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# The Connection is YOU: Public Service Announcement Campaign

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## Advice to Future Honors Students

Some people ask, "Are you crazy enough to take on a Thesis Project?" I ask, "Are you excited enough?" The key to success lies in active interest and engagement; if you're not having fun with your thesis project, then stop right now. To make this project worth your time, you must love it. It's as simple as that.

Some stress-saving tips, in no particular order: Pick a thesis advisor who has experience with the program and who will be engaged in your topic. Apply for Crown Funding. My Crown Scholarship enabled me to take two great production internships and still afford all my necessary materials. Know your limits, and take a break when you need it. It's amazing how much more gets accomplished when you're healthy and well-rested. Budget your time. Take your required classes as soon as you can; they prove very helpful in adding depth and insight to your project. Read through the Honors website regularly and stay on top of all paperwork/registration requirements. It saves you headaches later.

Above all, balance this project within your complete senior year experience. Your last year at Syracuse should be one of fulfillment and satisfaction, where you see all the fruits of your labor coming together. Let your thesis augment that celebration, not detract from it.

The thesis project requires a significant investment of time, energy, commitment, and intellect, but your dividends are a professional body of work, incredible learning, and the satisfaction of a job well-done. Good luck!

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But my greatest debt of gratitude goes to the SU/ESF Chapter of Habitat for Humanity for granting me four years of tremendous life lessons and a host of wonderful friends. You nurtured the seeds of social justice lying dormant in my character, and I am forever changed.

## *The Connection is YOU:* Public Service Announcement Campaign

## In the Beginning, There Were Tears...

This project began when Professor Bill Coplin made me cry.

I was a sophomore at the time and interested in applying for a Truman scholarship. Since it was a bit unusual for a dual Television-Radio-Film and Marketing major to pursue this public service award, I made an appointment with Professor Coplin over at the Maxwell School to seek his advice.

With his inimitable Coplin brusqueness, he immediately asked me about my community service record to date.

Coplin: "So, whaddya do?"

Julia: "Um...Habitat spring break?"

Coplin: "Any leadership positions?"

Julia: "Um... no?"

(pause)

Coplin: "You don't have a chance in hell."

Professor Coplin may remember the session a bit differently, but the conclusion remains the same: after twenty minutes of discussion, I was convinced I was an uncaring, disengaged citizen—an embarrassment which upset me to the point of tears.

But Professor Coplin did not destroy my confidence or leave me sobbing in his office. Instead, he whisked me over to Public Affairs and introduced me to Kim Gugino, his star student at the time, who also happened to be the current president of the campus Habitat chapter. Ten hours later, I was installed as Fundraising Chair for our 2002-2003 House Sponsorship Project and committed to raising \$10,000 by year's end. With 500 volunteers, 11 board members, and a homeowner and her family depending on me, the tears quickly stopped, and the real work began.

Since that fateful day, I have spent three years on the Habitat board, serving first as Fundraising Chair and currently as Grant-writing Officer. I have sponsored a student-run home, filmed a documentary about our build, gone on four alternative Spring Breaks through Habitat Collegiate Challenge, established the infrastructure for our chapter's next build, and raised over \$55,000 for the organization.

Even more importantly, I got the chance to leave campus and see what Syracuse was really made of. I saw schoolyards, grocery stores, and gas stations. I saw basketball courts and parks. I saw wealth, and I saw poverty. Most of all, I saw community, particularly through the people who peered into our windows as we drove along Colvin Street to our house on the southwest side of Syracuse. Old, young, male, female, black, white—here were the face and body of Syracuse, and I felt I was the only student privileged enough to be a part of it all.

#### The Call to Action

That day in Professor Coplin's office marked a turning point in my civic engagement. My first significant leadership role in the public sector opened my eyes to the reality of community service on the SU campus. In fact, my heightened involvement with Habitat highlighted a discomfiting trend among my fellow students. I noticed that very few people ever ventured off "the Hill" into urban Syracuse, unless they were going to Armory Square or to Carousel Mall two place that, though fun and useful, do not even start to reflect the true character of the city.

"Well, ok," I said to myself, "there seem to be a good number of people who are doing community service, so it can't be all bad." So I looked at the active students more closely, only to realize that the same 200 students were doing *everything*, and even their activities did not seem to integrate them into the fabric of a city where they would spend four college years.

In my newly minted public service sight, the situation was unacceptable at a prestigious institution that claimed to turn out well-rounded students. Every day I served Habitat, my experiential learning far surpassed some of my dryer classroom lessons. My Habitat work drove the point *home*, literally and figuratively. Syracuse was—is—a city, a community, and a home to diverse groups of people in terms of race, gender, education, and socioeconomics. Understanding my role in this city as a younger student deepened my perceptions of what it meant to maintain civic responsibility, and I became more convinced that my peers were lacking this important life lesson.

#### **The Thesis Project**

## Stage One: Genesis

Simultaneous to jumping into Habitat, I was participating in General Honors as an underclassman and greatly enjoying the experience. When it came time to decide whether I would pursue a thesis, I barely had to think. Here was a chance to hone my fledgling filmmaking skills, increase my experience, and combine my varied interests into one project. Through my Television-Radio-Film major, I would bring my message to the masses!

But wait... what was my message?

I identified the three "certainties" I did have. (If there's one thing I have learned from my thesis project, it's that nothing is ever set in stone.) One, the project had to be video broadcast because television was a popular and accessible medium on-campus, plus all of my personal technical experience was in video work. Two, I wanted the project either to be a documentary or to have a documentary aesthetic. I had done several documentaries, both for class and independently, and I felt a particular affinity for the format and the process. Three, the subject of the thesis had to be related to a social justice issue that I could investigate, document, and turn into an educational opportunity for my peers.

#### Stage Two: Evolution

With these preliminary thoughts as my only brainstorming, I hit upon a subject I found challenging and interesting. At the time, my friend was

volunteering at Hillside, an institution for emotionally troubled children in the Syracuse area. Before hearing of her experiences, I had no idea such a place existed. My curiosity was piqued. I wrote in my Honors Thesis application:

I'm leaning toward documenting Hillside because institutional living is a very misunderstood component of the American medical system. Therefore, I would like to learn more about it so that I can teach other people the humanity within this type of organization and promote awareness and compassion for both the patients and their caretakers.

Armed with my convictions, I approached my HNR 309 planning group with the idea, only to find out from Dr. Bruce Carter that the concept involved more red tape, clearances, and obstacles than I ever knew existed. It had everything that gives the IRB a headache: filming, confidentiality, medical records, questionable safety, children... you name it, my idea had it. As a junior looking ahead to an already-hectic senior year, I decided that feasibility would have to outweigh nobility. Hillside was panned, and back to the drawing board I went.

Around this time, in the course of scoping out potential Honors advisors, I set up a meeting with Professor Sharon Hollenback, an Honors vet and a TRF guru. Before I even made myself comfortable in the chair in her office, she fired the following questions at me: "What would you like to do, why do you want to do it, and who is your audience?"

I could somewhat answer the first question, had a vague idea about the second, and had not really considered the third. So we discussed documentaries, news programs, radio documentaries, screenplays, and media synergy. She told me about Hillside and Carrier and other Syracuse institutions. Overall, she forced me to question my assumptions, and in doing so, helped me arrive at the important answers to her three questions. I look back on my chicken-scratch notes now and laugh at the red ink slashed at the bottom of the page:

- "Inspire kids to get off campus," it reads. "Educate. Teach <u>how</u> to help, not just where to help." Thus I answered question #1.
- "Students live in a bubble up here on campus. Problem is, they don't know how to get involved. Awareness leads to activism." Thus I answered question #2.
- "Students don't understand how community works, but they need community." And that's how I answered question #3 and determined that students needed to be my audience.

I could tell that I had hit upon a much more organic idea. I felt that internal "click" that only happens when I finally manage to line up my thoughts, needs, wants, and skills. My concept had evolved: Through my TRF major, I would reach out to students and teach them what community was, where they fit into it, and how they could get involved, all in an effort to raise civic awareness and promote active citizenry.

#### Stage Three: Refinement

Then I needed to refine my project parameters, so I turned to Professor Larry Elin to be my thesis advisor. Initial discussions with him led to several key elements of the project. First, I further refined my audience of "college students" to "primarily freshmen and sophomores" to emphasize my conviction that students needed to get involved early. Appealing to seniors in their last semester would not engender any meaningful town-gown relationship.

Also in this vein, I realized that reaching the truly apathetic student was beyond my scope. If a student truly did not care, nothing I said or did could change that. Therefore, this project was meant for the students who had the desire to connect, but were not sure how or where to start. I would provide that springboard for them through my project.

Second, I committed myself to defining and distinguishing key elements of community, and then finding a local organization or institution that embodied that element. Though the concept of community was complex and could be defined innumerable ways, I thought that four broad components would give student an introductory synopsis through clear, direct, and personally applicable examples. At this stage, my elements still had to be defined, but I planned to conduct scholarly research and personal interviews.

Finally, I considered the attention span and time availability of most college students (my audience). They would not be willing nor able to sit through a thirty-minute documentary. To reach them effectively, I decided to do a unified campaign of public service announcements, each lasting around three minutes. I chose this format and length for a few reasons. First, I could maintain my desired documentary feel. Second, I was going to take Shortform Production as an Honors thesis class requirement. Third, I felt I needed a longer format than a commercial to adequately teach and give ample information to the viewing audience. Finally, by putting them all in a campaign and in essence branding them, I could fit in my marketing background and make the pieces recognizable as part of a whole.

My project was no longer a shadowy idea, but a concrete vision, and I felt confident in my ability to execute it. It was time to begin pre-production.

#### Stage Four: The Impact of <u>Bowling Alone</u>

Since my ultimate personal goal of completing a thesis was for direct insight and experience with the entire production process, my main focus was not amassing a wealth of scholarly research. However, the campaign was not going to work if I did not have any basis in fact for my community elements, so I once again went to Larry for his advice. He recommended the book <u>Bowling Alone:</u> <u>The Collapse and Revival of American Community</u>, by Robert D. Putnam. Since the ideas presented in this book are integral to my campaign, I will present the highlights here.

Putnam's main thesis concerns social capital theory, which is the core idea that social networks have value and that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations.<sup>1</sup> Basically, be an active member of your community, and everyone benefits. However, Putnam also notes a significant decline in volunteerism and civic engagement over the last few decades, particularly in community projects that require collective effort, as opposed to "individualized acts of benevolence."<sup>2</sup>

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Robert D. Putnam, <u>Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community</u> (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 20-21.
<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 132

Even more germane to my project, Putnam cites a huge generational disparity in volunteerism. My grandparents' generation was—and is—particularly active and involved, providing some of the highest community service level to date, whereas the baby boomer generation "continues to be less disposed to civic engagement than their parents and even to some extent less than their children." <sup>3</sup> And who are these comparatively active children? My generation, also known as my target audience. Among other statistics, Putnam states that the millennial generation's rate of volunteerism is up "with 42 percent of [college] freshmen donating their time for at least one hour a week, compared with 27 percent in 1987."<sup>4</sup> He summarizes the potential of these developments as follows:

A wide range of evidence suggests that young Americans in the 1990s displayed a commitment to volunteerism without parallel among their immediate predecessors. This development is the most promising sign of any that I have discovered that American might be on the cusp of a new period of civic renewal, especially if this youthful volunteerism persists into adulthood and begins to expand beyond individual caregiving to broader engagement with social and political issues.<sup>5</sup>

Eureka! After reading these facts, I suddenly realized a deeper dimension to my project. I started to think of my project as a small but important step in fostering citizenship among my peers, so that when they graduated and settled in more permanent locations with jobs and families, they would have a thirst for involvement and an idea of some places to start. My PSA campaign could aid Putnam's vision of civic renewal by putting another tool in the media arsenal and influencing students at a critical juncture in their lives—the college years. In my own small way, I could keep the volunteering trend alive.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ibid., 133. Chapter 7: Altruism, Volunteering, and Philanthropy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ibid., 265. 1998 study. Chapter 14: From Generation to Generation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ibid., 133

The influence of <u>Bowling Alone</u> did not stop there. Putnam also defines six spheres of community—youth and schools, the workplace, urban and metropolitan design, religion, arts and culture, and politics and government<sup>6</sup>—and gives prescriptive suggestions on how to increase participation levels within each sector. With my intended audience of college underclassmen in mind, I condensed these spheres into four that I felt were more pertinent to our immediate SU environment: youth and education, arts and entertainment, homes and neighborhoods, and politics and government.

A note on the reasoning behind my sphere revision: First, most students are not directly involved in urban and metropolitan design, but they *are* all part of the greater Syracuse University neighborhood, so I honed in on homes and neighborhoods. Second, the working world, though important in the future, is not yet a reality for students, whose primary job is their education, so I eliminated that sector entirely. Third, I considered religion to be a comparatively hot button topic; I did not want to be misinterpreted as trying to "sell God" to anyone, so I decided it was easier to eliminate that one as well. Finally, my four spheres came down to a "quality over quantity" issue. Due to the impending time restraints of senior year, I determined that my energy was best spent on making four great PSAs rather than six mediocre ones.

#### Stage Five: Pre-production

OK, so I had my spheres—now what? I needed funding and I needed organizations. In the spring of my junior year (2004), I applied for Crown

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Ibid., 404. Chapter 24: Toward an Agenda for Social Capitalists.

Funding and received summer wages and material reimbursement. Being a Crown Scholar enabled me to take two unpaid production internships during the summer, which in turn gave me valuable "real world" exposure to producers' responsibilities. By seeing how the professionals researched and managed their wide array of projects, I better understood what was required of me for my thesis schedule.

Also during the summer I began researching which organizations best fit my four spheres. You might call this stage the "List o' Lists," as I wrote huge brainstorming lists of organizations, community leaders, schools, theaters, community centers, and businesses. By the time I returned to school in the fall, phone numbers and web addresses in hand, I was ready to start contacting potential organizations.

By utilizing the closely connected network of SU volunteer coordinators, professors who live and work in the area, and executive directors at different places around town, I soon confirmed which organizations would partner with me. I worked with the Southwest Community Center (for youth and education), The Redhouse (for arts and entertainment), the Westcott Community Center (for homes and neighborhoods), and the Onondaga County Board of Elections (for politics and government). These organizations were chosen for their proximity to campus, the ease of getting there (either by car or public transportation), their relevance to the appropriate community element, the capacity (and desire) for students to volunteer there, and their willingness to be filmed. Within the first three weeks of school I scheduled and held interviews with the respective directors. My sessions followed a particular procedure. I recorded each interview on audiotape for personal reference during my scriptwriting process. I also wrote an interview template to act as my outline for each session, ensuring that I asked similar questions and received parallel information from each place. This step assured that my scripts would unify the campaign. I also designed a contract that each director signed and dated, so that we would all have legal protection. Finally, I toured the facilities and noted any restrictions the organization placed on my filming.

Overall, I really enjoyed this part of the process. I loved meeting Steve Susman, Carol Kim, Patrick O'Connor, Theardis Martino, Chandice Haste, and Ed Szcznesiak—perhaps the friendliest, most approachable leaders I have yet encountered. I still marvel at their willingness to open their doors and stories to me, and I hope that this campaign delivers to them the much-needed, muchappreciated volunteers that they seek.

Armed with my copious notes and research for each place, I wrote a script and corresponding storyboard for each institution and faxed it over for approval before setting up any filming dates. The scripts followed a certain format: narrator introduction, narration from the executive director, background information, explanation of connection to community, ways students can get involved, and reiteration of contact information. By the end of September 2004, my scripts were approved, revised, and ready to be filmed—all under the newly minted campaign title *The Connection is YOU*. The actual filming process ran throughout the entire month of October quite possibly one of the busiest months I have ever experienced. With the exception of classmate Tyler Neuendorffer's assistant camera work for a couple of Westcott sessions, I was solely responsible for reserving, picking up and dropping off the equipment, coordinating the shooting schedule with the organizations, working the camera, following the storyboard, and generally troubleshooting the myriad headaches that emerge in even the most meticulously planned shoots. (I probably could have extended the shoot into November and saved some rushing, but I was too afraid that Syracuse winter weather would rear its ugly head. Not only did I want sunny, snow-free shots, but I also needed clear roads and dry sidewalks to ensure my transportation safety. So October it was.)

A note on technical components: The PSA source footage was recorded on assorted Panasonic and Fujifilm Mini-DV cassettes, as well as one DV-CAM. I used a PD-150 on loan from the Newhouse Cage, Omni light kits, lavaliere microphones for the interviews and a basic tripod. For lighting, I used the 3-point system for all formal interviews and the Board of Elections sequences, and available lighting during all other parts. All computer screen footage was shot on my personal laptop

I came to love and appreciate my organizational skills and attention to detail, two qualities that served me well for those four hectic weeks. I shudder to think what might have happened if I had breezed through my pre-production process. As it was, I had, on average, three separate shooting sessions a week, often at odd times of the day, to correspond to the organizations' activity schedules. I learned how to maximize my equipment rental time, economize my shots, and work quickly when I had only 30 to 45 minutes to shoot. I also had to deal with a variety of subjects—children, teenagers, developmentally disabled people, senior citizens, acting talent, and more. The entire month required a degree of patience and flexibility I was not sure I had in me, but by the beginning of November, I looked at my six source tapes with pride and relief.

Little did I know the real work was just beginning...

#### Stage Seven: Post-Production

Larry allowed me to use his designated hard drive in the Newhouse Edit Suites for editing on Final Cut Pro, and Professor James Biddle generously allowed me to schedule editing time. Before I left for winter break, I screened every source tape and wrote detailed edit logs for each segment. Thanks to my pre-production planning, I had all the shots I needed for my storyboards, so no refilming was necessary. When I returned from winter break, I began my threemonth editing process on the Final Cut Pro system. Again, my campaign format proved a blessing because I did not have to "reinvent the wheel" for each sequence; instead, I was able to use the same introductions, conclusions, and narrations for all of them. Throughout the whole process, I constantly revised and tightened the scripts, became more discriminating about shot selection, and experimented with the Final Cut tools. Overall, editing the individual pieces proved relatively straightforward. I first laid down the narration tracks and then timed the visuals to the dialogue. My biggest stumbling block came in the form of the Adobe After Effects 5.5 program, where my grand visions about the opening graphics collided with my actual expertise. I wasted time and energy in fretting over tools I could not figure out how to use. Once I accepted that I did not have enough time left in the year to become an After Effects master, I used what tools I did know to achieve a simplified version of my original plan and moved on from there.

Recent calculations show that between logging tapes, editing, After Effects design and DVD burning, I spent over 72 hours in the edit suites on this project alone. And yet in all that time, I never had any glaring technical trouble no lost projects, offline media, or other problems that create Edit Suite hysteria. For that, I am truly thankful.

## Stage Eight: Distribution

I had the great fortune to present the final edited version of *The Connection is YOU* to Honors freshmen at their "Connecting Communities" dinner on March 30, 2005. There I was, in front of my target audience, the people for whom this project was always intended. (I made a joke at the beginning of my speech that if the campaign really stank, anyone could come up and tell me so after the presentation, since I had only three weeks to fix it. No one came up, so I'm taking that as a blessing.) The project was very well-received by students and faculty alike, and I had the benefit of seeing how it played in front of a live audience.

In the final weeks of the school year, I focused my energy on avenues of distribution for *The Connection is YOU*. In keeping with my original goal, the campaign will be aired on Orange Television Network and by UU Cinema starting this month and continuing at least throughout 2005-2006 school year. These two venues will reach a wide audience, and in turn, educate and inform the students.

Final copies of the campaign were burned onto Memorex DVD-R discs and delivered to all organizations and advisors involved in the project.

#### Reflections

Overall, this project was three years in the making, if I count my influential involvement in Habitat as the first half. The second half was spent within the structure of the Thesis Project—classes, seminars, and self-managed work. In that time I confirmed my chosen career path, discovered my writing and producing talents, and realized the importance of teamwork (and how hard it was to do this entire project nearly single-handedly). Needless to say, I now appreciate the perks and challenges of all production roles, from prominent ones like editor and director to the behind-the-scenes ones like grip and gaffer.

On a grander scale, this project reaffirmed for me just how tremendous a resource people can be. My most joyous moments in this process were spent with the people of Syracuse. How exciting to think that, for one month, my life would intersect with so many others! I still cannot believe they permitted me to record their humanity in all its beautiful imperfection. When I graduate, I will miss campus, but I will miss the city just as much.

If I could change just one thing about the project, I would find time to do more scholarly research. I based much of my project on personal experience and observation, using Putnam's book as an authoritative source. Since this project was a practice in production, I do not think the project suffers from the lack of sources, but I personally found the topic fascinating and could have written an entirely separate traditional thesis on it.

## The End?

Eighteen months after it officially began, does my project still fit into the Syracuse University landscape? Like so many media ventures, did it become outdated six months from its inception in a constantly evolving field? I do not believe so. If anything, I believe the project is more appropriate than when I started, and I think its roots point to a dramatic shift in the University's ideology, largely due to the new direction set by Chancellor Nancy Cantor with the "Soul of Syracuse" campaign.

Never was a Chancellor's advent more fortuitous to a student's project. In light of her initiative, *The Connection is YOU* becomes even more applicable because students will be actively looking for ways to get involved. The University has always had many community service requirements and service learning opportunities, and more crop up every year. In fact, the Honors Program is about to implement one under its new curriculum. Within this transition to civic engagement, my project serves as a small but important student-to-student step in bridging the University to the city. I understand how students think, because I *am* one, and my work can add an experienced, knowledgeable voice to the growing dialogue.

Beyond DVDs, beyond meetings, beyond editing, what do I perceive to be next challenge? My generation <u>must</u> fulfill Putnam's hope of an actively engaged society. It is no longer an option. We must dedicate our energy, advocate our mission, and educate ourselves and others about the importance of community connection. I believe in my generation with 100% of my being, and, along with Putnam, believe that our commitment to social capital will ensure the revival of American community.

*The Connection is YOU* may be finished as a product, yet it has just started its influence. I am proud to put my name on it. But I am even prouder to call myself a citizen of the Syracuse community, for it has made me a better person, and the lessons learned here will never fade.