

*Project Brave Woman: A Study of the Development of Female Authenticity and Bravery
Through Personal Storytelling*

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Project Brave Woman is a pilot website and creative thesis project created by Carlina Scalf. It shows that examining the personal stories of women, whether shared through interviews or literature, fosters community and promotes female bravery and authenticity. The pilot website shows this through four “As-Told To” stories and two essay reflections on memoirs written by women. The interviewees included two of Carlina’s family members (Monica Scalf, her mother, and Char Schuster, her grandmother) and two of Carlina’s peers (Madeleine Robling and Maren Orchard). The memoirs chosen were *Slow Motion* by Dani Shapiro and *A Girl Named Zippy* by Haven Kimmel. All the choices were made intentionally to relate the content of the project specifically to Carlina’s personal search for bravery and authenticity and her upcoming transition into adulthood. A reflection essay and a list of ideas for expansion examines the value of this project and the ways it could be expanded in the future into a community-building website for women that is focused on developing female bravery through the sharing of personal stories.

Acknowledgements

There are so many people who have inspired Project Brave Woman and who have made it possible, but specifically, I’d like to thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Andrea Wolfe, for her encouragement, guidance, advice, and wisdom. I could not have done this project without you!

I would also like to thank my interviewees – Monica, Char, Madeleine, and Maren – for offering their time and their stories to my project. The website would not be what it is without your contributions. I’d also like to thank Elizabeth Marot, who offered input on website design and provided the illustrations of each interviewee.

Process Analysis Statement

Project Brave Woman (projectbravewoman.com) is a creative thesis project that explores the development and encouragement of female authenticity and bravery through the scope of personal storytelling. Based in the belief that sharing deep, honest conversation is one of the most powerful things women can do, the PBW thesis website tells the story of my own personal search for female authenticity and bravery during my senior year of college. This personal study consisted of interviews with four women in my personal life about the themes of authenticity and bravery, as well as the reading of two memoirs by women that centered on themes of identity, individuality, and transformation. Through the collection of content on the website, the project aims to not only show what my personal search taught me about female authenticity and bravery, but also to show how this kind of storytelling-based content website could be expanded to reach out to a broader female audience in the future. This project not only allowed me to explore a subject I was really interested in, but also to use key core skills from each of my majors (Magazine Journalism and English Studies) that included writing, editing, analyzing, and interviewing.

Before starting my research project, I submitted an application for my thesis project to Ball State's Institutional Review Board to see if the project needed IRB approval because of the human subjects research involved. This process included the development of consent forms, interview questions and media permissions forms. I also completed the CITI training program. After submission, the IRB board decided that the project did not qualify as human subjects research and, therefore, did not need to be completed through IRB. However, the process of

applying for IRB approval taught me a lot about the formal research process, and also helped me to further develop thinking and strategy around my project.

The research that went into the production of the Project Brave Woman pilot website (projectbravewoman.com) was vast and diverse. When the idea was initially formulated, I had hoped for the content to not only be written, but also to be recorded and shared through the creation of a featured podcast series. To learn more about this, I consulted many sources, including the books *Out on the Wire: The Storytelling Secrets of the New Masters of Radio* by Jessica Abel and *Sound Reporting: The NPR Guide to Audio Journalism and Production* by Jonathan Kern. While the podcast did not make it into the final draft of my thesis, these resources influenced my project through the general information they provided about storytelling, as well as through their guidance on the best recording technology to use during the interviews.

In addition to research on the technical aspects of Project Brave Woman, I also did research on writing about female authenticity and bravery. Three books in particular shaped my approach to building the Project Brave Woman test website: *The Confidence Code* by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman; *Rookie on Love*, a collection edited by Tavi Gevinson; and *The Business of Being a Writer* by Jane Friedman. In addition, I studied the websites *Rookie Mag* and *Hello Sunshine* in order to see examples of websites that were producing content similar to mine. While none of these books or sources are formally cited within my actual project, each one provided knowledge that created the critical framework for my website and allowed me to understand how Project Brave Woman might fit into the larger discussion going on about female authenticity and bravery in popular culture.

After conducting my initial research, I then produced a Literature Report and an Interviewee Report that were meant to help me choose the memoirs and interviewees that were best for the goals of the project. It was always important to me that the stories I analyzed in the project were related to my personal life in some way. For the interviewees, I had to consider which women in my life would be willing to share very personal stories, and I also had to consider how their stories would work together to illuminate different aspects of authenticity and bravery. To choose the memoirs, I narrowed a list of about 20 memoirs down to five, and then analyzed those five books based on how closely their themes were related to the specific concepts I was grappling with, which included identity formation, life transitions, family and community impact, and coming-of-age issues. Out of these reports, I both made decisions about the interviewees and memoirs included in the project and also scaled the website back. Initially, I had been wanting to interview 5 family members and 5 peers, as well as read 5 memoirs. Through these reports and through discussion with my thesis adviser, I was able to come to the realization that I needed to scale the project back in order to be successful. This led to the selection of four interviewees (Monica Scalf, Charlene Schuster, Madeleine Robling, and Maren Orchard) and two memoirs (*Slow Motion* by Dani Shapiro and *A Girl Named Zippy* by Haven Kimmel). Each of the interviewees was chosen based on their proximity to my life and the unique attributes in each of their personal stories. The memoirs were chosen for different but complimentary reasons; *A Girl Named Zippy* provided a focused look at female development within community as it related to childhood, while *Slow Motion* provided a heavier, more literary examination of coming-of-age and transition within the context of community and family issues.

Once these choices were made, I began reading the memoirs and conducting the interviews. The interviews ranged from an hour to two-and-half hours long, with one interview

(the one I conducted with Madeleine Robling) requiring multiple sessions. These interviews then had to be turned into transcripts, as the “As-Told-To” stories I planned to write from them required an intimate look at specific quotes from each interview. These transcripts ranged in length from 8,000 to 20,000 words each, and they took several hours to complete. From the transcripts, I then wrote and edited together the “As-Told-To” stories, which allowed the women’s voices to come through while also de-cluttering, organizing, and clarifying the content for the reader. These stories, after going through multiple rounds of edits, were inserted onto the Project Brave Woman website, which was being built through the web design platform Squarespace. Pictures were gathered from each interviewee and strategically inserted on the web pages to compliment each woman’s story. Pull quotes were also inserted throughout the body of the “As-Told-To” stories to highlight particularly salient comments from each guest. After the stories were completed, I wrote a “Place in Project” essay about each guest that allowed me to explain why their inclusion in the project was important and broadly describe what I had learned from our interview and story creation process.

Simultaneously, I was reading the two memoirs I had chosen and taking notes on their relevance to the project. After I finished both books, I began drafting three different kinds of essays for each text: a “Place in Project” essay, which described in detail why I chose to study the text; an analysis essay, which drew on the literary criticism skills I developed in my English major to analyze what each text was communicating about bravery and authenticity; and a brief reflection essay, which included thoughts on how the events in the memoir were specifically revealing things about my own life and journey toward authenticity and bravery. These essays went through a few rounds of edits and were then formatted and placed on the website.

Finally, after the most substantial content was placed on the website, I worked to make sure the website was a cohesive, finished product by developing additional elements. I wrote an “About” page, which explained the project in detail for a new audience member; an “Ideas for Expansion” page, which explained strategies for applying the concept behind “Project Brave Woman” to an expanded, community-based website; and a reflection piece, which allowed me to tie all of the different stories studied in the project together and to analyze what they taught me about my initial themes of female bravery and authenticity. I also collaborated with a friend, Elizabeth Marot, to strategically develop a color pallet and custom illustrations for the website that would make it look professional and polished.

Through this process, I have learned so much about myself and my learning process. I have become more aware of my tendency to bite off more than I can chew and expect more out of myself and my projects than is possible or feasible in a given time period. Learning to find and accept my creative limits has transformed my work and my outlook on my own creative process. I think this lesson will inform many of my future writing projects and will allow me to carry out and bring to fruition more of my ideas as I work to scale them back and set realistic goals, instead of becoming overwhelmed by my own plans.

I have also very happily confirmed that I hope to make female storytelling the center of my future career. While my first job out of college (which I have already secured) will not explicitly center on this activity, I have every intention of continuing to pursue the study of female stories and storytelling outside of work, and also to incorporate it into my 9-to-5 job whenever possible. I am excited to have found an area of content that I feel passionately connected to, and am even more excited to continue exploring the best ways for me to engage with this content in the future.

Finally, through the personal interviews I conducted, I have really learned the value in reaching out to the women in my life and having deep, personal, honest conversations with them. The process of interviewing people I was close with was initially very intimidating. When an interview is based around personal and sometimes difficult stories, it can be hard to separate yourself emotionally as the interviewer in order to get the best content, and this becomes even more true when you have a personal connection to the interviewee. However, this project showed me the value in having tough or uncomfortable conversations and brought me closer to each interviewee. The lessons I learned in navigating these interviews will inform not only my professional communication and interviews in the future, but also my ability to connect with and listen to the people I love most.

Now that the project is done, I hope that those who read it will approach it as a very personal project that is also cognizant of the ways in which personal storytelling could be used on a broader scale to create community for women. While the memoirs and interviewees in my project are very different and unique in their own ways, I was very aware of the lack of diversity that exists within the project because of its need to closely relate to my (limited) experiences and viewpoint as a young woman living in the Midwest who was raised in an upper-middle-class community. I hope that readers of the Project Brave Woman pilot website see the value in my act of sharing and analyzing female stories related to my personal life while also understanding the larger goal of the project, which is to think about the value that personal storytelling and story-sharing could create for women from all backgrounds and all walks of life. In short, I hope it inspires readers to think about the women they would choose to interview, the memoirs they would choose to read, and the themes they would want to explore. I hope that it shows the

inherent value in the act of storytelling and inspires others to join and contribute to the global storytelling community by starting conversations of their own.

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