

2018

On Capstones: Daniel Lumpkin

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Daniel Lumpkin



Daniel Lumpkin with Chaplain Miller and Ms. B

Daniel is MAPW an alumni with a degree in Applied Writing and a Rhetoric and Composition supporting area. He graduated Spring 2018.

My MAPW concentration and support area are: Applied Writing and Rhetoric and Composition

My capstone project: “Grace and Mercy: The Work of Death Row and Prison Chaplains”

My capstone committee: Dr. Sergio Figueiredo and Dr. Chris Palmer

On capstone planning:

I was interested in true crime stories and how, fairly recently, we’ve seen true crime series (like, the Serial podcast or Netflix’s “Making a Murderer”) really capture a large audience. I was also spending a lot of time thinking about the ethics of these types of projects. For example, there was a three-part documentary done by HBO called “The Memphis Three” or Errol Morris’ award-winning true crime

documentary “Thin Blue Line” that helped free men from prison due to good journalism. There’s power there and important work can be done, but these new series seem to rush into stories hoping for those results without taking the necessary steps to ethically look at how the story is being portrayed to the audience. I was also reading a lot of Jack Olsen, and he was really into ethics of true crime.

For me, I couldn’t get away from his quote about portraying the victim empathetically and the perpetrator as a human being. He said “if true crime writers don’t do that, they’re just writing pornography.” I couldn’t shake the fact that writing about crime would draw in certain readers that enjoy reading about evil for entertainment. I didn’t want to participate in fueling that, so I considered writing about inmates but I still couldn’t escape that inmates would be seen as one-dimensional criminals if they were the primary focus. That led me to ask, “Who views inmates in prison as more than just inmates?” I couldn’t find a better answer besides the chaplains. So I decided to do an expedition where I would shadow death row and prison chaplains.

On capstone research:

I contacted a bunch of chaplains in several states. Some almost hung up immediately and others were more supportive, but really the only place I got any traction was Georgia’s very own death row prison in Jackson. Once Chaplain Miller realized I wasn’t interested in showing the prison or chaplains in a bad light and that I was genuine, he set it up for me to visit. I shadowed him for close to two weeks and during that time I saw a lot. Jackson is not only a death row prison, it is a super-max and high-security facility with low-security dorms. It is also the diagnostic prison (meaning every inmate that is convicted in the state is sent to Jackson first to be evaluated for several things before he or she is shipped to a permanent location somewhere else). I was in “The Hole,” I was in the mental ward, I made several friends on death row. I talked to Carlton Gary a day before he was executed. I saw what the work of a prison chaplain was and why it is so difficult and so important.

For those who are starting to think about capstone:

My serious suggestion is find what interests you and discover what makes you uncomfortable. Honestly, that should make a great thesis every single time you do this. I was really lucky with mine. I think a lot of students in the program are encouraged to simply expand on a project that they did earlier in the program or to consider subjects that are easy. There's a lot of work being done in identity politics that is fairly easy because it is difficult to criticize. If it's criticized or questioned at all, it is seen as more of a personal attack rather than academically critical. So it's rewarded, almost knee-jerkingly so. I suggest something that is much more of a challenge, something that is easy to criticize and something that really makes you dig deep and work extremely hard.

Hard work is good work. Do a new idea. Do something that matters to you. Don't do something that only interests you in the academic sense. Do something that interests you at your core. I wanted to know how to love other people so I went into an environment where loving other people is quite difficult. Other people are way more interesting than "Sexism in 90s sitcoms" or any form lazy and narcissistic research that only makes you feel important when you're talking about it with like-minded individuals or trying to impress your Tinder date. Find the beauty and life through connecting with others that have a different background and mindset than you. If that doesn't interest you, how are you a writer?