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Honors Work: Seeing Gaps, Combining Gifts, Focusing on Wider Human Needs

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Abstract: “Honors Work: Seeing Gaps, Combining Gifts, Focusing on Wider Human Needs” describes the authors’ collaborative work with high school girls to bring Canadian activist Leigh Boyle and “The Lipstick Project” story to Maine in April, 2017. “The Lipstick Project,” which Boyle founded and directs, is a women-run volunteer organization based in Vancouver that provides free, professional spa care services to terminally ill patients. The authors contend that their collective efforts with the high school girls to organize “The Lipstick Project” events in Maine brought together a number of community constituencies in important ways, reflecting qualities and values central to honors education. The authors cite the writings of the late Samuel Schuman, a widely involved and highly respected honors administrator and teacher, for their characterization of honors education as, at its best, engaged, imaginative, and socially conscious. The authors note

how, through Boyle's visit and "The Lipstick Project" gatherings, they confronted significant and bridgeable gaps: gaps between high school girls and college women, gaps among care providers and the university community, gaps in understanding the need for creative care. They conclude that identifying and addressing notable gaps can be an excellent starting point for an honors undertaking, particularly gaps that cross disciplines, form links to the local community, and focus on broader humanist concerns. They offer their experience as a replicable model for other honors communities to consider.

KeyWords: collaboration, women, community, care, interdisciplinary

In the spring of 2017, an honors-led team brought a unique speaker to the University of Maine community: Leigh Boyle, Executive Director and Founder of "The Lipstick Project," which is a women-run volunteer organization based in Vancouver, Canada, that provides free, professional spa care services to terminally ill patients. The organizing team's work to bring Leigh Boyle and "The Lipstick Project" story to Maine reflects qualities and values described in the writings of Samuel Schuman as central to honors education, and it offers a creative, replicable model for other honors communities to consider.

Samuel Schuman was a widely involved and highly respected honors administrator and teacher who served as director of the honors program at the University of Maine, as a chair and member of numerous NCHC committees, and as the organization's vice president and president. He wrote extensively and thoughtfully about honors education as engaged, imaginative, and socially conscious. In a comprehensive handbook, *Beginning in Honors*, Schuman defined honors as "enhanced educational opportunities for superior students" (7). He named "values essential to the honors enterprise" as "considerate human interactions, faith in the worth of the search for truth, a deep-seated conviction that academic excellence is worth pursuing and unflinching honesty in our work as teachers and learners" (4). Schuman's description of honors' "enhanced opportunities" rooted in mindful interactions, the pursuit of truth, excellence, and honesty resonates with the goals and outcomes of Boyle's visit to Maine, as does Schuman's summative claim that "sometimes honors work is not like other academic work, but of a different kind" (*Beginning* 8).

SEEING GAPS

“Once you see the gap, you can’t un-see the gap,” said Boyle in her keynote address on “The Lipstick Project” at the 2016 Independent School Gender Project Conference in Lakeville, Connecticut, a biennial gender conference that Mimi Killinger, Associate Professor of Honors at UMaine, and a group of Orono High School girls happened to be attending. Nearly a year later, Boyle would be flying to Maine to speak in Orono to more high school students and the University of Maine community.

“The Lipstick Project” efforts had begun for Boyle in 2010 when she traveled to Northern Ethiopia as a photographer working at a village school. Boyle felt isolated by linguistic and cultural barriers in the Ethiopian village as well as by infrequent contact with home. She found community by volunteering at a local women’s hospital that served patients with obstetric fistula, a debilitating condition that results from obstructed or prolonged labor. Obstetric fistula leaves women chronically incontinent, and in developing regions like Northern Ethiopia, they are often separated from their communities because of the stench that accompanies the condition and the stigma of failed childbirth.

Obstetric fistula is fairly easy to treat, but in rural Ethiopia women typically lack adequate medical resources. Boyle was eager to help the Ethiopian patients but unsure where to start. She reached out to friends back home in Vancouver, receiving several suggestions that she paint the women’s fingernails. Boyle thus began regular Sunday visits to the hospital, bringing nail polish, hand cream, and essential physical contact, connecting with women otherwise deprived of humane and beautifying care (Boyle).

Upon returning to Vancouver, Boyle was approached by a friend with a relative in hospice who needed similar restorative care. Her friend explained that while his relative was receiving necessary medical attention, the critical elements of personal touch and affection were missing. This moment stopped Boyle in her tracks. The troubles of the women she had helped back in Ethiopia were not isolated; they were here across the ocean in Boyle’s own community, too. Boyle describes this moment as “seeing the gap.” Compelled to do something like what she had done for the women in Ethiopia, Boyle and a group of her closest friends gathered their resources, reaching out to local spa care professionals in nail salons, hair salons, and massage therapy centers and then connecting with patients in hospice homes around Vancouver. Nearly everyone they contacted felt inspired or moved by their vision of

end-of-life spa care, and in 2012 their idea was formalized into a women-run, volunteer organization bringing smiles, color, beauty, and touch into the lives of dying patients.

The name “The Lipstick Project” derives from a story Boyle heard in college about a mysterious humanitarian crate of lipstick that appeared at the 1945 liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. A British officer there described the lipstick crate as an act of “unadulterated brilliance” (Gonin), giving prisoners back their individuality and humanity as Boyle and her volunteers likewise do through “The Lipstick Project” (Boyle).

“The Lipstick Project” is steeped in the first value of honors education delineated by Schuman: “considerate human interactions.” The project prompted a Maine team of honors students, an honors faculty member, and local high school girls also to interact and organize in creative ways, addressing local gaps by bringing Boyle and her story to Maine. “The Lipstick Project” events in Maine illustrate the honors focus on experiential education propelled by students who perceive a gap, who recognize something is lacking or amiss, and who have “faith in the worth of the search for truth,” Schuman’s second honors value (*Beginning 4*).

COMBINING GIFTS

In 2015, a special volume of *Honors in Practice* was dedicated to the memory of Samuel Schuman, and Aron Reppman’s essay, “Connections and Character,” focuses on Schuman’s remarkable “bridge-building imagination” as a hallmark of his work in honors. Reppman contends that Schuman used “his insight into people and institutions to establish interesting and unexpected connections among them”; he adds, “I also personally benefited from [Schuman’s] invitations and suggestions that helped me to discover elements of my character and experience that could be put to wider use, especially when they could be combined with others’ gifts in unexpectedly fruitful ways” (31). Schuman himself had written in a 2005 essay, “Teaching Honors,” about the important links to be made among honors students, faculty, and ideas: “fine honors teachers love serving as matchmakers between material about which they are passionate and students of whom they are fond” (32).

Honoring the importance of connections, the high school girls and Killinger determined after hearing Boyle’s keynote address at the 2016 gender conference that they would connect Boyle and “The Lipstick Project” story with their Maine community. In turn, Killinger procured a seed grant from the UMaine McGillicuddy Humanities Center and invited two UMaine

honors students to join the Maine organizing team. She contacted Samantha Saucier, a double major in sociology and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, who was actively involved across campus and also an employee at a local retirement community. Killinger next reached out to Maddy Jackson, an English major who works closely with the McGillicuddy Humanities Center. Jackson immediately noted links between Boyle's work and her humanist interests. Both honors students' enthusiastic responses to Boyle's story demonstrated a central tenet of Megan Jacobs and Marygold Walsh-Dilley's 2018 *JNCHC* article, "Cultivating Empathy: Lessons from an Interdisciplinary Service Learning Course." The authors contend that honors in its interdisciplinary and experiential approaches fosters deeper understanding across difference, and by extension "honors education is particularly well-positioned to cultivate empathy" (16). Embedded in the sort of activists' empathy that Saucier and Jackson demonstrated in their embrace of "The Lipstick Project" idea is Schuman's fourth value of honors: "unflinching honesty in our work as teachers and learners," a commitment to confronting important truths with tenacity and integrity (*Beginning* 4).

Together with the high school girls, Saucier and Jackson worked diligently over the course of the academic year to organize Boyle's April 2017 visit to Maine. "The Lipstick Project" story was an unusual one to bring to a college campus given spa care's customary disconnect from academia. However, the focus on spa care and the unique collaboration that formed around "The Lipstick Project" events made the undertaking especially rich and honors-worthy, an academic endeavor "of a different kind."

As the organizing team exchanged ideas about how best to arrange Boyle's visit, they realized that, simply through preparatory work, they were bridging a sizeable divide between high school girls and university women. In separate meetings with Killinger, Saucier and Jackson commented on how distant they felt from their high school experience as they talked with the girls. They also remarked how important it was to listen to the girls, to mentor whenever possible, and to demonstrate through their collaborative organizing work how the high school girls might likewise become post-secondary activists and leaders one day.

COLLECTIVELY FOCUSING ON WIDER HUMAN NEEDS

In her essay "Helping, Fixing or Serving?" Rachel Naomi Remen writes, "When you help, you see life as weak. When you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole." The Maine organizing team's work

to bring Boyle to Maine was rooted in a holistic service-learning spirit that created an enhanced, experiential, educational opportunity for all concerned, achieving the “academic excellence . . . worth pursuing” that Schuman named as his third honors value (*Beginning* 4).

Saucier and Jackson, in collaboration with Killinger and the Orono high school team, determined in biweekly meetings that their primary goal was to share “The Lipstick Project” story as broadly as possible in their Maine community in order to educate and inspire others through Boyle’s creative approach to end-of-life care. Together they designed events that would accommodate a variety of constituencies, and they came up with strategies for advertising via social media and flyers. They also sent informational letters to local high school principals, palliative caregivers, salon providers, retirement communities, and hospitals.

Killinger, Saucier, and Jackson recruited ten co-sponsors from across the University of Maine campus (the Honors College; the McGillicuddy Humanities Center; the Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies; the Department of Sociology; the Center on Aging; the Division of Lifelong Learning; the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; the All Maine Women Honor Society; Cultural Affairs; and the School of Nursing). The swell of university support was a testament to the ways that Boyle’s caring work resonates across disciplines and among various groups. It further illustrated Schuman’s claim in *Beginning in Honors* that some honors work opens “the inviting possibility of honors playing an active role in raising the intellectual and cultural caliber of the entire campus, not solely of a selected group of students . . . [through] cross-institutional enrichment opportunities” (9).

In her essay on service, Remen claimed that “serving requires us to know that our humanity is more powerful than our expertise.” Honors endeavors such as this work with “The Lipstick Project” moved university students and faculty, along with high school girls, outside their expertise into shared, humanist, cross-institutional opportunities. The project’s collaborative events in Maine highlighted the ways that, through interdisciplinary engagement and student effort, honors might serve as a critical hub for a variety of groups to come together around a common concern.

Boyle arrived in Maine on April 24, 2017, and the next evening spoke with local high schoolers, describing her path to “The Lipstick Project” and encouraging the teenagers in the audience to trust themselves as they seek to find their own transformative work. Boyle especially connected with a senior at the high school who was in remission from Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma.

Their connection made evident that Boyle's work was neither distant nor intangible but rather steeped in stark truths. Boyle conceded in her talk with the high schoolers that "seeing the gap" can be difficult, that the gap does not always present itself clearly, and that whatever community we are in, it is imperative that we look for inevitable gaps.

Boyle also gave an inspiring Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies luncheon talk and an evening address, tracing the evolution of "The Lipstick Project" and telling her audiences, "The ultimate goal should not necessarily be a good death—but a good life until the end," connecting notions of a "good life" with beauty, care, and touch. Boyle's story in its simplicity (spa service) and its profundity (bettering death) proved an effective means for communicating to her audience members, particularly college students who might feel distant from old age and dying, that all of us are inextricably connected to end-of-life concerns. "The Lipstick Project" events in Maine not only provided a critical platform for honors women to work with high school girls in shared community engagement, but they also brought together disparate members of our broader community around humanist issues in an honors-like search for considerate interactions, truth, excellence, and honesty.

Schuman argued in *Beginning in Honors* that the "unique and defining feature of honors is its hopeless and glorious vision of doing collegiate education as well as it can be done" (13). He said that it is "hopeless" because people "inhabit the sublunary world of human imperfection," but it is glorious "because it can give our entire educational enterprise a direction and a goal to inspire our professional lives, energize our working, and sustain not just those of us in honors, but the colleges and universities within which we live" (13). The Maine organizing team, led by the work of two dedicated honors students, grew as a group and as individuals through their shared work in bringing Boyle's inspirational and important story to Maine, attempting to do "collegiate [and community] education as well as it can be done." The team and their Maine audiences learned about human life measured in quality rather than quantity of days, in dignity and beauty, in connections and compassion. Boyle and "The Lipstick Project" also prompted listeners to valorize feminine practices, to see and to bridge gaps, undertaking the sort of personal and intellectual engagement that is at the heart of activism, humanitarianism, and honors.

The high school girls and honors women who brought "The Lipstick Project" story to Maine have worked on fascinating, creative projects since Boyle's visit. Three of the four high school girls chose to do adventurous

gap experiences after graduating from high school in 2017, and the fourth girl matriculated to a progressive women's college in Boston. Furthermore, Saucier and Jackson have expanded their impressive academic work. With Killinger, they presented on "The Lipstick Project" Maine collaboration at the 2017 NCHC conference in Atlanta. Saucier has done additional research on women living with obstetric fistula in Ethiopia, analyzing current efforts to eradicate the condition there. Saucier received the 2017 Maine Campus Compact "Heart and Soul Student Award" that recognizes students who have raised their voices on issues of local and global importance. Jackson—still a highly involved UMaine honors undergraduate and activist—has expanded her work to include assisting an English professor with her ongoing research into age and aging. She also received the 2018 UMaine Hill Scholarship in the Humanities.

REPLICABLE MODEL

Honors programs can curate this kind of community experience in a way that is unique within a college or university environment. Honors creates space for experimental and translocational projects that are philosophically and socially meaningful while also inspiring change on some level, even if solely interpersonal. This project represented the innovative nature of honors in its almost piecemeal, interdisciplinary quality, taking useful bits from humanities, local organizations, and women of various ages.

The Maine events centered on "The Lipstick Project" offer a replicable model for other honors programs and colleges in four ways. First is their reflection of the immutable honors values outlined by Schuman. Honors educators would do well—whether in community endeavors or academic pursuits—to look to Schuman and his writings as helpful, lofty guidance for honors work. Secondly, the efforts led to "enhanced educational opportunities" for both the organizing team and for Maine audiences by confronting significant and bridgeable gaps: gaps between high school girls and college women, gaps among care providers and the university community, gaps in understanding the need for creative care. Identifying and addressing a notable gap can be an excellent starting point for an honors undertaking, particularly a gap that crosses disciplines and forms links to local community. Thirdly, the project combined gifts in fruitful ways that allowed for a collective focus on broader humanist concerns. Together honors students, high school students, and honors faculty made real-world connections. With a service-learning spirit shaped by Boyle's inspiring activist's story, the Maine organizing team worked

toward cultivating empathetic, engaged citizens, which honors education also strives to do. A final takeaway for other honors educators is the model of honors as a locus for bringing together various efforts to address a common cause that leads to deeper, more complex learning and action, furthering the “glorious” honors educational vision Schuman espoused and giving the “educational enterprise” directions and goals that energize and sustain.

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