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### The Women's Advocacy: A Nonprofit by Women for Women

Samantha Aberizk

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**The Women's Advocacy: A Nonprofit By Women, for Women**

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

Samantha Aberizk

Candidate for Bachelor of Arts  
and Renée Crown University Honors  
Spring 2018

Honors Capstone Project in Communications Design

Capstone Project Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_  
Prof. Robert Cooney

Capstone Project Reader: \_\_\_\_\_  
Title

Honors Director: \_\_\_\_\_  
Chris Johnson, Interim Director

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**Abstract:**

The Women's Advocacy (WA) is a hypothetical, not-for-profit organization that empowers women of adverse or catastrophic backgrounds. With the support of female volunteers, the organization strives to prevent and respond to the oppressive behaviors that hinder potential for a healthy and successful lifestyle. Through marketing strategy and community outreach, the WA is expanding its network of volunteers so that we may offer the best services possible and foster social justice and equality within our communities.

## **Executive Summary:**

From the moment we are born, we fall victim to our circumstances and what is encoded into our DNA. We are classified, segregated and appropriated into our respective cultures without say and without notice. There are a multitude of factors that divide the human race, most of which we simply have no control over. Yet these are often the factors we are most judged for. Whether it is gender, race, religion or class, we find that these characteristics define us and define the way we look at others as well.

If it is our own DNA that makes us different, then it is our differences that make us special. But why have we become so afraid to be different? Why have we become conditioned to want to fit in when we are born to stand out? It is true that we all possess different talents and strengths and by the same standard, different weaknesses that define us. We see humanity making the greatest strides when we put these differences aside and use our strengths to achieve a common goal.

For this reason, civic and community engagement have played a huge role in shaping the lives of others to better mankind. With so many worthy causes, it can be difficult to know where you're strengths are most needed. Similarly, it can be easy to feel helpless with so many in need. For this reason, donating our time and efforts to not-for-profit organizations has become a sort of noble act. Too often we chose not to acknowledge the issues that do not directly affect us.

The Women's Advocacy is nonprofit, 501c3 organization that is empowering women in need by utilizing the strengths of others. With the dedication of female volunteers, the Women's Advocacy is working to end gender-based issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault and sexual harassment so that all women may have the

chance to live a healthy and successful life.

Within this network of volunteers and care recipients, it becomes clearer that our realities are different and are circumstantial. There will always someone who has is better than you, and there will always be someone who has it worse. But it is when communities come together that a sort of social harmony is instilled. It is through this harmony and understanding that we can begin to transform our lives and the lives of others to create a better world for all to live in.

## **Chapter 1 | Background:**

To begin, I must first acknowledge my background as a white female, attending a private university where I have been privileged and fortunate enough to pursue my career dreams in the field of design. Growing up, I lived in a predominantly white, upper middle class suburban town where the school system was praised and my parents were able to provide for my siblings and I beyond the point of necessities. Beginning in elementary school, I had been selected among few of my classmates to partake in upper level classwork to challenge myself both academically and creatively. It was during this time that I received awards for the “Young Authors” stories I wrote, finding a true passion for both writing and illustrating these original and elaborate novels.

As an above average student, I continued to take pride in my work as a student. As my experiences both in and out of school flourished my affinity with the arts, I explored the various avenues in which creativity and wit could take me. By the end of my senior year of high school, I had won multiple awards for my artwork, received a 5/5 on my AP Art Concentration—a collection of works entitled “Life for Women”—and was committed to study Communications Design at Syracuse University. The next chapter in my life was about to begin.

Feeling confident in both my abilities, I came to school ready to find out more about my passions and the person I was destined to be. At the time, I had ignorantly assumed that like myself, all of my peers would be equally as prepared and excited to begin their degree. It was not long before culture shock hit however, and I realized that Syracuse, NY was a far more complex city than I had imagined. At the time, I was unaware of the term “intersectionality” which refers to the cumulative effect of several

forms of discrimination combining and overlapping as it does in Syracuse, creating an environment where large minority groups live divided amongst one another. This marginalization takes place both on and around the campus and is even more apparent when comparing the two communities to each other. Never in my life have wealthier or poorer people surrounded me. Never in my life have I felt that everyone around me was exactly the same and also so incredibly different.

It is no question that we live in a divided society and though extremely fortunate in my experiences, I can attest to the discrimination and mistreatment of women. In a country that prides itself on liberty and justice, I often questioned why woman, creator of man, has never been seen as truly equal. Why are women more likely than men to be subject to gender inequality, sexual harassment and domestic violence? It seems that the reputation of our great nation is threatened by the terms of our own sexism and our history.

During my semester abroad nearly a year ago, I found however, that aggressive behaviors towards women were not confined to the United States. This was a global issue that needed tending to. Aside from the countless cat calls, and uncomfortable or offensive encounters that occurred, nothing will ever compare to the night my best friend got into a physical altercation with a man after she refused to go home with him. Even worse — after the bouncer had thrown my friends and I out of the bar, the man who had hit her was allowed to stay. We were dumb-founded, angry and helpless.



## **Chapter 2 | Academic Influences:**

As American citizens, we see the “design” of our nation manifest in several, less tangible outlets like legislation, elections or our own history. But over the past four years, my studies at Syracuse University have helped me to better understand that what truly defines us is our own behaviors. It is these actions, the actions of grassroots organizations we stand behind, and the causes we donate our time and efforts to that truly define us and shape the image of our nation as a whole. Surely laws have been passed to ensure women’s equality, but if these terms were truly enough, the reoccurring issues of gender inequality and sexual harassment or abuse would not plague so many societies. True change stems from the bottom up.

For my capstone project, I chose to brand the Women’s Advocacy; a nonprofit organization that brings justice to women of any background, and any form of abuse or oppression. My idea for this project has evolved thanks to the knowledge I have obtained through the Honors Program paired with the technical skills I have learned in my Communications Design major. But it is the outrage from my own experiences and the experiences of other women around me that has truly fueled my pursuit of this project.

### **Linda Greene and The Newland Foundation for Adult Literacy**

During the fall of my junior year, I was been exposed to humanitarian organizations that were doing good for the Syracuse community through an HNR260 course, called “Community Engagement Through Not-For-Profits.” It is within this course that I came to understand how nonprofit organizations obtain and maintain federal tax exemption and how they execute the missions they support.

After Linda Greene from The Newland Foundation for Adult Literacy came to speak to our class one day, I was inspired by her dedication and wondered why a program that was so impactful was not receiving more attention or greater federal funding. The Newland Foundation works with adults (typically those from outside countries) and provides services such as literacy training, group classes for those seeking a GED, financial literacy courses for any persons who want to learn how to manage their money, resume assistance and ESL classes. Linda shared with us the success stories of her students and even brought in illustrated books and novels written by younger children who had benefited from the program. Through care and compassion, it was evident that Linda and the other volunteers at the Newland Foundation were able to transform the lives of others.

The issue of adult literacy is not one that comes to mind often for me or for those who are privileged enough to receive public schooling, or live in their home country where everyone speaks their native language. It is estimated however, that 32 million adults in America cannot read. That's millions of families, parents and individuals who are limited everyday by their inability to properly communicate with the outside world and with each other, simply because they do not have the right tools. Literacy aids our problem solving, decision-making, communication and awareness at a community and global scale. Even more so, it is what makes it possible for us to obtain and maintain suitable careers and relationships. If we can't properly connect with our communities, society becomes divided.

The problem is, we label someone who is not well versed in English, illiterate. We claim that these people cannot read or write simply because they cannot read or write in English. Who is to say they are not just as talented, just as intelligent as you or I? Who

is to say they are not *more* than talented, *more* than intelligent as you or I? The only difference is they have developed their skills in their language, in their country instead. But too often this country tends to labels “different” as “bad.” We undermine the ability of someone we do not take the time to understand.

In this way, misunderstanding leads us to label or make assumptions about those who are different. After considering the factors of intersectionality, it seems that women, particularly those who are under-represented, discriminated against or oppressed, are being exploited most in this regard. The first step in understanding is to recognize these biases in our own actions and the actions of others. Only then can we begin to amend discriminatory issues in the way so many nonprofits are doing today. But implementation of these organizations alone is not enough. They require support from the community and from the federal government in order to succeed in their missions.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, the government allocates grants to state and local governments based on formulas pre-established by law. These formulas consider historical distributions, area demographics and other relevant factors. Moreover, any funds that trickle down to nonprofit organizations from the government are highly regulated and therefore, nonprofits are given no wiggle room when it comes to operating expenses.

For this reason, many nonprofits, including the Newland Foundation, function primarily from donations and volunteerism. The Women’s Advocacy (WA) benefits in a similar way — with in kind donations from other women who offer their professional skills and services to empower those in need. In kind donations are different than gifts of cash or stock, which can be used to fund goods and services. Rather, in kind donations are the goods and services themselves. Thus, any nonprofit must have a strong mission

and vision statement that highlights their benefits and core values in relation to society. It is within the mission statement that a nonprofit states its reason for being by outlining the principles they are putting into practice. A successful vision statement will “visualize” the organizations hopes for the future by highlighting their cause in action.

### **An Indigenous Viewpoint**

The most critical and important conversations that I have had about society and social issues however, were not in this Honors class, but in “Women’s Rights: A Native American Tradition” taught by Sally Roesch Wagner. It was within this classroom setting that I was able to engage my classmates, who belonged to various minority groups, in meaningful discussion about the roots of female oppression throughout history. Through an indigenous lens, the course went further to examine realms like medicine, food, environment and their respective relations to womanhood.

It is in this class that I came to understand why everyone *should be* entitled to their own individual beliefs, opinions and “truths” based on their own upbringing and experiences. Because the knowledge we pride ourselves on is really just an evolving mindset of acceptance, what we believe to be true might not hold true for others. Too often however, we as a nation allow these subjective “truths” to divide us, making reality a bigoted and circumstantial concept. Our lives are constantly fluctuating between periods of good contrasted with periods of bad; sometimes needing help, other times being able to give it. We thrive as a species when we can achieve a collective mindset that accounts for both ends of the spectrum; a mindset that can only be achieved through listening and understanding.

As part of the curriculum for this Honors course, our class read a book called

Braiding Sweetgrass. Through a series of anecdotes, the author Robin Kimmerer exemplifies the idea of an indigenous mindset; a mindset which is wholesome and collective of all members of the tribe. She explains that the natural world and all of its life beings, including plants, animals, and even waterways, are gifts that present themselves to us everyday. As humans, we too possess many gifts but often do not send them in return—likely because we do not view earth or our talents as gifts at all. Everyday there are animals giving us food, trees giving us air and rivers giving us water to support our lives. Therefore, we must foresee that these lives are being supported as well. With an indigenous mindset, this concept of reciprocity applied to all life-beings of the earth.

In a section of this book entitled “Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of the Grass,” Krimmerer tells of a student who studied the ways of the sweetgrass and the most beneficial ways of harvesting it. What her data concluded was that only the grass that was harvested and received as a gift by humans, continued to flourish the following season. The patches of grass that were not picked shriveled and died away. The example of sweetgrass proves that nature does in fact require human interaction in order to thrive, just as we humans rely on nature to survive. Understanding and acting upon this concept of reciprocity appears to be our gift to the world. The human species was bred with the capacity to understand the life forms that coexists around us. From this understanding, we gain knowledge. Thus our gifts as humans is to know; know and learn what the earth can do for us and what we can do for the earth as well as for each other. That is the way the nature intended it and that is the only way we as humans can survive.

However, Americans have become accustomed to the Western ways of giving – a system in which the earth is not a gift at all, rather a commodity that is free to take and

easy to sell. We discredit the gifts that the world provides perhaps because we cannot see immediate monetary value in commodities like clean water or fresh air. We discredit our own abilities in this same way. We do not work for free, or give help where needed without some sense of reward. We see struggle around us and choose to look the other way. We exploit the gifts of the natural world and of each other.

There is a quote from a philosopher named Joanna Macy who says: “Suppression of our natural responses to disaster is part of the disease of time.” Though this disease may have been man-made by the means of our own governmental brainwashing or despicable actions, we are unable to be stripped of our humanness. If our purpose as human beings (according to indigenous knowledge) is truly to do right by others, to help the living and non-living, then perhaps the gut feelings we so often encounter are not coincidence after all. Perhaps these sudden urges we have to help, or to stand up for our beliefs are innate biological responses. We are, after all, programmed with the capacity to help others. Only we have forgotten to listen to our hearts and minds when our bodies send us this signal. We have been conditioned to not recognize this feeling and it’s meaning as our ancestors once had.

### **Chapter 3 | Design Process:**

#### **Research and Development of Mission**

The Women’s Advocacy is allowing women who are in a position to give help to those in need with the professional skills they already possess. Therefore, expanding the network of volunteers is integral to the success of the WA. To do this, the causes of the WA must become marketable on some level and appeal to an outside audience of

volunteers, not just women who are benefitting from their services. In order to make the mission of the WA more accessible to the public at large, it must be branded properly and offer some form of community outreach.

As a Communications Design major, I have come to understand the ways in which design can function as a problem solving mechanism through compelling experiences — in this case, the problem of women’s oppression. Communications designers pride ourselves for creative thinking and the “big ideas” that some might otherwise call hopes or dreams. These dreams, however, are brought to life through tangible mediums such as exhibits, websites, apps, publications and even packaging design. We have been conditioned to grow these ideas and develop them from start to finish through the design process.

The design process is a lengthy and involves strategic business thinking, utilizing market research and creativity on top of patience and persistence through mistakes and failed attempts. It is through this process that we must problem solve to attract and inspire our end users. Furthermore, we hope to motivate people to respond to our messages. The biggest challenge to this is stepping outside of your own shoes to imagine what the world is like for others. Because of this, the design process never truly starts or ends with aesthetic. Rather, aesthetic comes secondary to delivering the message and meeting the needs that are articulated through research.

My research began by looking at other nonprofit organizations for women, their missions and their branding. I was inspired by organizations such as the Vera House, Safe World for Women Foundation and Women for Women International. Similar to the Women’s Advocacy, these nonprofit organizations operate to provide practical and moral support to women.

It was through these explorations and interviews with volunteers that I was able to formulate the mission statement for my brand that would later lead me to design choices. The mission of the Women’s Advocacy reads as such: “The Women’s Advocacy empowers women of adverse and catastrophic backgrounds by providing legal services, support and shelter to prevent and respond to discriminatory, violent or oppressive behaviors that hinder potential for a healthy and successful lifestyle.” With this cause in mind, I was able to formulate the message I wished to send— become a lifeline for women in need.

### **100, 10, 1 Process**

My process of work is similar to many others in my field in this way. Beginning with research, designers follow a procedure that my program sums up in the phrase “100, 10, 1.” This refers to the process of starting with a broader scope of ideas and narrowing it down through multiples critiques and revisions. As mentioned, the purpose of the Women’s Advocacy is to help women in need through the support of others. Thus, the audience that would be responding to brand messages is split — one group of women who are seeking help and another group of women who are capable of providing it.

I find in most of my design process that a logo is the first step in finding an overall aesthetic after research has been conducted. This is often where the biggest challenges lie, but it is always beneficial to begin on paper before being moving to my computer when designing. The repetitive nature of sketching logos and word marks is tedious, but is crucial to the design process. We, as designers, find that our first ideas are not typically the best and are what we refer to as “first level.” A first level idea might show you literally what the service is providing and can be a difficult mindset to break



away from. For example, some of my first marks for the Women's Advocacy incorporated silhouettes of women and hands to portray the idea of giving. But as I have learned in my design coursework, the best logos are the ones that can portray your cause without showing it verbatim. My design professors often refer to this as being indexical, or being able to imply multiple meanings based on context. It is only through proper communication of your brand (descriptor, means, marketing strategy etc.) that the intended purpose becomes clear.

When I moved past the first level of logo ideation, my biggest challenge was finding a way to accurately portray the brand message and voice of the femininity, compassionate and trustworthiness. I often found myself creating marks that were geometric or bulky and had a sort of hardness about them that did not seem welcoming. Though I wanted the brand to appear strong and reliable, I needed it to be approachable as well.

Through a continued cycle of ideating, I found that through the symbolism of a lifeline, I could target both groups of women the WA is targeting. The hard angles found in both the letter "W" and "A" made it easy to achieve the look of an EKG monitor and directly related to the intentions of the brand on a more conceptual level. Innately, an EKG has a medical connotation — we associate the rise and fall of these waves with the human heart rate and as a sign of life, whereas a lack thereof is associated with signs of death. Though the Women's Advocacy is not dealing with medical encounters, the inherent association with life is integral to the brand.

## **Chapter 4 | Strategic Execution and Impact:**

### **Sharing The Vision:**

A vision statement is another way for nonprofits to communicate their message. As previously mentioned, the vision statement of a nonprofit highlights its cause in action and paints a picture of an idolized world where their mission has been implemented. The vision of the WA reads: “We strive to bring justice and peace to women of oppressed backgrounds so that all women may have an equal opportunity to reach their full potentials and live freely.” These ideals therefore must be represented through marketing and community outreach. Because the Women’s Advocacy works to end serious causes such as, domestic violence, harassment and sexual assault, it was important for these events to create a safe environment where women could motivate one another and feel empowered rather than defeated.

The “Strides for Strides” half marathon, which would be held in places such as Central Park in New York City or Millennium Park in Chicago, is open to the public and raises awareness for the various causes supported by the WA on top of raising money to support its mission. The Strides for Strides half marathons are mainly targeting professional women who would be compelled to donate their time and efforts to support the organization.

In addition to Strides for Strides, I decided to brand another charitable event called the “Youth Revolution” 5K, which would take place in similar urban locations but targets youth and young adults instead. The purpose of this marathon in particular is to show teens that even from a young age, they can become catalysts for change. Oppressive

behaviors that target women are *not* the norm and will not be tolerated in our communities.

The website design for the Women's Advocacy became a crucial part of the brand's ability to advertise upcoming events, spread the organization's message and gain volunteers. In communications design, we view web design as the creation of a digital environment, not just a hypothetical IP address. These environments facilitate and encourage human activity and are reflective and adaptive to the individual voices and content of the brand they identify.

For this reason, one of the most important features of the WA's website is the "escape" button. This button, which is static to the top right of the webpage, allows users to quickly be redirected to a different webpage. I was inspired to include this feature after looking at websites like that of the Vera House, which offers a similar cue. As I have mentioned previously, the challenge for designers can often be to imagine the needs of those you are designing for. In this instance, any woman who is visiting the WA's website for help may be at risk being seen by her perpetrator and so the sites design must take safety into consideration. The "escape" key is therefore a direct reaction to the audience profile and must reflect their needs accordingly. Furthermore, it is attention and consideration to user and interface that allows design to have an impact on social issues.

### **Impact of Design:**

Within the design field, it is easy for humanitarian issues to become second to more commercial industries, clients and brands. However, the problem solving nature of the design process can be used across any discipline. Along with critical debates surrounding feminism and sexual misconduct, social movements and organizations regarding these causes have also risen in eye of the media. These conversations mean that

along with the visionaries leading these movements, designers are at work adding a visual element to the conversation.

In ten years from now (or hopefully sooner) those who engage with my work or with similar nonprofit organizations will already see less injustices towards women occurring in their communities. The Women's Advocacy (or organizations like it) will be recognized for giving the world a relevant perspective from volunteers who are generating change from "on the ground." This grassroots insight will be deemed the fresher, more personal perspective than news from media conglomerates. Because of this, those who engage with my work or similar causes will be inspired to volunteer their own time and efforts to contribute to the greater good of mankind.

The movements that have recently inspired me most in my field are the Women's March and the #MeToo movement. Both the Women's March and the #MeToo Movement have utilized web design and civic engagement as a platform for communicating their cause. In the same way, I see my own work for the Women's Advocacy participating in conversations regarding women's equality and offering an avenue for change. As Robin Krimmerer expressed in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, we all have a gift to give to this world. Whether that be a voice, a dream, or a design, we are responsible for sharing our gifts and spreading our knowledge so that it may be understood or at least acknowledged by others.

### **Our Own Next Steps:**

The impact of the Women's Advocacy and similar organizations is integral to the future design of our nation. We can continue to live divided and plagued by intolerable actions against women, or we can use our skills and our knowledge to stand up for what is right. My work is a piece of me in the sense that it wishes to succeed in aiding those in

need. I recognize that having had a different upbringing, I may not be in the position to design or even hope for good. Having had a different upbringing, I may have never been exposed to the injustices committed against women. The Women's Advocacy aims to raise awareness for injustices against women and evoke the mindset of reciprocity that I have been fortunate enough to appreciate.

Furthermore, the work of the Women's Advocacy teaches people that they are more powerful than they might have ever imagined. Not only are our individual skillsets capable of evoking positive change, but our actions and words that degrade and discriminate can also have equally negative effects. Over the past four years, I have come to understand that worldwide, society has told women that they need to be subservient to men. When you add the effects of intersectionality, economic dependency, cultural attitudes about what a woman's "place" is supposed to be, on top of the obvious – that women tend to be physically smaller than men, we create a recipe for inviting abuse. Therefore, we must be conscious of our behaviors and the behaviors of others around us. We must continue to advocate for the best quality of life by supporting nonprofits, social movements and taking appropriate political actions when necessary.

**Work Cited**

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.