

Crisis: Understanding the Opioid Epidemic in Calhoun County

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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December 11, 2019

Expected Date of Graduation

December 14, 2019

Abstract

Opioid addiction is a devastating problem across the United States, with staggeringly high addiction and overdose rates in the Midwest alone. Calhoun County, the county in which I grew up, is one of the worst counties in the state of Michigan for opioid abuse. Through this four-part documentary series, I explore the perspectives of people who see the effects opioids in their daily life, from a former addict to a 911 operator. This project aims to bring to light the true, complicated nature of the opioid epidemic so that matters surrounding opioids can be better understood by the general public.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Suzy Smith for advising me through this project. Her continued support and advice through this complicated endeavor allowed me to create a more elaborate finished product than I could have ever imagined and of which I am truly proud.

I would also like to thank Tod, Rockne, Jordan, Morgan, Erin, Sheriff Matt Saxton, Dr. Michael Chapman, Deputy Dubois, and my father, Kevin, for allowing me to interview them for the documentary series. Their participation and honesty created the backbone of my entire project.

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Creative Project: https://allisonbrownell2.wixsite.com/thesis	

Process Analysis Statement

I have always been interested in the media's representation of opioid addiction, especially in the area where I grew up in Michigan. Calhoun County, where I have lived all my life before attending Ball State University, was always portrayed as one of the worst areas for opioid addiction. As I grew up I saw more and more stories about this opioid crisis in the newspapers and on television, and I heard more and more people talk about people they knew dying from overdoses. My interest reached a new level when my father began taking prescribed opioids to help with the pain from a series of severe back injuries and resulting surgeries. The opioids he took seemed to be the only remedy to allow him to live a normal life, so I wondered, *How can so many people be suffering from addiction and dying from overdosing on the same substances that are helping my dad cope with his pain?*

This curiosity was the inspiration for my creative thesis project. From my original question, I began researching about the problem of opioid addiction itself so that I could develop a better understanding of the topic before beginning the filming process. I found staggering statistics:

- In 2016, there were twice the national average amount of opioids dispensed in Calhoun County, at roughly 120 prescriptions per every 100 people.
- More than 40 people died because of opioids in Calhoun County every year between 2015 and 2017.¹

These numbers were shocking, but I wanted to know just how bad Calhoun County was compared to other Michigan counties. Although the numbers varied a bit by source, I found that

¹ "calhouncountymi.gov." *calhouncountymi.gov*. Calhoun County, May 25, 2018.

Calhoun County was typically listed between second or fourth highest for opioid overdoses. According to an article by the *Detroit Free Press*, in 2015, Calhoun County was the second worst county in the state of Michigan for opioid and heroin-related deaths, with 2.8 deaths per every 10,000 residents.² After seeing the data that confirmed the seriousness of the opioid addiction in my home county, combined with my existing interest on the topic, I knew I needed to create my thesis around Calhoun County's apparent opioid crisis.

After selecting my topic, I began the process of figuring out how to best format my creative thesis. I knew that I wanted to create some form of documentary project, but I was also inspired by documentary series I had seen from channels on YouTube like Vice and BBC Three that had similarly highlighted serious subjects. I liked the idea of a four-part series that could be watched back-to-back as a full documentary but that also could be watched as episodes and still be meaningful. This way viewers could take breaks if the content was upsetting to them, but it also would help prevent people from losing interest, as can often happen with long-form video. I felt that in order to best target the average Michigan resident, for whom this project is meant, I needed to create the documentary in a way that was the most "user-friendly." Since most people prefer to sit through shorter videos and most video content that people take in is generally short content like one would find on a social media platform, I decided that I would attempt to emulate that style as much as possible with my final product, while still allowing the videos to be informative and well-rounded.

The second step I took in preparing for my thesis was to gather people who would be willing to talk with me on camera. First, I asked my father, as he was the original inspiration for

² Kristi Tanner, "Tragic toll: Drug overdose deaths quadruple in Michigan," *Detroit Free Press*, April 21, 2017.

the project. After receiving his approval and agreement to speak on camera about his experience with opioids, I made a list with my thesis advisor of people to contact. My thesis advisor had a friend who used to work for Calhoun County's 911 dispatch center, so I contacted her. She referred me to Sheriff Matt Saxton and Erin Allwardt, the current dispatch supervisor for the county's 911 dispatch center. I continued gathering contact information from people who knew someone who they thought would be interested in taking part in my project, and eventually I had compiled a list of future interviews that I felt would create a full story. I found this portion of the process to be easier than I had originally expected as everyone I contacted either agreed to talk with me on camera or found somebody else in their office who was willing to be part of the project. A benefit of creating my thesis project around the area surrounding my hometown was that many people I contacted knew me or at least knew of me, so they felt comfortable talking with me or referring me to somebody else in their field.

Once I initially spoke with people and scheduled times to interview them, the next step I took was to do more research on the topic and on each interviewee's position as much as possible so that I could ask the most effective questions for my project. I developed question lists for each person I talked to, and as I conducted more interviews, I found which questions worked and which ones did not. It was helpful that my first interview was with a doctor who was very well spoken and had an incredible amount to say about all areas of the topic. His interview somewhat shaped the questions I asked people after that as I could begin to imagine the storyline of the series based on my conversation with the doctor.

After I collected my initial interviews, I watched all of the footage to make sure that every important aspect of the topic had been covered by the answers in each interview. I then made lists of what b-roll, or supplemental footage, I still needed. For example, to support the

interview given by Sheriff Saxton, I needed b-roll of a police car, lights flashing, and Narcan as these were all objects that related to what he said in his interview. For interviews where I needed to collect more b-roll, I reached out to the people I had interviewed and set up times for me to come back and shoot the video. This was somewhat time-consuming, and if I were to do it again, I would have tried harder to record everything in one visit. Despite that challenge, I collected all of my footage by September.

Once all of my filming was completed, I moved on to the editing process. Although I had a rough idea of what each episode would entail when starting my project, looking at the raw footage and the candid responses from the people I interviewed made the storytelling both more interesting and more complex. I had responses that were unexpected and whole topics I had not considered when creating the initial concept, so the first step of editing was to create a storyboard in order to lay out each episode more specifically. I drew these storyboards out on paper, writing descriptions with which interviews to include for each segment of each video. Because I took the time to focus on the layout of each episode before I actually started editing on my computer, it made the physical editing process move much more quickly than I had expected.

To efficiently execute the actual process of going through files and editing them into a cohesive story, I felt it was necessary to sort each interview answer into categories, like “911/Overdoses” and “Rehab,” which I did by creating individual sequences in Adobe Premiere Pro. By doing this I was able to quickly search a category when I needed dialogue about a certain topic in my documentary series without worrying that I had missed or forgotten about a good sound bite. Although that process was time-consuming as well, it was helpful in ensuring that all interviewees were represented in each of the topic areas. To help organize things, I created sequences for each episode in Adobe Premiere Pro. This allowed me to switch easily between

episodes when working with b-roll footage and helped ensure I was not using all of the same footage in multiple episodes.

When I felt that there was a portion of the storyline that needed to be explained or set up with narration, I wrote out a script and recorded the narration. Instead of writing a full script before beginning, I wrote individual scripts for each narration as it came up, so as not to over-narrate the story. I wanted as much of the documentary to be in the interviewees' own words as possible, so I only added my own narration when I felt it was truly necessary and beneficial to the overall storyline. When editing the rough cut of each episode, I recorded myself on my iPhone and sent the files to myself so I could have an instant placeholder for my final narrations. Before adding b-roll to each episode, I went back through and recorded my voice properly using a Zoom H4N Pro microphone. I then replaced the iPhone recordings with the final recordings so that the timing would be accurate for me to add the b-roll correctly to the episodes.

Finally, after laying out the skeletons of each episode, I was able to add the b-roll, sounds, and music. Because I had recorded b-roll with certain subjects in mind, it was relatively easy to search through footage and find fitting b-roll for a certain part of the story. My b-roll footage served as a way to cover cuts in the editing, but more importantly as a way to add visual interest and creativity to the project. There were also certain parts of the story where I was unable to film supporting b-roll, like shots of heroin or moments where a graph would be more helpful to the storyline. In these cases, I found non-licensed or creative commons media to use as b-roll. I believe that using this media for b-roll in combination with the supporting footage that I shot creates a more dynamic and interesting storyline for the viewer. The borrowed footage allows the viewer to better visualize what is being said in the interviews in a way that I would not have been able to express through my own footage as a result of access and production level

constraints. For the music and sound effects, I searched royalty-free music websites that I already trusted from previous projects, such as incompetech.com. I found music that I believed would not be distracting from the dialogue, and I placed songs within each episode strategically so that they would support the mood of the interview. Using music will help the viewer to fully feel the project on a deeper level rather than simply understanding what is being said. I used sound effects to create feeling, as well as clarity, throughout the episodes. I added these effects sparingly so as not to take away from their effectiveness or distract from the overall story. For example, I put siren sounds in places where emergency situations were being discussed as the average viewer automatically has an emotional reaction to sirens and understands that there is an emergency when he or she hears the sound of a siren.

Throughout the process of creating my thesis project, I encountered several challenges and obstacles. Because I was required to coordinate with several people across several different fields and backgrounds in order to set up interviews, I found communication to be the most difficult part of my project. I came across multiple barriers in terms of finding times for interviews and getting timely responses from the people I was interviewing for the series. For example, my contact for the rehabilitation facility who had been setting up my interviews with staff at the facility was fired during the middle of my project, but I was not informed by anyone at the facility. This caused me to lose communication with my interviewees for a prolonged period of time before I was eventually able to communicate with them again directly through the rehabilitation center. I believe this challenge taught me an important lesson about being persistent and making sure to have reliable contact information when taking on a journalistic project. As filming of the series progressed, I felt that I improved in this realm, and I will be better prepared for challenging communication in future projects of this nature.

Another challenge I faced was in travelling to and from Michigan in order to film the entirety of the project. Although I knew this would be a necessary step from the beginning, it still proved to be frustrating at times, especially in terms of scheduling out-of-state interviews in line with my class and work schedules. Most of my interviews had to be conducted on Fridays, weekends, or Mondays so that I could plan to drive home for a long weekend rather than try to leave Muncie during the middle of the week. Because I had limited time in Calhoun County, it also meant that some weekends when I was home, I was filming three or four interviews in a very limited amount of time, which was strenuous in itself. However, I found that the reward of creating a project around a place which is so meaningful to me far outweighed the inconvenience that sometimes came with filming the series.

Something else that I found surprisingly challenging was the unexpected problems that came along with using rented equipment from University Media Services. Because I shot my series on basic equipment that most telecommunications students have access to, such as the Sony Nx5 camera and Fiilex lights, I found myself running into issues with faulty equipment. For example, on one shoot I had a camera battery die in the middle of my interview, and when I went to change it for the secondary battery they had given me, I found that battery to be dead as well. Of course, I should have made sure to check batteries before starting the interview, and from that day forward, I always made sure the batteries that came with my camera had time to charge, just in case I had been accidentally given more dead batteries. On another occasion, a sensor inside of the camera was loose, which I had not been informed of before renting the camera, so during my shoot a black ring kept appearing around the edges of my shots. This issue could only be resolved by turning the camera off, waiting a minute, then turning it back on. While issues such as these can be expected when using video equipment that hundreds of other

students are constantly using, I could have avoided such issues altogether by using my own equipment instead of the university's.

After creating this series, there are several aspects I would change about my method if I were to do the project over again. As stated above, I would have recorded b-roll on the same day as interviews when possible to avoid more difficult scheduling. I also would have put more variation into the way that I framed interviews, as I realized when editing that the interviews looked a bit repetitive. I could have achieved this variation by having more interviews where the subject was doing something related to the topic on which they were speaking, like when the sheriff deputy was talking with me while in the police car. If I would have done more interviews in this fashion, the interviews themselves would not have required as much b-roll to make them interesting, and the videos would have been overall less stagnant.

Another piece of my method that I would change were I to redo this project would be to work more on the project throughout the filming process. When making the series, I saved up all of my footage on a hard drive and did not touch it much, if at all, until I was completely finished filming and ready to move onto the editing process. If I would have begun cutting and categorizing the footage as I collected it, it would have saved me a significant amount of time during post-production. Along these lines, it would have been much better for organization purposes if I would have taken the time to go through the files, discarding the ones I did not need and naming and sorting the usable files into labelled folders. This would have allowed me to access the files I needed much more easily when it came time to edit the episodes, whereas in actuality, I had to search through my entire hard drive by date to find all of the files I had dumped onto it while filming.

Finally, I wish I would have taken more time for pre-production so that I could have planned and scheduled my shoots, and subsequently, my out-of-state travel, ahead of time as much as possible. If I were to do this project over again, I would have been more organized about finding all of my interview subjects and scheduling times with each of them before filming began so that I could have had a set schedule with coordinated weekends to travel to Michigan. If I would have followed such a plan, I would have been able to save a significant amount of time and money by travelling fewer times. I believe that if I would have planned my interviews in this fashion, it also would have allowed me more time and structure to craft better questions, setups, and coordination of topics.

Through the creation of my thesis project, I feel that learned and grew in every aspect of video production. As a result of making this documentary series on my own, I was forced to use skills in areas of production that were outside of my comfort zone, such as being my own director of photography. Going into the project, I understood the basic skills of how to operate the camera equipment I was using, but by practicing in interview after interview, I became more comfortable with the camera, as well as with branching out and trying more creative techniques. This project also allowed me to gain experience editing a larger-scale piece as I do not work very often in post-production. I learned throughout the editing process how to be more efficient by memorizing shortcuts and by finding the workflow that was best for my personal editing style, like creating categorized sequences to sort interview answers into for easy access. I learned new ways to use Premiere Pro, the editing software I have been using for years, in order to get the most out of its capabilities. For example, something seemingly simple that I had not learned how to do before this project was making a still image appear to move and/or grow on the screen in order to make it more visually interesting to the viewer. This is a commonly used technique in

documentaries, but I had never needed to use it before. Through trial-and-error and by combining my knowledge of other Adobe software like After Effects with my existing knowledge of Premiere Pro, I was able to find and effectively use the controls to make this effect appear on the still images throughout my project.

Overall, I feel that creating this documentary series challenged me in ways that have truly prepared me for life in the video production field after graduation. I tackled a more serious topic than I had ever worked with before, and I did it on a larger scale than I had ever created before. The challenges that I faced, from coordinating interviews and dealing with equipment malfunctions to the typical obstacles of putting together a cohesive piece in post-production, pushed me to think critically and solve the problems I encountered. The end result of my project turned out to be just what I wanted it to be: a thought-provoking exploration into a deeply complicated subject that allowed viewers to gain insight and knowledge while highlighting the frustrating fact that there is no simple solution to the problem of opioid addiction. This documentary series is one that I truly believe is important for people to watch and learn from. It presents subject matter that is often difficult to hear and discuss, but as the series shows, the inability to face the serious truth of opioid addiction only furthers the problem. The representation of differing opinions, experiences, and types of people creates a viewing environment that is accessible and welcoming to audiences of almost any background and baseline knowledge of the topic. My hope is that through this project, people in Michigan and across the country can become more knowledgeable about the true nature of opioid addiction so that support and resources can continue to grow in order to successfully fight the opioid crisis.

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