

Just a Mother

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Timothy Pollard". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "P".

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Abstract

Decades after the preliminary successes brought about by the Women's Rights Movement, many women are choosing to forgo career advancement in order to stay at home and raise their children. My film is about Meredith Proctor, a married, college-educated woman who chooses to stay home to care for her three young girls. The film details the reasoning behind her decision to stay at home and her goals for the future. The purpose of the film is to explore the connection between the advancement of women in general and her choice in particular.

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Artist's Statement

The idea for this film came from a conversation with a friend. As a response to the question, "What does your mother do for a living?" I replied, "Well, she's just a mother." My friend, a mother herself, took offense to my statement. Even though I have the greatest respect for my mother and other stay-at-home moms and did not mean the statement to come across in a negative manner, my friend had experienced genuine negativity about the subject in the past, and it caused her to regard my answer as unappreciative and disrespectful.

As a result, I began to think about the role of stay-at-home mothers in society and the way they are viewed by others. I came to the realization that many of today's stay-at-home moms seem to be highly educated women that choose to forgo career development in exchange for the opportunity to stay home and raise their children. I decided to produce a film entitled *Just a Mother*. The film provides an inside look at the life of Meredith Proctor, a college-educated, stay-at-home mother of three. As an educated woman for whom stay-at-home child-rearing is a definite possibility in the future, I used this project as a method to explore the decision to stay home and the challenges that come along with it.

The first thing I did to prepare for this project was research. I read three books relevant to the project. *Documentary Storytelling* by Sheila Curran Bernard (2007) was the most helpful of the three. I learned a great deal about the process behind documentary filmmaking and all of the often-overlooked elements of storytelling that need to be taken into consideration. I also read *To Hell with All That: Loving and*

Loathing Our Inner Housewife by Caitlin Flanagan (2006) and *Beside Every Successful Man* by Megan Basham (2008). These books gave me some insight on the life of stay-at-home mothers and how the decision to stay at home can benefit the entire family. I also did some preliminary research on the basics of the Women's Rights Movement, just to fill in my educational gaps on the subject.

The decision to use Meredith Proctor as the subject of the film was based on the fact that although she is enthusiastic about her role as a stay-at-home mom, she also has insecurities and flaws. The subject must be someone to whom the audience can relate so that they will be interested in the story. I did not want to use a "Super Mom," or someone who always seems to do everything right when raising children, because I wanted the story to be believable, personal, and easy for the audience to relate to. Meredith was also a good choice for the subject because she is very open and good at answering questions in detail. This made the interviewing process much easier. Another reason for choosing the Proctor family is that the three young girls are very cute. This is an important aspect of the film because viewers often want to watch cute children. I also had to take into consideration the difficulty of working with children of such a young age when preparing for the film. I practiced by filming another two-year-old ahead of time.

When interviewing Meredith, I made sure that my questions went beyond the basic expositional inquiries. Among them were questions about her opinion on working mothers, the amount of influence she has inside and outside of her social circle, and the relationship between the Women's Rights Movement and her decision to stay at home. These questions allowed me to get some insight into her view of where she stands in relation to the rest of the world. The most important point to emphasize, in my opinion,

was the reasoning behind her decision to stay at home when she has a college education. I made sure to include her goals and the ways in which she is attempting to reach them. I purposely chose to open the video with a shot of her daughter crying while Meredith spoke the words: "I like being a stay-at-home mom, most of the time." I wanted to show that staying home is often difficult and frustrating, yet, for Meredith, the impact that it will have on her children is far more important to her than her career outside of the home.

I filmed the video digitally over the course of three days. When filming the girls, I used a boom microphone for its directional property and because it picks up more sound than the on-board camera microphone. Most of the footage was shot handheld; I wanted to represent visually the chaos of raising children, not to mention that it would have been nearly impossible to follow them around so quickly while using a tripod. This decision, however, caused some problems later during the editing process when many of the shots were shakier than I had expected. I remedied this problem using a software program called Apple Motion. I used the stabilization tool to take away some of the shakiness. Doing so, however, took away from the quality of some of the video clips. In the end, I had to make decisions on whether the clips should remain shaky and high quality versus stabilized and lower quality. I made these decisions based on the importance and length of the clip.

Another difficulty that I had while making this film was that the original interview shots were not quite in focus. This was something I did not realize until after shooting the entire video. I therefore redid the interview section. I used this opportunity to make the video more interesting visually by zooming in closer to Meredith's face during

touching parts of the interview. This practice allows the audience to better relate to the subject, and it makes the film less monotonous because it is constantly changing.

Although it was difficult to reschedule and get access to equipment again, I think the end result was much better and definitely worth the trouble.

I also tried to keep the film about Meredith and not so much about the children. This is because the story is about her decision to stay home and her subsequent interaction with the children. I therefore tried to film shots of her alone and along with the children. This was difficult because children are much more interesting visually than adults; they are more active and curious. I had to constantly remind myself to take the camera off of the children because, though cute, they are not the focus of the film. Also, in filming adults and children together, it is difficult to fit them both into the shot because of the difference in their sizes. To remedy this as much as possible, I used a wide-angle lens on the camera so that I could film Meredith along with her children in the small space of her home.

After filming, I transcribed the interview to gain a better understanding of Meredith's answers and to determine which quotes would work best in the film. I then used all of the best quotes to make a storyboard, which I used to piece together the narrative aspect of the film. I then chose corresponding footage to go with the narration. It was difficult to find footage to go along with some of the abstract ideas in Meredith's narrative. I edited the project using Apple Final Cut Pro, the industry standard for this type of work. I used DVD Studio Pro and Adobe After Effects to make the DVD menu.

Overall I feel this project was a success. Meredith's interview responses were personal and believable, and I am positive that many audience members will be able to

relate to her story. By zooming in and out during the interview I added to this effect and kept the film from seeming monotonous. I made the right decision when I chose to use the boom microphone; it allowed me to record some excellent audio. The girls are interesting visually, and using the wide-angle camera lens allowed me to capture quite a few shots of them alongside their mother. All of these technical elements add to the overall look and feel of the film and serve to advance the storyline. I accomplished my original goal in that the film gives the audience an inside look into the life of Meredith Proctor and reveals some of her thoughts and opinions regarding her place in society as an educated woman and a stay-at-home mother.

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Interview Questions

What is your name?

Spell it.

What education do you have?

How many children do you have?

What are the names and ages of your children?

What do you do for a living?

How would you describe your job?

What do you do all day?

Who is your husband and how does he feel about what you do?

Does your husband help you when he is home? How?

What did you do before you had children?

When did you decide to stay at home?

Why did you decide to stay at home?

What is your goal in life?

How do you go about meeting this goal?

How do your children benefit from you staying home?

How does your husband benefit from you staying home?

How do you benefit from staying home?

How has this situation affected your family for good?

How has this situation affected your family for bad?

What challenges do you face when trying to accomplish your goals?

What challenges arise in terms of finances?

How does your husband feel about your job?

How does staying home affect your marriage?

What are some of the best moments of being a mom at home?

Do you receive support from others?

What kind and from whom?

Do you know other stay-at-home moms?

What kind of pressure do you feel from others in regards to your children?

What kind of pressure do you feel from others in regards to your lifestyle?

What kind of formal training do you have at being a mom?

How do you feel others perceive you and your work at home?

Do you face criticism for your decision?

What are some of the misconceptions about your job that you hear from other people?

Do you ever feel that what you have to say is perceived as less valuable or accurate?

What are some of the insecurities that you feel?

How do you feel about working mothers?

What is your opinion on how your choice to stay home relates to the work done within the women's suffrage movement?

Do you feel productive on a regular basis?

Do you feel as if this is your life's calling?

Who have been your biggest influences?

Who has given you the most advice or guidance in this area?

What are the negative aspects of this lifestyle?

Do you ever have time for yourself?

What do you do for you?

What do you do once the children are asleep?

When do you spend time alone with your husband?

Did you picture yourself in this position when you were in high school/ college?

Is it difficult to have a social life in your position?

Do you feel like you have enough time to do what you need to do during the day?

How do you find time to get things done?

Will you send your children to school when they are old enough?

Have you thought about home schooling?

What do you plan to do once your children are all in school?

Do you ever plan to use your degree?

Do you like being a stay-at-home mom?

Do you feel like your life has variety?

Do you ever feel taken advantage of because you're at home during the day?

How do you get your children to behave?

What is your biggest challenge day-to-day?

Do you ever feel like you should be getting paid for the work you do?

Do you think you are good at being a mother?

What are the guidelines you live by?

What is some advice that you have for aspiring stay-at-home moms?

What is it that you want your children to get out of this experience?

What do you want to get out of this experience?

Film Script

I like being a stay-at-home mom, um most of the time.

My house isn't perfect, and it's not usually clean, and um and the kids aren't always, you know, sitting at the table drinking their glass of milk just like, you know, they do in Leave It to Beaver.

But looking back a few years, I can see results.

My name is Meredith Proctor, and I'm a stay-at-home mom.

I have no formal training for being a mom.

I have a Bachelor's degree in psychology and a minor in art.

I did not picture myself doing this when I was in college getting my degree.

But when I met Mike, you know, and we got married, and then when we found out we were expecting, um you know, my focus shifted, and it was no longer all about my career, it was about you know the kid I was going to have at home so. And I just knew I was gonna stay at home.

I guess I just decided to settle down, and um I realized what an impact my actions would have on my family, and so I decided to um put my kids as a priority over my own self or my own career.

My goal is to see that my girls will grow up um to be contributing citizens.

And especially that they'll grow up to love God.

I think staying at home has helped a lot with the character building. I mean, I'm here for the whole eight hours that I would've been at work, and they would be at a daycare. Um I know that I am their influence.

Each day I spend time um reading to them from books that I think are character-building.

I've been teaching Hannah how to read a little bit, so it's kind of fun to watch them progress and learn because of things I've helped them do.

I think that they learn too some of the everyday life skills that we do here at home. I mean they learn what it's like to run a house, um doing laundry and doing dishes and doing the trash and cleaning the floors and cleaning up messes and things, um the everyday things that it takes to run a house, whether you're home all day or not you have to do those things. So I think they're starting to learn some of that early on.

I probably don't always handle things in the best way. I mean, I yell at the kids sometimes, or I've lost my temper or get angry. But that's everyday and hopefully the good outweighs the bad.

One of the biggest challenges in building their character is when my character flaws show through.

It will be interesting to see if our goals will come to fruition someday.

I'm leading them there, but there's no guarantee that they're actually going to make that decision um to lead a good life when they get older so.

When I first decided to leave work, um leaving the car your career is, I mean a lot of people didn't understand that at first. I think that my um my boss was surprised that I wasn't just taking a maternity leave and coming right back um and was trying to offer me, you know, more incentives to come back right away, but I was I had made up my mind, and I was determined that I was going to stay home.

I have a great deal of respect for working mothers.

I mean, after working all day and being gone all day then they have to come home and do all of the household tasks and all of those things, homework and extracurriculars and that kind of thing, so I think it's a hard job.

Like, when I talk to some of my friends from college like on Facebook or whatever um, you know, I see that they're, you know, busy working up the corporate ladder or taking their kids to daycare or things like that and I think sometimes they don't understand or maybe even look down on me wondering why in the world I got a four-year degree if I'm gonna just stay home for such a huge period of my life and take care of the kids.

I can see how someone who's really pushing for women's rights might look down on my decision to stay at home with the kids. Maybe they might think that I'm not doing anything to help women or in society in general.

I could see where they might think that I'm sort of living an oppressed lifestyle and being completely subservient, you know, scrubbing the floors on hands and knees all day, but um but I feel like that I'm contributing to society by raising children that will be wonderful people in the society in the future, in their generation. I think they'll contribute in wonderful ways.

I think when people realize what a sacrifice it can be

And see what a blessing it is to see these things in your children's lives um as they're growing up

I think there are people who would definitely praise it.

If I had a job, I think, you know, we'd have more things or we'd probably have a better van, but you know it's not worth it to me. I think the most important is the time that I get to spend with my kids and the memories that I have. You know in fifteen or twenty years, if I look back, I don't know that I'll remember what van we drove or what kind of cool things we bought, but I know I'll remember their first step or their first laugh or all the times I got to rock them to sleep.

I enjoy staying at home with the kids. I think it's fun watching them grow up; I like being able to see their first step and their first words and their um each of those little milestones along the way.

There are some days where my temper might get away from me, or I just get all stressed out and have a bad day. I really just don't want to do this anymore, and, you know, if I was working I could go take a personal day, you know, just do something for myself, but I can't even take a sick day when I am sick. If I just want to lay in bed all day and not do anything I still have to get up and do things with the kids so.

Luckily they all three nap right now, so um I get an hour or two in the afternoon when I can spend some time, you know, just get a cup of coffee and chill out for a little bit. Um I'll do Facebook or read a book or, um you know, even just folding laundry can be kind of therapeutic, you know just chilling out.

Mike's really good about letting me get a few minutes out. Um he knows how stressful it can be with the kids, and he's always telling me that he appreciates me staying home and that he knows that it can be overwhelming after a while especially on days when kids are sick and things like that. So if it gets crazy and hectic and I don't get something done he's really good at picking up where I left off and something like that.

He's also really good with the kids, if they're getting agitated with one another he can go help them calm down, or he'll help them get dressed or um help us get buckled up in the van um to go to preschool or things like that. He's very helpful.

Once all the girls are in school I'm going to probably get a job. And Mike totally agrees too, and I think I would probably go crazy if I stayed home with no kids all day long.

And maybe ten or fifteen years down the road I'll have something different. When the kids are older and almost ready to go out on their own I think there will be other things that I'll be doing.

I don't feel like this is the only calling I have in life, I just feel like it's the calling I have right now.

And yeah, it doesn't require a college degree, and yeah, most of the day I'm speaking in one syllable words, but um, but it's stressful the same as any other job would be, so, and I don't get off at five.

When when you hear them learn something new, or when one of them gets hurt and the other two run over and give her hugs, you know, you see the character building actually working, those are the things I consider successes and those are the reasons I stay at home.