

AN ARTIST'S REFLECTION ON MAKING THE DOCUMENTARY

A DIFFERENT MISSION: THE EXTRAORDINARY

STORIES OF CASSATA HIGH SCHOOL

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a reflection on the documentary Anna Dietrichson and I created for our departmental honors thesis, *A Different Mission: The Extraordinary Stories of Cassata High School*. I will review the narrative of the film itself, and then focus on the actual process of making it. I will take you through the logistics of pre-production, production, and post-production and reflect upon them. The film turned out well, but not as well as we would have liked; however, the lessons learned are extremely valuable to us for our potential futures as film-makers and in life as individuals who remain curious, open-minded, and engaged in the world around us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first want to thank Anna for her remarkable partnership. There were so many sacrificed nights and days, moments of panic and joy, and the sense of being way over our heads but persistence to find our way. None of this would have been bearable without you by my side, your drive for this project, and your timely sense of humor. So thank you for the passion you exude for life and allowing that to affect others around you.

Next, I want to thank our supervising professor, Greg Mansur, for his patience and grace as we attempted to figure out what making a film looks like. You were always there when we needed you, always willing to offer advice, and I respect you so much as my superior and your eye for filmmaking. This was a more ambitious project than we realized, but I am grateful for being given the opportunity to attempt to conquer it. It truly would not have been possible without your support, knowledge, and guidance.

Finally, I would like to thank every faculty, staff, and student at Cassata High School. You were all so vulnerable and open to letting us invade your precious space of education for an entire year. The students are incredibly strong and ambitious young people who I am sure will contribute great things to society one day. And that is all possible because of the strength and love that the faculty and staff pour into them daily. So thank you for giving us a beautiful and encouraging story to tell. Thank you to all the faculty and staff for your hard work and dedication to Cassata and the students there. Thank you for opening my eyes so I no longer take for granted the education I have been blessed to receive, from my high school diploma to my bachelor degree.

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INTRODUCTION

Making a film is no small task. On average it takes anywhere from six to twenty-four months to make a full-length film. There are typically sleepless nights, sacrificing personal time to get the perfect shot, and beautiful days wasted away in front of a computer editing. However, I knew I wanted to make a full-length production before I graduated, and the honors departmental project offered the perfect platform to undergo this endeavor. Yet, I also knew that undertaking this solo would be completely unrealistic. Luckily, Anna Dietrichson was in the same boat I was, so finding each other we then needed to decide what we wanted the subject of our film to be.

First, we knew we wanted to make a documentary. One thing I have learned about myself over the past four years is that I am an extremely relational person: I love talking to people, hearing their stories, and learning and growing from people. I think it is a beautiful process, and the art of documentaries can share that experience with a mass audience. The question remained, whose story is worth telling? We threw around a handful of different ideas, from the homeless population, to Christians' role in the community, to an entertaining friend that would have the audience laughing the entire hour. None of that seemed either feasible or worthy though. We wanted to stay focused in our community of Fort Worth, and we wanted to tell a story that involved interesting people worth diving into their lives accompanied by some sort of uplifting message or call to the community. It needed to be more than just a story; it needed to be a story with a mission.

That is when we stumbled upon Cassata High School. We quickly realized that their story was one worth telling. It is a small private school that aims to serve kids who

don't fit in a more traditional educational environment. About forty-five percent of their student body was once high school dropouts, seventeen percent are teen moms, many of their students have long-term illnesses that require they be in the hospital frequently, and then there are others that public school simply moved too fast or too slow for. Cassata uses unique teaching strategies, such as individualized learning where every student is going at their own pace, a lot of one-on-ones with teachers, and brought in tutors and mentors from the community to further cultivate these students' potential. The heart of this school can be seen in our documentary *A Different Mission: The Extraordinary Stories of Cassata High School*. However, the point of this paper is to break down the process we went through making the documentary and reflecting upon it. The film making process consists of three stages: pre-production, production, and post-production. I will now walk you through the logistics of each of these steps and my reflections of what I learned and what I will do differently next time. (Disclaimer: if you want to read a more eloquent form of what I will be saying next, I advise you turn to my partner Anna Dietrichson's paper; she is much better with words than me.)

PRE-PRODUCTION

This first stage consists of a lot of planning. Now that we knew what we *wanted* to do our documentary on, we needed to make that want a reality. We set up a meeting with the President of Cassata, Susan Flood, in July 2013. At that initial meeting, we laid out our intentions, being that we wanted to make a documentary about not just the school, but more specifically the students that attend Cassata. Susan was very excited at the potential of this and agreed to allow us on campus to interview faculty, staff, and

students. Once we had permission, planning took a legal turn: finding talent releases, location releases, material releases, and more.

Then we began looking at calendars and setting our production schedule. Our dates were as follows:

- Feb 3: All footage transcribed/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 (as needed), 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

We also did a lot of research in this phase of production. We researched more about Cassata, statistics (namely dropout stats), the education system, and documentary style. Once we felt like we were learned enough about the subject from afar and we had dates established, we moved onto production.

Reflection

This is the part of the process that I thought I would dread the most, but I actually really enjoyed it. I discovered that I love knowing what the big idea is then putting together the pieces to make it all possible. I enjoy making connections, building relationships, coordinating with people, and exploring to find these people and places. I

enjoy the details and the scheduling that needs to happen for the rest of the creative project to be completed.

The thing that was tricky about our pre-production was the fact that we didn't have a set story. I suppose most documentaries don't have a set story when they begin because no one knows where life will go, but at least it can be a timely progressive narrative, or showing a process, or persuasive message. However, for us, we had a subject and that was it. We didn't know where to go from there – and looking back I would have planned our filming better prior to actually beginning. Obviously, if the content we capture changes the story then the narrative changes, but we went into this film with the mindset that there was no way for us to plan before because of this great unknown content of footage, but we should have started with *something*. Whether that was picking one student to follow in their final year leading to graduation, framing a persuasive argument for education reform, or even walking daily with the principle and seeing the role she plays in their lives. We needed to narrow our subject matter from just an ambiguous Cassata and education to a very distinct narrative. That was our original plan, do preliminary interviews then pick a student or two to follow from there, but we did not execute that well enough, and in my opinion I think that goes back to our lack of narrative planning in pre-production.

Also, the style of the finished documentary was a little all over the place because we couldn't decide on a style we wanted to pursue from the beginning. We couldn't decide if we wanted to play a more observational role or participatory role in the film. We even toyed around with it being a performative documentary. However, since we didn't have a distinct sense of narrative, it was difficult to decide on a distinct style; you

might notice the variance in interview style, shot construction, and more, as a result. Once again, this stems from our lack of definitive planning in pre-production.

PRODUCTION

According to the schedule set in pre-production, our production period should have lasted for about five months. This time included: introductory interviews with faculty and staff; preliminary interviews with students, which we would then choose a couple stories from to go deeper with; follow up interviews with students; b-roll footage of Fort Worth, Cassata's building and surroundings, students in class, students in the hallway, teachers interacting with students, and mini labs; parent and guardian point of views; students outside of Cassata, either at home or at lunch in the area; and special events Cassata holds, like Learn About Cassata, Say Yes, and Glam Girl.

Everything was shot with either a HVX 200 Panasonic camera or a Canon Rebel. The Panasonic is property of TCU, along with the Cartoni tripod, kino flo 2-bank lights, light stands, Rode shotgun microphone, and lapel microphones we used. The Canon Rebels and Rode shotgun microphones used with that was mine and Anna's own equipment.

When we had shooting scheduled we would make an appointment with Patricia in the FTDM office to pick up equipment. On most interview shoots that Anna and I were together I was in charge of the more technical side: setting up and running equipment, while she orchestrated the interviews. That doesn't mean it was exclusively that way, I would often chime in with questions and she would help set up the lights and audio. When we finished shooting, we brought equipment back and took the P2 (memory) cards to our editing suite to download all of the footage we recorded in that shoot. Filming with

our own equipment was typically done individually, whether that was just collecting b-roll footage or in-house interviews.

The students and staff at Cassata High School were extremely compatible to work with. They kept us updated on events and always welcomed us through the doors and into classrooms to film. We corresponded via email most frequently.

Reflection

This is the part of the process that I thought I would enjoy the most. However, I was proved wrong yet again. I think I would have really enjoyed it if this was my full time job – if every day for a month I was able to be at Cassata and film interactions and students learning and the daily joys that happen there, if I could have really become part of the Cassata family. Unfortunately, I was not so lucky; I am a full time student first with sixteen hours of other classes. Because of classes being my first priority (in most cases) I was unable to physically be filming as much I would have liked and as much as a documentarian needs to be. When filming a documentary, you can't film off a shooting script or shooting schedule because you never know what you are going to get on camera or whom you are going to meet, so you need to be ready at all times to capture anything. We obviously had interviews scheduled and locations decided beforehand, but those weren't set up in pre-production. There were so many lessons I learned during the process though. I'll take you through a few of them.

The first lesson comes from the experience I got interviewing people. Wow, that is a lot harder than it seems, having to really listen to what they are saying so you can ask them eloquent follow up questions. That was something I could have done better and hope to do better in the future. I had a list of questions written up after carefully planning

them out, and they were good questions, but I would get lost in what the interviewee was saying sometimes instead of really being engaged. There were also times that I just wasn't any good with my words either, so it would take me a full minute to get a question out. That pause disturbs the flow of conversation; the long pause and dramatic gathering of my thoughts pulls the interviewer out of conversation and into the realization that they are being filmed. Probably the biggest lesson I learned about doing interviews is not to verbally respond to everything they say. This is something that I learned in my documentary class and should have known better, but because I am such a relational person, I was naturally inclined to physically respond and give them encouragement to keep talking or empathize with them. Most of the time though, that audio sounds terrible in editing because they will be saying something beautiful, and we would jump in with an empathizing comment instead of just letting them sit in their tears for a minute. Patience is key in trusting that the interviewee will get to where we need them to take us, and that they don't need our constant reassurance and affirmation along the way.

Along the lines of interviewing, I also learned what it is like to have someone avoid your phone calls and emails when trying to coordinate an interview, and even for someone to just not show up at the last minute without any warning. Working with people in the midst of their daily lives, in the midst of their realities, can be scary for them and I want to learn a way to better communicate with them and express my vision and heart behind why we want to interview them.

The second big lesson I learned is about equipment. I am very appreciative about learning how to use those cameras and better understanding the capabilities and limitations of my own camera. However, when shooting, don't worry about getting the

perfect shot if it means a jerky camera movement. Looking over footage I realized it is so much better for the subject to be a little off target than having to jerk the camera up. That sudden movement can pull the viewer out of the film if you can't cover it up in post. There were also many lessons in framing the subject: moving them further away from the background to give a higher depth to the shot, mixing up interview backgrounds so it doesn't all look the same, more light is better than less light, and always keep the focus on their face. Some of those might sound obvious, but during shooting they can be easy to forget about. I also learned to always check the camera's settings before recording. We worked with the same Panasonic camera every time we rented equipment, yet one time in between our checkouts someone else used it and completely changed the settings to alter the proportions and frame rate. Considering this was about the tenth time we had the equipment, I assumed everything was fine: it looked okay on the screen and it sounded great. However, it wasn't until we got the footage on the computer and saw the way it was stored to realize the settings were off. I will never make that mistake again.

The third big lesson I learned while in documentary production is to always be prepared. One day I went up to Cassata just to talk to the principle, Nancy, about something coming up in the next week. As we are sitting in her office chatting, someone upstairs just earned a credit and would be moving onto the next grade level. When that happens there is a big celebration by the teacher and congratulations are in order, and all of this gold was happening before my eyes but not before my lens. When filming a documentary, I need to always be prepared and I can't be scared to enter someone's space with my camera. Sometimes I felt like I was intruding, but you have to intrude on someone's life to get to the heart of it.

I also learned that shooting the visuals and content you need will often times take longer than expected when making a documentary. For instance, instead of shooting being done in February, like was on our production schedule, I will have shot some content earlier this week (aka the final week before the finished product is due). I have to learn to stick to that schedule created. In the real world, I can't just tell a client that I need an extra two weeks when doing freelance work. The client will have a date they need the finished product by and I have to produce that finished product. There will always be more I can shoot, but I have to learn how to say enough is enough and simply work with what I have. Which leads me nicely into post-production.

POST-PRODUCTION

Oh the joys of the film world that are known as post-production. This is by far the piece of the puzzle that takes the longest to figure out and is the most damning to a documentarian. You see, in other film genres there is a script that the production team is not only shooting off of, but the editor also has the script to help him/her in post-production. However, with a documentary (and especially with this documentary) you can never be positive where the plot is going to go. Don't get me wrong, there are definitely some that have a very logical order about them, whether that be chronological or a process. Unfortunately with *A Different Mission*, there was no such formula easily available for us.

Post-production officially started for us in September when we began transcribing all of the footage that we put on the computer. This transcribing process parallel to filming lasted up until early February. Once we had the majority of our footage, we began talking through what the story we were trying to tell exactly was and who our

audience was. We decided we wanted to focus on the student's stories and really showing how Cassata has changed their lives. We knew we wanted to pose the question of education reform and put faces to the issue, but not harp on that issue or turn the documentary political. Our ideal audience is people who have grown up with education as an expectation and not a privilege. We want to open other people's eyes to what a true education really entails and show them what is happening to tons of students in America. This audience is the people who could make a change to the education system if they wanted to with their affluent voice. While that is target audience, we also want to inform the community of Fort Worth of this amazing institution in their midst and allow Cassata to use this for anything they need. Once we had a vision, we then made a paper edit. Using what we had transcribed we took pieces we saw as vital to the narrative and edited them together using time codes and dialogue on paper.

Once our paper edit was complete we began the long process of actually cutting together the film. About half way through the edit of the full-length edition, when we knew where we were going, we took a break to cut together *A Glance At: A Different Mission*, the eleven-minute preview video that was screened at our honors presentation (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJ8MEfoUX4U>). Then we went back on the full-length edit grind and have been slaving away up until the final hour it was due. This includes: cutting clips together, color correction, audio corrections, transition effects, music placement, lower-thirds, and animations.

We edited in Avid Media Composer 6, made title animation in Adobe After Effects, and white board animation in Video Scribe. I am pleased to inform that Avid

only crashed on us twice, and both times our supervising professor, Greg Mansur, was able to come in and save the day to allow us to continue forth.

Reflection

If there was one aspect of this process I wish I could change or go back and start over it would be post-production. There were three big lessons I learned in post-production. The first is how to creative problem solve. I realized that we had enough footage, but not necessarily the *right* footage. With limited time to go out and get the right footage, we had to work with what we had, and that resulted in some creative problem solving. Whether that was small things like covering up the camera jerks described in the Production section, or bigger problems like moving the narrative from point B to point C. One of the solutions we were able to create were the white board animations you see in the film. We realized that we had a lot of talking heads on screen, those talking heads were saying really great things, but were all talking heads nonetheless. The audience is guaranteed to get bored or lose focus if that is all they have to look at, so in two different segments of the film I created a whiteboard animation that visually enhances the audio being heard.

The second big lesson I learned is the importance of timeliness. We kept pushing back due dates we set for ourselves, and that is not professional as well as not being beneficial for us. I understand having to go back and shoot some insignificant b-roll footage in the middle of editing when you realize it would be nice to have a shot of this or that, but filming big pieces of content up until a month before this is due is not okay. It is that lack of timeliness that has induced the most stress and will result in a product that is not as perfected as we would like.

Finally, I also learned that collaborating is a good thing. I was worried about working with someone else in the editing process because each artist has such a distinct eye and different definitions of beauty and tempo. Luckily, Anna and I worked well together. I was more of a big picture person while she focused on the details. She was able to hear things differently than me and match two clips together, while I'm able to keep the film moving forward in the narrative. Once we both found our own creative liberties, the narrative was really able to develop and pick up speed.

Having the honors presentations in the middle of editing was really helpful to me. We were getting to a point where I was tired of looking at the same faces, hearing the same stories, and I felt like the story was not near as compelling as I wanted it to be. Despite what I was feeling, we got a really positive reaction at the presentation of *A Glance At: A Different Mission*. There was interest, tears, and people drawn into the story that wanted to hear more. This was the kind of encouragement I needed to continue on and remember that the story we are telling is beautiful and gripping; it gave me a fresh and invigorated point of view to persevere.

CONCLUSION

I am extremely pleased that I decided to do a departmental honors project. This is by far the most beneficial academic experience I have had that will translate into my life after school. I am elated that I get to proudly say that I have made a full-length documentary, but even more important than that are all of the lessons learned from this process. I would much rather make these mistakes now and learn from them than entering into the world of freelance and make these amateur mistakes for a client.

As well, just as significant as the film lessons learned are the lessons learned from Cassata High School that I am taking away from this. The faculty, staff, and students opened my eyes and mind so much as to what great education can look like. I am very passionate about the story our documentary tells and the mission it has to put faces to the issue of education reform. I'm not saying that all schools need to look like Cassata, that would be impossible and not serving students well that enjoy the public school system, but I think it is a model that needs to be more readily accessible to more students. The love that is found in that school is greater than the love I have felt in some churches. The faculty and staff really believe in what they are doing and see the impact they can and do have on individual lives. Those individual lives can make ripples that lead to tidal waves in not only our Fort Worth community, but even more so in our American society.

I hope this documentary doesn't end at TCU, but I am thankful that this is where it had the opportunity to start. I want others to see these faces, feel empathy and hear the real stories of these brilliant and driven students that were once told they weren't smart enough, or couldn't do it, or were bored in the class room. While Cassata is fighting for lives and minds of these students every day, I want to fight for Cassata, and through that, fight for their model of education. We are hoping to make this a reality with distribution to KERA or other PBS stations. We are also looking into Netflix possibilities or some other source to make this more accessible to people. Cassata has found a way to cultivate their minds and develop their ambitions. Think of how much lost potential is sitting around America in jails, home with children working minimum wage jobs, or still at home with parents. As so many of these students and parents said in the film, all these students needed was someone to believe in them, someone to care for them and tell them

they are worthy of dreaming, and even more importantly, they are capable of achieving those dreams.