

The lives of others: How our Hearst team project got students off-campus and into another culture



"Fades and Fros Barbershop"

I knew I was on to something when I saw terrified looks in my students' eyes. I had just suggested to a dozen white and Hispanic students in a new special topics journalism class that they should work as a group to explain the ties that bind our city's black community. Instead of thinking about affirmative action, or meeting quotas to ensure inclusiveness, what are the elements that preserve culture among race? Could we capture that conversation through a series of photographs, videos and text pieces that would explain the lives of others? Could we do it as a class project without any insider help (i.e. black students in the class) and make it worthy of submission to the annual Hearst Multimedia Intercollegiate Journalism Awards Competition? The students reluctantly agreed. And so we began.

Because the course was experimental, for only one-credit hour and it met only once a week, progress was slow. Ideas would flow in, discussion would follow but execution was severely lacking. Students were reporting that businesses they tried to visit were closed, potential subjects were not calling them back, and other classes and outside work was getting in the way of time they had for the project.

So I began inviting other students not in the class to join the class informally. That's what really got everyone motivated. The newer students were more aggressive being asked to work on the Hearst

project because of the name recognition and prestige that Hearst carries. They bonded and in some cases paired up as the semester raced to the end and our deadline approached. My confidence in the group increased greatly when a leader emerged who would build the website. We asked around to develop topics that were relevant to our community. Churches scored highly, as did businesses and the concept of work. The workers we profiled ranged from a custodian who worked two jobs to the dean of research in the College of Education. She had three sons and strong opinions on who and what they would become. A barbershop with a long-time history in town became a focal point for the project. At one point, three white females from class were shooting video and taking pictures in the shop full of black men. Students also profiled the editor on a weekly newspaper, a community college multimedia specialist and a restaurant owner. We kept pieces between one minute and three-and-a-half minutes, and following my suggestion to achieve visual unity, the entire website and projects are presented in only black and white.

The goals of the class were to get students off campus and into a different community that they hadn't seen before, and to produce a multimedia website that was Hearst worthy. Working until midnight on the submission day, the project was a success. The students were amazed when everything came together. We don't know the Hearst contest results yet, but I am proud of them. Upon seeing the website, the dean wrote: "This is beautifully composed in all dimensions!"

See the work at: <http://thetiesthatbind-gainesville.tumblr.com/>

