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See the Difference, Make a Difference, Be the Difference

Theresa Dark
Eastern Michigan University

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SEE THE DIFFERENCE
MAKE A DIFFERENCE
BE THE DIFFERENCE

By

Theresa Dark

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Honors Director (Print Name and have signed)

See the Make the **D**ifference Be the

Senior Honor Thesis Reflection

Balancing a box of three-ring binders on my hip as I pushed the buzzer that was barely visible on the brick exterior of the building I wished to enter, I wondered what I would find inside. The building did not seem big enough for a refugee center, not that there are size criteria. The noise of the passing traffic was muted by the door as it closed behind me. As I adjusted the box in my arms, I noticed how eerily quiet it was: I felt the need to whisper like one does when they enter a library or church. From up above me I heard my name being called.

“Theresa, is that you? Come up two flights of stairs and turn to the left. I have to get the phone,” yelled Shirin.

Chuckling to myself, I proceeded up the stairs. On the way up, I noticed that the walls were decorated with brightly colored pictures depicting laughing children, outdoor scenes and funny looking animals. At the top of the stairs Shirin Timms, the director of the Refugee Development Center (RDC), waved me into her office all the while, her left ear was glued to the phone as she dealt with one of the many issues that arise at the center. Placing my box down in a corner, I wandered the halls and rooms of the center looking at all the projects that were going on at the RDC. Down below I could hear the buzzer going off repeatedly and voices drifted up the staircase. More and more voices floated upwards—some were laughing, some were singing, and some were chattering excitedly, all in languages I did not understand. Along with the voices came heavy footfalls on the stairs and, just as I reached the door of Timms’ office, ten laughing, smiling faces of all ages rounded the corner to greet me. That was the beginning of my relationship with the RDC. While I have not been able to have a lot of hands-on time with the people at the RDC, I keep in touch with Timms and send supplies from their wish list whenever I can.

I first met Shirin Timms through Jackson Community College. Timms was my political science professor. At that time she had been the director of the RDC for two years and was implementing many new changes to meet the needs of the people the center was assisting. The RDC is located in Lansing, Michigan and opened its doors in 2002. The goals of the RDC include helping refugees from all parts of the world resettle in the U.S. with as little difficulty as possible. Most of these refugees are fleeing their country due to persecution for religious, political, and/or ethnic reasons. They have been refugees in a bordering country with no hope of going back home or being allowed to integrate in the country they are sheltering in. When they arrive in Lansing they usually come with the clothes on their backs, little or no money—and do not speak English. They are told they have three to six months to integrate into their new community and start being productive citizens. This is where the RDC comes in; the volunteers at the center help the refugees find homes and schools for their children. They offer classes in English to people of all ages, they have tutoring available for anyone in need, and they have a computer lab for technology lessons and for students to do their homework. But the center is much more than that—it provides a safe haven, a place of community, a place of hope.

* * * *

As the sun heats up the day, people start to line the streets, some pull out their lawn chairs, while others grab blankets from the trunk of their cars. There is a buzz in the air that has nothing to do with the insects that come out in the heat of the day. For miles and miles people spill out onto the edge of the road, all patiently waiting for the first sign and sound. Then it happens—the blast of a fire truck's siren punctuates the air. Followed by others giving short bursts of sound followed by long bursts. One after another the fire trucks roll down the road. Laughing faces and waving hands can be seen hanging out the windows as they pass by. The people lining the road are waving American flags, signs, and pom poms, cheering and shouting as the fire trucks, motorcycles, ambulances, and vintage cars parade on by heading toward Pretty Lake Campground, where Great Lakes Burn Camp is hosting its sixteenth year.

I have known about and supported the Great Lakes Burn Camp (GLBC) for approximately eleven years. The inception of GLBC came from director, Mike Longenecker, a firefighter in Jackson, Michigan and his friend, Chris Klavon, who had been badly burned in an auto accident. Together they decided that they wanted to start a camp for children who were burn victims. This summer the GLBC will celebrate its seventeenth anniversary. Since the summer camp was so successful Longenecker, the director, and the other volunteers implemented a winter weekend for the children, and this past winter was its twelfth anniversary. The weeklong summer camp gives the children the opportunity to run around free of stares and ridicule. Each child is encouraged to get involved with fun activities such as archery, water skiing, hiking, crafts, and much more.

The camp counselors work with the children on team and confidence building skills. Some of the children have been burned by an abusive parent, and are in hiding, which adds to the child's worries. At the camp each child is encouraged to grow by discovering and developing new talents that they can use every day and in the future. The winter camp is a long weekend, and it gives the children a chance to reconnect after the summer with their friends and to get away from the daily struggles they face at school and home. The camps are respites for the children, and help them change from burn victims to burn survivors.

* * * *

It is cold, dark and six o'clock in the morning as I drive into the parking lot of the building I will be working in. I show my Red Cross ID and find a place to park. Upon entering "Heroes Hall" out of the corner of my eye I catch a glimpse of something floating in the air outside the bank of windows—it's a giant American flag that appears to be waving in the wind attached to nothing. All of us Red Cross volunteers begin setting up our information table, getting ready for the donors who will come in shortly for a free meal after donating blood. Donors and their families come from all over Michigan and other

states to donate today. With a lull in people traffic I walk over to the window and stare at the beautiful glow of the red-orange sun as it rises behind the flag, creating an awesome backdrop. While it was a beautiful sight, today, it was a reminder of why I was there—to remember—and to honor—those who were the victims and those who were the heroes of 9/11.

The Spirit of America 9/11 Blood Drive will celebrate its tenth anniversary this fall. As a Red Cross volunteer in the area, I had the privilege of working at the blood drive. This is where I met Tim Booth, the director of guest services at Michigan International Speedway. Booth had come up with the idea to turn a horrific tragedy into a positive giving day by hosting a blood drive on September 11, 2001. Tim Booth called the American Red Cross (ARC) and asked if he could sponsor a blood drive at the MIS track. While it was not possible to accomplish a blood drive that year, he and the ARC formed a partnership to host a blood drive each year on the anniversary of 9/11. The first blood drive began September 11, 2002. Booth, the director of this blood drive, wanted to create a positive memory in honor of the victims and survivors of 9/11.

Each year Booth and the volunteers have added to the experience at the blood drive. The donors and their families are given a free meal in “Heroes Hall,” which is a dining area specifically dedicated to giving the donors and their families the experience of being a hero. Then they are taken on a tour of “Unity Field,” which is a square grid with over 3000 flags perfectly lined up mimicking the crosses in Arlington Cemetery honoring those who died on 9/11. From there they move onto “Home of the Brave Museum,” which is an exhibit featuring photos, equipment, news headlines, and a video of the events of that day—all vignettes are dedicated to those who lost their lives and those who responded to the tragedy. And the final stop is at the “Stars, Stripes and Speed” area, which is located right by the race track. Donors are given the opportunity to get their picture taken with the track pace car, and if they wish they can pay to ride with a professional race car driver. A portion of the money collected for the racing experience is donated back to the ARC. The community has responded to the call

to give. The first year 375 units of blood were collected, and in 2010, 1,329 units were collected, making this blood drive the largest in the nation for a single day drive. What is more amazing is the fact that Booth's blood drive has inspired other race tracks across the nation to hold blood drives on 9/11, and as of last year 30 tracks were holding blood drives in honor of the victims and heroes.

* * * *

It was amazing and inspiring to work on my senior honors thesis project. The people I interviewed are passionate, caring, giving individuals who think nothing of sharing their time with others. I designed this project to highlight how three separate organizations in southeast Michigan, working with three totally different populations, are interrelated in that they are making a difference nationally and, for some, globally. It is apparent that all three of these organizations are families—families built with compassion for others, a determination to make a difference, and a vision for a better future.

The RDC family under Shirin Timms' guidance has grown in its diversity of cultures, customs, ethnicities, and demographics through the refugees, volunteers, neighbors, businesses, educational institutions, and other non-profit organizations. Together they are forming a safety net and a strong network for all the new refugees who come to the RDC. The RDC's vision for the future is to create a place(s) where refugees feel welcome—where the greater community recognizes the value of the refugees—to create better neighborhoods and schools—to be the bridge. I would say they are well on their way.

The GLBC family started out with firefighters and nurses from several counties who wanted to give children hope for their future. The family now includes motorcycle clubs, businesses, PTAS, PTOS, Girl and Boy Scout groups, and other first responders. They now have partnerships with similar organizations in Texas, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. In the last couple of years a representative has come

from Germany to gather as much information as possible in hopes of starting a burn camp over there. Their family is really expanding. They too are forming a safety net. This safety net comes from team building, teaching lifelong skills, creating stability—shows these kids someone who trusts them, someone who will listen to them, and someone who will mentor them—They know it is working because past campers are now coming back as camp counselors.

The Spirit of America's family started out with an unusual group: racetrack personnel, the American Red Cross, and the community. This family has grown to include racetrack personnel's immediate family members, businesses, and over 1300 donors and 500 volunteers. This family has also grown to include 29 other racetracks all hosting a blood drive on the same day every year across the nation, all of them with the same mission—to get others to donate blood in honor of those who were victims and those who were heroes of 9/11. Their goal is the larger goal of building a large family of lifetime blood donors.

* * * *

I have spent the last seven months interviewing and gathering background information on these organizations. I enjoyed interviewing each of the people featured. Some I met for the first time and others I was able to get to know better. I tried to capture the personality of each individual while I interviewed them. With some of my interviews this proved to be tougher than I first imagined. The two young men, Caleb and Kyle Booth, who I interviewed from the Spirit of America organization, were shy. One consented to an email interview only, while the other gave me very brief answers. I generated open ended questions so I could make sure to get more than monosyllabic answers, which helped a great deal. I did have more interviews scheduled, but unfortunately because of scheduling conflicts and medical issues I was unable to garner all my interviews. With that said, it turned out, that the interviews were the easiest part of my thesis project.

I discovered that both the RDC and the GLBC have restrictions on what photographs can be used. The RDC only allows a few photos to be used because many of the people that they assist are in danger from their home countries and need to keep a low profile. The same goes for the children at the GLBC: many of those children are in hiding from an abusive parent, so I was only allowed to use photos that are posted on their website. It took a lot longer to connect with the people about my photos than I first thought it would (not everyone is on my schedule—go figure!). The Spirit of America photos were available for me to use, and Tim Booth and his family were generous enough to take some extra photos of themselves setting up Unity Field so I could have some before and after pictures.

I had my web design early on in the process of the project and was excited to begin work. My overall design consisted of between 10 to 13 pages, all accessible from the main page. The main page would have pictures that also doubled as the tabs to navigate to the other pages. The main page looks the same as my original design; the only difference is that the pictures on the front are static, which means that they do not change when the cursor goes over them. In order to get to the next pages, the viewer has to click on the tabs at the top of the pages. The people page is, however, interactive; if you move your cursor over the person's image it creates a vignette (shadow), and if you click on the image it will take you to a profile page of that person. There are six profile pages. The organization page is designed the same way as the profile page. Just click on the organization's logo and you will go to the bio page of that organization where there is information and pictures. The "about" page features the web designer, which in this case is me.

I was not sure how to get my design from paper to a website. I purchased a couple of books on web design and learned the basics of setting up a web page. I downloaded free trial versions of Photoshop and Dreamweaver, which are software programs used to design and create a website. I used Photoshop to prepare my photos to be uploaded to the Dreamweaver program. Several components that I did not take into consideration with my project included understanding the software program

Dreamweaver, and I did not anticipate the time that it would take to find someone who could either teach me how to do the page or who could create the page for me. I was in contact with a professor on campus who tried to find me some help, and he gave me some great reference materials to read. In the end I found a young man, Ben Irmen, who attends a community college not too far from me. I sent him my PowerPoint presentation on my design and chatted with him about my other ideas. In deference to my time crunch, we decided to change the main web page from being totally interactive to having some interactive and some static pages. He created a template using my ideas and then proceeded to import all the data into the web design program. We met up to go over the website, and he taught me how to navigate through the web pages, making changes where necessary. I created, on my own the "About page," which contains information on the web designer—me.

I have purchased a web hosting site and domain name for one year. I have uploaded my website to the hosting site where it can be accessed by the public. Ben suggested that I add a blog and Facebook to my website because he stated that people will find out about my website through these other media avenues and then access my site if interested. The goal of the website is to give added exposure to these three awesome organizations. A more far-reaching goal is to somehow link universities' and colleges' community service sites to mine, thereby giving students other community service opportunities. Whether this will come to fruition or not, I have had a great time working with these people and their organizations. I have learned a lot about how organizations get started and how they keep moving forward. I had a crash course in website development and will continue to forge down this path by taking some Dreamweaver software program classes. Most importantly, all of these skills and tools that I have learned and gained and will continue to learn and gain will help me in my future endeavors.

Process Documentation

Objective

My goals for my senior honors thesis project was to study, interview, and photograph three non-profit organizations in Michigan. With the data I collected I planned to design and host a website demonstrating my ability to incorporate all the skills that I have learned these past four years as a professional writing major. Another part of my goal was to make the non-profit organizations: Refugee Development Center, Great Lakes Burn Camp, and Spirit of America 9/11 accessible to the public and educational institutions for volunteer opportunities. The organizations that I worked with touch the lives of three very different demographical groups of people.

Time Frame

I mapped my project out in four phases.

Phase I: September 2010: finalize project concept, and set scheduled goals for the next seven months. I built in some flexibility with these projected goals.

1. September decide on the three organizations and make contact with their directors and start journaling my progress.
2. September through November: interview six to nine participants in the organizations.
3. November through January: collect background information and photos on each organization, and partner with a web fabricator (preferably a student or professor), and continue journaling progress.
4. January through February: finalize web design and set meeting with designer.
5. February through March: collect any missing elements and work on website.
6. March through April 11, 2011: complete senior thesis and finalize reflection and process documents. Send to multiple editors for critique.

Phase II: Begin the process of gathering data and organizing information.

I did hit some of my target dates, but most of my goals took longer due to schedule conflicts.

1. All of the interviews were completed by January.
2. Background information completed by November.
3. Photos completed by January.
4. Web design finalized in November.
5. Web fabricator finalized at end of March.

Phase III: Upload the data to the website by mid-March and complete the documentation by end of March. This process did not happen on schedule because I had trouble getting a web fabricator to work within my time frame.

1. Website completed April 8, 2011.
2. Send reflection and process document to a couple of editors first week in April.
3. Upload website to host server by first of April.

Phase IV: Turn in completed Senior Honors Thesis by April 11, 2011.

1. Turned in final project April 25, 2011.