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Big Questions Travels the World for Answers to Human Need

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DePaul professors Patricia Werhane and Kim Clark, producers of the documentary series “Big Questions,” had a stroke of luck the day they arrived at Jordan’s Zaatari refugee camp. The 1 millionth Syrian refugee came through the camp’s gates, and their documentary team was one of just three crews allowed to film the somber occasion. They set up alongside cameras from the BBC and Al Jazeera, and when the crowd got rowdy, they seized an opportunity to do what they do best: showcase people whose voices are often unheard.

“This man was yelling in Arabic at me, ‘You’re not telling my story!’” shares Clark, an instructor in the College of Communication. “And I said, ‘Well, you haven’t shared anything with me yet. Why don’t you invite us somewhere we can talk?’”

Werhane, managing director of DePaul’s Institute for Business and Professional Ethics, continues, “We went into his tent and sat on the floor, drank about 14 gallons of tea and smoked cigarettes—and neither Kim nor I smoke—and people in the camp came to look at us and talk.”

The team hoped that filming the camps and the organizations that provided aid would raise awareness of the refugees’ plight, one of the main purposes behind “Big Questions.”

“When you are listening to people tell you about their suffering, you can only hope that this tiny project could make a big impact,” says Sarah Sweilem, who served as the team’s translator, researcher and producer in Jordan when she was a DePaul student.

Shedding light on global issues

What began as a project to create a three- to five-minute video about micro-lending and cottage industries in Bangladesh has grown into a 13-episode series of stories from around the world that highlights impoverished and stressed communities and those who have come to

By Jennifer Leopoldt
their aid. As askingbigquestions.com, the series’ website, states, “This is not reality television. It’s a television show about reality.”

“Big Questions” focuses on education access in Ghana, school building in Haiti, health access in Tanzania and wage theft in Chicago, among other topics. Werhane and Clark saw the potential for the series to touch a wider audience and interested WNIT, a public television station in South Bend, Ind., in showing it. “Big Questions” first aired in 2013 as six one-hour episodes before the professors shopped shorter, 30-minute episodes to WTTW, Chicago’s public television station. New episodes will air on WNIT this spring, with the possibility that WTTW will show the series later on (see sidebar for schedule).

“The series is based on the question, ‘What can one person do to change the world?’” says Clark. Werhane explains, “Our purpose was always to record real-world, sustainable actions that are alleviating poverty, suffering and injustice. Every episode ends with a Vincentian challenge: What can you do about this issue? How can you actually change the world?”

The DePaul community has long known the university as a leader in framing questions of poverty. Broader distribution of “Big Questions” will make DePaul’s commitment apparent to a new audience.

The project is underwritten by the Callista Wicklander Fund, an endowed fund at the university that Werhane oversees as the Wicklander Chair of Business Ethics. This funding gives the team the freedom to pursue and televise stories they think will resonate with viewers. “Have you ever been to a party, and you find one interesting person in the room and think, ‘I wish I could spend a day with you, just talking?’ That’s sort of what we do,” Clark says. As Werhane explains, the range of potential ideas outstrips the team’s capacity. “We’re not bereft of topics. We’re just bereft of time.”

Making academic contributions in new ways

Many academics use written case studies to show different approaches to global challenges. “Big Questions” stands apart by using video to invite viewers into people’s daily lives, which Clark calls “uncharted territory for teachers.”

“I always see case studies done only in the dry world of paper and ink,” Clark says. “Bringing a video camera into a hut in Haiti and spending a few hours with someone, that’s a much better way of understanding people’s lives.”

Using new tools to give people a clearer view of global issues ties into DePaul’s emphasis on academic understanding leading to ethical actions. Within its Vision 2018 strategic plan is DePaul’s commitment to creating a “mix of theory with practice, particularly in search of solutions to the pressing issues of the day, including injustice and poverty.”

DePaul also is at the forefront of ethical teaching methods as part of the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative. The school was part of the international task force of representatives from leading business schools that created the initiative in 2007. The mission of the PRME is to inspire and champion responsible management education, research and thought leadership globally. One of the principles focuses specifically on supporting “dialogue and debate among educators, students, business, government, consumers, media, civil society organizations and other interested groups and stakeholders on critical issues related to global social responsibility and sustainability.”

Both Clark and Werhane have used clips from “Big Questions” in their own classrooms to teach media ethics and business ethics, and they look forward to the full documentary series becoming a teaching tool for others.

“Eventually, we have an idea to create written case studies for each one of these episodes, and then teach the written study and the video together,” says Werhane.

Ian Goran-Dry (BUS ’12), who took Clark’s media ethics class, enjoyed seeing video clips as part of the instruction. “Every media format has its own benefits, but there is so much more you can pick up from videos compared
to reading an article or case study,” he says, noting how body language and visual cues help convey the stories.

The clips also provide a practical view of ethical issues that isn’t easy to come by in a normal philosophy course. “Philosophers will say, ‘What does it mean that you’re studying philosophy? What good can you do?’ This shows exactly what you can do,” says Clark.

Focusing on empowering others

Most episodes of “Big Questions” focus on sustainable poverty alleviation, that is, ways to help people become independent without philanthropy. According to Werhane, “the question is how do you empower people to make their own way? You can. It does work.”

As the recent recipient of a lifetime achievement award for outstanding contributions to scholarship from the Society for Business Ethics, Werhane, one of the society’s founders and author of one of the first textbooks in business ethics, is in a better position than most to help answer this pressing question. Her student collaborators on “Big Questions” have already taken this lesson to heart.

Scott Arakawa (CDM ’12), who joined the team as a video editor and has since done everything from post-production sound to writing and on-location filming, says, “I want these stories to get out there because these people are not hopeless causes. It’s going to take a lot of work to help them become self-sufficient, but it’s not impossible.”

Tim Rolph (CDM ’11) joined the film crew to go to Bangladesh in 2010, after taking Clark’s screenwriting class. Rolph, who now works full time as a project manager in DePaul’s Institute for Business and Professional Ethics, was determined to stay attached to the series over the years because of the dedicated people it showcases. “We found this market of people doing wonderful things but not getting a lot of attention,” he explains. “We put ourselves in a position to document them and be the go-between for these incredible efforts.”

The film crew’s composition showcases collaboration at DePaul: Werhane comes from the Driehaus College of Business and the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Clark from the College of Communication and alumni from the College of Computing and Digital Media and the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. Participating on the film while still in school let crew members gain a hands-on understanding of global poverty.

Traveling locally and internationally with the team brought learning out of the classroom and into the community. That many who began as students have stayed involved after leaving the university speaks to how DePaul’s pedagogical style can spark a lifelong commitment to social justice.

Sweilem, who finished at DePaul in June 2013, credits her experience on the documentary team with helping her get her current job as a human rights and governance trainer for ActionAid Denmark in the Arab region.

“My time at DePaul—learning from the ‘Big Questions’ crew—gave me the confidence and determination to go out and practice what I have been preaching for so long,” she says.

Sharing stories ethically

A delicate balance is needed to tell difficult stories in a way that respects the subjects, especially when dealing with vulnerable populations. The crew keeps that in mind when filming, and Sweilem says she sees the ethics of DePaul’s namesake reflected in the videos. “St. Vincent de Paul did not want the followers of his mission to just go around handing out food and money. He wanted those dedicated to the mission to work in a way that endorsed human dignity,” she explains.

Werhane and Clark want the series to be memorable for its ability to introduce new audiences to issues around the globe and inspire them to re-evaluate some of life’s big questions. The series has an accompanying book that documents the team’s travels and provides background on and interviews with many of the film subjects. The book includes a foreword by well-known Chicago journalist Rick Kogan. Kogan, who spent time as a television critic, writes that the documentary series is “a program that will not only change the way you see the world, but also has the potential to change that world.” He adds, “‘Big Questions,’ I am happy to report, does something that television, with its immense power, has been incapable of doing. It gives me hope.”

Visit bit.ly/bigquestionsvideo to watch a video preview and read more about the television series.

Learn More About “Big Questions”

Watch new episodes on WNIT (South Bend, Ind., public television) at 7:30 p.m. Eastern every Thursday until April 24.

Visit askingbigquestions.com for updates on television air dates, clips and selected full episodes.

Buy the companion book by contacting Patricia Werhane at pwerhane@depaul.edu.