit card to pay for any additional expenses. Right now, I am \$17,000 in debt. Even with that much money on my card, I was able to convince my creditor to defer interest for a year. I truly believed, and still do believe, that the amount of debt I am in is completely worth the end product if I just stick to it and do my best.

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Additionally, the film faculty awarded me the use of the XTR PROD 16mm film camera thereby further complimenting the professionalism of the entire production. This allowed the project to distinguished itself in so many other capacities, and also to be recognized for the equipment we used to create it.

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With my accomplishments in receiving funds and resources fresh in my mind, I decided to do something I probably never would have considered. I went to Mayor Matt Driscoll, and asked him for special considerations and accommodations from the City of Syracuse for the filming of the project. My boldness proved worthwhile, and I was granted a tax-free status on purchases for my film.

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Things were going great and I could not believe everything that was accomplished already. Through personal connections, I was even able to obtain a rental house in the University area to use as a location for my film without having to pay a dime. The owner, Michael Albanese, was gracious enough to let the set designers paint the walls and allow me to store my equipment there for the four months we were in production.

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I embarked upon this thesis effort, seizing the opportunity to challenge myself and those working with me on the project, to go far beyond what was traditionally expected for a senior thesis film. We watched the effort unfold successfully, but our good luck was about to fall short as production started.

After the first weekend of shooting, my best friend, Munjal who was the director of photography demanded that I pay him \$15,000 for the job or he would quit. As hard as it was, I had no choice but to allow him to quit. I then had to assume the position of Director of Photography in addition to my positions as Director and Producer.

Deleted: When production began, I ran into some disheartening problems.

I was still feeling the remnants of betrayal and hurt while we were shooting the next weekend. Luckily, my girlfriend, Chrissy, assumed any role she could on the set to alleviate the immense stress I was feeling of having to be in control of this production while needing to stay behind the camera. Whether it was grabbing a few water bottles or operating the boom microphone, she was there for me every minute of production.

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The set of “Weight the Week” was as professional as possible. We used all the lingo, safety precautions, procedures and techniques that I learned from my internship experiences in the film industry. Unfortunately, the attitudes of some cast and crewmembers were less than professional. Because of this, there were times that I wanted nothing more than to cancel production and admit defeat. I had moments where I realized I had bitten off much more than I could chew.

Deleted: As production moved on, things started to go down hill.

Productivity and moral stayed on a downward slope as production continued. People who were enthusiastic to be helping with an independent film started to get disinterested and drop out of the project. I could not keep these people convinced that it was worthwhile, and actually quite commonplace, to spend this much time to create a film. Some people just did not care about the project as much as I did, and I understood that this was something beyond my control. It was an important lesson to learn, however. As bitter and pessimistic as it may seem, when someone is putting a lot on the line both financially and socially, trusting the words of others is not a reliable means of security. Major decisions, especially those involving reputations and thousands of dollars, should not be made on verbal agreements.

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To add insult to injury, several faculty members were in opposition to my project and thought that any student who was working on it with me was wasting their time. These members of the University community would actively discourage anyone who was thinking about becoming

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involved with “Weight the Week.” I was so outraged by this that I arranged meetings with those who were so opposed to me and I made sure we straightened out any misunderstandings. Unlike some students, I care about my image and reputation and will do what it takes to preserve it.

Despite the negative and spiteful actions of these faculty members, one professor was doing quite the opposite for me. Tim Davis Reed was a very important advisor to me throughout this process. He was constantly there for me with advice and words of encouragement. He came to the set periodically because he is the type of professor that takes interest in the projects that involve his students. He is a person who genuinely cares about film and show business because he has actually been there and doing it. It is for these reasons that I value his opinions and advice.

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It is because of the motivating people in my life that I was able to keep on my feet and moving forward. When one of my main actors quit half way through production, Brendan and I scrambled to rewrite or cut scenes from the script. At the same time, I was encountering great difficulty in finding a location to shoot the scenes at the doctor’s office. Eventually I had to cut out all those scenes because none of us could find a location for it.

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As my crew got thinner with each day of production, it became more challenging to accomplish what we needed to and the shooting schedule was getting longer. When snow started to fall on the ground, I had to cut out the scenes that were to be shot outside. It was looking like

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the end product would be nothing like what I had envisioned the year before.

By the end of the fall semester, I had to wrap up production because the location had to be returned to the owner. Some of the actors would be in London the next semester, and others were cast in other productions. I realized I would have to make a movie out of the footage I had. I had to do it ~~becuase~~ I couldn't disappoint all the people who wanted this project to be great. I couldn't let down all the people and organizations that donated money and resources to me because they believed I was capable of this.

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The film I have created now is different from my original idea. Primarily, it is not a feature length film like what I had planned. I was not able to get enough scenes shot, so I had to recreate it into a short. It is less of a social activist film, and more like a snapshot of what a person's life would be like while they are awaiting the HIV test results. I originally wanted to focus deeply on how friends can become enemies when you are in your darkest of times. In addition, I wanted to create a good sense of how misinformed people can be about HIV. The lack of depth could actually be a good thing, especially for a short. Leaving it somewhat open to interpretation ~~is~~ good for sparking conversation about the issues revolving around HIV and its social impacts.

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Feature length films like "Philadelphia" and "Rent" gave me some great ideas to use in production and post production. Color hues and tones in these films really influenced the mood and I took ~~this inspiration and~~

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applied it to my own film. I have learned that the mood is not set by a single image or a sound. It is the combination of many components, and that balance is what will evoke the emotion I want the viewer to feel.

I was very conscious of how the viewer will react to “Weight the Week” while I was editing. I plan to show my film to certain HIV and AIDS activist and awareness groups, like Teen Aids Task Force, in hopes that they will want to show my film to their members and to the people they want to reach. It would bring me great happiness to know that my film made a difference in a worthwhile cause like HIV prevention.

I also plan to send my film to various festivals in Central New York and elsewhere in order to get my name out there and hopefully gain new networking opportunities. I believe it is important to put my work out there, even if it didn’t turn out quite like I wanted. Who knows, maybe someone will see my film and want to recreate it in the way I had originally envisioned it. It doesn’t hurt to dream. In fact, it’s a requirement in this field.

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After months of editing my footage into a featurette, I have been thinking about what I would do if I were to do it all over again. This experience has taught me an immeasurable amount about being a director and producer. It has changed my values about trust, friendship, networks, and my own ability. I have given a lot of thought of how I would create this film if I could do it all over again.

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Firstly, I would make sure I had a slimmer, but more devoted crew.

It was wonderful to see the amount of people who were eager to participate, but what it did was create a false sense of ability. My plans that included the help of many, were squandered when only a few remained. Finding several people who are devoted to the project is more productive and enjoyable than having a bunch of semi-devoted people who realize after a few days that it's not something they are interested in.

Looking back, I had several cast and crew members who had the level of interest and devotion to the project that I did. If I had focused on these people, and gaining a few more people like them rather than a volume of people, I believe I would have had a much more positive outcome.

Secondly, I would arrange my shooting schedule so that the most important scenes were shot first, and the least important ones were shot last. I learned that a filmmaker cannot plan for mishaps and unexpected circumstances. By organizing a shooting schedule in this way, it would allow for easier restructuring of the script if I were to run into similar obstacles later in the production.

Another thing I would keep in mind is that I need to have my script revolve around my obtainable resources. I cannot create a film that is in a location I cannot obtain. One thing that makes films great is the filmmaker's ability to create art and entertainment out of what resources he

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has. Good examples of this are “The Blair Witch Project” and “Grizzly Man”.

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By keeping my obtainable resources in mind, it would alleviate a lot of the pressure put on me by donors and myself to achieve something that would be extremely difficult and costly to do. I learned that it is important to get creative and to work with what I have, rather than to go crazy with obtaining everything I possibly can.

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After reflecting on my experience of creating this film, I feel that my accomplishments at SU are indicative of, and a result of, my

intellectual growth at Syracuse University. Everything I have done with creating “Weight the Week” demonstrates that I have grown not just to be a traveler of well-beaten paths, but a creator of new paths that others may explore. Certain faculty and policies that are the foundation of Syracuse

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University made all of this a possibility for me.

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As I approach Graduation Day, I intend to make graduation not an end, but another beginning. I am ready to go forward as an alum who is proud and thankful for my University experience. My years here have been a time of tremendous growth and discovery. I now look forward to going out and making a difference in my field with the hope of being included in the group of distinguished alumni from the University who share the same passions for filmmaking as I do.

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