



#### FACULTY SPOTLIGHT: BEVERLY PETERSON

One summer morning, Kevin Morrissey, managing editor at the Virginia Quarterly Review, walked to an abandoned coal tower, then dialed 911 to report a shooting before turning his gun on himself. The press linked Kevin's suicide to alleged abuse by his boss.

Coincidentally, MSU documentary filmmaker and Associate Professor Beverly Peterson was in Wales at the time to present her documentary and advocacy work on the topic of at an international conference on workplace bullying. About a month after she returned home, the Morrissey story broke in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Peterson had always wanted to make a film that included the perspective of the alleged bully. Four years later, she put the final interactive piece up online, and the project, titled "WhatKilledKevin.com" was rolled out. Peterson is among the early adopters embracing the exciting new technological trends in interactive nonfiction storytelling.

But, Peterson's legacy for dealing with difficult subject matter in an intimate and emotionally riveting way was already well established, thanks to a 25-year documentary storytelling career. She has built an international reputation backed by an impressive body of work that reflects the way media can be used to effect social change.

Peterson recently returned from Cuba (with Associate Professor Roberta Friedman), where she took part in the International Videoart Festival of Camagüey, Cuba. "What Killed Kevin," was showcased to an international body of video artists.

Aside from getting the opportunity to display her ample storytelling skills to her international peers, Peterson was looking forward to the trip for personal reasons as well. "It wasn't until I was in middle school that I discovered my father was born and raised in Cuba, the son of a sugar baron who had survived an assassination attempt by a political enemy. It was always my father's wish to return to Cuba. In some way, I feel I have fulfilled his dream and can now understand who he was in a way I hadn't before.

"What Killed Kevin" is the quintessential example of modern day narrative. You see, while the film piece is titled "What Killed Kevin," it's only one facet of a much richer, more interactive and immersive viewer experience known as "WhatKilledKevin.com." The web site is the experience, allowing visitors to the site to dive much deeper into the story and learn more about the tragedy of Kevin Morrissey's death from a number of different character perspectives. As Peterson recalls, "From a distance it seemed as simple as the press was reporting; an evil boss accused of bullying his employee to death. But, it soon became

apparent that this was a far more complex story.” A traditional linear documentary couldn’t deliver as satisfying a storytelling experience that a transmedia project would.

“WhatKilledKevin.com” has received a great deal of critical acclaim, including an honorary Webby. It has also been highlighted in major press, such as the Washington Post, Huffington Post, and Psychology Today. But, what Peterson is most proud of is the response from audiences around the world who have seen the story at numerous conferences for human resource personnel, management and legislators who can actually implement change for those suffering the devastating impact of abusive work environments.

Last year, Peterson joined several experts on the topic to create the National Workplace Bullying Coalition. She joined others to host a conference, WORKPLACE BULLYING: SEEKING SOLUTIONS in partnership with Rutgers School of Law - Newark which garnered personal recognition in the form of a Joint NJ State Senate/Assembly Resolution and proclamation from the Mayor and City Council of Newark. Next October, in partnership with Shippensburg University, the NWBC conference will focus on bringing together various advocacy groups concerned with overlapping issues related to Dignity in the workplace.

Bev Peterson can’t hide the passion that drives her work. It’s the fuel that energizes her work, and it’s also plainly obvious in her commitment to teaching the future generation of storytellers in the School of Communication and Media.

“I came to Montclair in the fall of 2008,” says Peterson. “I’ve been lucky enough to oversee the field production and documentary area of SCM’s program and help students learn to tell non-fiction stories that come from their own lives and are deeply important to them. To me, our role as mentors represents one of the greatest gifts we can offer our students and deeply informs my own teaching philosophy. The ability to inspire our students to embrace a passion and meaning for the stories we tell is important to me, and it is not unusual for my own films to come out of my personal experience. A crucial component for me, and I hope my students, is to address what it is to be living at a certain moment in history.”

Other Peterson projects also reflect her ardor for creating powerful stories. “The Andre Show” is a film about a young boy with AIDS Peterson and her husband, artist Farrell Brickhouse, adopted shortly before he died. Her video diary, “71 West Broadway: Ground Zero, NY,” is the street address of Peterson and her husband’s loft located about two blocks north of the World Trade Center. She began filming that story from her doorstep during the terrorist attacks. The film follows the impact on Peterson and her husband, but also, more importantly, the immigrant small business owners on the block as they struggled to move back home.

“Invisible Revolution” is an investigative long-form documentary about racist and anti-racist skinheads that captured a revealing interview with a young racist, Ben Smith, just two weeks prior to the deadly shooting rampage he went on in Indiana and Illinois before shooting himself. The film screened in the Utah state capitol in an effort to help pass hate crime legislation just prior to its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival.

This is the core of Peterson’s voice as an artist, which she states is “my true collaboration...with the characters within my films as I use the medium of video to find the best way to make their situations understood by unaware or unconcerned audiences. All of these films have been featured in major museums and festivals and broadcast on Sundance, HBO and PBS, to name a few. Peterson says, “To make these films I have often had to learn to ‘wear all

the hats' so I could afford to make projects that weave together unusual and artistic approaches to the documentary genre in an attempt to find ever more effective methods to allow viewers to witness experiences outside of their own lives and circumstances. In today's technologically evolving marketplace, that's a talent and understanding that all of our students now need."

Peterson hopes to bring more collaborative work into the classroom as she has so successfully done over the years, with the John Theurer Cancer Center, the Community Food Bank of NJ, Debby Galant in SCM's NJ News Commons, and currently Bryan Murdock's community engagement project in the Orange community, all of which allow her to pass on the essence of what she's learned those many years ago from George Stoney. "It's not unselfish - the reward for me is that "aha" point in the semester when students recognize and truly understand the power of creating work that has a real world impact on the community."

Beverly was awarded a Kiplinger Fellowship at OSU where she received her MA in Journalism and has a BFA from Cooper Union Art School. She joined the faculty of the School of Communication & Media's TVDM Major in 2008 where she teaches Documentary, field production and Transmedia courses.

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