

2004

Voices behind the lens: The creation of the YVEA kick-off video

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Degree Type

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department

Technology Studies

Keywords

Urban Michigan Ypsilanti Attitudes, Video recordings Production and direction

Subject Categories

Other Arts and Humanities

Voices Behind the Lens: The Creation of the YYEA Kick-Off Video

EMU Honors Thesis Project

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Preface

Ypsilanti Youth Empowered to Act (YYEA) began with a collaborative grant sponsored by Kellogg and created by EMU Communications faculty and other non-profit groups interested in making change for teens in Ypsilanti. I became involved through Kathy Stacey who headed the grant. She challenged me to create a video to play at the first rally held to promote the group. Being involved with Ypsilanti youth myself through tutoring at the high school and studying education, I was very interested in having an active part of this group's actions. I attended meetings with the initial youth members and adult supports to learn about the group. I found it's objective was to interview Ypsilanti teens interested in making change and form a twenty-five member youth committee to decide how to proceed with the spending the \$200,000 in grant funds. Their first event would be a rally to get the attention of possible long-term business and community sponsors, possible youth board members, and gain identification within the community. Important political figures such as Mayor and the Kellogg grant representatives would also be in attendance. I had only four weeks to film, interview, and edit this video.

Filming

The YYEA kick-off video project began with the gathering of a small adult committee, including myself, and five aspiring youth members. We discussed the issues the youth felt at odds with in Ypsilanti, and set off to capture it on tape to play for possible members, sponsors, community members and representatives. The first day the site coordinator, Alice, and I met the youth at the high school. We piled the teens into our cars and ventured off into Depot Town to tape the youth with some of the scenery of

Ypsilanti. The teens posed for snapshots and pointed out things they thought we should include. We filmed until it was dark.

A week later we set out to get footage of the downtown area. We all agreed that Ozone and the Corner Street Health Center were good organizations set up to help in Ypsilanti, so we started filming with them. The two members that road with me, joined me inside the Ozone house as we asked if we could set up a filmed discussion with their youth. The gentleman in charge agreed and we set up a date and time for my return. We met up with the remaining youth and walked around the corner towards the bus station. On our way I turned to film the group laughing and talking as they went. (This is where the still shot at the end of the video came from.) Some of the youth made comments about how scared they were to be by the station. Another commented how it stinks that the busses stop so early. Nevertheless, with some reassurance the students posed in front of the bus station and I filmed them from the road.

As we continued on to Michigan Avenue, we noticed a group of teens. We stopped and spoke to the group who were sitting on an inoperative fountain. We asked them why they were sitting there. Their responses were not shocking, “Because there’s nothing else to do in Ypsilanti.” So, we asked if we could get someone to say that for our video. We had to choose the eighteen-year-old because otherwise we would need to locate and gain parental permission. One of the youth members took down the name of the person speaking and we let the camera roll. The dark hours came and once again it was time to retire. This time, on our way to the car, I decided to film downtown in the dusk light as we walked. This later became the background for the beginning of the video.

Alice and I talked the youth into one more stop at the “Harriet Street Center”. By this time it was dark and this area is what the teens tell me is “the ghetto south side”. All of the youth hovered behind Alice and I, and they were pretty scared. I laughed and told them not to worry as I was the one with the \$1,500 camera around my neck. As we walked, I filmed the tattered housing project by the center with my night vision. (This is also in the introduction of the video.) I saw a teen coming towards us dribbling a ball. I asked the teens if I should interview him for our video. They were scared, but as the teen neared I recognized him! He was a student in the tutoring center with me at the high school. Much to the youths’ surprise I interviewed him in the doorway of an abandoned building. He ended up fitting nicely into the video.

Interviewing

Two days later I met with the principal of Ypsilanti High School to discuss the project with him. He was interested in the group and said the students had on-file permission with their emergency card to be filmed in the building. He thought it would be great if I taped some student comments. So with his blessing, the following week I went down to the cafeteria at lunch time. I asked students what they would tell a group of teens to do with money given to them to make something for teens in Ypsilanti. Over the course of two days I spoke with and taped over fifty students! Keeping track of the order they spoke in was difficult, but I managed to keep my lists straight. By the end of it all I was amazed at the suggestions they had given!

At the end of the week I returned to Ozone where a group of seven teens sat in a circle to discuss issues in Ypsilanti that need resolution for teens. I explained that they couldn’t be on camera unless they were eighteen. The group agreed I could use their

voices and focus the camera image on their wall logo. The teens were very patient as I stopped to check sound quality and for unexpected interruptions. They were very outspoken and unafraid to articulate their viewpoints clearly. After two hours, a recent Ypsilanti High School graduate, Bethany, volunteered to give me a private interview because she was eighteen. She wanted Ozone to have a face to go with it, and to sum up our discussion. I seized the opportunity and filmed her views.

Editing

Shortly before leaving for Ozone, I was in class at EMU. Usually I stand outside with a group of my peers and talk afterwards, as I did this day. As I was leaving to go to Ozone, I stated my venture and was about to leave. One of my peers, Bryce, heard me mention where I was going and asked about what I was doing. He immediately volunteered to help me edit my footage and explained that he had a small amateur studio in his new apartment. Anxious to have help by someone with more expertise than myself, we made arrangements to begin editing the next week in order to meet the deadline.

This was precisely what we did. We spent about twenty hours together in front of the computer. We had to sort and separate the footage into short movable clips. As we did this we decided which clips showed diversity, represented the students' views, had clear voices and picture, and addressed issues stated by several students. From the chosen clips we created an order. We wanted similar ideas to flow together. I decided we should order it by student quotes that summed up sections of the video. We made these into Brechtian titles: "nothing to do", "lots of places for older people", "we need a community place", and "no place to go". We went back and adjusted clarity and timing of voice with image. We also had to adjust where we cut students off and transition timing in between clips. It

was difficult to figure out what to do with all of the footage we had of the Ozone logo and the great comments from its youth. Bryce suggested I go out and grab some photos to put on the screen while the voices played. I had about an hour to grab digital photos to fit. I went frantically around Ypsilanti and thought of signs and sights I had seen that always bothered me. The “no bikes” sign, the broken basketball hoops at one of the housing projects, “Abe’s Coney Island” by the College of Business, the empty community center on the south side, and an empty bus stop.

Finally we added the music and credits. We decided to use my downtown walking footage in the introduction and it worked out well with the emphasis of the bar sign, businesses, and empty buildings. I thought this really captured the voices to come in the video. Also my choice of song seemed an appropriate introduction, “Where is the love?” because that was a consistent theme in the students’ responses. The end song I choose, “I know I can” was also fitting because it speaks of kids working hard to make success happen. That to me embodied the hope YVEA project holds for the youth to make change. Typing in the credits was easy enough, but looping the music to repeat was tricky because we wanted it to flow as smoothly as it could. After listening to small snips of music over and over we finally got the loop just right.

The Final Product

Our first cut was previewed two nights before the kick-off rally by the youth and some of the adult board members. It was felt that the clip of Bethany was too controversial and should be edited more. So, Bryce and I reviewed her clip and I decided we should snip out things she said that were pointed and blaming. We received a call from Alice, the night before, to cut Bethany’s clip completely. I felt that with respect the

student voices we couldn't use, that had said what Bethany said, that this would not do justice to the video or the students. It would also take a lot of effort to take out all of the places we had spliced her in. So, COMPLETELY stressed out that Alice and others would take offense to our call, we brought the final video to play an hour and a half before the rally. Bryce and I were totally worried that it wouldn't get played at all, but we both agreed that in its final format it was an accurate portrayal of what the students said. When the video played we crossed our fingers, and to our delight, everyone seemed pleased. What a breath of fresh air!

Making this video taught me a number of things. I was able to listen what the students were really telling me and embody their views and emotions in the images on the screen. Every part was challenging from the frantic video taping, hours of editing, and careful selection of details to make it all fit together nicely. I think my creative talent and my emotional personality made me think deeply about each part. I wanted it to truly represent what the students told me. It was the story of the forgotten youth of Ypsilanti, the ones with broken basketball hoops and forbidden bicycles; those who can't hold jobs because the bus does run late enough to work after school; and the united feeling that without a place for the community of teens and adults to coexist, they, like the abandoned buildings, were truly reclusive. But because YYEA strives to change this, I really wanted to show that there is hope of change. I was glad to find a way to give the video a promising ending with "I know I can". And even better I was glad the video added to YYEA's fresh beginning!