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Mottos: Learned Through Life

David Edelstein

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Abstract

Mottos: Learned Through Life is a seven-part video series, investigating leadership and life lessons in multiple forms as experienced and told by people from a diverse set of ages, backgrounds and professions. Through the telling of the story of a defining experience from his or her life, each interviewee relates the lessons he or she learned to a broader set of life mottos that any viewer can utilize. Each story of the series is designed to inspire the viewer and let the viewer feel like he or she is having a personal conversation with the interviewee. This allows the viewer to meet these characters in an intimate setting, which he or she might not otherwise have the opportunity to experience.

As the broadcast and digital journalist, it is my job to serve the audience as the storyteller. From selecting fitting subjects to setting up interviews to asking thought-provoking questions to successfully using proper recording equipment and editing software to designing an appropriate digital layout, I act as the person in the middle, granted access to both high-profile and everyday people, learning their stories and sharing those stories with the public in a concise, understandable and meaningful way. Unlike other forms of broadcast and digital journalism, I do not appear in the video series. Instead, I act behind the scenes as the messenger, ensuring clear communication in allowing the interviewees to tell their stories and mottos entirely in their own words.

As a multimedia digital work, *Mottos: Learned Through Life* can be accessed in its entirety on the Internet at www.DavidZEdelstein.com/honors-thesis.

Executive Summary

Wow, do I have a story to tell you.

Here are the seven life mottos to live by.

I bet each of these above statements sparked your curiosity at least slightly. No matter who you are or where you come from, humans are interested in stories and in learning how to better their lives.

Think about this: when you are in conversation with someone, what do you do? When you see a friend or sit at the dinner table with family, what do you do? When you recall what happened in your day, week, life, what do you do? My guess would be that one answer common among all of these situations is that you tell stories.

Humans tell stories. At the dinner table and at events, at the highest points of life and at the lowest points of life, people tell stories. People tell stories through conversation and literature and movies and television shows and podcasts. As people live their lives, they understand what they are going through and process the world through stories. I have learned that people look for meaning from these stories; people want to know what the purpose is for what they or others have experienced and they want to know how this meaning they find is applicable to what they do now and in the future. And I have learned that humans relate to other humans and other human experiences. Stories about numbers and science and abstract thoughts may be lost on a person or go over his or her head, but people always seem to understand, relate to and be interested in what happens to other people.

It is because of this that, as a broadcast and digital journalist, I see myself as a storyteller. Whether it be news, sports, entertainment or general conversation, people understand and tell

stories, and it is my job to find meaningful stories and tell them in an understandable and purposeful manner.

I would say that one of the biggest contributors to my story—to the person I am today—is the Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RYLA). RYLA is a leadership program run by Rotary International that is designed for young adults and takes place all over the world. As a junior at Paramus High School in my hometown, Paramus, New Jersey, I was fortunate to be selected to attend the Rotary International District 7490 RYLA program in May 2014.

For me, RYLA was life-changing, and if not life-*changing* per say, definitely life-influencing and life-enhancing. Throughout the six-day program, I learned about personal, team, community and global development: stepping out of my comfort zone, trusting my team, accomplishing goals and objectives, using and sharing resources, being a servant leader and thinking optimistically. It is not possible to fully explain the experience I had at RYLA, as RYLA is an experiential program. What I can say in words, though, is that I went home from RYLA feeling inspired, motivated, part of a community that wants to lead by serving others and making a positive difference in the world and those around us. I gained mental confidence and direction and took home a new definition of what it is to lead and new meaning behind forming relationships with people. I started to understand the kind of person I was and who I wanted to become as well as how I was going to be that person throughout all that I do.

Mottos: Learned Through Life draws its purpose from this mentality. It is a seven-part video series investigating leadership and life lessons in multiple forms as experienced and told by people from a diverse set of ages, backgrounds and professions. Just as the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics says journalists should “seek the truth and report it,” in *Mottos: Learned Through Life*, I have sought meaning diverse people have learned through life

and have used the journalistic skill I have honed at Syracuse University and the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications to inspire viewers with these messages. *Mottos: Learned Through Life* is the product of longer conversations where I got to know both high-profile and everyday people beyond the formal titles they have earned.

A journalist's job is to speak with people others do not have access to or simply do not have the time to speak with as they go about their own busy lives and then to share the stories he or she has learned with the public. In *Mottos: Learned Through Life*, I have had the opportunity to speak with a Rotary International Assistant District Governor who is originally from Africa, a young gym manager who rode equestrian in college, a congressman of the United States of America, a boy scout and venturer who teaches leadership, the chancellor of a major research university, the captain of a college women's ice hockey team and my 94-year-old grandfather. I asked about their lives, who they are, how they see themselves, moments and people that have stuck out to them, lessons they have learned from experiences, what they believe in, who they are thankful for and what advice they would give to others. With the use of computer editing software, I have taken these full conversations and edited concise, meaningful, powerful stories in an understandable manner.

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Critical Statement

And then it began. Junior year of college had started already. They always said college went fast, but this was different than I thought it would have felt. While I was amazed that the past two years of college had already gone by, I recognized that there were still two years remaining. Or in my case, just three semesters, but I'll get to that later. Starting Fall 2017, it was one of the first times in my life that I looked back at the past two years and thought that, yes, it did feel like two full years had gone by, that they were full of learning and involvement in activities and meeting new people and accomplishing tasks. I could see how far I had come since having a literal anxiety attack before moving into Sadler Hall in August 2015—how much I had grown as a person in that time and how I could have never predicted where everything would lead me up to that moment.

I would say that one of the biggest contributors to the person I am today—one of the things that was life-changing, and if not life-*changing* per say, definitely life-influencing and life-enhancing—is the Rotary Youth Leadership Awards (RYLA). RYLA is a leadership program run by Rotary International that is designed for young adults takes place all over the world. As a junior at Paramus High School in my hometown, Paramus, NJ, I was fortunate to be selected to attend the Rotary International District 7490 RYLA program in May 2014. Throughout the six-day program, I learned about personal, team, community and global development: stepping out of my comfort zone, trusting my team, accomplishing goals and objectives, using and sharing resources and servant leadership. It is not possible to fully explain the experience I had at RYLA, as RYLA is an experiential program. What I can say in words is that I went home from RYLA feeling inspired, motivated, part of a community that wants to lead by serving others and making a positive difference in the world and those around us. I gained

mental confidence and direction and took home a new definition of what it is to be a leader and new meaning behind forming relationships with people. I started to understand the kind of person I was and who I wanted to become as well as how I was going to be that person throughout all that I do.

Just over a year later, in 2015, I started my college career, studying Broadcast and Digital Journalism at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. In March of 2016, I reconnected with RYLA 7490 and joined the leadership team that would be planning and executing the program. Along with my personal studies and development at college, I realized there was a lot I was going to have to learn about the messages and teachings of RYLA before leading the program in June. At RYLA, it is said that the leadership team experience is meant to rival the experience of the participants—returning as a leader of the program provides a learning experience about servant leadership, and personal, team, community and global development at an even deeper level. The same was true even after RYLA 2016 as I kept learning and working on the RYLA team and then led RYLA 2017. Every day was an opportunity to learn more and keep developing as a person, and RYLA accelerated my understanding of being a person on a team in a community in the world, as everything is when looking at it from the right perspective, as I also continued on the path of growth that college naturally provided through both textbook and experiential education.

My RYLA and my BDJ crossed paths during the Spring 2018 semester. I was very fortunate to have been accepted for an internship with NBC for the Winter Olympics in February 2018, and being one semester ahead with college credits, I took a leave of absence from Syracuse University. Without classes to worry about, I suddenly had a lot more free time than I had ever been used to in March, April and May. This free time provided opportunity. In the summer of

2017, I began making connections with leaders of RYLA programs all over the United States. Based on the community and global goals of RYLA 7490, I had decided to reach out to members of the larger RYLA community and make connections. One of these connections was RYLA 5330 in California. To keep a long story short, I was offered the opportunity to observe RYLA 5330 in April 2018, and it was an excellent experience.

To see why this all matters, jump back about one year ago. In thinking about all the possibilities I could pursue as a BDJ student for my Honors thesis, I kept on coming back to wanting to speak with people, get to know them, ask them what they do in life (profession) and get to know how they use leadership in what they do. Maybe then I could hear various perspectives about what leadership qualities are necessary in life and combine them all to get one agglomerate sense of leadership. In fear that not everyone I spoke with would have the vocabulary necessary to explain leadership (and in recognizing that as a video project, these people would do most of the explaining and I would act as the storyteller), it was suggested to me to ask people I spoke with about their role models and what they saw in them, something it might be easier for them to speak about. When I started doing this, I became increasingly interested in figuring out who a person is, what makes him or her tick, what makes a person who they are, how does a person view himself or herself and how does a person think others view him or her.

I planned to start filming in the summer of 2018. Throughout the Spring 2018 semester, I spent time explaining my project idea to people that I wanted to speak with and started planning times to meet up and film. I worked with my advisor and the Newhouse Cage to be able to get video equipment to me in New Jersey. It turned out that I had a full week off from my internship

in July, and so that was the proposed week that Newhouse would allow me to have the equipment.

As it got to that week in July, shipping and insurance concerns halted the process. The Cage was ready to send me the equipment, but by the time it would get to me, I would have just one day to film before having to send the equipment back. So, I spoke with my advisor and the Cage, all who were understanding of the situation, and cancelled the shipment of the equipment.

But, I still wanted to film these interviews and utilize the people who were willing to give me their time to help. This presented an opportunity. Before I went to RYLA 5330 in April, I had been using my iPhone 5s for approximately three years. For the last two of those years, I was protesting *against* my parents who wanted me to upgrade my phone (I know, I'm an unusual college student). I was saying we did not need to spend the money on it, I could deal with the storage issues I was having, there was no reason to upgrade. My parents were saying I am studying journalism, I am constantly taking photos and video on my phone and we should fix the storage issues. It is true that in Fall 2017 I started using my phone even more for journalistic purposes, not only taking photo and video and sending it out but also having shot and edited an entire package on my phone for CitrusTV, the student-run television station. It also turned out that the Camp Director for RYLA 5330 is a professional photographer, and he even asked what phone I had and told me the same things my parents did about being a journalist and using my phone for photos and video. The Camp Director even joked with me that if I showed up in California without upgrading my phone that he would send me back to Syracuse. So, amid all of this, I did upgrade my phone to the iPhone 8. The first picture I took with it of a beautiful sunset over Waverly Avenue at Syracuse University was phenomenal. I was amazed with the rich colors and quality of the image. This is not an advertisement for the phone, but I want to point

out how this phone, this piece of technology I carry in my pocket, is so amazing. It might even rival some of the professional equipment out there. The Camp Director professional photographer told me he used his phone to shoot an entire movie and that it was amazing. I could see why.

So without a camera from the Cage and in a world that is increasingly requiring journalists to be available 24/7 and to use their mobile devices to take photos and video, use social media and even edit and export full news packages on the go, I thought it would be an interesting challenge to use my phone to conduct my interviews over the summer. What would I be able to do with my phone? What would be the challenges? What would the quality of the video and audio be? How cool would this exercise of changing media be in the midst of creating my Honors Thesis! It would add another dimension to what I was learning and experimenting with. I was approved to move forward with this idea. I bought a tripod for my phone and began filming.

While filming, I encountered some challenges. It was harder to focus, set light exposure and get the perfect shot I wanted with my phone. Also, the phone recorded all noise, including a lot of ambient sound, such as crickets chirping during an interview I conducted outside. Aside from these minor issues, however, the video and audio largely came out looking and sounding very good and of high quality.

While filming, I ran into a different problem, though. It seemed that, for some of my interviews, I did not seem to have enough B-roll for what I would need to make the story visually pleasing. For example, my first interview was with a friend of mine who wants to be a math teacher and whose role model is an uncle of hers who was a police officer that passed away. I realized I would not be able to get video of my friend teaching in a classroom, one because the schools would not let me in (especially with a camera) anyway, and two because my

friend decided to go back to school for another year rather than beginning a teaching job. It also was going to be a challenge to get video to fill the conversation about her uncle as a police officer because her uncle is unfortunately no longer alive and filming police-related video would bring up its own set of barriers and obstacles. For some stories, I asked the interviewee to email me some photos and videos that related to what they spoke with me about, such as one person who spoke about participating in equestrian throughout her life and learning a lot about it. So, I spoke with my advisor about using b-roll like Goalcast—a video series on Facebook—does. (Side note: Goalcast debuted after I came up with the idea to tell inspirational video stories, which is basically what Goalcast is now.)

At this point, I am drafting messages to people I want to speak with here in Syracuse during the Fall 2018 semester, ranging from Chancellor Syverud to a firefighter to students who also have stories. I am looking for a diverse set of stories from a diverse set of people: people of different ages, backgrounds and jobs. The main decision I am about to make is what I want the final product to look like: a series of videos or a single hour/hour-and-a-half product that would air, and how do I want to be part of these stories and narrate them. Making this decision will allow me to understand how to format the work I am doing the rest of this semester and will dictate how long each segment would be and how many interviews I need in the end. I am currently functioning under the “as many as are good” philosophy.

To round out my project, I started a social media campaign to act as an extension to spread life inspiration even further. I posted positive quotes, images, inspiration, messages and life lessons primarily on Instagram and Snapchat.

As the months continued, I have learned an incredible amount about storytelling, especially about visual storytelling for broadcast media platforms. I have also spent considerable time

thinking about what kind of stories I want to tell, how I want to tell them, whose voices should be heard, which images should be shown and what feeling and impact the videos and overall project should create. This has allowed me to focus my questions and narrow my approach to gathering video and sound from my interviewees.

What I have learned is that humans tell stories. At the dinner table and at events, at the highest points of life and at the lowest points of life, people tell stories. People tell stories through conversation and literature and movies and television shows and podcasts. As people live their lives, they understand what they are going through and process the world through stories. I have learned that people look for meaning from these stories; people want to know what the purpose is for what they or others have experienced and they want to know how this meaning they find is applicable to what they do now and in the future. And I have learned that humans relate to other humans and other human experiences. Stories about numbers and science and abstract thoughts may be lost on a person or go over his or her head, but people always seem to understand, relate to and be interested in what happens to other people.

This is a profound realization that has influenced how I navigate my interviewing, my editing and my own storytelling. In speaking with the diverse range of people I have been in contact with—including a friend who is going to be a math teacher, a young gym manager who rides as part of an equestrian team, Syracuse University Chancellor Syverud and others—I am looking for the stories they have to tell from their lives that have left an impression on them. I want them to tell me these impactful stories so I can use their own voice to tell it to the viewer. I want to know what it is that makes these stories so powerful, what it is these people learned from these life experiences, what it is that makes these people tick. And then I want to know why these messages, these life lessons, these themes of life are powerful beyond an individual

experience, an individual moment that happened for them. How do they apply these lessons to their job, their family, their career? How can these lessons be important to someone else who this person may never meet and who may have completely different life experiences than them but who will see and hear their story through viewing my project?

This, I think, is the key. As a broadcast and digital journalist—as a storyteller—I am the connection between the interviewees and the viewers. I am the person who is finding these people and hearing their stories for the hundreds, thousands, millions of other people who are doing other things. It is my job to make these connections, to listen and to ask proper questions and then to present these stories in an understandable, engaging, interesting way in a reasonable amount of time. As the broadcast and digital journalist, I have the platform to communicate with a large amount of people. It is my responsibility to empower people to tell their stories, to allow other people to see and hear these stories, to find meaning people can relate to and to inspire them with it.

Because, at the end of the day, we are humans, and we thrive through our relation—our human connection—to other humans and the experiences they have.

When I look back to video interviews I did toward the beginning of the process in summer 2018, I can see how far my question-asking and general interview skills have come. It is interesting to see how much harder it was to edit the stories that I recorded toward the beginning of the process than the interviews I got later because of this growth I experienced.

