

OYLER

CAN
A SCHOOL
SAVE
A COMMUNITY?

ONE SCHOOL
ONE YEAR

a documentary film



BROKEN TOP PRODUCTIONS in association with public radio's "MARKETPLACE" Presents "OYLER: One School, One Year"
Original Music by NATHAN BELL. Cinematography by GLENN HARTONG, STACY DOOSE. Edited by PATRICK WRIGHT
Produced & Directed by AMY SCOTT. © 2015 Broken Top Productions. WWW.OYLERDOCUMENTARY.COM



Amy Scott's documentary captures the communal character of Oyler

The Community Learning Center concept is galvanizing the national consciousness and has catapulted Cincinnati to the forefront of the conversation. For the comprehensive and analytical approach to defining the Community Learning Center model, look no further than the website for the Cincinnati-based Community Learning Center Institute, which has branded the vision: "leveraging (of) public school facilities to become hubs of educational, recreational, cultural, health and civic partnerships, which optimize the conditions for learning and catalyze the revitalization of the community."

This call to arms is a far cry from the notion of the one-room schoolhouses of old that gathered multi-age learners for a precious few hours of instruction before those young students needed to shift to working the land on family farms. Back then, the school was not a primary concern — that schoolhouse, in fact, might have likely been seen as a waste of land, if it were not also used as a place of worship and, in some cases, a community or town hall.

Development and specialization over the years stripped away those extraneous functions while allowing for the expansion of the "schoolhouse" into a strictly academic facility. Fast forward to the technological age we currently find ourselves in, where the focus is on testing and outcomes and the school is, to some extent, even more of a data-driven processor, a place where true learning must be quantifiable at each stage of the process. There is little personal investment in the process or the place.

But the Community Learning Center Institute wants to recalibrate our thinking. All of the language addressing the strategies and implementation of goals and objectives rooted in the "five foundational elements" is there, but the very human heart and soul of the model returns again and again to the idea of the school as the town/community center. And one of the key ways this comes to life is through the sharing of stories, because when students and families can illustrate their connectedness, the school achieves a larger mission as a resource hub and something more — the school becomes a neighborhood character.

Darlene Kamine, the executive director and founder (in 2009) of the Community Learning Center Institute, is the ideal spokesperson for this approach because she instinctively appreciates the idea that to support and promote such reform demands being a skilled storyteller. I spoke with her days before the local premiere of Amy Scott's documentary *Oyler* (made in association with American Public Media's *Marketplace* as part of their award-winning radio series "One School, One Year").

Kamine quickly zoomed in on the perfect narrative to hook a film-centric interviewer like myself.

With all the attention from Scott's film and the revitalization efforts honing in on the Lower Price Hill community currently being served by the community learning center at Oyler School, there is still so much work to be done. But the changes can be seen and felt across the spectrum, especially in the inspiring stories of students. Kamine caught me up on the history of the school's rejuvenated newspaper, *The Griffin*, which has become not just an extracurricular activity for students seeking to bolster their resumes, but a vital source of investigative reporting for a community that lacks that degree of coverage routinely found in the suburbs.

She described one student — "one who had been trouble with a capital T" — being approached to join the newspaper and being so moved because no one had ever asked him to get involved in anything like this before. He signed on as the paper's film critic and shared with Kamine his plan to cover *Furious 7* for the community.

"He was riding his bike down to Newport on the Levee, but his bike broke down at Fountain Square, so he walked the rest of the way, and then walked home (afterward)."

Kamine's point, which struck an obvious chord with me, was this student's desire to engage his passion and to share it within his community. He simply would not be denied, which made him real to me in ways that most of the heroes created for summer blockbusters can only dream of being.

What makes Kamine so effective, though, is her immersion in the communities in which the Community Learning Center Institute operates, her encyclopedic cataloguing of those narratives and her ability to recall the perfect anecdote for the audience before her.

••• The *Marketplace* radio series "One School, One Year" works in a similar way, selectively telling more universal narratives, highlighting the systemic challenges and the unique regional characters on the frontlines where education and poverty intersect. During a phone interview before her arrival to the premiere of *Oyler*, Scott, the film's director, attempted to outline the key highlights in the process of the radio-to-screen treatment.

For Scott, the starting point was a report she read that called for schools to fund pre-natal care, "which makes a lot of sense, since schools will eventually get those kids who are born in difficult situations," she says. "So I called the guy

who wrote that piece and asked him if he knew of any places where this kind of thing were happening, and he mentioned the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati as one cradle-to-career approach to education.”

A series of investigative calls led her to Kamine and the Community Learning Center Institute and to the idea of multiple community services being offered in schools. Kamine pitched Oyler as an example, and Scott entered into the process assuming that she would do a single radio story on the school. But it turned into something else entirely — from a series of stories to the documentary.

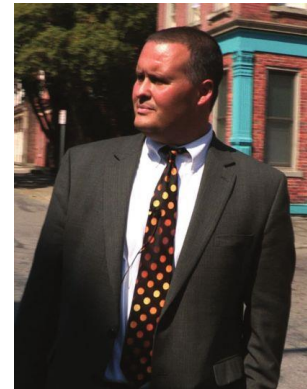
“What surprised me was that it became much more of a character-driven film about the longtime former principal of Oyler, Craig Hockenberry, and his struggle to figure out his own place in the system,” Scott says. “The film was very different from the radio stories I had done, because I finished the school year with more than 100 hours of footage and handed it over to an editor [Patrick Wright, winner of the 2010 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short *Music By Prudence*] who is very much a filmmaker and an artist, whereas I am more of a journalist by training and by approach. And he kept coming back to the characters.”

Cincinnati is familiar with creative renderings of characters on the big screen. Back in 2012, we had the premiere of *Radius*, a short film touted as “the world’s first game-sourced movie” created by Possible Worldwide and several community partners. The film was shot during arts events via material culled from attendees’ smartphones and captured the story of the arts scene as a “superhero” capable of uniting the regional community. The filmmakers focused on the tools used to document the story, but what truly mattered was the idea of the arts as a “character” who could rise up from the communal will.

••• As I watched *Oyler* during its May 22 premiere at Mount St.

Joseph University in Delhi, it was impossible to lose sight of the film’s characters. Besides Hockenberry, the film also zeroes in on Raven Gribbens, a high school senior desperate to become the first member of her family to escape the Urban Appalachian black hole that leaves individuals under-educated and unable to gain the economic footing necessary to change their lives or positively impact their communities.

Unlike the pre-social media experiment driving the *Radius* project, *Oyler* demands more of its participant characters. Hockenberry and Gribbens submit to reality show-level exposure and tacitly agree to serve as representatives for a neighborhood in crisis, something most people sensibly run away from. It is a phenomenally brave thing, to be this naked and raw, even with the care and consideration that will come through the editing process.



Yet, out of it all, stars are born. But it is different in the documentary field — unlike in the feature world — because the stars are not actors pretending to be characters of note. Here, especially in *Oyler*, the stars are real people, representatives of an unseen community. On an even more fundamental level, they are heroes.

It was plain during the Q&A session that followed the film’s premiere that Hockenberry and Gribbens are in fact superheroes. Forget the capes and the costumes. These two are the real deal, and the proof was up there on the screen.

Scott captures them just right, toggling back and forth between their unfolding narratives, complete with tension that could not have been scripted better if a Hollywood studio had paid millions for an Aaron Sorkin (*The Social Network*) or a John Ridley (*12 Years a Slave*) to spend months holed up in their isolated fortresses of writerly solitude penning the scenes. They dominated the frames.

Hockenberry, a man who for 15 years was obviously so much more than a mere school principal, bounds across the screen, driving through the streets to round up wayward students, walking the hallways with a smile and ever-watchful eyes, cheering at games, tough-loving the players of the high school basketball team when the cops are waiting to dispense law and order from on high. Hockenberry is no Superman; he is a real Daredevil, a man without fear, eager to inspire the same fearlessness in his students and his community.

And Gribbens, whom we see early on in cellphone footage, fights in the streets with another girl over meaningless namecalling; she is an accident waiting to happen. But she is also a turnaround, a miracle in the rough.

Jack Black and Kyle Gass may have snagged the moniker Tenacious D, but Gribbens is what it means. She fights, whether on the basketball court, in sessions with mentors preparing her for the college application process or with her father, a high school dropout and recovering addict who longs to see his daughter do what he could not, even though he is afraid to express the idea with any confidence (she rolls her eyes at him when he hedges about her being able to attend college because she knows she will do it). Most importantly, we hear her internal struggles, her insecurities about making strong first impressions, even her own doubts. But as soon as she puts herself out there, she elbows

these doubts aside like little Steph Curry boxing out Dwight Howard for a rebound in the NBA's Western Conference Finals.

A curious thing happened for me while listening to the comments during the Q&A (which took on the feel of a testimonial service with respondents either sharing their own stories or thanking Hockenberry and Gribbens for representing the community so effectively) — I started to see what *Oyler* is truly about. This is not simply the story of individuals or a community in transition. *Oyler* documents the emergence of education as a character, the hero gathering resources to meet difficult challenges ahead.

And Hockenberry and Gribbens, along with all of the storytellers Kamine and Scott will continue to introduce us to, are part of that greater collective soul striving to command its place in the narrative of this city.

For more information about OYLER and to stay apprised of its pending DVD release, visit oylerdocumentary.com.