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WRITING WOES

TUTORS HEAR THE STORIES

From a modest beginning in 1978, Wesleyan's Writing Workshop has grown to enlist more than 100 tutors per semester who help their peers say what's on their minds.

The student glances at Julie Goldberg '00 as she reads through his paper. His foot is planted on the office floor. His knee bobs up and down. The forefinger of his right hand taps against his thigh, out of sync with the bobbing knee. Goldberg puts down the paper. The student looks away and then back at her casually as she looks up. Goldberg smiles.

"I don't think your transitions need much work, though you could give the reader a little more at the beginning of each section," she says. "But the main thing: You're laying out the subject mat-

ter fairly well, but where's your own analysis? What do you think here?"

The student shifts in his seat, smiles shyly, and shrugs.

"I wasn't sure how much of that to bring in."

Goldberg and the student continue to discuss the paper, a music history assignment that explores issues surrounding Mozart's wife. It's the type of exchange that occurs all the time on college campuses between professors and students. Except Goldberg isn't a professor, or an instructor, or even a teaching assistant. Until 30 minutes ago, she had never met the student who handed her the paper. That's fine with Goldberg. Students give her dozens of papers to critique each week.

Goldberg works as a post-graduate fellow in the writing tutor program, a free, comprehensive writing and editing service that addresses everything from short essays to honors theses. The idea of using students as writing tutors was ground-breaking when the program was first developed 23 years ago. Now colleges and universities across the country emulate this concept.

Anne Greene, adjunct professor of English and director of writing pro-

grams, later developed the idea of assigning writing tutors to certain writing-intensive classes. Still on the forefront of innovation, she and her colleagues now have launched a new effort to pair first-year students with writing mentors who will advise and encourage them all year long. In this way students will get help before they are overwhelmed by the difficulties of writing at Wesleyan.

"The demands of writing in high school and writing at Wesleyan are very different, even for good writers," says Greene. "Many students must write in formats they've never encountered before. This new effort pairs selected freshmen with a personal writing tutor who can focus on helping the student improve his or her writing over the course of an academic year. We introduced it on a very limited basis last year. It was so successful that we received funding from the dean's office to expand its scope."

Greene believes the program serves an additional purpose by helping first-year students become comfortable with tutors in general. "If they learn early on that there's nothing wrong with seeking help on a paper, they'll be more likely to come in over the next four years."

The original program began in 1978.

In the intervening years it has become a major campus resource, deploying 100 tutors per semester and two writing fellows funded by The Ford Foundation.

The tutorial program sprung from Greene's observation that students would tell other students things about their papers they would never share with professors. This level of candor and trust, combined with the lack of anxiety that accompanies working with a fellow student, gave her the idea of using undergraduates as tutors.

"We're not here to proofread papers or correct grammar, but to help students become better writers," says Molly Barton '00. She and Goldberg are Ford Fellows for the 2000–01 academic year. "Mostly that means talking with them about their intent," she says, "the structure of the paper, and what exactly they're trying to say. Once we get to that point, good papers seem to come together quickly."

As with any walk-in service, regulating the tutors' schedules can be challenging: as the semester draws closer to midterms and finals, the pace can become frenetic. And then there are the inevitable panic cases.

“If they learn early on that there’s nothing wrong with seeking help on a paper, they’ll be more likely to come in over the next four years.”—Anne Greene



Ford Fellow writing tutor Molly Barton '00 helps Stephanie Mandell '04 think through the structure of her paper on women and revolution in China.

“There’s nothing worse than someone showing up with a paper at 2 p.m. that’s due at 4 p.m. the same day,” Barton observes. “We can always help on some level, but there’s only so much we can do with that kind of time frame and pressure.”

Greene says that at first, many faculty members were skeptical that undergraduate writing tutors could be effective. They soon changed their minds, however, and tutors are now a common adjunct to writing-intensive classes—and not all of these classes are in the English department.

Joyce Jacobsen, who teaches Urban Economics and Economics of Gender, has been using the tutors for eight years and finds that the discussions between students and tutors are crucial to success. “The tutors are exceptional at providing technical assistance and helping

students with their analysis,” she says.

Not all the tutors are English majors, either: “We’ve had tutors majoring in virtually every subject offered here,” notes Greene. “Our alumni include not only writers and editors, but also physicians, stock brokers, psychologists and psychiatrists, financial analysts, scientists, filmmakers, and artists.”

Of course, the proof of its success lies in the testimony of the students who have used the tutoring service.

Laura Middleberg '04 made an appointment with Barton for help on a “particularly difficult” religion paper: “She really helped me with the structure and some of the word choices. I can see the improvement.”

Tori Barber '01, agrees. “I know I’m a good writer, but I also know that seeing a tutor helped me do even better work. It really makes a difference.”

ART FORM IS REBORN

Alive, On Stage: Cambodia

When *Dance, the Spirit of Cambodia* began its U.S. tour at the Center for the Arts this summer, the event was more than a performance. It was a rebirth.

One of the many arts nearly destroyed by the country’s civil war—in which nearly 90 percent of its artists, intellectuals and educators were killed during the brutal years of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge (1975–79)—classical dance had been performed only by a select few, and only for royalty. Those dancers who survived the regime had returned to their Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh during the '80s, devastated to discover how few of their number remained.

Ten years ago three Wesleyan alumni began a collaboration to save this art form from extinction. Sam Miller '75, then director of the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival; Sam-Ang Sam PhD '89, a MacArthur Fellow and one of the world’s foremost authorities on Cambodian dance and music; and Ralph Samuelson MA '71, director of the Asian Cultural Council in New York, brought surviving members of the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh to restore their dance traditions in workshops at the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival.

“It was like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle,” recalls Miller. “Everybody had a little piece of the whole. We got everybody together to recall the dance, recreate it, and then share it on stage. We videotaped the performances so everybody could leave with a copy to show others.”

Last year, the three agreed that members of Cambodia’s newly named University of Fine Arts should return to the United States to tour and “share what had been restored.”

Pam Tatge '84, director of the Center for the Arts, recalls, “When they were looking for a place to mount the tour, it made all the sense in the world to do it here. It wasn’t only that we had our alumni involved, but at Wesleyan we are comfortable hosting those from another culture.”

Tatge invited them to use the university’s rehearsal space for a week to prepare for their opening event, a much longer commitment than is customary for a performance.

“In Phnom Penh—no, in the whole country—they have only one functioning theater,” explains Samuelson. “At



home, they mostly rehearse for each other. The lighting, the sound, the stage all heighten the experience of the dance—but it’s all very new.”

“We needed that week at Wesleyan to put everything together,” says Miller. “This was also a pilot project in contextualization. How do you give American audiences the context for a performance of traditional Cambodian dance? Can you make it understandable?”

This question is central to Tatge’s commitment. “Part of the mission of the CFA is to build audiences for our events beyond the Wesleyan community. Knowing of the large Cambodian population in the state and particularly on our staff, it made wonderful sense to host this here. We created a host committee of Cambodians in the state to welcome the dancers the night they arrived. We had a potluck dinner that was really like a big family reunion, a wedding feast.”

In return, the artists offered a workshop in Cambodian dance to the Wesleyan and Middletown community.

“It was so exciting,” recalls Sophat Men, a custodial foreperson at the university who was born in Cambodia. “I contacted Cambodian communities around here to all come out and welcome them. I’d known one of the dancers in Cambodia, and it was great to see him again.”

Others also found the experience to be very moving. “I had a conversation with a woman from Travelers,” says Tatge, “who had been several years in a refugee camp, had left her family of 10 people behind in Cambodia. This was her moment to bring her daughter to see what had been a big part of her life, the culture of classical dance. For every story like that, there were ten more.”

Still the question remained: Could a nearly extinct art form of Southeast Asia be brought to life in Connecticut? The answer was clear on opening night. “The performance was sold out; the audience stood up and applauded,” recalls Miller. “It meant so much to the dancers—the care, respect, and consideration they received at Wesleyan.

“Cambodia is alive, on stage, when they perform,” says Miller. “The culture is in their bodies.”

ENDOWED BY \$1.7-MILLION GIFT New Lecture Series Brings Distinguished Speakers

A new lecture series endowed by a \$1.7-million gift from Edward W. Snowdon '33 is bringing internationally renowned intellectual and public leaders to campus.

Snowdon Fellows are chosen for their intellectual stature and for offering activities that will “spark and sustain intellectual discourse” as well as enhance the academic life of the Wesleyan community, said President Bennet.

The first Snowdon Fellow, Stephen Jay Gould—the provocative philosopher of science, paleontologist, geologist, and author of books on evolution—was scheduled to offer a public lecture on “Unpredictability and Nondirectionality in the History of Life.” He also planned to join small discussion groups with students and faculty and several larger classes.

Other speakers scheduled under the auspices of the Snowdon Lecture Series this fall included Spalding Gray, the writer, actor and performer; and James Billington, the Librarian of Congress and a leading American historian of Russian culture. Ralph Lemon, the award-winning choreographer who is researching the use of media and new technologies in the creative process, also was scheduled for a campus visit. Lemon and Professor of Classical Studies Andrew Szegedy-Maszak co-authored *Persephone* (1996), illustrated by photographer Philip Trager '56.

“It is just terrific that Wesleyan has benefited from Mr. Snowdon’s strong feelings in favor of a liberal arts education and his interest in supporting our endeavors,” said Jean Shaw, the coordinator of the Wesleyan University Lectures. “These lectures will expand horizons and support academics.”

WESONLINE

Wesleyan Faculty Expert Sees “A New Type of Threat”

Wesleyan’s faculty expert on terrorism, Professor of Government Martha Crenshaw, said recently in the *Hartford Courant* (9/12): “I think this is not a crime and not a war. This is a new type of threat, and we don’t have a name for it other than ‘terrorism.’”



has concentrated on a period of rapid climate change 55 million years ago, with emphasis on the role of atmospheric carbon dioxide and impact on life. Thomas and her colleagues published a paper on this topic in the April 27 issue of *Science*.

RUTLAND EXAMINES INTERNATIONAL FINANCES FOLLOWING ATTACK

Professor of Government Peter Rutland, writing one of the lead opinion pieces in the *Courant’s* Sunday Commentary section (9/16), said the interconnectedness of the global economy has prevented a breakdown in international financial trading following last week’s attack. Noting the attack was “not just on America, but on the global capitalist system,” he said: “But the market is not an object that can be knocked out in a single blow, however terribly costly in human life.”

SURVEY RANKS WESLEYAN E&ES DEPARTMENT THIRD AMONG COLLEGES

A recent study, “Geoscience Research at Liberal Arts Colleges: School Rankings,” published in the May 2001 *Journal of Geoscience Education*, ranked Wesleyan third in a survey that assessed geoscience scholarly activity from 1987 to 1996. The criteria included journal articles, total pages published, abstracts published, and department size. The survey looked at refereed publications in the GeoRef database that had first authors affiliated with any of the 161 educational institutions classified by the Carnegie Foundation as liberal arts colleges.

NSF GRANT SUPPORTS THOMAS’S RESEARCH ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Research Visiting Professor of E&ES Ellen Thomas has received a \$217,000 NSF grant — part of a \$2.5 million grant to a multinational group of scientists who are studying the interactions between climate change and life on earth. The group

WOMEN’S TRACK COMPETES AT NCAA CHAMPIONSHIP

The women’s 4x100-meter relay squad of Esther Schlegel '04, Austin Horne '03, Meredith Barrett '03, and Jenna Flateman '04 broke the team record for the third time in the spring season, finishing 12th at the NCAA Division III Track & Field Championships. The quartet clocked at :48.36, .14 seconds under their previous best. Flateman also ran in the 100-meter dash, finishing 16th in a time of :12.61.

WOMEN’S CREW WAS ONE OF THREE DIVISION III TEAMS AT NCAA

The women’s varsity eight competed in the NCAA Rowing Championships in Gainesville, Fla., May 24 to 26, as one of just three Division III colleges nationwide that were invited. The squad rowed in three races but did not qualify for the semifinals, signifying the top 12 crews. It was the second year in a row that Wesleyan had been selected to participate in the NCAA championships.

DANIEL HANDLER '92 IS PROFILED BY TIMES MAGAZINE

The *New York Times Magazine* (4/29) featured Daniel Handler '92, a.k.a. Lemony Snicket, creator of the best-selling children’s books *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. The series has sold more than a million books, and the *Times’* writer described Handler as “one of the most poised, inner-directed and unsolipsistic 31-year-olds you are likely to meet.” Handler was a guest lecturer in the Distinguished Living Writers course, taught by Director of Writing Programs Anne Greene during the spring of 2000.

Something in the Water

A researcher and his student discover high concentrations of a deadly poison in a populated, affluent Connecticut suburb.

It came down to hats: Fedoras, bowlers, stovepipes, fezzes, pill-boxes, and dozens of other styles lost to time. Hat manufacturers, 50 miles up the Housatonic River and as much as 200 years back in time, are linked to chemical contamination that is recorded in Connecticut's sediments. Their poisonous legacy is sitting in the middle of one of the state's most populated and affluent communities and slowly seeping down to the sea.

All this from hats? Hats were probably the last things in Johan Varekamp's mind back in the late 1990s. A professor and department head of Earth and Environmental Sciences, Varekamp was working with Wesleyan students (John Crockett '96, Bart Kreulen '98, Kate Lauriat '01) with funding from the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to document mercury levels in Connecticut and Long Island Sound. Since the Sound and its fringing marshes have long been a collecting area for all sorts of pollutants, he was expecting to find elevated levels of mercury in the sediment. What he found caught him completely off guard.

"There were levels in the samples three to five times above what we considered normal for that area," Varekamp says. "Significantly, the mercury contamination wasn't spread evenly throughout the Sound. The very high values were concentrated in a relatively

small area near the mouth of the Housatonic River."

Significant, because mercury pollution is typically airborne, emanating primarily from coal-burning facilities and waste incineration plants. As a result, it tends to be carried by wind and evenly deposited over the land from the air. But Varekamp's findings pointed to a water-bound source somewhere along the Housatonic River. The data showed that the level of contamination had strongly decreased since the 1970s, but even in the young sediments, the levels were higher than elsewhere.

"Remember what we are talking about here," Varekamp says. "Mercury is a dangerous poison that can be absorbed through the skin, through the lungs or through food. When someone drops a thermometer in a school room, that room is evacuated immediately for cleanup. And we were finding high concentrations in areas that are considered nature preserves!"

The Housatonic flows down from the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts and covers nearly 150 very crooked miles. It drops nearly 1,000 feet from its source, which is steeper than most New England rivers and accounts in part for a swift current. The river also takes on the water and sediments of several tributaries along its way to the Sound. Given these conditions, trying to locate the source of the mercury posed a significant challenge.

One of Varekamp's students, Kate Lauriat, had become intrigued by the mercury plume and volunteered to ini-

tiate a search for its origins as part of a senior thesis project.

"I knew we would be weaving together a story of some sort, but I had no idea how daunting this would be," Lauriat said.

An E&ES major who has since graduated and now works as a consultant for Geological Services Corporation in Hudson, Mass., Lauriat worked with Varekamp to take sediment and surface samples from points at the mouth of the Housatonic to as far north as Kent, a town near the Massachusetts and New York borders. Results from the Still



The VonGal Hat Co. in Danbury (1916), one of many mercury sources.

River (near Danbury) area stopped them in their tracks, with concentrations that were even much higher than those found in the mouth of the river.

The levels we found were equivalent to what I have seen in SuperFund cleanup sites in California," Varekamp said.

The data indicated that the mercury had been deposited at various points along a timeline that stretched from the late 1700s until the mid-1900s. But who had been doing the depositing?

Varekamp knew that a few hat-making shops were located in Danbury at one time, and mercury was once a key component in the felting process.

"That is where that phrase 'mad as a hatter' comes from," he says. "Mercury is easily absorbed through the skin and 'madness' is a symptom of an advanced state of mercury poisoning."

Lauriat began searching records and Web sites maintained by the Danbury Historical Society and the Housatonic Valley Association. She learned that Danbury had not been the home of merely a few hat-making shops—at one time, it was the hat-making capital of the world, producing more than three million hats each year. Until U.S. law forbade it (1940s), mercury was a key component in the process.

The mercury used during nearly 200 years of hat making, especially the large amounts applied near the turn of the century when the manufacturing was at its zenith, was not subject to environmental laws or regulations. The waste products of hat-making simply disappeared into the Still River, where large amounts of contaminated sediments accumulated. Also, around the old hat factories in Danbury, high concentrations of mercury are common in the uplands.

"These old mercury-contaminated sediments are mobilized during large rainstorm events. Major floods occurred in the early 1900s and 1955, and these mercury-laden sediments were propelled down the Housatonic River, to accumulate in the estuary and then were flushed into Long Island Sound. We are now taking a careful look at how much of the mercury in Western Long Island Sound sediment is derived from the Housatonic basin," Varekamp explained.

He knows the work is not yet done. Currently, he has a proposal for funding under consideration to 'fingerprint' the sediments of the Housatonic basin by means of pollutant ratios and the isotopic composition of mercury. Once that is done, the Danbury hatting mercury may be traced all the way into the far western Long Island Sound.

—David Pesci

DANBURY MUSEUM & HISTORICAL SOCIETY

WEST WING STAR

Distinguished Alumni Honored

Wesleyan recognized the achievements of several alumni during Reunion weekend with Distinguished Alumni/ae Awards. They are:

David Batdorf '51—an attorney for 46 years in Shillington, Pa., who has been active in politics from the local to the national level and has raised more than \$200 million for civic, charitable, educational, and religious organizations. He serves on the Wesleyan Campaign Council.

William Harris '61—a senior fellow at the Tufts University College of Citizenship and Public Service, who in 1981 founded KidsPac, a political action committee dedicated to sound public policies for children living in poverty, from birth to age six, and their families. In 1984, he founded and continues to serve as president of the Children's Research and Education Institute.

Thomas R. Broker '66—professor of biochemistry and molecular genetics at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, an authority on HIV and viral gene replication, and founding president of the International Papillomavirus Society in 1995.

Leslie Brett '76—executive director of the Connecticut Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW), a nationally recognized expert on women's issues, civil rights, and public policy who successfully fought for the state to assist uninsured women.

Robert H. Thompson '76—Phelps Minister and instructor of religion at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire, former alumni-elected trustee and a strong supporter of Wesleyan's commitment to diversity. Reverend Thompson is renowned for his presentation of American music, especially spirituals from the African American experience.

Bradley Whitford '81—acclaimed for roles in theater, film, and television; best known for his current role as Josh Lyman

on the Emmy-winning NBC drama, *The West Wing*. Recently he has starred in *The Muse* with Albert Brooks and *Bicentennial Man* with Robin Williams.

One individual received Wesleyan's Outstanding Service Award:

Emil Frankel '61—recently nominated by President Bush to be assistant secretary of transportation for transportation policy; Wesleyan trustee emeritus and former commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Transportation. He chaired both the Wesleyan Annual Fund and the Alumni Association.

Recipients of the Binswanger Prize for Excellence in Teaching this year are Gilbert Skillman, associate professor of economics (left); Gayle Pemberton, professor of English and African American Studies; and Richard Elphick, professor of history.



BILL BURKHART

CAMPAIGN NEWS BRIEFS



CAMPUS RENEWAL IN PROGRESS

If you've been on campus recently, you'll have noticed the scaffolding around the Memorial Chapel, '92 Theater, and Clark Hall. All three buildings are undergoing restoration with the proceeds of tax-exempt bonds, issued in part because of generous unrestricted giving to the Campus Renewal Fund. The Fund has already received three gift commitments of \$1 million or more which will support the University's programs, including construction and renovation projects on campus even after the end of the current campaign.

NEW SCHOLARSHIPS ESTABLISHED

Increasing the resources for student aid is a primary goal of the Wesleyan Campaign and, thus far, 77 new scholarships have been created: 36 are endowed and 41 are current scholarships. This means Wesleyan has raised more than \$30 million in gift commitments for financial aid and an additional \$25 million for the Freeman Asian Scholars Program—for a total of \$55 million toward the goal of \$96 million in new resources for student aid.



WILLIAMS FAMILY ENDOWS VISITING PROFESSORSHIP

In memory of David Williams '51 and in honor of his 50th Reunion, Patty Williams and her family have generously endowed the *David Scott Williams '51 Visiting Professorship in Psychology*. To be awarded every other year, this visiting professorship will help meet intense student demand for psychology courses, enhance the curriculum, and provide new research opportunities for students. Patty chose to create an endowed position in psychology because David had often related fond memories of his inspiring psychology courses.



FALL 2011

High on Documentaries!

Wesleyan alumni teamed to make Emmy Award-winning American High, a bold experiment in cinéma vérité that tells what it's really like to be in high school.

American High, the 13-part documentary series commissioned by the Fox Network, premiered last summer on commercial television and aired again on PBS this spring and summer. An Emmy award winner (best reality program that didn't involve competition), the show followed the daily life of 14 teens from suburban Highland Park High School outside Chicago over the course of a school year.

The project drew on the talents of three Wesleyan alumni: Ted Skillman '91, Dan Partland '92, and Lisa Maizlish '90. They, along with Chris Roberts '89, Ben Brand '92, and the late Jonathan Mednick, a former Wesleyan faculty member, had formed Other Pictures, Inc., in the early '90s to make documentaries. Finding a market for their work was difficult at first, particularly before the mainstream interest in "reality-based" television shows.

"Ted used to say, 'I feel like I'm selling manual typewriters in a world of word processors,'" Partland recalls. "We were all just about to hang it up when this opportunity came along."

The crews produced 3,000 hours of film as they followed students through their school days—classes, lunchtime, guidance meetings, catching the bus home. In addition, they also filmed morning routines, after-school jobs,

fight with parents, and hangout time with friends. To supplement these, each student recorded his or her diary entries on the individual hand-held videocams that the project provided.

The results were intimate, hilarious, heart-wrenching, hopeful, and at times even triumphant: a roller coaster of teenage emotions.

Q. How did you decide to focus on a high school?

Dan Partland: We looked at what was already on TV: doctors, lawyers, cops, high school... High school! It's filled with so many trials. There's always an audition, a tryout for a team. High school is a minefield of dramatic moments.

Q. Security at high schools has been a national concern since the shootings at Columbine. How did this figure into your production schedule, your subject matter, your film?

DP: We'd begun looking for a site two weeks before that. No school we contacted after that date even returned our phone calls. It's a good thing we'd already talked with some administrators before that happened. But in the end, the events at Columbine didn't change our movie. We had to make the administrators comfortable that we weren't showing scandal; we weren't out to do an exposé on their school. At first, there were police cars in front of the building;

Columbine was all anyone wanted to talk about. But that tragedy ended up being a point of departure on conversations about multiculturalism and inclusion, about power, about why the "Trenchcoat Mafia" felt disenfranchised.

Q. What were your roles within the production?

DP: I was based in California as the point person between the film crew on site, who sent in the hours and hours of footage, and Twentieth-Century Fox, which wanted neat episodes on budget.

When we signed Lisa on and saw her photographs, we made a breakthrough in shaping the stories. We'd been thinking about how to introduce the characters in the show. When we saw her portraits, we knew they were a major way to shape the storytelling. They were so beautiful, so intimate and insightful. She found some great, defining moments—and had done it in just several days.

Ted Skillman was on site: He's great at brokering sensitive issues. He's the one who would go to the parents' house with the piece of tape their son or daughter had created and screen it for them. Allie's relationship with her dad was a sensitive issue—her parents had divorced—but Ted made it all work.

Q. How were you able to do that?

Ted Skillman: In one respect I was Allie: I had a not-too-dissimilar family situation when I was around that age, and I think it was helpful to have that knowledge. Kids are articulate if you give them half a chance. Teachers, parents, pastors, rabbis all listen to kids, but there's so much that they want to impart. That's the filter through which they hear: the agenda they want to press. But we were adults whose role was just to hang out and listen.

DP: "We want you to be who you are," we told them, "warts and all." I try

to be a good documentary filmmaker, to have compassion, to be nonjudgmental with everyone I meet in life. You have to be open, trusting, and believing in them.

Q. How did the spate of other "reality-based" programs that began the previous summer affect the airing on Fox of this reality show that season?

DP: It hurt us. We kept getting pushed later and later into the season. We aspire to dramatic episodic serial TV, except with real people. We're not making something sociological or scholarly. We want to make artistic, entertaining documentaries.

Q. Morgan, one of the students, filmed his parents berating him, some might even say abusively. Did the team worry about lawsuits then?

DP: When people expressed concern about an aspect of the film, we'd ask them: Would you agree this is a true thing in your life? What, then, do we need to add to complete the picture and make this an accurate portrayal? We're not wolves in sheeps' clothing. We believe that people could be happy with the way they are portrayed and that the portrayal could be real.

TS: It was difficult, though, grappling with sensitive things that kids wanted to bring up. Some topics just felt sensitive and hard to explore—yet the kids wanted to talk about them. Our own confessional culture has some gray areas about how much to tell on camera. A documentary filmmaker once said, "You have to have a cat burglar's mentality to make documentaries," and there's a certain truth to that, but it's a pretty icky feeling if you are sneaking in to put someone's life on display. We said, "Look, we're not going to make you look bad." And we wanted to be true to that.

Q. Lisa, how did you interact with the students?


Lisa Maizlish: My job was different from the filmmakers'. The kids were already selected for being open, cute, charismatic. I had to get to know them quickly. I had to be a kid, but that's okay, I can morph.

When I went over to Morgan's house, he wasn't out of bed yet. His mother was yelling up the stairs for him to get up, the photographer was here for the appointment. I went upstairs and photographed him getting up, going to the kitchen, going down in the basement checking out his CD collection, outside to shoot some baskets, then back in the kitchen for lunch—and all that took about 10 minutes. It was amazing—but that was Morgan.

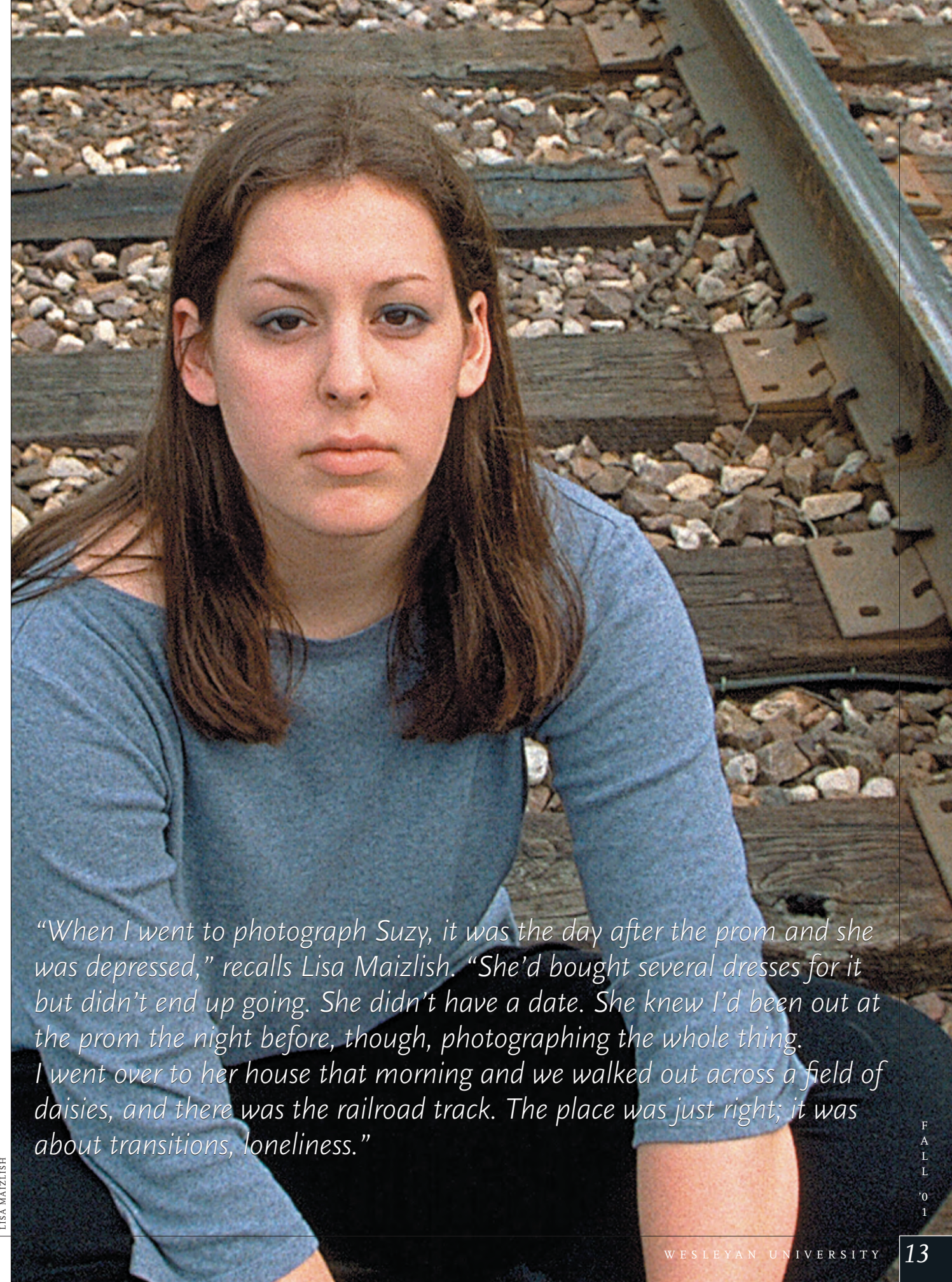
Q. Is there a greater good that this film serves?

TS: I've always liked documentaries, and the highest aspiration for documentaries, and for art, is to complicate the issues, the subject, and not let you feel too easily one way or the other about a character. That makes for good storytelling, and it's an interesting way to live your life.

One of the students, Brad, was gay and out. Kids wrote about that on our Web site. It gave them comfort to identify with him or with Morgan or Allie.

If you recognize something of yourself in what you see, that is a valuable thing in the world. It's what art is about: You look at the world through other peoples' eyes and you feel connected to other people and how they experience the world. 

To view some of Lisa Maizlish's favorite shots and to find further information on American High, please visit: www.pbs.org/americanhigh/weekly/lisaphotos.html.



"When I went to photograph Suzy, it was the day after the prom and she was depressed," recalls Lisa Maizlish. "She'd bought several dresses for it but didn't end up going. She didn't have a date. She knew I'd been out at the prom the night before, though, photographing the whole thing. I went over to her house that morning and we walked out across a field of daisies, and there was the railroad track. The place was just right; it was about transitions, loneliness."