

# Flint

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, Savannah College of Art and Design, 2010  
Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree  
of Master of Fine Arts

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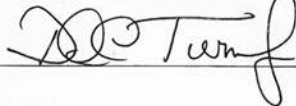
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Ann Arbor, Michigan


April 23, 2014

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## **Abstract**

This is the story of a storyteller. Peter Leix describes in detail the production of his feature length documentary “Flint”. Included in this written thesis is the author’s personal background, including being raised in the cult religion of Jehovah's Witness and how this led to his strong connection with the city of Flint, Michigan. Peter writes openly about the choices he makes both technically and creatively allowing the reader full access to his decision making process throughout. The film deals with issues of abandonment and loyalty. Viewers meet several people who endeavor daily to strengthen the individuals and the community in the crumbling city.

**Keywords:** Keyword1: Documentary, Keyword2 Film, Keyword3: Cult, Keyword4 Jehovah’s Witness,

## **Acknowledgments**

This has been the most meaningful and intense two years of my life, and while it has been an amazing ride I am very grateful to have reached the end of the journey. There are so many people that have made this project possible that I would like to thank. First and foremost my thesis committee David Turnley, Matt Kenyon, Markus Nornes, Stashu Kybartas, without whom this would not have been possible. Your energy, attention to detail and encouragement allowed to make the film I wanted to make. Thank you Guna Nadarajan and Elona Van Gent for allowing to be in this program and grow into the person I am today. I would also like to thank Kath Weider-Ross, David Chung, Rebekah Modrak, Nick Tobier, Cynthia Pachikara and Carol Jacobsen for taking their time to watch my film as it progressed and for the priceless feedback. I would like to thank Jim Cogswell for helping me find my voice. I would like to thank the Smucker-Wagstaff fund for supporting me, without your financial contributions I would have never been able to make this project. I would like to thank Wendy Dingan, Brian Banks, Betty Smith and the rest of the university staff for going out of their way to help me. Last but not least I would like to thank the subjects of my film, my family and wonderful and supportive fiancée and collaborator without any of this would be possible. I leave this University full of confidence and memories that will last a lifetime, for that there are no words.

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If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research,  
would it?

-Albert Einstein

## Introduction

My earliest memories of the city of Flint include sitting on my grandfather's lap, in front of his church organ, inventing a song about Chevy's greatness. At that time, around 1985, my Uncle Dennis lived with my grandparents. He was a 25 year-old long-haired hippie whose beard used to frighten me. But each time my family traveled to Flint from Ann Arbor, I felt more drawn to him.



Uncle Dennis from *Flint*

Although they met in Ann Arbor, both of my parents were from Flint. We would visit my paternal grandparents there as well, but they passed away before I could really form any concrete memories of them. The home of my maternal grandparents, the Dyes, was warm and inviting.



Inside the Dye House from my film Flint

The windows illuminated the numerous comfortable surfaces with the same diffused light that shines today. My grandfather Ray always seemed to have the state-of-the art La-Z-boy, it was his one gift to himself for his tireless work. The few hours he was not working he was usually watching a horrible TV evangelist playing at full blast due to his poor hearing. This was a consequence, he told me, from sticking twigs in his ears to kill the bugs while he picked cotton in rural Arkansas.

My grandfather was a joyous, affable mountain of a man who worked in the foundry at the notorious Chevy in the Hole plant, named not just for its physical location in a riverbed but

My Grandfather Ray, posing for me early in my Photography career.



also for its gloomy windowless interior. Before he was an autoworker, he held many other jobs, including the position of short order cook, so every time we arrived he cooked a mountain of food. He

loved to tease and was constantly trying to pull a prank. I never remember him being in a bad mood, and I knew him for 33 years. My grandmother, on the other hand, was always creating drama in the family, but she was always kind to me. However, the majority of my time spent in Flint was spent with Uncle Dennis or my cousins.

My cousin Steve and our local neighbor, Mike, would usually be over as well. Mike and Steve both had unstable home lives and the Dye home was a place to not only find peace but also fun. Uncle Dennis seemed to revel in creating games for us to play. They were usually basketball and football-based games, but my uncle was creative and often we would invent games of our own, like silverball. We would spend an afternoon wadding up pieces of aluminum foil and setting up obstacles in the three adjacent lawns. Tom, the recluse hoarder who lived directly next to my grandparents, made objections but could be easily bribed with a McDonald's cup or Aunt



Experiencing normalcy in the guise of basketball

Jemima bottle. Then we would attempt to hit one another as targets with the balls of silver.



Dennis included silverball in his “Backyard Olympics,” which pitted me and him against Mike and Steve. This culminated in a tug of war between radio-controlled toy cars. Mike was sure they would win, with his muscled monster truck pitted against our strange-looking sedan. Unknown to Mike and Steve, Dennis and I had planted two Estes rockets in the rear of our



Jehovah’s Witness propaganda.

humble looking car. On the count of three, I pushed an ignition switch and our car yanked the monster truck across the line like a child dragging a stuffed animal. Memories like these remind me why the Dye house was my refuge for fun and normality; when I was there, I could escape.

I was raised in a cult. I was forced to be a Jehovah's Witness until the church kicked me out when I was 15. Until then, I went to church four times a week. Every Saturday I had to go door-to-door trying to convince people that we knew the truth about God, and if they wanted to live, they needed to join us. I was told that the world as we know it would soon end in Armageddon. There were frightening, violent images in our publications such as these, intending to illustrate what the end of the world would look like. One can imagine the effect of looking at these images as a child. I was always anxious that this was imminent. Additionally, when a person believes that the world is going to end, one

does not plan for the future. Now that I have received years of training in making and comprehending the visual arts, I see this as propaganda intending to strike fear in any non-believer and to keep the flock from going astray.

Notice in the image below, the warning of “A well intentioned teacher urges you to pursue higher education at a university” is grouped with doing drugs and other serious biblical offenses. I was told I did not need to worry about high school because Armageddon would come by that time. We were not allowed to socialize with people outside the religion, and we celebrated no holidays. We could not watch most television shows or movies, and could not play sports.

**WHAT WILL BE THE  
“End Afterward”?**

Young people are often exposed to temptations and pressures to experiment with things that seem popular. Here are some likely scenarios.

- Someone dares you to smoke a cigarette.
- A well-intentioned teacher urges you to pursue higher education at a university.
- You are invited to a party where alcohol and possibly drugs will be freely available.
- “Why don’t you post your profile on the Internet?” someone suggests.
- A friend invites you to watch a movie that features violence or immorality.

If you are ever confronted with any of such situations, what will you do? Will you simply give in, or will you carefully consider what the “end afterward” could be? You would be wise to ask yourself: “Can a man rake together fire into his bosom and yet his very garments not be burned? Or can a man walk upon the coals and his feet themselves not be scorched?”—Proverbs 6:27, 28.

The poster includes three inset images: a close-up of a hand lighting a cigarette, a man in a suit talking to a man in a blue shirt, and two young women looking at a laptop.

Jehovah’s Witness Literature, warning against dangers such as higher education

So I absolutely hated being a Jehovah’s Witness as a child, and the only time I really got to enjoy my childhood was in Flint. My uncle saw through the religion, and helped me salvage a somewhat normal childhood. The cult finally kicked me out of the church when I was 15 for insubordination. I was officially “dis-fellowshipped,” which means I was ostracized from speaking with any member of the religion as well, of course, everyone else in the world. Next, I dropped out of high school and moved in

with my cousin Rita on Flint's east side. Rita was a stripper, and yet created a more uplifting environment than my parents' home in Ann Arbor. I asked Rita to be interviewed for the film "Flint," but she declined, feeling too self-conscious. This changed when I proposed we record a video expressing thanks to Dennis. I picked her up from her small house on the day we would record. Rita was incredibly articulate and comfortable on camera. Sometimes in documentary work, the challenge is that a really great subject may not want to reveal their private lives.

Around the time I left the church, my parents divorced. They did so for a number of reasons, mainly because my mom and sister wanted to leave the church as well. I eventually had to live with just my dad. We did not really speak with one another and, whenever I could, I would go to Flint to experience some sort of normality.

As the years have gone by, my father and I have mended our relationship. He ended up moving up North, and the rest of my family did our best to move on. But I have never stopped going to Flint, and the town has always seemed to be on my mind. I made a short documentary in the beginning. Upon seeing it, my colleagues urged me to explore the subject further, which led to making the film *Flint*. I was reluctant to include this part of my life in the film, partly because I did not want to be the focus of the film. More importantly, I was afraid for my father to hear me express these sentiments again, after these years of healing. My father is still a practicing Jehovah's Witness, and I did not want to embarrass him or damage our relationship. It is this paradox that filled me with anxiety, because for the strength of the film I knew that it needed to be included. The burden of telling my parents that this would be in the film turned out to be a positive healing moment. My father and I have never really talked about that openly, we just moved on and it never came up again, until the showing of this film. My mom, on the other hand, cried openly. I think it was difficult to process, and after she moved out, she had no idea

that my dad gave me that ultimatum. After I showed her the film we talked and once again. I believe it has strengthened our relationship. I honestly never thought that tackling such a difficult moment in my family's life in film would lead to such a positive outcome.

### **Context and Theory**

I knew from the beginning of the production that I would be confronted with the fact that one of the most famous documentaries of all time, *Roger and Me*, was about the city of Flint. The movie was made 25 years ago and was about General Motors closing factories in Flint. It was not a personal story. When I began the production of this film, one of my advisors, Stashu, said, "People are going to say there has already been a movie about Flint, but the hell with them." We had a discussion and talked about how it was important to confront this in the movie. So, I made a point of including a brief statement that if people know anything about Flint it's from a movie made 25 years ago. I think Flint and Detroit are fascinating subjects and worthy of more than just one film. How many movies have been made about New York? The fact a movie has already been made about a place does not prevent further exploration years down the line.

One of my favorite films that deals with a town similar to Flint is *Bombay Beach*. This film is set in a town that was built rapidly (much like Flint) in the 1950's after the Colorado River flooded an area in central California. The town was built and it quickly became a tourist destination. However this did not last and within a few decades it was in shambles. It actually looks very much like Flint now, except it's in the desert. I was immediately struck by the film's beauty. It has a very unique look to it. I was surprised that the filmmaker shot the entire film on a modified prosumer camcorder. I was also surprised and inspired to find out that she had shot, directed and recorded the audio by herself. In the film she lets her subjects collaborate with her in some scenes, usually it was a choreographed dance or some sort of

fantasy. While I did not have any choreographed scenes in my film, Dennis came along with me on nearly every shoot and would give me ideas from time to time.

Not having much experience interviewing, I found that this is a process that is honed over time. I also found that it takes time to build a rapport with people before they are willing to really open up. Filmmaker Alma Har'el described the evolution of her relationship in much the same way. There is an old man named Red in the film of whom she says, "He had this schedule that he would have to fit me into. As we got closer, he trusted me more and it became different between us, but in the beginning it was very much like that" (Harris).

In his review of one of my biggest cinematic inspirations, *October Country*, Roger Ebert points out that while the film is about one of the filmmaker's family (Daniel Mosher), he is never seen, mentioned or acknowledged in the film (Ebert). While Mosher obviously made a conscious decision to not be in the film, I felt like my presence was integral to the narrative. What I believe our two films share is certain visual sophistication that is not always present in documentary films. The first time I watched *October Country* I was immediately impressed with how beautifully it was shot. When I went to research the film, I learned that it was inspired by a series of photos that Daniel Mosher had made about his family. The film did not have narration; it was a more observational fly-on-the-wall approach to the production. However the qualities that inspired me in the making of my film were they transitions, b-roll and untraditional framing that made the film such a unique documentary. The movie was shot in a small post-industrial town in upstate New York. Mosher's family, much like mine, is dysfunctional. While I did not focus as much on my family's problems, I was keenly aware of similarities between these projects.

At a recent showing of a film I worked on called *Medora* (which is a film not dissimilar to the

project I'm currently working on, about a town struggling after it has lost its manufacturing



A photograph of mine from the film *Medora*

base and the resulting social problems), I was having a conversation with one the subjects of the film. He and another young subject said that they were so open with us because we opened up to them. This was my first time working on a documentary film or a film of any sort, as I had done only still photography until then. I found that the type of human exchange where we expose vulnerabilities to each other came naturally to me. It was interesting to see that as these exchanges became more common between the filmmakers and the subjects, the presence of the camera began to disappear. Learning how to disappear as a documentary cameraman is essential to capturing any sort of truth.

While I was a cinematographer on this project, I was not making decisions on the story and I did not have a say in the final edit. It was very interesting to see what was pieced together for the final film. I think a lot of people (myself included) see documentary film as being true to reality. After the experience of working on *Medora*, and seeing the final edit, I wonder how close to truth some films really are.

As we enter the post-industrial era it seems that there are a lot of documentary films being made about the aftermath. In 2012 *Detropia* was released. There was no narration in the film. I have mixed feelings about the film, I enjoyed a few of the characters but I wish there would have been a more

personal approach to the film. One of the directors (Heidi Ewing) is from Detroit and could have offered a personal view. Maybe it's because I was working on a similar project or the fact that I have spent a lot of time in the city, but somehow I feel it would have helped to know that there was a personal connection there.

So when I place my film in the context of above-mentioned films, I see interesting parallels between parts of each film and my film *Flint*. Like *Detropia*, I am documenting the lives of people that are presently being impacted by disappearance of the auto jobs, however I'm taking a more personal approach by including my family and my connection with the town. I'm using a similar visual approach to *October Country*, and additionally documenting my family, but once again I'm including myself in the story. However, I'm borrowing from the more lyrical or poetic approach to both *October Country* and *Bombay Beach*.

I think one aspect my film shares with all of these films is that the communities we are documenting are facing complex problems that have no easy solutions. At the end of each film the viewer is not necessarily left with the satisfaction of a happy ending or a sense of closure. Rather, these films document the lives of the people that are attempting to survive in communities that have been abused by corporations and left to pick up the pieces.

### **Making**

This project has made me keenly aware of the both the advantages and challenges included in tackling such a personal story. On one hand, I had an exceptional degree of access to all of my subjects in my family. I did not have to spend time building a rapport with them like I usually need to do with strangers or people that I have recently been introduced to. However, using family as a subject can be

challenging because you don't want to damage meaningful relationships in the process of telling a story. Honesty is key. I always tell my subjects how I think I will use what we are shooting that day in the overall scheme of the film. Additionally, I took both of my parents aside before showing them the film and told them about the scenes that they may find personally embarrassing. I really think this helped diffuse the situation and established a trust that was still in tact after seeing the film. This wasn't necessarily a learning moment, as I knew what I had to do, but the outcome reassured me. There is always a time to put the camera down and for both parties to talk honestly. Once they realize my intentions, the interviewees seem to be more forthcoming. This is just as important as any shot or important quote one may capture. In fact, this lays the foundation for the future success of the film.

The duty of telling the stories of the people I choose to document can be a heavy burden. Often, I wonder if I'm doing them justice. My hope is to never even remotely seem to be exploiting someone for the sole purpose of entertainment. If there is one thing I have learned about people, it is that they want their story to be told. These exchanges tell me how to proceed. There are thousands of fictional films in the world, and many of them are derived from true stories. After working on a few documentary films I can honestly say I have no aspiration to work on a fictional story. There is something I love about telling the stories of real people fighting through overwhelming circumstances. I feel like this is my calling my true strength is to make these stories visually stimulating. I also feel that I have the interpersonal skills that allow me to have the kind of communication that is needed to allow for a real, honest exchange between filmmaker and subject. In the handful of projects I have worked on, I have been humbled by the gravity of the stories people reveal to me. It makes me wonder, as I pass a town on the highway or an unassuming house on a street, what amazing stories or struggles lie within.

I have been told that my Midwestern, easy-going qualities allow to me connect with many types



of people. For this, I thank the diverse life I have lived. I have been as low as a homeless high school dropout with a substance abuse problem, to where I am now, working as a teaching assistant at an incredible university, and making films. I treat a worker at Taco Bell with same respect as a person of some celebrity. I have been at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and I recognize that the person at Taco Bell is not necessarily there because they are stupid or unambitious; they could be there because that is where life has taken them so far. I am not afraid to tell people about my life; from the lowest of my lows to the moderate success I am experiencing now. I think my colleagues and collaborators respect my honesty, and that understanding the reciprocity of honesty has assisted in the successes I have had.

### **Against the Grain**

While thousands upon thousands of people were fleeing Flint, I was finding as much time as possible to spend there. My grandfather had retired and narrowly missed losing his pension after the auto bailouts of 2008. I have two uncles who still work for the company; miraculously, they have managed to be two of the 8,000 people still employed by GM. They had to make many concessions and are laid off for months at time, forced to live off a fraction of their original salaries.

I think the people of southeast Michigan may not fully realize what an astounding socio-economic failure the state has experienced and is still dealing with. I wonder if



A still from the film *Flint*

there will ever be another event when there was such an amazing opportunity to rapidly climb the socioeconomic ladder, only to disappear only within a few decades. This is why I made this film. I wanted to document this phenomenon through my family's eyes and to document the heroes, as I consider them, who remain in the city and devote their lives to help deal with the aftermath of the failed social experiment that Flint has become.

I realize it may sound strange to find solace in a city like Flint. It is infamous as the setting for Michael Moore's film *Roger and Me*, which was about General Motors abandoning the city and the following radical increase in violence. In 2012 it was one the most violent places in America (Sterbenz and Fuchs) and the population has nearly shrunk in half from over 200,000 residents to just over 100,000 after losing 70,000 jobs directly or indirectly from GM closing the majority of its factories (Sterbenz and Fuchs).

Muscatawingh is the Ojibwe word for the area that is now known as Flint. The word translates to "open plain burned over" (Love 11). I could not think of a more apt description of the city's current state. Mimicking the natural cycles that once occurred in the area, the city was once alive and vibrant; now it is literally and figuratively burnt over. Although the natural cycles that replenish a burnt-over area are missing, and the cycle that would return Flint to a vibrant city is not even understood.

On October 8th, 2013 the governor of Michigan appointed Darnell Early as Emergency Manager of Flint ("Office of the Emergency Manager"). In elections a year before, voters repealed this law, but Governor Rick Snyder recently wrote a very similar law and had it passed by his Republican constituents. In an article on NBCnews.com, Ray Holman was quoted saying "It's the exact same law with window dressing. Ultimately, it's a dictator's law," (White ) The emergency manager law is currently being challenged by the NAACP. In her article on Freep.com, Tresa Baldas points out that

according to the lawsuit, slightly more than emergency managers now rule half of Michigan's 1.4 million African Americans, compared with slightly more than 1% of white residents (Baldas). These laws directly affect the people in this film. There is essentially taxation without representation, making their struggles to better the city harder by having disconnected people in charge of the city's resources. All of my attempts to speak with anyone from the emergency manager's office were denied. The subject came up in a few interviews, but ultimately I chose not include the issue in my film. The subject was interesting, but ultimately it was more of a distraction for the arc of the film.

People were originally drawn to Flint because it was situated on the bend of the Flint River and it was an ideal spot to float logs from the large forests that surrounded the area. This abundance of raw material and supporting labor force led to the formation of several carriage factories, this is how Flint got the name "Vehicle City". Flint was once one of the largest carriage producers in the world (Love 81). But as my Uncle Bill, a Flint resident, often says to me, "these guys were big dreamers." The men he was talking about were Louis Chevrolet and William Durant. Together they started General Motors and created the "poor-mans prosperity" that drew people from all over the world to Flint. Flint's population went from 13,000 in 1900 to 156,000 in 1930 (Young). People migrated from all around the country to Flint. My grandfather Raymond Dye was one of those people; he and my Grandmother Hazel (who was 8 months pregnant at the time) hitchhiked from St. Louis to find work in Michigan. They were originally cotton pickers from a small town in Arkansas. I would have loved to have my grandparents, especially my grandfather, still here for this project. He had so many stories that seemed too incredible to be real. My grandmother had a stroke and could not be interviewed. They, like many others, saw Flint as an area for rapid upward mobility. Things were wonderful until the late 1970's when GM decided to start eliminating the majority of employment in manufacturing, eventually eliminating over 80,000 jobs. With

those jobs went the tax base to pay for infrastructure and all of the industries that relied on the workers to purchase their goods and services. Among my family, those who could leave went to Texas and Florida, including my Aunt Yolanda. Those who remained either could not leave due financial reasons or were just in denial of what was happening and thought that things would turn around. With a sudden total lack of opportunity things got bad quickly. People started self-medicating to deal with depression, resulting in all kinds of drug related crime and ensuing violence. With no way to leave and no jobs to find, Flint turned into what many have called a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

### **Subjects**

Mr. Hubert Roberts

I met Mr. Roberts when Roland Graf (a professor at the Stamps School of Art & Design) traveled with a group of undergraduates to Flint for a tour and a brief history of the city. I was immediately struck by Mr. Roberts' ability to connect with an individual and the group as a whole. His wardrobe looked like that of a professor but he spoke with obvious knowledge of the inner city. The two are not mutually exclusive, but this peaked my interest in him. I spoke with



Mr. Hubert Roberts in a still from *Flint*

him briefly about the project I had begun, and if I could document him as he went about his activist

efforts. He was very enthusiastic about the prospect of having his life documented. He agreed to meet me on Easter Sunday at my family's home in Flint where my grandmother, Aunt Lori, and Uncle Dennis all live. I had no idea what to expect. This would be my first real interview with someone outside my family. I was excited for a number of reasons. First, Mr. Roberts seemed to be a very interesting man, second, he was the first person outside of family who had agreed to be in the film. The feedback I had received from a 30-minute version I had shown some of my colleagues was that they wanted to see some people of color. The idea that the documentary needed people of color seemed odd to me but I understood the need to show a proper cross section of the community. I did not want to force it into the film, so I was happy that it unfolded naturally.

Mr. Roberts did not have a lot of time to visit that day. He had come from Easter service and had another social event to attend. I think we both wanted to get to know one another a little better and to set up some further opportunities to document. Mr. Roberts greeted my family, had a little food, and then gave a brief introduction to all of the charitable/social activist foundations he was involved with, which numbered to at least seven. He delivered the speech with the authenticity and eloquence of a preacher giving a sermon. We then agreed to meet regularly for the next couple of Sundays for interviews. The following week he arrived with folders of notes and an agenda for what he wanted to accomplish that day. I asked him to introduce himself and where he was from and then he proceeded to tell in copious detail nearly every event from his birth to the age of 7! This happened again the following week, outlining the next part of his life, and I could see from his notes that he intended on reciting his entire life story in detail.

Interviewing, like anything, is an acquired skill full of nuance and emotional negotiation. I had spent at least four hours filming these interviews as well another four just traveling to and from Ann

Ann Arbor to meet with him. About four hours into reviewing the footage, transcribing and making sub-clips of the interview, I knew that I had to come prepared with questions that would provoke a more focused response. Additionally I needed to set up some times and places where I could document Mr. Roberts when he was engaged in the community service he had described. Mr. Roberts works with kids at risk and people who have just gotten out of prison so I had questions of access. Much to my surprise, he was very excited to cooperate and immediately sought permission for us to proceed. The next time we met was in the basement of the public library where Mr. Roberts was meeting with at-risk youth for the program “Black Men for Social Change.” There was some good visual material that I captured at this meeting to illustrate or serve as visuals for his previous and future interviews. The next time we met for an interview he picked up just where he had left off in reciting the mundane events of his life, but this time I had prepared several questions on the drive up from Ann Arbor that I thought could produce the kind responses I wanted. This strategy worked better than I could have hoped for. His responses to my questions yielded a conversation rather than a detailed retelling of distant events.

This would help my future interviews with Mr. Roberts, but also with future interviews with the other subjects of the film. As the vision and the arc of the film clarified, I was able to go into an interview with a desired outcome or to have specific a topic fleshed out. This lesson proved invaluable.



Dennis at a camping excursion for kids led by Mr. Roberts

My uncle Dennis and I volunteered to work with Mr. Roberts on an excursion he organized to take inner city kids fishing and camping in northern Michigan. This was good for the film and also personally fulfilling. Around this point during the filming Mr. Roberts told me that he had been in prison for 17 years and that he had been diagnosed with a brain tumor that was supposed to have killed him 12 years ago. These revelations would give a whole new dynamic to him as a subject and I believe he finally spoke about them after he had spent enough time with me to feel comfortable divulging such personal information.

Throughout the making of this film, Mr. Roberts was a pleasure to work with. He is now struggling with his health care providers to remain on the medication that is sustaining his life. He actually disappeared for about a month during the production of the film because he was struggling emotionally and physically after being deprived of his medication. When he finally returned my numerous phone calls, he explained in an interview in the film that he had been denied his medication because he refused to sign a liability waiver that cleared the various corporations involved in case it caused his death. Not having access to his medication Mr. Roberts told me that he could not do what he loved to do, which was to help people. Mr. Roberts' brain tumor is attached to his pituitary gland and it affects his hormone

production and he was an emotional mess without it. Mr. Roberts finally signed the document so he could continue to his work and is currently doing much better physically.

### **Dewana and Ray**

When I first met Dewana Wright at a filmmaking workshop in Flint, I never would have guessed she would end up being one the key subjects of my film. We would always greet one another, but it wasn't until we were waiting for the same late bus that we got a chance to talk. She began to tell me about all of the creative ideas she had and we agreed to meet so I could see the non-profit at which she worked. Within five minutes of speaking I knew that Dewana had to be in this film.



Dewana, in a still from the film *Flint*

On top of responsibilities working at Remix, Dewana is a foster parent. I believe she currently has five “foster” children but the word foster never comes into the conversation. It is obvious from our interactions she sees this as a lifelong journey, and one she is happy to be on. One of her oldest children, Ray Ford, is featured in the film as well. He had a terrible childhood in which he was tossed



around from home to home where he was abused. Having done nothing wrong, he was briefly housed at juvenile detention facility because there was nowhere else to go. This all changed when he was placed with Dewana. I was documenting them as Ray reached his biggest goal, to become a police officer. This was one of the highlights of the film to me and I was so happy to see Ray meet his goal and to make his mother proud.



A still from *Flint* in which Dewana cried from her pride in Ray.

### **David and Domingo**

A week or so after I started with this project, I knew that I wanted to focus on the people that are helping Flint recover and move on. I expressed this to my Uncle Dennis and within a day or two he got a knock on his door from his old friend David Berlanga. A mutual friend of both David and Dennis had recently died and David was just stopping in to reminisce and grieve. They started talking and David told me about this technology center that he and his father Domingo had been working on for

years in their spare time. When I say spare time, one must remember these men are not trust-fund philanthropists, David works over 40 work as a laborer and his father is a 90-year old retiree from a



GM factory.

David and Domingo in a still from *Flint*

They bought an abandoned bank building and with some help from Mott Community College turned this old bank into a technology center on Flint's east side. The east side is known as being one of Flint's rougher parts, but the Berlengas wanted to do it there despite some pushback from Mott. There is a large Latino population on the east side and most don't have access to the internet or money to pay for English lessons, which are both services provided by the center.

They welcomed me to film whenever I wanted. David's warmth made me feel as if I had known him for years. He is a reformed alcoholic who has been sober for over 20 years. Additionally he is an amazingly talented guitar player and the film opens with him playing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow".

### **Lori**

My aunt, Lori, has faced a lot physical and psychological challenges that would make most people I know fall into a deep depression or become very negative. However, Lori has always

remained a very positive person, she is fun to be around and has a great sense of humor



Lori hugs her son Trevor.

even about some of the awful things that have happened in her life. Lori was in what other states recognize as a common law marriage with man whom she had a child with. Lori was a stay-at-home mom, raising their son Trevor and giving up her job at a grocery store where she had acquired enough time to be making a decent wage and had the possibility of working towards a pension. However, her partner left her and Trevor to be with another woman. Since they were never married she was unable to collect any alimony and it took years for him even to pay child support.

Lori also developed a series of allergies over the past 20 years that prohibit her from working a most jobs. She recently figured out what was the main agitator for allergies, SLS, a foaming agent made from coconut oil that is in an astronomical number of products. Since figuring this out Lori said she “feels like she has a new lease on life”. She’s taken out around \$100,000 dollars worth of student loans for her son Trevor to go to college.



My Aunt Lori in a still from *Flint*

With her new found health and the weight of the student debt loans weighing on her mind, I documented Lori as she started her road back to being an independent woman. We traveled around to a few schools in the area looking for a program that would not take that long to complete and that would help her find a job directly after she completed the program.

As a character in the film, Lori does not personally deal with the community at large. However, I felt that she was an important character to include because not everyone seeing this film is going to be able to help the community at large. I felt that many people could identify with the struggle just to better their own lives. I'm sure there are plenty of people that face similar challenges and can identify with her. I see her struggle as a good contrast to larger issues that Dewana and Hubert Roberts are facing. Certainly struggle is not a competition and Lori and Dennis' private struggles seem to balance well with interpersonal issues that others are dealing with.

Lori finds a higher education program for her in the film and completes it, a small victory in a city

of constant defeats. In a place where the problems seem overwhelming, I think Lori's story illustrates self-empowerment. Lori is now in her externship and is working towards paying off her massive student loans but has no plans to leave Flint.

### **Me**

It was hard to figure how I was going to place myself in this film: would I be seen, heard, or would I be the "Voice of God" narrator throughout? I struggled with this decision more than anything. I think I found a nice balance in the end. I also had the challenge of figuring out a way for all of the parts of the film to be cohesive. I had incredible access to my family, at the same time it was difficult to be objective about what ultimately made it in the film. Certain stories that I found compelling but did not work with overall arc of the film and needed to be edited out. In the end what really ties the story together is me, and I actually enjoyed the narration I did for a parts of the film.

### **Uncle Dennis**

This film all started with a trip with Dennis to the former site of Buick's world headquarters, a factory formerly known as "Buick City," which is now the biggest brownfield in America. It started with a prompt to make a five minute-documentary on someone doing something, like repairing a bicycle. I decided it would be interesting to document a space where



A still from *Flint* showing the largest brownfield in the world.

people were once manufacturing thousands of cars per day and now is nothing more than a giant cement slab where nothing is being manufactured. I know my uncle Dennis very well; he has been as big an influence as anyone in my life. What was interesting to me is that on that day I heard Dennis vocalize many things that I imagined he thought about the city but had never heard him articulate so clearly. Maybe it was because I never asked him directly about those spaces and GM's mistreatment of the community.

He provided the sanctuary from my dysfunctional family life I needed when I was young and we remain like brothers today. For whatever reason, Dennis never got a steady job and has never really been in a romantic relationship. He can't afford to leave Flint and lives with my grandmother and his sister Lori in a small home on Flint's north side. While he may seem to be a failure as far as societal norms, he is far from that in my eyes. While he has no children of his own, he has filled the role of a parent for me and nearly a dozen of my cousins. It's hard to say where many of

us would be if Dennis had not been there for us. As the film began to focus on other members outside of family helping the community at large, I realized that Dennis had done just as much.



Dennis, Lori and Grandmothers house as seen in the film

Dennis is also a great example of someone who is stuck in Flint doing whatever he can to better his life by doing little things. I see his attitude as this: if you're stuck at least you can better your everyday life by controlling your direct environment. In my uncle's case, that means buying the lot next to his house, which had a burnt out crack house leveled by the city, for \$128 and planting a garden and apple orchard in its place. Dennis also has 38 birdhouses at last count, which fill the yard with hundreds of birds a year round. These may sound like small improvements but having birds singing and crops growing changes the environment from just another small house in a beat-up neighborhood to an aviary with a real, food-producing garden. These changes have also inspired the surrounding neighbors to start creating gardens of their own and in general treating their homes with more respect. This has a domino effect, in that more responsible people want to move into the

neighborhood. I can actually see a turn in the attitude and appearance of the neighborhood.



My Uncle Dennis in a still from *Flint*

Even though Dennis himself is a subject, I have taken him with me as a collaborator on nearly every excursion for the film. This has led to us volunteering on a couple of projects in the community and I believe it has opened both of our eyes to the various volunteer opportunities beyond just the ones we took part in and the effect he can have on the community at large.

### **Discussion**

I began my time at the University of Michigan as a photographer, and I earned my Bachelors of Art in Photography from the Savannah College of Art and Design. When working in photography, I think about a story that is frozen in time, existing in a single moment. Without the element of time inherent in film, I am allowed to dwell for longer on elements within the frame; dynamic movement, contrast, balance, etc. Because I have worked in photography for so long, the care I put into these elements has become subconscious. As I have moved forward into time-based work, I bring along



these instincts. I believe that these sensitivities set my filmmaking apart.

As we exit the post industrial era there are bound to be more documentary films made about this towns, lives, and the catastrophic aftermath. As discussed above the approach to telling these community's stories can very gratefully. Since I did not study film in my undergraduate work a lot of this project was research. As stated above by Albert Einstein "If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it? I wanted to embrace that idea in this paper, there were a lot of times where I was learning on the fly. However I am glad I pushed myself beyond my comfort zone into the realm of the unknown. This where I truly began to feel not only was I making, I was also doing research.

The subjects in my film use their own words to tell their stories. I also narrate certain parts of the film. Thanks to the growth I experienced in Jim Cogswell's writing seminar, I feel that my ability to articulate my ideas clearly allowed my to narrate my own story effectively. Yet the element of personal storytelling that I felt most excited to create was my creation of visuals. I wanted to create a film that was visually complex but I wanted the visuals to simply complete the lives of the amazing people I documented in this film.

I believe this work is compelling because I feel I competently fill the role as director, as well as the creator of a beautifully executed work of art. My intense training as still photography allowed me to concentrate more on my weakness: producing and directing. I knew that I had the ability to create beautiful visuals my real challenge, or research came in ability to learn how to direct, produce and edit a film. I'm proud of this film and feel that I leave this amazing program with an incredible film to show for my hard work and research.

## **Conclusion**

Because Flint had served as an oasis for me, I always felt like I owed the city and I had never volunteered in any large capacity before making this project, and when the opportunity came up to help work on a filmmaking workshop with underserved high school kids I jumped at the opportunity. Volunteering for that workshop led to me meeting some of the key subjects of my film, Dewana and Hubert Roberts and it also led to some more volunteer opportunities for me and some of my family. They say you only get what you give back and these synchronistic events are direct examples of that proverb. I found the selflessness of the film's subjects infectious and beyond just my new understanding of the city and challenges it faces; I learned what it really means to be of service to your fellow man. Just as a child and throughout my life, my trips from Ann Arbor to Flint seemed to always change my perspective.

Going back and working on this project has given me a deeper understanding of the city, its people, and the serious challenges it faces. It's deepened my empathy for a people with a tremendous lack of opportunity and a crumbling infrastructure. I find it so interesting that I every time I show this film, there is always someone in the crowd that grew up in similar town in places all over the world.

After spending so much time in Flint I now understand the radical crime rate not as character flaw of its citizens; but proof of people scraping by just to put food on the table and keep the lights on after a corporation raped the land and completely abandoned the very people who built it from the ground up. General Motors provided a fast track up the socioeconomic ladder to the nation's working class, only to kick it out from their feet and leave the average man to lend a hand back up. In this film I found the people who are helping to pick these people up, one by one, little by little. I found the beauty and courage in the members of my family as they make the best of the situation.

I'm happy I went so far out of my comfort zone for this project because I learned so much

about making a film on a number of levels: technically, interpersonally and most specific to this project how to make a film about people that I am so close with. It's a blessing to have so much access; and at the same time a curse because I know them so well that it's hard to be objective sometimes.

Additionally there was an extra level of sensitivity in exposing my family's private life without alienating those closest to me.

I found there are no easy answers to complexity of Flint's problems, but there is a remarkable perseverance in the people who dedicate their lives to others. Looking in the mirror, I see someone who helped shed light on these stories. I see the sacrifices and perseverance of members of my own family who continue to make the best out of a hard situation. I see people doing whatever they can to bring brightness and structure to a collapsed environment.



The film workshop team above from *Flint*

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