AN ARTIST’S REFLECTION ON MAKING THE DOCUMENTARY

A DIFFERENT MISSION: THE EXTRAORDINARY
STORIES OF CASSATA HIGH SCHOOL

by

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(In conjunction with Caitlin Stowe)

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ABSTRACT

A learned motto of the American school system has been No Child Left Behind, yet so many are. We’ve noticed many students who have fallen through the cracks of the public school system have found a place in Fort Worth that is willing to meet them where they are and pick them right back up. We wanted to enter into this place, Cassata High School, and figure out what makes them different. How come students that have dropped out or failed out of other public or private schools are able to come to Cassata and succeed? We wanted to make a documentary that shows the audience that any student can be successful when put in the right environment, surrounded by people who believe in them.

Our audience is ideally the naturally affluent who may have forgotten the value of being educated. These are students who know first hand that being educated is not a right or a given, but an opportunity worth fighting for. We find these students today at Cassata High School, where they are actively fighting for their education on a daily basis. The same students that were told they would never succeed, kicked out of school, or who once lost sight of the value of graduating high school, are now avid students of Cassata High School, on the track to earning their very own high school diploma. Through viewing this documentary, we hope our audience is reminded of the gift and value of simply having the opportunity to receive an education, an opportunity most take for granted.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the people that helped make this experience all that it was and help guide this small idea into a substantial and completed product.

First and foremost, I have to acknowledge Caitlin Stowe, who in conjunction with myself, co-produced, co-directed, co-edited, and co-created the documentary. Thank you Caitlin, for your patience, professionalism and priceless sense of humor that got us both through this entire process.

Our supervising professor for the project, Greg Mansur, I also thank you for your patience and understanding. Through our hectic disorganization you continuously offered us guidance and support, pushing us to create the best documentary we could and reminding us of our creative capabilities as storytellers and filmmakers. I didn’t say it enough during the process, but I am saying it now—thank you. Thank you so much for always believing in this project and in our ability to create a piece of worth and meaning.

Finally, this project wouldn’t have been able to exist if it weren’t for the amazing hospitality and transparency of the Cassata High School students and staff. Not only did you open your doors, but you opened your hearts to us and our cameras. I can not thank you enough for letting us into your lives and allowing us such unbridled access to whatever we needed. Thank you Susan Flood and Nancy Martin, in particular, for your constant support, warmth, and generosity. I hope this documentary gives you both the deserved appreciation and acknowledgement for what you, your staff, and your school is doing for your students. Thank you.
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INTRODUCTION

Broken up into school semesters, this paper will first chronicle the process of creating the documentary, showcasing how we and the project progressed over time. The second portion of the paper I discuss the outcomes and the learning experiences resulting from my participation in this project.

The Process

Pre-Production, Spring 2013

As of Spring 2013, this project was centered around an entirely different idea. The original plan was to document the homeless population in Fort Worth and surrounding the TCU campus. Initially, there were plans for my film partner, Caitlin Stowe, and myself to assimilate into the homeless population via multiple charitable and volunteer organizations such as:

- Tarrant County Hands of Hope
- The Net
- The Day Resource Center
- Salvation Army
- Union Gospel Mission
- Love For Lancaster
- Beautiful Feet
- Feed By Grace
- Presbyterian Night Shelter

That semester, we reached out to these organizations in Fort Worth to get a better understanding of the overall environment, the outreach programs available,
the solutions that were being posed, and the relationships between that population and the policy makers. Upon our preliminary research we realized we would be needing access to not only some of the roughest and most dangerous neighborhoods in Fort Worth, but also to some of the higher offices of city government. When realizing the potential problems and roadblocks that could arise during the production of this documentary, Caitlin and I sat down for a meeting in May to discuss changing our direction and finding a topic that we still deeply cared for, a story that needed to be heard, and a location that had more controllable variables.

*Pre-Production, Summer 2013*

Over the Summer of 2013 both Caitlin and I pursued other topics and options for our documentary. We knew we wanted to focus on something that was important not only to us and the things we cared deeply for, but also to Fort Worth, as it would be our main and primary location for filming. During a conversation with one of my fellow TCU classmates, Cassata High School was brought to my attention. My friend was explaining how she did volunteer work for one of her classes at TCU with Cassata and how impressed she was by the students there. I decided to begin my own preliminary research into the school before approaching Caitlin with the idea, and what I found was exactly what we had been looking for.

On the school website it described itself as a private, nonprofit outreach school that is dedicated to providing young people with another chance at success. When I read that first description of the school I knew that there was potential for a great story. Further research proved that this organization was not only doing great things for students and families across Tarrant and Johnson counties, but was also practically unheard of in a lot of social and charitable circles across Fort Worth.
After having done research on local charities and their working members, I reached out to a few of them to see if they had heard of the work that Cassata was doing. Out of a near dozen people that I reached out to, none of them had heard of Cassata High School, and all wanted to hear and talk more after my brief introduction. This told me that not only was Cassata a topic of interest and appeal, and one of Fort Worth’s best kept secrets, but it was also a stepping stone to a much larger conversation about our education system.

Everyone who I had brought up Cassata to had something to say about the way students are being taught these days. Public schools in particular have a way of funneling the kids through the system in very neat, tight-knit boxes. If a student doesn’t fit in said box, he may be placed on the disability track, or in classes strictly for vocational positions. For many students, not fitting in that box means dropping out of school altogether.

Cassata is special because it accepts those students who don’t necessarily fit into the traditional, mainstream educational system, and gives them the time and the attention that they need to reach their full potential. These students may have learning disabilities, chronic illnesses or diseases, or criminal records. Some may be teen parents, while many are former dropouts. The mission behind this uniquely structured school is that all of these students, no matter their adversities, deserve an effective, quality education that enables students of all backgrounds to raise their educational level and complete their secondary education. Beyond a reasonable doubt, I was convinced that this school, their staff, and their students, all had stories worth being told.
I met with Caitlin during the end of the summer and updated her on my findings and research on Cassata High School. She and I both agreed that this was wonderful subject matter for our documentary as it met not only our mission as community documentarians, but the TCU’s mission as well:

*To educate individuals to think and act as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community.*

I couldn’t think of a better way to live out this mission than by starting in our very own community of Fort Worth. By looking after the education of the young individuals in our own community, Cassata is taking the time and the energy to create more ethical and responsible citizens who now have the ability to continue on to bigger and better things, to even higher education, and reach far beyond the communities of their own. To become what TCU wants of us, we must look after the education of our youths, we must ensure their future successes, and we must show the global communities the possibilities that this educational structure can bring to others through the making of this documentary.

*Production, Fall 2013*

Having updated Caitlin on the new path our documentary will be taking, we set out to meet with the appropriate peoples, receive the necessary approvals, and get started filming.

The first week of August, Caitlin and I took our first steps inside Cassata High School. There, we were greeted by the school’s Principal, Nancy Martin, and the school’s President, Susan Flood. We sat with the both of them for over two hours, discussing their backgrounds, their work with Cassata, and their relationships with
the students. I was absolutely blown away by the love and care that seemed to flow out of both of these women. They so adamantly cared about their students, almost as if they were their own children. As they began telling us stories both heartwarming and heartbreaking, of their students both past and present, I could barely contain my excitement. I wanted to start filming as soon as possible. We set out basic talent releases and told them the kind of access we would be needing to make this work, and they practically handed us the key to the school, giving us complete and unabridged access to anything and everything we felt necessary to tell their story. I knew after that first meeting that the next few months of filming were going to bring some of the greatest professional and personal experience I have ever had.

We began by spending time at the school getting to know the students on a more personal level. We started by leaving our cameras behind and just talking to the students. Whether it was grabbing lunch at their favorite spot, Paul’s, or teaching each other the rules of chess, we felt it was best to get comfortable with them before we brought out our camera equipment. It wasn’t long though, before I was eating a burger in one hand and focusing my lens with the other. To our delight, most of the students were open to sharing their personal stories with us on film.

One of the first filmed interviews I had was with Diego Soto, a senior at Cassata. I joined him for lunch at Paul’s and placed my camera on the table in front of him. I told him I was recording but I didn’t pay much attention to the camera, rather I focused in on our conversation. It took him less than a minute to open up to me and tell me his family’s history and the heartbreaking story of his educational experience before Cassata. That interview still stands in my mind as a moment
where I felt my love for documentary film was firmly vindicated. His emotion was raw, his words heavy, and his story real. The connection I had with him during that interview will forever be a staple point in my life when I knew I wanted to make documentaries.

For the remainder of that semester, Caitlin and I arranged and carried out closed interviews with over twenty students, the entire faculty, and multiple sets of parents. We filmed the students inside the classroom interacting with each other, as well as one-on-one with their teachers. We also attended and filmed the Learn about Cassata Luncheon, where students shared their stories of tragedy and triumph with the community leaders and members whose funds and donations make Cassata a reality. Other events, such as Cassata Connections, allowed us to film the student-mentor relationship that gives so many of the students that extra attention and motivation they need to complete their studies.

*Post-Production, Spring 2014*

During the final semester of our project, we had strictly scheduled ourselves as to ensure we had all of the elements needed to complete the project in time for the Honors College deadline as well as film festival submissions. The deadlines we had set for ourselves were as followed:

- Feb 3: All footage transcribed and catalogued. Plan of action and comprehensive overview of project written out
- March 7: All footage shot and first rough cut completed. Meet with Prof. Mansur for editing notes
- March 31: Extra footage added. Second rough cut completed. Meet with Prof. Mansur for editing notes
- April 4: First draft and Artist Presentation Paper Due to Honors College
- April 21: Draft returned, make all improvements/changes as needed
- April 28: Third rough cut completed. Meet with Prof. Mansur for final notes
- May 2: Final completed Thesis due to Honors College

Within these deadlines we planned to gather more footage of students outside the classroom, more interviews and footage of parents and their point of view’s of how their child has changed, grown, or assimilated into school since coming to Cassata, and more b-roll that could accompany the sound bites we had catalogued and chosen for the film. We also planned to interview an education professor, Dr. Mike Sacken, for a look into his views, opinions, and conclusions regarding the unique structure of the school.

This semester also took us all the way through the post-production process, from transcribing our interviews, cataloguing all footage deemed necessary, and organizing all material into a story structure. After rough cuts had been made we noted any holes that were present and made the changes necessary to fill them. Finally, as we wrapped up all loose ends and tied the documentary together, we both began writing out our own papers, cataloguing the concept, the process, and the results of this creative project.

This was the time in the process where we started to make editorial decisions. For instance, we had originally intended on taking a dialogical approach, meaning we would portray multiple and contradictory experiences, impressions, and viewpoints in order to give the story more grit. However, upon viewing our footage, we discovered that our intention was not to leave the audience to decide whether or not the education system was flawed or that changes should be made, but rather
leave them inspired and impressed by the determination and dedication of these young students who chose to become the best person they could be. So we took the dialogical approach and refocused it on the different and varying types of students who attend Cassata.

The greatest thing about these students is that none of them fit any of the common molds. They are so unique and their stories’ so extraordinary that placing their differing experiences against each other gave enough contrast and change to keep the story moving while also maintaining the common thread of the story throughout. The thread that we needed to weave was one of equality. We wanted to show that each of these students, although they all may learn in different ways, deserve an equal opportunity to receive their education.

**Reflection**

The nature of a documentary changes as you go through the process. As that happens, you see questions you should have asked, follow ups you should have pushed for, and footage you should have captured. This can be extremely frustrating. I imagine it would be like constructing a building with only the materials and no blueprints. As you go through the process of building the structure, you may realize you needed more lumber or that more attention should have been paid to a specific space. If you have the foresight to know the need for changes will arise, you can plan to have extra time, extra materials, and a chance to go back, fill in the gaps, and give that attention where it is due. Sadly, we didn’t have such a luxury.

Time management, planning, scheduling, and staying true to our deadlines was one of our biggest struggles. Pacing the project as a whole in order to afford us
time to work and rework the final cut multiple times in the editing room, see what gaps needed to be filled, and go back for any extra footage needed, was something we knew we would need to do, but failed to carry out. Feeling rushed by a hard deadline was not conducive to creating our best work, for it made us feel like we had to settle for less than our ideal vision and put our focus on finishing rather than finesse.

While filming a project as large as this, there are bound to be issues, problems, and unexpected hiccups along the way. The best thing you can do for yourself, your teammate, and your project, is find a way to stay positive, adapt, and troubleshoot yourself out of any complications that come along. One day during filming, our light stand wasn’t working properly so the light wasn’t able to be held at a specific, and necessary angle. If we couldn’t get the light to hold in that direction, then the scene would simply not be able to be filmed and the day’s schedule would have been thrown off entirely. We looked around the room, found a large whiteboard eraser and wedged it into the light stand apparatus to hold it at the ideal angle. Other days, participants who were scheduled for interviews simply didn’t show up. Instead of hanging our heads low, packing up and going home, we made the most out of the moment and captured footage that ended up being great additions to the final film.

There are so many things I know Caitlin and I would go back in time and do differently if we could. Filmmaking, especially documentary filmmaking, isn’t conducive to bad planning. You can’t go back and recreate the emotions or the expressions; the moment was there and you either captured it on film the way you
wanted to, or you didn’t. The only thing you can do in the editing room is adapt and learn, keeping these problems in mind so that you can plan to avoid them next time.

Little things such as audio recording, shot construction, and steady camera work are all things that we saw we should have done differently only after the fact. In the editing room, we realized we should have taken more time to carefully place the lavalier mics on the subjects to not interfere with fabric or accessories, and should have tried our hardest to put lavaliers on every person we interviewed. I can clearly hear the difference in audio quality from an interview recorded with a lavalier microphone clipped to the subject versus a shotgun microphone simply connected to the camera. If we would have had the diligence to just take the extra step to ensure the best audio quality possible, I feel the documentary would have been better served and better sounding. When it comes to shot construction, I think both Caitlin and I tried to do our best with the locations we were given, but background elements and lighting could have been better designed and orchestrated. Thinking back on the interviews we did with the staff, I really wish we would have given them a little more depth of field, putting more space between the subjects and the back wall. Our camera work for the most part was sufficient, but there were times when I would feel the emotion building and would choose to change the construction, zooming in to a tighter shot with the idea that this would add to the gravity of what was being said, when in actuality, the camera moving so abruptly and unsteadily took me out of the moment and into the physicality of the camera. I hope this is not the case for most of our viewers. As a filmmaker, viewing the inconsistency of audio quality, the brick wall behind the subjects, and the shakiness of the cinematography takes me out of the scene and into the production
quality. Knowing what I know now, I wish we would have had the wherewithal to make better aesthetic choices during the production process.

There are many different types and styles of documentaries, including expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative. A big difference in these various styles of documentary filmmaking is whether or not the filmmaker is involved, showcased, or heard throughout the film. One of the biggest decisions Caitlin and I had to make was whether or not we were to be a part of the story and whether our experience with education and our opinions on the varying school structures were a necessary addition. We worried whether our input would add to or take away from the exposition of the extraordinary stories from these exceptional students. Caitlin and I originally planned to do an expository film where we as filmmakers were neutral observers, sharing the story with the audience without our opinions or our subjective point of view being shared with the viewers. As we filmed, we began to get shots here and there of us behind the scenes, asking questions and holding the cameras. We captured angles that would show not just the interviewee but myself as well, asking the questions and prompting responses from the participants. In the editing room, we realized we had shots and content where we as filmmakers were involved and shots where we were not. Our inconsistency in style of filming left us with a choice to make: to participate in the story, or to stay objective and cut out any sound bites or commentary coming from behind the camera. Caitlin and I, after seeing the footage with our commentary, quickly realized that the piece was sounding biased and was turning our objective documentary into a propaganda piece. Ultimately, we decided to take ourselves out of the story, and eliminate any sense of bias or partisanship.
Working with a partner in an endeavor such as this is testing for both involved. Communication, understanding, patience, and collaboration are gears that must be well-oiled if you want to see the project through to completion, and not completely lose your mind. When two artists come together to work on a project like this, especially one that is so personal and meaningful to both, it can be hard to share the same ideas and visions of how the final product should look, sound, and feel. Artists in general rarely see the same idea in their minds and seldom have the same process of making that idea come to fruition. When collaborating, you have to learn when to yield and when to lead. It is a delicate balancing act. I am so proud of Caitlin and myself for doing such a wonderful job of sharing the work load, conceding on some of our contrasting ideas, and doing our best to make executive decisions together.

**Conclusion**

Exactly how much I have learned, how much I have grown, and the amount of experience I have gained from participating in the Departmental Honors program cannot simply be described in a paper such as this. There is not a doubt in my mind that as a film student, having this opportunity to work on such a large project as this, from concept to completion, is immeasurable. I know the experiences and lessons I have learned during this process will continue to make me a better filmmaker for years to come.