Original title: Find X: Creating Common Ground through the Written Word
Revised: Find X: An Exploration of Fracture in the United States.
The reason for the title change is because the nature of the project changed to focus less on the written word and more on interview and conversation. The second title also uses the word, exploration, which is intentional as exploration takes pressure off from finding or creating a solution, which is something I cannot do and do not want to do as one individual. Through exploration and conversation I made space for hope in the midst of feeling lost within The United States various points of fracture.

Country: United States of America
Nominating College: Sarah Lawrence College
Student team member name(s): Syd Walter
Associated project website: www.findxproject.com

Find X is a podcast series over four states surrounding fracture in America. Find X follows detailed journeys of individuals I met while exploring the complexity and nuance of this current American moment.

Project Description

The theme of fracture was chosen for this project because of the way that it runs as an undercurrent in all of our lives. Fracture is a constant tension between us and the outside world, so I thought that examining fracture would be fascinating. To examine fracture I choose the medium of storytelling because it helps to bring people into the conversation instead of shutting them out. For the specific lanes of fracture that I wanted to address, the choosing of those fractures came from what I know to be persistent tensions in my own life and come up often in media conversations.

My host site was always in flux depending on what fracture I was examining. For each host site though, a theme was that I had access to housing accommodations. This was a huge help in releasing the burden of paying for housing and also, supported me to connect to individuals and brew up ideas that I wouldn't have naturally thought to look at.

The original ideation of this project was going to be an anthology with a matching podcast series. I had made anthologies in the past and trusted that I would be able to get people to submit their work. That did not happen. For the first couple weeks of starting in on this grant project I was tirelessly pitching the project, talking to writing groups, and I did get a couple submissions, but they weren't exactly what the project had outlined and I wanted to feel proud of the end product and not like I just made due with what I had. So I pivoted. My first pivot was to go to twelve different states and spend three days in each state doing interviews and telling stories which correspond to a list of prompts—the prompts were a part of the anthology project and I was trying to keep some things the same. As I began to map out what that would look like, it was a scary mess of colors and early flights and no sleep. I also lacked a clear directional plan about how I would meet those people for three days that I was there. I fully intended to go through with that plan though because I felt guilty admitting that I had made some mistake and wasn't sure how to proceed. Thank goodness for moms though, because when I called my mom and she said something along the lines of “All of that sounds crazy. You have to change your plan.” Really what I needed in that moment was validation that I could pivot again. And so I did, which is how I ended up with my final plan which was four states spending about ten to seven days in each state producing a podcast series on areas of fracture that that state exemplifies.
With my project I was able to stay completely within the grant.

A part of this project is the Curriculum, which will be a component that I develop in the fall. The work that I did this summer taught me so much about what it means to engage in conversations that I am unsure about, and how to use the world through a lens of story. I am immensely proud of the work that I have done, and I feel that a part of the reason for our fracturing is our inability to withstand conversations where we have to just listen. For the curriculum component of this project I am going to write a curriculum—which will be available on the website—and help lead small scale workshops in high schools around teaching podcasting with the lens of listening.

Reflection

There was a group that I interviewed for the project, whose mission is to live out the words of God's Gospel, and peace was a huge tenent of that practice. When I arrived for our interview my tour guide was busy showing me “peace-lane”, and other objects they had named after peace. To that group peace was the ultimate end goal and a constant practice of stepping outside of oneself to be better able to see the whole picture. I had never given peace much thought except for an end goal in which peace is a utopia that we can all co-exist in.

To make my understanding of peace, It is important to understand how I feel my project will contribute to peace. I came into my project a bit naive, and hoped to solve fractures by creating space for common ground. Interview after interview it became clear that to solve something was a hopeless venture. The best I could do was to just listen to people and there stories. I remember a distinct moment in my third reporting trip in Louisiana and I was talking to another journalist about how I was starting to wonder how to tell stories without knowing the ending, or having any proposition for a solution that felt it could hold promise for a significant shift forward. She told me that I had already created a significant shift, I just won't see it, maybe for awhile or ever, but I have to know it is there. I asked her what she meant. She expanded:

“When you sit down and interview someone, you are listening to them and hearing their story. That is what I always remember when I am reporting. In the act of me sitting here, I am creating space for someone to feel seen. That is change too. Don't forget it.”

I don't know what kind of peace work this podcast series will do, it will be exciting to see how it is received and what people make of it. But I know that I have created space for people to feel seen. And this comes to my definition of peace today, which is the ability to create moments in which people can see hope clearly.

Similar to how my definition of peace has changed, my relationship to the unknown has changed too. For reporting, you can only ever be so prepared, a lot of it is just getting in there, asking questions, and showing up. I am a person who finds solace in certainty and the unknown terrifies me. When I first began reporting I wondered if I could do this. In my daily notes from this reporting, on May 12th, 2023—my second day of officially beginning— I wrote this in my morning write up:

“I am worried I have made some terrible mistake in embarking on this podcast for the summer. It is day two, and yes only day two, but without the security of schedules and secured interviews (I only dont have them for today and tomorrow… but still) it makes me worried.”
I found my way through the unknown by witnessing others fumble through it too. The project’s title: Find X, came from a prompt that I was going to originally use in the first iteration of this project. However, the name took on a different meaning the longer I thought about it. The prompt seems like a dead end when you first look at, and just like my discomfort with the unknown, to Find X is a calling of many and it brings me back to where the project started, with a prompt that I thought was a dead-end, and it is, if you look at it alone. Because of this, I will always be watching the world to learn more about how people navigate the things that scare them, and if I can I want to stand there with them.

My project has most definitely changed the way I think about the world, and how I interact with the world too. This project has challenged me in ways I was not expecting—facing the unknown and handling uncertainty, having to let go of what I thought I was looking for—and because of those challenges, I have developed a better understanding of storytelling and my place in it. The work that I want to do as a career is radio journalism, and the journalism and stories I produced this summer make me feel confident in my ability to keep finding my way even if I have no clue where I am going at times. This gives me peace.

**Personal Statement**

I am incredibly grateful for having been able to produce Find X. The value of this project to me is that it built space for me and for those who I spoke to, to imagine a different world for a moment, and to reflect with intention of how we are currently showing up. In the words of Sister Patricia (from the first episode) “It is always hope, in the end that gets the last word.”