Uncovering the Facts About Nursing Home Staffing in Indiana

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Elderly Americans represent one of the fastest growing demographic groups in our country. Millions of baby boomers will soon be in their sunset years. With longer life spans, many of the elderly will require assisted living or care of some kind. Are the nursing home industries ready to handle this approaching tidal wave?

Studies find that there are serious problems in nursing homes in regard to the issue of staffing. Staffing is the fundamental key to providing quality care to nursing home residents.

My thesis is a creative video project that outlines the problems in Indiana regarding nursing home staffing. The purpose of the project was to create an informational video that could be used to educate the public on the issue of nursing home staffing. The hope is that the video will also be able to function as a lobbying tool as viewers encourage our state lawmakers to legislate for reform in nursing home standards across Indiana.

The project consists of a DVD, which includes an introduction to the project and a seventeen-minute video about the issue of nursing home staffing. Additionally, I have written this companion text in the pages that follow, to explain the process and creation of the video.
Acknowledgements

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- Another thank-you to Mary Sipes and the University Teleplex staff for help in securing the equipment needed to create the project.

- Many thanks to Robyn Grant, Michelle Niemier and all the folks at United Senior Action. I hope the video will further your mission.

- A last thank-you to Dr. Michael Gerhard who was the mentor, partner, teacher and friend behind this entire operation. Without his unwavering vision, ideas and persistence this project would never have seen the light of day, and I would not have benefitted in the ways that I have. A more dedicated and suitable faculty mentor could not exist; of this I am quite sure.
Introduction

I had not expected this creative project to be my HONORS 499 thesis when I began. In fact, I had almost decided to quit honors and graduate just one course away from earning my honors diploma. This would have very likely happened if Dean James Ruebel and Associate Dean John Emert had not encouraged me to rethink my plan and worked to help me find an option that was achievable. The rest was that little grain of conscience that I think all honors students possess which bugs, prods, pleads and bullies our wills to try to achieve more than just average. I ended up knowing I would regret being so close to completing the honors curriculum to simply take the easiest path to graduation instead.

The following pages describe a project that evolved much more than I knew it would, and an educational experience that I never expected to manifest in the way that it did. It shows the journey from beginning to end, the steps that it took to get there, and the effect that those steps had on the wandering explorer who was as much charting his map as he was following it. As the explorer behind this academic venture, let me describe that process in some detail.
The Project

This thesis first began as an honors undergraduate research fellowship opportunity. Dr. Michael Gerhard, Associate Professor of Telecommunications, was trying to put together an honors fellowship for one of the causes that he supports: lobbying for State reform in the area of nursing homes. He had sent an e-mail in late January of 2008 looking for a student who was interested in partnering with him in the endeavor. He also made a personal announcement of the same effect in the Telecommunications Documentary Film course that he was teaching – a class in which I was enrolled.

The honors fellowship, as he saw it, was to create two DVDs to be used for lobbying Indiana legislature in issues relating to long-term care of senior citizens and educating the general public on how to lobby effectively. The student that he chose for the fellowship would have the opportunity to practice videography, digital storytelling, editing and DVD creation. Also, as there was no academic credit offered for a student engaged in the honors fellowship, there would be a fiscal stipend for the student.

I will admit, the last detail made my ears perk up a little bit. At the time, I considered any opportunity to earn cash better than working the night desk in the Johnson Complex dorms. The other factors clicked for me too. I was looking for an outlet to practice production skills that I was beginning to learn in the Telecommunications curriculum, specifically an opportunity outside of the classroom. The cause also seemed worthwhile; though helping elderly Americans is probably not something that most college students think about too often. Maybe, hopefully, I'm wrong about that last part. Dr. Gerhard would attribute my reasoning to assist in the
project as a byproduct of my “do-gooder” mentality. Dr. Gerhard, being a “do-gooder” himself, likes people who have this type of moxie.

Additionally, I was comfortable working with Dr. Gerhard. He had been the professor of my first Telecommunications foundational class when I entered the program in fall of 2007, and I had enjoyed his teaching enough to enroll in his special topics documentary film class in the spring. Despite differences in political views, we get along very well.

As you have probably guessed by this point, I did submit application to work with Dr. Gerhard on the honors fellowship. We kept in correspondence and submitted for the honors fellowship in the later part of March 2008. It would eventually be approved for the fall semester of 2008 and the spring semester of 2009.

Throughout the summer we kept in touch loosely to try and plan the initial stages of the project. I was taking summer courses, so we even met to briefly discuss our battle plan on at least one occasion. Dr. Gerhard wanted to work closely with a group that he supported: United Senior Action (USA), an organization that works to make life better for senior citizens in Indiana. We arranged to meet two USA staff to discuss the project, which Dr. Gerhard intended to use to help the mission of the organization. We were not able to schedule this meeting until early September, which also marked fall semester as underway.

At the meeting I was introduced to two people who would greatly affect the project: Long Term Care Policy Director Robyn Grant and Executive Director Michelle Niemier. It definitely takes meeting these two women to understand their great passion for service and commitment to community action and betterment. It is no exaggeration
to say that these ladies would give an arm and a leg to help improve conditions for seniors who live in nursing homes.

Robyn and Michelle were both thrilled with the idea of what Dr. Gerhard and I were going to undertake, and very hopeful at the potential such a project would have to raise public awareness and promote action in the community. The meeting was a terrific help to getting on the same page with them, and after the meeting was over it was clear that they were, in essence, our “clients”. I approached the rest of the project with the thought of use by United Senior Action in mind.

At this point, the content of the project had changed slightly. The new focus of the project was to create a single video that could be released on multiple platforms, that would serve as an educational and informational video, and that could be used as a lobbying tool for citizens interested in pushing for reform in Indiana nursing homes. Additionally, we had decided that the subject of the video would be tailored to one specific topic: staffing in nursing homes. This decision was made because Robyn, Michelle and other experts with whom we would later speak all agreed that the lack of sufficient staffing in nursing homes was the most comprehensive problem that we could engage. This was a huge decision in the project, and I believe it was the right one.

Staffing levels are something that almost everyone can wrap his or her mind around. It is also one of the most correctible problems that our lawmakers have the power to directly impact via legislation. Staffing levels are a tangible, evidence-filled issue that is so linked to common sense that citizen activists are able to feel powerful enough to make a difference. Once you have these “do-gooders” sold on the idea, organizing them to help becomes infinitely easier. I think that is another reason why this was such a good topic for our video: it has the potential to provide the most assistance to
United Senior Action volunteers to help people get involved. The more voices, the more power. That is how democracy works, in simple theory.

With new focus and vigor following the meeting, Dr. Gerhard and I began to plan for the next stages of the project, still engaged in the pre-production. Through several meetings we discussed the production steps for creating the project. We planned rough ideas of content, constructed outlines and sent Michelle and Robyn an action plan, so that they could stay current on the progress we were making.

I also reviewed equipment that we would be able to use for use in the project. As the videographer of the project I was always in charge of checking out the equipment and seeing that it was returned on time and in good condition. Ball State does a pretty good job of getting video production equipment into the hands of students who need to use it for academic purposes. Even so, having a contact on the inside is invaluable.

Mary Sipes is a Media Lab Specialist who works for the University Teleplex – the branch responsible for lending video equipment. She is essentially the queen bee of the hive. If you need equipment, you talk to Mary. I knew her from some past video projects that I had worked on for student organizations, and so I made sure to let her know about the honors fellowship that I was undertaking. She was very helpful and flexible in seeing that equipment ended up in my hands during the duration of the project.

I had hoped to be able to use high definition cameras for the project. After making inquiry for these with Mary and Professors Rich Swingley and Tim Pollard, however, it was clear that this would not be possible. Instead, Dr. Gerhard and I settled for using the Sony PD-150 cameras. These cameras are mostly dependable and robust, though a bit dated. Additionally, we had access to some three-piece lighting kits and several types of microphones.
Another thing we prepared before we did any real filming was release forms that we had signed by our interview subjects. Whenever any filming is done in which there is no contract or pay involved, it is of the utmost importance to receive consent from participants so that they cannot bring litigation against you later for any reason.

Ball State is lucky enough to have a Professor Barry Umansky on faculty. Professor Umansky has practiced law and teaches the course on media law that all graduating Telecommunications students are required to take. He often helps to insure that viable release forms are available for use in student projects. Dr. Gerhard acquired the form that we used so I don’t know if Professor Umansky was directly involved, but I would bet that there was a good chance he had a hand in it at some point.

The middle of October was the first opportunity we had to capture material for the video. Robyn and Michelle had tipped us off about an opportunity to get interview material from experts who were attending the NCCNR Conference that was held at the Hilton Hotel in Indianapolis. NCCNR stands for the National Citizens’ Coalition for Nursing Home Reform. United Senior Action often teams up with NCCNR because the groups have common goals. There were several experts who were flying in for the conference who had extensive knowledge on the problems in nursing home care. Through Robyn’s influence we attempted to interview a few of them so that we could use the footage for the project.

I learned from this part of the project was how few things actually go according to plan. One thing led to another, and the time for us to interview the experts after the conference activities were over kept getting pushed back further and further. I set up our equipment and waited in our interview room for almost three hours. In hindsight, I should have had a textbook or other resource handy to help pass the time. There was a
copy of the Indianapolis Star in the room that I think I read back to front two or three times.

When the experts were finally able to talk to us we had to pull them one-by-one from a cocktail party of sorts that had followed the conference activities, so they were not exactly in the best shape to even think clearly. Nevertheless, we did a pretty decent job of interviewing three of them. Dr. Gerhard would always conduct the interviews while I ran the camera. It was up to him to come up with questions that we would ask the interviewees, though he also asked for suggestions from Robyn and I when he was preparing his questionnaire in the days prior to the interviews. Through this process we conducted about three 20 minute interviews. I did not get back to Muncie until about 1:30 a.m. Such is the price of success.

In the next few weeks I did not get as much work done on the project as would have been desirable. I also made a mistake that I wish I could retract: I did not capture the footage from the DV tapes from our interviews soon after conducting them. This was part of the learning process for me. I think a good rule of thumb for any kind of video project is to make sure the footage is ingested or captured, saved to hard drive and backed up as soon as possible after the taping or filming. Not only is this approach the most professional and the most organized, it also gives you the chance to really evaluate what you were able to capture and decide if it was as good as you had hoped. The fact that I did not follow this procedure would end up hurting me later.

The next batch of interviews that we had planned was more comprehensive; We filmed them in the middle of November 2008. This time we were going to a USA annual conference and we had more control over when and whom we were interviewing since Michelle and Robyn had more control over the conference. We had high hopes for these
interviews because we had a good variety of subjects from whom to gather footage. Robyn had done a good job getting us a few people to talk, and we made an announcement at the start of the conference that anyone who had sometime to say could feel free to stop by and talk to us.

We spent most of the morning and early afternoon conducting interviews at the conference. We talked to several family members of nursing home residents who had seen the results of the lack of staffing firsthand. We also were able to talk to a Certified Nursing Assistant who provides care for nursing home residents and an ombudsman who tries to help the residents voice their concern to the nursing home staff and owners. A nursing home resident who had lived in several nursing homes was also attending the conference and agreed to speak to us.

After these interviews the project took the backburner for a while as I tried to keep up with my tough academic schedule. I did not accomplish much else in November other than some contact with Dr. Gerhard. At this point we had a lot of interview footage but I hadn’t really looked at it too closely and we had nothing else of much substance.

One thing any video project of documentary or news needs is what is termed as “b-roll.” The name makes sense because it is additional footage to the main video that is used to make up the structure of the video. B-roll helps bridge gaps between ideas and reinforce what is spoken about in the video. Clever use of b-roll can make even a mediocre project look impressive.

We got a good chance to gather b-roll when a local nursing home in the Muncie area advertised the need of a student to help with a special event the staff was planning for the residents. The management at this particular nursing home had arranged a day for the residents to take “glamour shots”. They were looking for a student to volunteer to
come take pictures. The residents were going to be able to dress up in makeup and costumes and have a little fun. Dr Gerhard thought that this would be a great opportunity to get b-roll in a nursing home without having to explain our actual project.

We received permission to bring a camera to the nursing home and take some footage while I took the “glamour shots” for the residents. I concluded that we were not being outright deceptive about our intentions, and that we were doing the nursing home a favor in the first place. Furthermore, what we were engaged in could be attributed as investigative journalism. All in all, I feel we ended up doing a good job getting useful b-roll from the event and did not in any way harm the reputation of the nursing home since it is not clearly indentify them in our video.

When spring semester began after Christmas break I was tied up for a week or two getting all my other academic business in order and Dr. Gerhard was preparing for his new classes. Neither of us worked too heavily on the project, apart from meeting to discuss business. At the end of January we went to the nursing home at the date I had arranged to help them with their “glamour shots”. I spent the majority of the time helping take the photographs while Dr. Gerhard captured the b-roll for our project.

After this opportunity I did not get very much accomplished on the project for a week or two. Dr. Gerhard finally got on my case; I’m glad he did. Spring break was fast approaching and I had not gotten much of our video work captured to a hard drive, and we were definitely behind our action plan for how much work was finished. It is very helpful to have accountability to keep you in line when you lose focus.

Dr. Gerhard thought that we really needed a strong voice to tie the video together. We had decided near the beginning of the project that we wanted to use Robyn Grant to speak on the staffing issue in our video but we had not yet interviewed her. In late
February we set up a time to film an in-depth interview with Robyn at the USA headquarters in Indianapolis. The interview was very successful. It was easy to work with Robyn, who already had a good idea of what we were trying to do in mind. The interview would provide the backbone for the finished product. We also had the idea to film an introduction to the main video with Robyn. This short message would be used on the DVD as a description of the video.

Prior to spring break I had started capturing footage from our tapes so that we could preview it and have a better idea of what we had to work with in the editing room. This is where I ran into the first problem with our footage. One of the two tapes that we used to interview the experts in our first batch of conference interviews in October 2008 was corrupted. I don’t know how it happened exactly, but the tape was inoperable and many of my attempts to retrieve the footage failed. I had always taken precaution to clean the cameras with a special cleaning cartridge and test the tapes prior to use on our video shoots so I don’t know how what went wrong. My suspicion is that the tape deck that I tried to capture from in the Ball State media lab had dirty play heads that caused the tape to be ruined.

In any case, had I tried capturing the footage soon after we had taken it before Christmas break, I may have discovered this earlier and we could have tried to get additional footage or seek an alternative. As it turned out, we lost a good resource for our project that we could not salvage. The second tape from those interviews was saved, but it only had about one third of the footage that we had taken.

Dr. Gerhard soon concluded that the only good way that we would be able to sift through the data was to transcribe all the interviews into text documents that he could
He was in charge of writing the script for the project, so we did about half of the transcribing before spring break.

After spring break the clock was ticking against us. We captured more b-roll for the video in March. I shot some sequences of the exteriors of several nursing homes that Dr. Gerhard thought would be good in the first segment of the video. We also filmed some shots of computer screens with websites loaded on them that we used while talking about government reports and other data related to nursing home staffing data.

By the beginning of March we had all of our footage, and Dr. Gerhard was trying to finalize the script. He sent copies to Robyn Grant and I to look over and give him feedback. I had a few comments but overall he had done a good job organizing the script. I had always thought that Dr. Gerhard should have an executive-producer type role in the project since he had initially envisioned it in the first place. He was very good about involving me in creative decisions. After getting feedback from Robyn we had a pretty complete script. We planned to use a narration as a framework for the topic.

In mid-April I was busy working on finding sound tracks for the video and organizing a time to record the script. Audio Professor Stanley Sollars from the Telecommunications department helped me get in touch with university staff, who directed me to a website with licensed music that Ball State had permission to use. Dr. Gerhard had begun making graphics to be used in the video that held useful facts and relevant data. Near the end of the month we recorded the narration. We decided to use my roommate, Eric Peat, as our narrator. Eric is a Telecommunication news option and has a strong voice for broadcast. I handled the recording in Pro Tools, while Dr. Gerhard coached Eric on how to use emphasis on certain lines. It took us about an hour.
It was also in late April that I began talking with Dean Ruebel and Associate Dean Emert about the possibility of using my honors fellowship project as a creative project for the requirement of my HONORS 499 thesis. I did not decide until the last week of the month to do so. Though it seems like a no-brainer, I had a busy schedule for the summer and did not know if I would want to divide my focus from an internship that I had received with WRTV. In the end, it was the desire to finish what I had started that pushed me through.

The last two weeks of the semester were two of the busiest weeks of my college career. I was furiously editing six to eight hours a day while also trying to handle course finals and finding an apartment in Indianapolis for the summer. Weekends just meant more time to edit. While I was editing I discovered many things that I could have done better in the project. For example, I had poor shot composition in some of the interviews from our early shoots. I had to crop them for the final video, detracting from the pixel quality of these interviews. I also did not give myself enough “pad”. Pad is just wasted time at the beginning and end of a shot to make sure all the audio and video is captured. It makes editing easier. If I had shot it all again I also would have “slated” for more organization when editing. Things of this nature are part of the learning process of any project.

During much of my editing time, especially for the last week, Dr. Gerhard was seated next to me helping with ideas, advice and suggestions. I am very grateful for all of the hours he put in during the editing process of the project; his presence allowed for a much clearer collaboration, and allowed us to achieve a video of which we both approved. One idea Dr. Gerhard had was to cut the video into different parts related to the staffing issue. We added text graphic titles to the beginning of each of these
segments. The result is a very chapter-like feeling that helps inform the viewer of what is being addressed and keeps the video from becoming boring.

By the end of the semester we had just finished a good rough draft of the project and felt that it was very near to completion. We sent the draft to Robyn and Michelle at USA to see what they thought. They were very excited about the video, but they had a good long laundry list of changes that they wanted us to make. Dr. Gerhard and I arranged that I would make trips to Muncie over the summer to continue and finish editing the project when I had time off from my internship.

I made three trips through May and June to spend several hours working on edits to the video. Dr. Gerhard would join and also help with the process. The longer we took, the pickier we became, and the more we changed things. We sent a second draft to Robyn and Michelle by the end of June. Again, they had some more suggestions.

We made a variety of changes and additions to the video. One issue was the problem of protecting the identity of people from whom we did not hold release forms. We had captured some staff and nursing home residents on video when we gathered the b-roll from the nursing home. We spent a long time trying to find the best way to blur their faces in the final video. Another issue was properly attributing sources and speakers. We wanted to be sure that we gave legitimate evidence to back up our facts and sources. There was one section that we removed from the video completely. We made many small touches, re-designed some graphics, and searched for ways to hide jump cuts.

The conclusion I drew from the editing process was that we could have used at least twice as much b-roll. It was, at times, hard to get good b-roll for the project from the limited supply that we had gathered. Even with the use of graphics, this proved to be
tricky business. I also think if we had a more firm idea of a sample script before we began doing interviews we would have more closely tailored the questions toward the topics that we covered. There was good interview footage that simply was not useful for the points and issues that we covered in the video, including footage from Janet Wells, a national expert on nursing homes.

It was during the June editing that I learned another valuable lesson: keep files backed up on multiple hard drives. I had been editing on an external hard drive that at one point decided to crash and stop working. I was, by then, frantic because I hadn’t backed up my files onto my desktop computer in several weeks. Luckily I was able to buy a new hard drive and get the files transferred. I now know to back up all of my files twice. Save early and save often. That sounds like a good slogan.

I made the final edit of the video on July 14, and burned the final DVDs the next week. The video, from planning to finish took over a year to make, but I learned a lot and gained great experience from undertaking such a sizable project. The final run-time is between 17 and 18 minutes in length. We have a web version for USA to stream from their website or Youtube, and a DVD version that they can use to show to community organizers.

The Learning Experience

The honors fellowship-turned-thesis was first and foremost a learning experience – much more so than what I realized it would be when I signed on. As the project progressed and I learned a wealth of information about nursing home care and staffing issues, my views of the project and the topic changed dramatically.
I have always been aware of the fact that there were staffing issues in the nursing home industry, but I had never realized how pervasive these issues were and how personally they affected so many people. It is hard to interview a woman in her sixties who breaks down and cries during the interview because her mother was not cared for properly during her final years at a nursing home facility.

I think the experience that I received through this project has been a positive one by allowing me to experience the effects of nursing home staffing on others from this personal level. The saying is true: to understand other people you often must “walk a mile in their shoes.” Until you have that experience, I think it is hard for you to really know the problem and what can be done about it. This is the kind of thing that textbooks and class lectures cannot teach; these are the realities of life that you learn by living.

I do not to say all nursing homes are evil institutions that do not care for the welfare of their residents, or that all nursing home aides and nurses are evil, mean-spirited people. The nursing home workers have almost as many problems as the residents. Nurses and Certified Nursing Assistants are underpaid, and not properly compensated or trained. The on-the-job injury rate in nursing homes is extremely high, yet this is not properly factored into worker’s compensation or benefits.

The learning experience was terrific. I learned so much from this project and from the people I worked with. I gained knowledge and experience that will be valuable for life. I have no regrets from working on this project, because it continues to surprise me in everything that I have taken from it. I now fully understand the significance of the thesis to the honors curriculum. I hope any student who, like me, considers graduating without doing an honors thesis will reconsider. There are few better learning experiences that you can get out of Ball State.
Conclusion

There is so much that the average person does not know about the nursing home staffing issue. I really hope that this video will make people aware of many things regarding nursing home staffing and be better informed. I hope the message will reach them. I hope they will never look at the topic in the same way. I hope they will want to do something about it.

I can’t think of a better last project to look back on after I have graduated. I’m proud to have finished the honors curriculum, and glad that my persistence has paid off. I’m ready to face post-graduate life, and I think the experience of finishing an honors thesis will be helpful. This wandering explorer is ready to climb new mountains and cross uncharted territory, but he will have a better chance of success because he has already braved one of his first journeys. And later, when he looks behind him on the roads he has traveled, he will be able to smile and remember the happy quests that he found along the way.