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May 25, 2012

Interview with Haftom Khasai

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May 25, 2012 Success Stories, Vitale Digital Media Lab Interviews, lab gab, Vitale Digital Media Lab David Toccafondi Edit

*Haftom Khasai is a political science major and has been an avid user of the Vitale Digital Media Lab during his time here at Penn. I had the opportunity to interview him last semester about the documentary he helped create, “A Legacy of Courage: W.E.B. Du Bois and The Philadelphia Negro.”*

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**Q: What do you do here at Penn?**

Haftom Khasai: I’m currently a student. During the summers I work at the School of Design developing a high school curriculum.

**Q: What kind of curriculum? Tell me about that.**

HK: So, we’ve been working on this Du Bois project for, I would say quite some time now. I’ve been working on it for about four years, and it’s just been this huge collaborative effort between many different people. The project itself has many different components. One is an actual classroom curriculum where we have instructions for the teacher on how to teach this particular topic, which is Du Bois’s life and what he did here. Du Bois came in the 1890s to Penn to do this huge sociological study on what at the time people thought was, well, to put it the way they would, why African Americans have all these problems: why they can’t just succeed, why they’re not working hard enough. Du Bois actually came to Philadelphia thinking something similar to what the white folk were. But he came here and he did this seminal work, which ended up as “The Philadelphia Negro”. It was just this thick, thick book. It was a huge study, using advanced statistical and sociological tools of the time, and he is probably the first person to have done something like this. I think that is just an amazingly cool thing. And the thing is, people—especially young people—don’t really know what he did. And this whole curriculum—I think it’s a 1-week module—it’s supposed to explore what he did—this huge work, this huge accomplishment that he achieved. And the first component was this documentary that I’ve been working on here in the Digital Media Lab. The tools you guys have here have made it such an accessible thing for us, for the students here at Penn. And the second component is a Google Earth tour. The other
components are being done by the other members of the team, and that includes board games and what not.

Q: You said you’ve been working on this for 4 years, but you haven’t been a student here for 4 years.

HK: No, I started this when I was in high school. I did this competition in high school called National History Day, which is a nation-wide competition, and there are various categories. My freshman and sophomore year I decided to do documentaries. Both years I made it to the state-level competition. My sophomore year, my partner met Amy Hillier while viewing other people’s documentaries. Amy’s an assistant professor of City and Regional Planning. They got to talking, and Amy said, “Hey, I’m looking for some high school kids to help me make this film for other high school students.” So he gave her my name, and we started working on this project together that summer. And it’s been evolving ever since. It’s gone from an hour-long feature-length film down to a classroom-sized 20-minute film, and it’s come a long way. We’re very happy with the way it turned out.

Q: How much time do you think you’ve spent on the documentary?

HK: Too many hours to count. Hundreds. Hundreds of hours. I’d say if you took out all the gaps and put all the time together, it’s probably a solid year’s work of work.

Q: What equipment did you use?

HK: We used a Sony HD camera, which we bought simply because we tried the one here in the Vitale Digital Media Lab and liked it so much that we used our own funds to buy one. Actually, everything we used or bought was modeled after what we were able to try here in the digital media lab. So we tried the camera, we tried the tripod. We liked them, we bought them. We didn’t have to actually spend money on software because all we had to do was come here and use the software here. And you guys have tons of amazing software, and you’ve actually been open to suggestions in terms of acquiring new software and equipment. For the second module, the Google Earth tour, I’m using Google Earth Pro, which costs hundreds of dollars a year, it would be completely pointless for us to buy an entire subscription, but you already have it here in the lab. You have these amazing wide-screen computers, which made it great for working with other people instead of hovering around a tiny screen hurting our eyes. And I learned a lot about Final Cut Pro while I was here.
Q: Tell me about some of the people you interviewed for the documentary

HK: We interviewed a lot of people, at least half of which didn’t make it into the final cut. We interviewed Michael Nutter, the mayor of Philadelphia. That was pretty cool. Elijah Anderson, who did the recent preface for the new release of *The Philadelphia Negro*; Anthony Montiero, a professor at Temple—an amazing figure; The author of *Tumbling*, Diane McKinney-Whetstone. We interviewed a Philadelphia public school worker who had a lot of interesting things to say. And the thing that all of our interviewees had to say about the book is that it’s just this amazing work that has so much potential to teach us about history, and so much of it is right here beneath our feet that we don’t realize. Especially the young people because, you know, who’s talking about it? So they were very excited about the whole project.

Q: What are some of the interview techniques you learned or used that made it easier both for yourself and for the person being interviewed?

HK: Before I started, I did some online research to find out what documentary filmmakers do to make people feel comfortable. One trick I picked up was to cover red dot light that comes on when you’re recording. Because that light telegraphs to the interviewee, “uh-oh, this is being captured, I better not mess up,” and then they freeze up and stumble and things like that.”

I left the camera recording the whole time, and I just started a conversation. I had them looking at me instead of at the camera. They knew the camera was there, but they didn’t know when it came on. Eventually they just forgot the camera was there and they were having a conversation with the interviewer. And ultimately, that’s the goal of a documentarian’s interview – to have a conversation with someone, to have them teach you, and to have it recorded so that you can use it for your film.

Q: Tell me what you think overall as a result of this process, of creating this documentary beginning to end. What have you gained? How are you different? What are you better for knowing, etc.

HK: Working on this film, obviously I gained a lot of technical prowess, working with all this new equipment. I learned how to set up a scene for a camera shoot, how to use advanced, professional video editing software, how to be resourceful when things don’t work out. That’s pretty useful. But I think one of the greatest things that working on this project has given me was
simply this new insight into myself as a person. My race, actually. I never thought about race in that way. I always thought race as just this historical thing, that’s only talked about at arm’s length because it’s very uncomfortable for everyone. But working on this project has helped me look at it from a more objective standpoint and reevaluate what I think of it. Prior to this I probably would be so uncomfortable addressing race that if something minor came up, I’d just be more likely to sweep it under the rug than to think about it and address the issue, when in fact there are still huge issues that are still bearing on us today. Also, today it’s very socioeconomic—as it was back then, but back then they also had the outer layer of extreme hatred and prejudice. Now we’re dealing with the aftermath of all this hatred, prejudice, and socioeconomic oppression. People think that it’s no longer mainstream culture to say “oh, it’s ok to hate people or be prejudiced because of their skin color or where they come from,” but it’s still mainstream culture to hate people for other reasons, sadly. We don’t really want to deal with the leftovers. We want to let it unfold as we go and hopefully it’ll figure itself out, when that’s not the case. We have to know what happened. We have to think about what’s going on today—because of what happened—and figure out what we can do about it, because if we don’t think about it, if we don’t do anything, then nothing’s going to change.

Q: And did you try to work that point into the documentary?

HK: That was the key. That was the focus. That is exactly what we were trying to get across in our documentary. We had a small, mini release to a limited number of people, and the reaction from the crowd was just overwhelming. We had a discussion afterward, led by Amy, and people started tearing up, they started recounting instances in which they felt that race was a factor in situations they were in, and how they tried to ignore it or try to sweep it under the rug. Things like that that people try to not talk about, but in bringing these out into the open and talking about them, they started feeling so emotional, and neither Amy nor I expected that. I think that was the moment I realized that we did this documentary the right way.

Q: Is the documentary online?

HK: It is. And right now the DVDs are going into production. The goal is to have it in every classroom in the city of Philadelphia.

Q: Can we get a copy in the lab too?
HK: Absolutely. We owe much of the success of this to you guys.