

## PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

### **Project Summary: Youth Journeys through California.**

Of the hundreds of thousands of homeless youth in America, one in four reside in California. While many were born here, many more migrate from other states following a long tradition of going west in search of opportunity, fame, fortune, landscape and weather. Digital Dove, a video program for at-risk and homeless youth, will train students, ages 18-21, in interview and camera technique and over the course of a ten week storytelling and filmmaking class, they will investigate their stories in the context of the 'go west' narrative tradition – adventurers who seek a better life in a far off land. While many of the young people who come to California and end up homeless are fleeing broken homes or are victims of failed institutions, their stories also contain other elements: subculture, rural and urban terrain, pluck, resiliency. The stamp 'homeless' rarely allows for these counter-narratives. The resulting video stories will be edited into a web series on youth journeys to and within California, to be aired on Digital Dove's and Covenant House California's websites. In addition, public screenings will be held at HBO's west coast offices and Covenant House California and a revised version will be submitted to film festivals.

### **Project Rationale:**

Digital Dove is a video program which operates out of Covenant House California, a youth homeless shelter in Hollywood, and has been working with homeless teenagers and young adults for seven years. Over the course of this tenure, instructors and students have worked together to bring student stories to the general public – to build awareness around the complex, intertwined factors that result in youth homelessness, and put faces and stories behind the dry numbers. Year after year, the most common subject that comes up in class discussions is the students' relationship to their homeless status: they understandably see their homelessness as a circumstance, a time in their lives, rather than a defining, totalizing characteristic. The idea for this project arose from one of those discussions where students were asked what other categories might their stories fall under, if not "homeless stories". A student piped up: "An adventure. I could tell you some crazy stories about how I got here."

Almost every student in the class offered up a 'crazy story' and most had to do with their journey to California and/or what they found when they got here. One young couple saw an ad on TV for California, bought greyhound bus tickets to Santa Barbara and joined a 'surfer church' to sustain them. Another student spent nights under Route 60 in Los Angeles where he said found peace for the first time in his life – until he was forced to leave by a local gang. A male student who had been kicked out of his house for doing Judy Garland impressions moved to Los Angeles because it was the only place where he felt like he would be understood.

What makes these stories worth broadcasting is that they are not only recognizable to California audiences in terms of a shared culture and landscape, but they offer a unique

perspective on those contexts: highway 60 may be how many Angelenos get to work, but it is shelter and peace to other Californians. Digital Dove stories are often about survival, and these stories share that characteristic – they show how some of the most vulnerable members of society survive in California, or in some cases, because of California. And they are rarely black and white, which gives the richest material for audiences to contemplate: there is confusion and ambivalence about what young people find in California. A sense of opportunity often clashes with a sense that opportunity is limited or not what they thought it would be. In this regard, these stories are democratic texts – they provide ‘on the ground’ information about what resources kinds of institutions, groups, landmarks, and situations came through for this vulnerable population, and which did not.

At the same time, true to the original impetus, this project offers both the storytellers and the audience an opportunity to think differently about ‘homeless youth’. Embedded in each of these stories are journeys, navigating terrain, growing up, and taking on challenges – often considerable ones. Like Huckelberry Finn, who escaped a drunk father, hopped aboard a raft on the Mississippi and began a journey that profoundly changed him, there is room for looking at these situations through the lens of resiliency, resource, and hard won wisdom – to focus on accomplishment alongside hardship.

### **Humanities Content and/or Approach:**

This project, from the outset, adopts a humanities framework – a narrative tradition – and challenges its storytellers to see how their stories fit within it. It asks homeless youth to become acquainted with a set of adventure and pioneering stories from the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in order to connect them to an American tradition they may or many not know they are a part of. The humanities, in this context, is being used to generate a deeper sense of connectedness, self-confidence, and cultural understanding within a community that is often disconnected and alone. It is also answers an implicit call by this same community to re-categorize their stories into genres other than ‘news’ and ‘social services’. By taking a humanities perspective and commandeering the ‘action/adventure’ genre, homeless youth are asking California audiences, and themselves, to honor aspects of their experience that are powerful and resourceful.

Because Digital Dove works expressly with homeless youth who are staying at Covenant House California, the program has ready access to storytellers for this project. Covenant House is a comprehensive shelter which means that young people stay for extended periods of time (up to two years), giving Digital Dove has the ability to hold classes of 6-10 weeks long throughout the year and involve a consistent group of students. This project would be produced within the framework of a ten week class entitled “Journeys to and within California” and residents would participate based on their interest in the project and the permission of their case manager. As part of the class, students will be asked to recruit additional storytellers, their peers, whose stories they may already know and who live either at the shelter, on the streets, or in the community. Covenant House California ensures that all classes are monitored by residential staff and that both the instructor and students are in a safe environment.

The primary humanities expert, Jeffery Clapp of UC Irvine, will contribute his expertise to three phases of the project. He will assist in curriculum development and furnish the instructor with a filmography, spanning various eras, that fit within the 'go west' narrative tradition - such as "The Adventures of Huck Finn" (1993), "The Grapes of Wrath" (1940), "Easy Rider" (1969), and Lords of Dogtown (2005). In addition, he will teach a class on the meaning of narrative traditions and characteristics specific to frontier and western stories. During project editing, he will provide feedback on the series' structure and content. Two additional humanities experts will also support the project. Cynthia Kanner, HBO post-production, will also provide structural and artistic feedback during the editing phase and Stephen Mancari, of Covenant House California, will advise the Digital Dove instructor on how to approach storytelling sensitively given the likelihood that many of the storytellers will have experienced some degree of trauma during their lives or journeys.

### **Project Activities and Programming Plans:**

#### ***Program Plan***

Over the course of six months, Digital Dove will produce a multi-part web series on youth journeys to and within California, to culminate in two community screening/discussions and an online campaign. In early March 2012, the instructor will collaborate with the humanities experts to develop a curriculum for a 10-week Digital Dove class to begin in April, with the purpose of collecting stories of youth journeys. As with most Digital Dove curricula, half of the class will be devoted to teaching technical skills such as camera, sound, and interviewing technique so that the students take part in the collection of each other's stories. The second component of the curriculum will be creation of a humanities backbone: students will learn key aspects of the go west narrative tradition – via film screenings, instruction, and discussion - and be asked to collect stories from each other with that tradition in mind.

The class will begin in early April and run until mid-June. Ten-week classes generally attract between eight and twelve participants, and include five additional storytellers. Students will be critical to recruitment of storytellers – many will tell their own stories, but they will also become journalists themselves, asking their peers from the shelter and the street to share their stories as well. The Digital Dove instructor and program volunteers from the film industry will assist in story collection, overseeing the use of the program's Canon HDV cameras, professional microphones, and donated lighting setups. Shoots will take place at Covenant House in an improvised studio, and also at locations around Los Angeles that are pivotal or meaningful to the storytellers.

By week six of the class, footage collection will be complete and students will begin the editing process using Final Cut Pro video editing software and seven iMac computers. Week 6-10 will involve the students assessing the footage and making decisions about content and structure – what stories to include and where to put them. The humanities experts will also give feedback about structure and content, especially as it pertains to the adventure genre and 'go west' narrative traditions. By the class's end, the series will be

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roughly assembled. At that point, two or three students, the humanities experts, and the instructor will form an editorial committee that will oversee completion of the series. Dion Riley, a graduate of Digital Dove now working as a film editor, will be brought on as series editor (if he is available) to create two finalized versions of the project— one for screenings and one for the web.

In August, Digital Dove will team up with Covenant House California and HBO's west coast offices to hold two public screenings and discussions forums. Covenant House California will use its community ties to bring together youth from other organizations and area high schools to the screening - with the goal of bringing together 120 young people (Covenant House's capacity) to an expressly youth screening. Digital Dove students will present their work and a panel consisting of students and the humanities experts will lead a discussion on the project's purpose and outcome, and students will engage with other young people who are navigating young adulthood in California. At the end of August, HBO will host a second screening with professional filmmakers and the general public, where students will have the opportunity to hear how their stories impact other storytellers and people from outside their immediate community - especially because the project challenges audience expectations. The HBO panel will consist of a guest documentary filmmaker, a humanities expert, and all of the students involved in the project. HBO, Digital Dove and Covenant House will participate in an outreach effort to draw the general public to the screening.

After two public screenings, the editorial panel will re-convene to make final editing decisions for the web series, based on audience feedback. The web series will launch at the mid-September on Digital Dove's website, with links on Covenant House, HBO, and Time Warner's Facebook pages and additional funder's websites. There will be a campaign on the part of all three organizations to circulate the series to all partner and community organizations, LA County schools, and Covenant House International affiliates. Additionally, the students themselves will be publicize the link to their peers. The Digital Dove website will have a comment area for series feedback.

***Target Participants and Audience***

The target participants for this project are Los Angeles' homeless youth population, between the ages of 18 and 23. Given Digital Dove's affiliation with Covenant House California, most participants will reside at the shelter, at least for the duration of this project. Most young people end up on the streets through no fault of their own; many have emancipated from the foster care system or escaped a home life of neglect, physical abuse, and/or sexual abuse and exploitation. Approximately 1,000 youth emancipate from the Los Angeles foster care system each year and the *Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services* estimates that nearly 50% will be homeless within six months. Young people face particular challenges at the age of 18; they are too old for foster care, yet too young for the downtown adult missions. Covenant House residents in Los Angeles are roughly comprised of African Americans (38%), Latinos (32%), Caucasians (23%), Asian-Pacific Islanders (2%) and "other" (5%); males (65%), females (35%); 18% of clients served are gay/bisexual/transgender or questioning. Clients enter Covenant House California's services at an average of 18.5 years of age.

The target audience for this project spans a number of communities. Because the project deliberately approaches youth homelessness from an unconventional angle, with a focus on resiliency, travel, and accomplishment, it is not a consciousness-raising effort, per se, but an investigation into what young people find as they navigate California. However, Digital Dove believes that a widening of the discourse will also make for powerful testimonials in addition to bringing audiences stories of geography and subculture. Homeless youth, high school students, and at-risk communities may be more responsive to storytelling that honors certain experiences and builds self-esteem. Thus Digital Dove is making an effort to engage younger audiences with these stories. Similarly, the general public and other storytellers may feel that these young people's lives becomes more comprehensible and accessible with an expansive treatment of the issue. Putting the focus on California, subculture and terrain engages each of these audiences on levels that belie expectation and create new possibilities for discussion and understanding.

### **Project Evaluation and Documentation:**

The goals for the "Youth Journeys" web series is the creation of a series of texts that deepen the audience's understanding of what it is to navigate California institutions, cities, landscapes, and subcultures as a young adult who is on their own. Additionally, it seeks to create a sense of context, confidence and connection among the storytellers themselves. The success of the project will be evaluated by: 1. Attendance and quality of discussion at the two screening panels 2. The web series' reach, as defined by number of website hits and additional metrics - such as time spent on the site (partner organizations will share their metrics, as well) 3. The feedback in the comments portion of the site 3. the degree that students engage with the topic – as measured by attendance in classes and at screening panels, engagement with the editorial board, and direct feedback.

Additionally, the project will be documented in two ways: 1. Classes taught by the humanities expert will be recorded via video camera as well as both public screenings and excerpts will be uploaded to the Digital Dove and partner websites 2. Raw footage for this project will be kept in the Digital Dove archives, and class documentation (attendance records, student information, curriculum) will be kept by both Digital Dove and Covenant House California.

### **Timeline** (maximum length: one to two pages)

<b>Time Period</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Who is Responsible</b>
March 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>o Primary humanities advisor researches filmography, discussion points for class</li><li>o Curriculum development</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>o Primary humanities advisor</li><li>o Program manager, and humanities advisors</li></ul>
April 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>o 10 week Digital Dove class entitled "Journeys to and within California" commences</li><li>o Storytellers identified</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>o Program manager, students, additional storytellers, film industry volunteers, and primary</li></ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Students trained on camera, mics, lights and interview technique</li> <li>○ Students prepare interview questions</li> </ul>	humanities expert
May 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Journeys to and within California” continues</li> <li>○ Storytellers recorded</li> <li>○ Footage digitized and organized</li> <li>○ Students learn Final Cut Pro editing software</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Program manager, students, additional storytellers, film industry volunteers, and primary humanities expert</li> </ul>
June 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Journeys to and within California” continues until mid-month</li> <li>○ Footage arranged into assembly cut</li> <li>○ Editorial committee assembled</li> <li>○ Editor begins rough cut</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Program manager, students, film industry volunteers, and humanities experts</li> <li>○ Program manager, students, and humanities experts</li> <li>○ Editor</li> </ul>
July 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Editor works on fine and final cut of web series</li> <li>○ Planning begins for August screenings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Editor, Editorial committee</li> <li>○ Program Manager, HBO, and Covenant House CA</li> </ul>
August 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Screening at Covenant House CA</li> <li>○ Screening at HBO</li> <li>○ Finalize cut for online launch based on audience feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Students, program manager, storytellers, community partners, humanities experts, Covenant House CA, youth audience</li> <li>○ Students, program manager, filmmaker guest panelist, humanities experts, HBO, general public</li> <li>○ Editor, editorial committee</li> </ul>
Sept 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Web series launches online at the Digital Dove website with partner links</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Program manager, HBO, Covenant House</li> </ul>

### Work Sample

The Digital Dove work sample can be found on the main page of the Digital Dove website, at the following location:

<http://www.digidove.org>

Entitled the “Leaving Homelessness”, this web series is a collection of stories from formerly homeless youth who found ways of out homelessness – and how they did it. It

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was produced by Digital Dove students and the current program manager, Laura Guichard, using the same methodology as is outlined in this proposal, albeit without the humanities framework. The series is designed to be updated with additional segments (to maintain interest), but currently runs 14 minutes and includes four segments: 1. Becoming Homeless 2. The Streets 3. Turning Points 4. Behind The Scenes. To view segments 2-4, scroll through the right-hand window entitled "More from this Project". This project was completed in September 2011, and will be updated with a fifth segment entitled "Shelter Living" in December 2011 and a sixth segment in early 2012.