

1-1-2013

Inside the 815: A Longtime Resident's Report on DeKalb County's Entertainment Scene

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Recommended Citation

Diehl, Lindsay, "Inside the 815: A Longtime Resident's Report on DeKalb County's Entertainment Scene" (2013). *Honors Capstones*. 678.
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HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT THESIS SUBMISSION FORM

AUTHOR: Lindsey Diehl

THESIS TITLE: *Inside the 815: A Longtime Resident's Report on DeKalb County's Entertainment Scene*

ADVISOR: Allen May

ADVISOR'S DEPARTMENT: Communication

DISCIPLINE: Broadcast Journalism

YEAR: 2013

PAGE LENGTH: 16

BIBLIOGRAPHY: YES

ILLUSTRATED: YES

PUBLISHED (YES OR NO): NO

COPIES AVAILABLE: One disc and a YouTube Page at www.youtube.com/LindseyGDiehl.

ABSTRACT:

"Inside the 815", my segment on NTC News Tonight, explored the various entertainment, dining and shopping options offered within the 815 area code. But instead of just reporting on the surface, I aimed my artistic vision to focus in on the underlying human-interest stories behind these concepts. I crafted six different news packages that were featured on air; I researched story ideas, set up pre-production arrangements, performed on-camera interviews, gathered background information, acted as my own photographer for most stories, executed stand-ups while producing, writing and editing my stories. My thesis materials on file are a burned disc and a YouTube page that can be found at www.youtube.com/LindseyGDiehl. (Both materials have the same content.)

University Honors Program

Capstone Approval Page

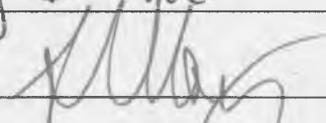
Capstone Title (print or type)

"Inside the 815": A Longtime Resident's
Report on DeKalb County's Entertainment
Scene.

Student Name (print or type)

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Faculty Supervisor (print or type)



Faculty Approval Signature

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Department of (print or type)

COMMUNICATION

Date of Approval (print or type)

12/4/13

“Inside the 815”: A Longtime Resident’s Report on DeKalb County’s Entertainment Scene

Dining, shopping and entertainment. These may seem like fluffy topics for a news segment; however, I made it my goal this semester to dig deeper than your average feature news reporter. For my “Inside the 815” segment on *NTC News Tonight*, I focused on six different topics which all had very different underlying human-interest takeaways. I started with Cassie’s Popcorn Stand in Sycamore and then moved onto Jonamac Orchard in Malta, a clothing line called City Nativ that was created by a Sycamore High School graduate, You-Pick Berries Farm in Kingston, a haunted hotel tour at the Jane Fargo Hotel in Sycamore and ended with a DeKalb Native who just released his own book. My overall analysis of these projects and the process used to create them will continue throughout this paper.

My passion for wanting to pursue this project came from a personal place. Having lived in the Sycamore/DeKalb area my entire life, I often face questions about my reasoning to stay in DeKalb County while my high school peers have moved on to new areas to pursue different schools. And in my opinion, many young people who have grown up in the area tend to overlook the unique and exciting characteristics here.

One major asset to DeKalb County is obviously the agriculture. Our climate and growing conditions are one of a kind, allowing us the opportunity to experience a wide range of crops. That is a feature that not many people in the country, and even the world, are familiar with.

Secondly, the type of culture experienced in DeKalb County is of true Midwestern style. Though Sycamore and DeKalb are thriving with many more residents than in the past, these towns continue to offer a small-town feel, giving many the chance to enjoy the smaller things in life and enjoy the moment.

Lastly, the spirit of this county is one of a kind. Many people share a strong trait of being driven and working hard for what they want. This area has had its fair share of hardships, yet many people continue to pursue their dreams, no matter the degree.

The accumulation of these factors has led me to “Inside the 815”, where I was able to share these stories and really show the heart of the community through my reporting. And though I’m very familiar with the area, this project came with its own distinct set of challenges.

I truly took on the role of being a “one man band” as we call it in broadcast journalism. Essentially, this means that I took on every possible role in creating a news package. In a six week period, I was deeply busy with creating each week’s story while preparing for the following weeks. Ultimately, it gave me a realistic view for how many entry-level reporters do their jobs.

In pre-production, I was responsible for researching possible feature stories, contacting the subjects, researching background information, and setting up interviews and locations. This stage of production proved to be very important, with organization and time management being crucial for staying on top of the weekly deadlines. And in the end, I was very proud of the fact that I never got behind and missed one.

Once on the scene, I was responsible for conducting multiple interviews for each story, accurately reporting and engaging with the environment, performing stand-ups and shooting most of my stories. I started off this project with one of my classmates as my photographer because I wanted to put more of my project emphasis on the reporting aspect. Once I got to my third package, I decided to pursue that creative role as well. It gave me a lot of creative freedom and control of my overall packages. That way, once I got back from a shoot and began writing, I

knew what footage I already had and was able to write to those images. Although it gave me a much heavier load of responsibility when I was on the scene, I really enjoyed it and feel like my packages grew as a result.

In post production, not only did I write the scripts but I also edited my pieces using software called EDIUS. This step may have required the most time but it turned out to be the most rewarding. It was when I was able to see all the pieces of this project come together to form a story with a solid theme throughout. It almost resembles a puzzle because each sound-bite, voice over and stand-up needs to fit in the right place in order for it to become a fluid story. Additionally, editing was a major step that required a lot of creativity. I was able to incorporate some advanced editing techniques like adding graphics, photos, transitions, etc., to help add to the emotion of my story.

Cassie's Popcorn Stand

My first segment was on a one hundred year old popcorn stand in the heart of downtown Sycamore. Originally, I was under the impression that this nostalgic stand would be the angle itself. After much brainstorming, researching and chats with my advisor Mr. May, I realized that this way of thinking isn't *news*. Though it may be something that could be seen on Travel Channel or Food Network, in order for a feature story to be taken seriously, it needs a deep human-interest angle.

Having visited the Popcorn Stand since I was a young kid, I was able to understand the element of tradition that is synonymous with it. Therefore, I couldn't see myself using any other angle. In pre-production planning, I focused my stand-up and interview questions around this. For example, for the owner, Cassie Oltman, I asked questions along the lines of, "Is this a labor

of love for you that's more than just about the popcorn?" and "People can purchase popcorn anywhere else...why do they keep coming back to Cassie's?" For the visitors, it seemed to be a natural reaction for them to admit that they've been coming there for years and that it's a signature Sycamore business.

With it being my first "Inside the 815" segment, I had a lot of learning to do other than just developing the right angle. I also needed to consider formatting, writing styles and of course the intro. With the help of *NTC News Tonight's* director Jennifer Corvino, we were able to brainstorm a fifteen second intro for the segment. Through her expertise and graphic design ability, she created a custom piece that I was able to edit into my stories each week. It certainly helped establish the "Inside the 815" brand identification with viewers and set my stories apart from the general news packages. I really got my inspiration to distinguish myself as *the* feature reporter from Steve Dolinsky's *The Hungry Hound* on *ABC7 Chicago News*. He's got a catchy segment name and intro that I really wanted to model "Inside the 815" after.

Once in the field, it was certainly a learning process as for handling "feature" types of shoots. In semesters past at *NTC News Tonight*, I was a general news reporter and covered business and local government. There is a definite difference in this type of reporting because it requires an extreme level of professionalism and determination and you didn't have an abundance of shots to work with during the editing phases. In feature reporting, many of these businesses were very open to the opportunity of working with me and even excited and thankful. It was also natural to stay at these destinations for one to two hours to make sure we've shot every shot imaginable and captured some quality sound-bites. It was much more laid back but thorough job.

The inspiration behind my Cassie's Popcorn Stand segment was the television show *Man vs. Food* but particularly the episode about Nashville's Delicious Bites. In this show, Adam Richman takes a behind-the-scene look at the best food in various areas across the nation. He gets interviews with the owners and various customers and usually takes the camera back in the kitchen to show how the meals are made, as he did with the spicy chicken restaurant in Nashville. Though I overlooked his style of developing an "angle," I really wanted to add these behind-the-scene elements to my story. That's why I encouraged my camera man to physically squeeze into the tiny popcorn stand without a tri-pod and record shots of the popcorn actually being made, get natural sounds of the popping and capture the owner interacting with customers from her point of view in the stand.

I would consider this type of behind-the-scene feature reporting one of the strengths of my piece. I feel like being verbally open with my photographer about the shots that I was expecting really helped my story in the long run. This type of communication between a reporter and photographer really helps the efficiency while on the scene and helps everyone get on the same page. The final product really showed a wide variety of exciting and dynamic shots.

Another strength of my piece, as stated before, was the quality of sound bytes I received from the interviews with Cassie and the customers. I didn't just simply add the sound-bites with the most information in them to my story, I added the ones with the most emotion. That way, I was able to voice-over the bits of information and allow the participants to voice their own excitement, something that many reporters take away. I felt like these sound-bytes help evoke an emotion out of viewers that I cannot do by myself. In my opinion, this is especially important for feature reporting.

On the other hand, the weakness of my piece is my angle that didn't develop as well as I would hoped throughout the package. Essentially, I took too much time during the story to get to the heart of it; the tradition. I dedicated the first half to background information, something I should have included in my anchor intro that is read before the story on-air. Had I gotten to the tradition theme more quickly, I believe it would have been more apparent to viewers and been more interesting.

Jonamac Orchard

There was less of an initial learning curve when it came to my second package about Jonamac Orchard. I really wanted to do a seasonal story that could showcase the agriculture here, especially since many out-of-town visitors specifically travel to our area because of the wide range of farms to visit in the fall. Since I've been to Jonamac Orchard in the past and have seen the crowds that it draws on a regular basis, I knew this was the place that I wanted to explore next for "Inside the 815".

Going into it, I knew that I didn't want to solely focus on it being apple picking season. I *knew* there had to be a deeper story I could tell about this orchard. After lots of research about Northern Illinois' agriculture, I realized the significant drought that hit our area last year. Naturally, I thought a drought would create serious and harmful effects for the orchard's crop...and it apparently did that specific season. However, when I learned from the McArtor family that this season's (the following year's) crop was actually much more plentiful than usual, the creative light bulb in my mind clicked. I knew that if I was intrigued by this turn of events, I thought my viewers would be too.

My photographer and I arrived on location early in the morning to beat the rush of the crowds. We were able to get some establishing shots of the orchard, meet up with the owners and establish a game plan for the rest of the shoot without much interruption from the swarms of visitors. And before I knew it, the crowd truly multiplied and there were people on every inch of that orchard. It made it really difficult to find our interviewees since they became extremely busy trying to keep up with the high demands of the visitors out in the orchard and also in the main shop. That day, I truly realized the importance of being flexible with my game plan as it totally went awry. I wasn't able to get my interviews with the owners until later in the day because the orchard's apple cider machine died unexpectedly.

With my previous story about Cassie's Popcorn Stand, I had written my stand-up script before getting on location. For this story, that was almost impossible. I wasn't quite sure before getting out there how this day would unravel, what kinds of shots I would get and who would be available to speak with me. So it was really difficult for me to conceptualize the flow of my story. With a moment to spare between our interviews, I realized that I needed to do a stand-up and was stumped when it came to writing it right then and there. A stand-up truly needs to fit perfectly within the middle of the story just like a puzzle piece. After writing a few of them down, I realized that I wasn't extremely comfortable just shooting one. My photographer and I agreed on shooting a couple of them, all using the same background. Without changing location, this proved to be very smart because I was able to perform a few all within a short time limit. Coming back into post-production, I was extremely grateful that I had a few options to pick from and was able to choose the one that continued to move my story in the direction I wanted to go.

An inspiration for my story on Jonamac Orchard was a piece from *Windy City Live* called "Ji's Walt Disney World Food Tour" where one of the co-anchors (who is notorious for being a

“foodie”) visits the legendary destination and explores the different ethnic cuisines offered there. What I wanted to take away from this piece was Ji’s ability to speak broadly about the entertainment venue but then focus in on a core topic. Though hers was more food related, I wanted my piece to resemble hers in the fact that I could portray the entertainment venue to the viewers while delivering a specific message. On another note, I noticed that Ji was featured in a lot of her shots for this story including some when she was interviewing participants. I decided to add a few minor shots of me interacting with my interviewees as well to portray a feeling of “being on the scene.”

All in all, the strength of my piece was definitely the angle of last year’s drought influencing this year’s abundant crop. It was a topic that I’ve never seen anyone else use before and I completely stumbled upon it while actually *talking* with the owners. It really showed me how important pre-production research and planning is but ultimately, just learning from the people themselves was what really set my package apart from others. For me, this was a true “wow, I didn’t know that!” kind of story.

A weakness of my piece has to be the stiffness in my writing. Much of the script didn’t sound conversational, one of the most important aspects when writing for television. I found myself writing for print and it sounds really unappealing when I actually voiced it. This concept was a struggle for me throughout my “Inside the 815” journey because I’ve been used to writing for print my entire life, from writing stories in elementary school to research papers in high school. It’s been hard for me to shake that habit and I find it very obvious especially during this particular stand-up.

My third package of the semester was my first one-man band experience, meaning that I created everything for this piece top to bottom, front to back. I had all of my responsibilities that I had in previous stories; however, I was now my own photographer as well. This proved to be a challenge as I juggled both reporting (gathering facts, interviewing, etc.) and now my more visual responsibilities. As difficult as it was to handle every exact detail of this shoot, I actually enjoyed it very much. I was now able to have full creative control over my own piece, giving it the exact look that I wanted. It was also very easy in post-production to know beforehand the shots that I was able to work with.

The difficult part was obviously my stand-up, where I am required to be on-camera. This proved to be the biggest down-fall of being a one-man band because it is very difficult to create a visually dynamic on-camera experience if I cannot actually operate the camera. For this piece, I wanted to create a little bit of movement and that's why I walked into the frame. Additionally, at this point in the semester our weather started to change. I had to re-schedule doing my stand-up because the rain and the wind were just too much to handle in terms of video, something that I never took into consideration before.

My package on City Nativ was the most person-driven story I did for this segment. It only featured one interviewee, which is the line's creator, in his own home where he operates the business. Since this story already had more of an up-close and personal feel based on visuals and interview content alone, I really aimed to create a piece with a script and editing that portrayed this feel. I chose to take an in-depth look not just at this young man's business but his story behind it. Eventually I learned that this line meant more to him than just designing trendy clothes but it was actually the outcome of a very difficult high school experience. I was able to craft my script around that element and also gather photos to be featured along with it.

I am very proud of the fact that this piece isn't very "promotional." I find that when reporters cover businesses or products, they sometimes have the tendency to focus on the product itself and it can come off as them trying to sell something. Instead, I really put a lot of energy into focusing on Alex's journey and how he grew to this point in his young adulthood. I found myself looking at some of WMAQ reporter LeAnn Trotter's feature packages, specifically "High-End Outlet Mall Opens in Rosemont". Obviously the main story is about clothing and a brand new mall but I think she does a responsible job of not just speaking about the "product" itself, but she provides context behind it.

Ultimately, I believe this is one of the best pieces I've created during my time at Northern Illinois University. I take a lot of pride in the fact that I did everything by myself for this package and paid the utmost attention to every detail. Though it wasn't the most visual story I've ever covered, I was still able to convey the personality of this story through the use of various and differently paced video. This is a very emotional story and I find it very exciting that I was trusted to share someone's story in this way. It proved to be extremely rewarding and reminded me the very reason why I want to be in this business after all.

You-Pick Berries

I chose to stick with acting as a one-man band, sometimes known as a multimedia journalist, because I was very pleased with the outcome of my previous package. But this time, I was out in nature again. In retrospect, I realize how much physical work goes into carrying around a heavy tri-pod, camera, cords and microphones especially when you're out in nature. Since that was a lot of ground to cover physically, I found myself exhausted at this end of this shoot. Without a doubt, it was all worth it.

This story was at a raspberry farm in the heart of Kingston, with cornfields and farms as far as the eye could see. I hadn't visited this farm beforehand as I did with Jonamac Orchard. Going out on a whim, I was absolutely delighted with the visuals of this location. The colorful raspberries were just dripping off the bushes, the sky was beautifully clear and all I could hear was the wind through the trees. This proved to be the dream of any videographer. There was so much room and so many different shots I could make. I came home with way more footage than I ever needed; however, I found in the past that it's better to have *too much* than *too little*. The one downfall was managing to keep all the bugs off of me while having my hands full of equipment.

This farm was such a quiet venue with only a handful of visitors during my afternoon there and therefore my choices for interviewees were slim. Additionally, this was my first run in with a family that had absolutely no desire to be on camera. I had been so used to virtually everyone being willing to be featured on camera, so I was quite shocked. It proved to be a good learning opportunity though, as I assume with harder news stories this might be a usual occurrence. This situation really hindered my ability to keep moving forward and getting pieces of my package that I needed because I eventually ran out of new aspects to cover while waiting for the next visitor to come to the farm. However, this did give me time to think of an appropriate and different stand-up.

My stand-up for this package was much more interactive than those in the past. Since I was operating my own camera while actually being on camera as well, I walked just like I did in the last package to create movement in the frame, but this time I walked right up to a prop that I explained. It was a payment box for customers to use on an honor system when the owner wasn't in the fields. Since this was such an essential part of the story in terms of explaining the

farm's laid back mood, I decided that this was a great opportunity for me to explain this on-camera rather than voicing it over.

I thought it would be difficult to top my last package on City Nativ, however, I feel like this package may have given it a run for its money. After this aired, I specifically remember feeling like my writing was improving. The post-production aspect of actually sitting down and writing the script was coming easier to me and required less intensive brainstorming. I was becoming more skilled at visualizing how it would all piece together and eventually following through with it. I really look up to WABC reporter Lauren Glassberg and her segment called "Neighborhood Eats" because her writing comes off very effortless and unforced. All of her scripts seem to be the opposite of print style writing because they seem to easily just roll off the tongue.

The one thing that I wish I could go back and change would be my opening lines. I start with, "Not too many people venture out to the You-Pick Berries farm in Kingston says Christine Ewald." Instead of speaking on her behalf, I wish I would have made it more my own. Looking back, I should have replaced it with something more attention grabbing to the audience. Perhaps I could have read, "1...2...3 people here at the You-Pick Berries Farm in Kingston. And that's pretty much the usual here."

Haunted Tour at the Jane Fargo Hotel

My fifth package about the haunted tour at the Jane Fargo Hotel was unlike anything I've covered before. For starters, it was extremely timely with Halloween being just a few days away. But it was the first feature story that I truly had to cover all the different angles of. Since it was dealing with paranormal activity, I really had to think to myself about why this would

matter to the average person. Ultimately, I think it's very interesting that these people who either work at the hotel or visited the haunted tour all have different takes on the existence of spirits. My angle dealt with each person's interpretation of it all.

Once again, I stayed with being my own photographer as again because I really developed a love for crafting my story visually. Especially with this type of story, I knew visuals were going to be extremely important with a story about paranormal activity. I came prepared thinking that I wouldn't get any outrageously unusual shots but had a game plan of getting different, creative shots like the man with the photo on his phone.

An element that proved to be difficult was once again the physicality of the assignment. The hotel rooms and halls are very small and narrow. I tried to stay out of the visitors' way as much as possible since we were in such tight quarters. That's why whenever I could, I just left my tri-pod to the side and held it myself. It ended up working out much better as I was able to get into the action more without ruining the visitors' experience.

Another difficult part of it all was the lack of lighting in the hotel. I was able to bring a light for my camera with me but unfortunately, there were no batteries in it. I was forced to work with the natural lighting of the hotel. Though at first I was very concerned about my final product, in the end I was able to adjust the brightness levels while editing. Eventually, I went through my whole piece and brightened up each shot manually to the point where it was viewable. Unfortunately, the shots did become a bit distorted from this but it was the best I could do in the situation.

All in all, I'm really pleased with how it came out. I think representing each side of the story was essential and I was lucky enough to find people who were willing to speak on all sides

of the issue. My main problem with this story, looking back, is my stand-up. I'm very dissatisfied with the framing of the shot itself. Most of what can be seen is the side of the brick building. Not to mention, it is extremely boring. What I am actually saying does not match what the audience is looking at. I speak about unusual happenings at the hotel like unscrewed light bulbs and what I should have done was actually been interacting with a light fixture, up on a latter.

Digging for Home

My final story for "Inside the 815" was about something that I stumbled over across the internet. A retired gentleman, who happens to be a life-long resident of DeKalb, published his first book. I was intrigued and decided to dig a little bit deeper. After speaking with Jimmy Ball on the phone, I realized that his fiction novel is centered around a young boy and his dog. The true essence of this story lies in the fact that this dog is based off his current dog, a stray he and his wife adopted from Tails Humane Society in DeKalb after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. At the beginning of my journey, it was difficult for me to decipher the elements that make a feature story...a feature story. Now, the second I heard the truth behind Jimmy Ball's new book, I knew right then and there that this was going to make a magical package.

At this point in the semester, I was truly less focused on the technicalities of putting together a news story and more involved with getting to share Jimmy and his dog Digger's story on a personal level. Though I was reporting, shooting and doing everything in between, the time that I spent at their family home was more fun than anything else. I was once again reminded of how fantastic this business is to be able to learn about people every day.

Despite having one in every other package, I chose not to put a stand-up in this one. Quite honestly, I didn't have a purpose to put one in there. I had no props to interact with, nothing to introduce and I felt as if it would disrupt the flow of my story. In retrospect, I really stand by that decision. Watching the news, I feel like reporters force stand-ups in their packages that really don't make sense or add anything to the story. I would rather let the emotion of my sound-bites and my voice-over explain it.

The one thing I wish I would have expanded a little bit more on was the aspects of Tails Humane Society. I was able to go to their location and shoot interior and exterior shots, however, no one was available to speak with me on camera before my deadline. I would have loved to include their experience rescuing dogs at Hurricane Katrina. All in all, the weekly deadline for my "Inside the 815" stories really drove home the urgency of putting packages together and making sure to get all the elements you need in a timely fashion.

In conclusion, these past six weeks during my run on "Inside the 815" for *NTC News Tonight* was one of the most rewarding and valuable experiences of my entire college career at Northern Illinois University. Not only did I get the chance to grow as a journalist by practicing my writing, editing, interviewing and researching skills, but I learned a lot about myself in the process. I really put an emphasis on developing my skills further and further each week and as a result I put a lot of pressure on myself. But it wasn't a stressful kind of pressure, it was more like a fiery passion of wanting to run with the "big dogs" and put together just as good of feature stories together as professional reporters. It was one of the most special moments of my life when my Capstone advisor, Mr. May told me after my You-Pick-Berries Farm aired that my quality of work was certainly up to par with any other feature reporters in the business and that I

wasn't just a "student" anymore. Words cannot describe the feeling that I had when I realized that hard work truly pays off.

Going into my senior year, I had my eyes set on landing a producing job after graduating. I really enjoyed everything off camera, from writing scripts to video editing to fact checking, and I felt like my skills were better suited for a behind the scenes job. I still do believe that, however, doing such an intensive on-camera independent study made me really excited to keep my eyes open for any reporting opportunities as well. Looking back, I think I might have been selling myself short to a certain extent by only looking at a handful of openings. After this semester, my skills have broadened and I now have a wider view of the job market.

Though my outlook on specific jobs may have shifted, my passion for wanting to be a key player in this business hasn't changed. I love the fact that every story is unlike the last and as a journalist, we are constantly open to meeting new people each day. It's a tough business, requiring a certain level of thick skin, and I love a good challenge. Technologically, it is always changing and you can never get used to doing your job a certain way. And deep down, I want to be a journalist because we're constantly *learning* new things and I will always be a student at heart.

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