

Hot Off The Press

THE LIVING NEWS: SHELTER—where the academy meets the streets.

BY LISA DIFRANZA

Students arrive at Columbia College Chicago excited to commit to their majors, to proudly name themselves filmmakers, dancers, musicians, poets. The First-year Seminar (FYS), the foundational course of the LAS Core Curriculum, provides all students with a strong, interdisciplinary educational experience as they begin that commitment.

For me, as an artist and instructor of FYS, the seminar serves as a clarion reminder that although disciplinary identities are encouraged by the academy, real life is expansive and integrated. During each class session, we come to the table, reach across it, and stretch beyond the limits of our academic borders to question, explore, and communicate from as many different angles as possible. FYS challenges us to walk in each other's shoes.

This is not an abstract academic experiment or a feel-good exercise. It is a rigorous, compassionate, adventurous approach that pushes us all to do better, more meaningful work. It's the same perspective that emboldened me to create—and to continue creating—THE LIVING NEWS: SHELTER, a journalistic theatre project.

Recently, this work has expanded to engage Columbia College Chicago students as writers and performers, to provide research opportunities through the undergraduate Mentorship Research Initiative (the URMI), and last winter, it expanded further into a J-Session course where students researched and built their own living newspapers.

In 2010, I began volunteering with Chicago HOPES, tutoring school children at Cornerstone Community Outreach, a homeless shelter in Chicago's uptown neighborhood. When homework was finished we made art. Kids drew life maps and exuberantly told stories in words and pictures. I listened and learned as bits and pieces of the circumstances that led them to become part of a growing national epidemic of family homelessness emerged, each child's story particular and different from the next. I knew then that these voices had to be heard.



Around the same time, with funds from a Columbia College Chicago Faculty Development Grant, I began investigating Depression-era Living newspapers. Sponsored by the Works Projects Administration of the 1930s, The Federal Theatre Project assembled teams of unemployed theatre artists and journalists to address issues of the day by constructing multimedia theatre pieces that traveled throughout the country, changing as the news unfolded. Living newspapers developed communally with a bold, analytical, agitprop style influenced by the contemporary work of Bertolt Brecht.

In retrospect, the driving question seems inevitable: What would a twenty-first century living newspaper about homelessness look like? Once it was articulated, there was no stopping THE LIVING NEWS: SHELTER from coming into being.

Reaching toward something I couldn't see but certainly felt, I slapped posters up at the Cornerstone Community Outreach homeless shelter and began recording interviews. One day my phone rang. "I'm so interested in what you're doing," a man said. Richard had no home but told me he had "so much to give," and he spoke the with an urgency that filled me with a sense of responsibility. Another day, when I held a tape recorder, and while a young homeless mother tearfully recounted her own childhood "in the system," the abstract concept of the cycle of poverty came alive for me in her determination to bust out of it.

I soon found myself in writing roundtables mirroring the Living newspapers of the '30s. two Columbia students (former students from my FYS class) worked alongside reporters from the Chicago Tribune and RedEye. We immersed ourselves in taped interviews, news stories, and research, and almost drowned trying to decipher the messy tangle of social causes that lead to homelessness. Month by month we wrestled inside questions, knocked out scenes, and found a play structure. Soon our team grew to include Chicago-area actors and designers, faculty members at the college, more Columbia students (one of whom completed an URMI project), and staff and residents from Cornerstone. Every voice contributed to a raggedy, powerful first draft of THE LIVING NEWS: SHELTER staged in raw, preliminary public readings last fall.



Devising a brand new play that fuses theatre, journalism, civic commitment and scholarship—creating it entirely from scratch with a collaborative team—is a scrappy, unwieldy, and necessarily unpredictable process, unbound by disciplines, class roles, or assumptions. A professional journalist is pressed between fact and feeling as she writes a theatrical scene. A homeless woman squints into the spotlight. An actor struggles with journalistic ethics as he reveals character. A social worker witnesses her personal story in a performance.

The expanding web of people across Chicago invested in THE LIVING NEWS: SHELTER is bound together by the trust, struggle, and joy that comes from creative collaboration. Our work echoes the process and energy of the FYS classroom, where passions fire high as we dare to walk in each other's shoes.

Yes, toes get stepped on, but we press on, boldly, in good faith, reaching across all kinds of boundaries to search for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of life's complexities.

Lisa DiFranza is a theatre director and Senior Lecturer in the First-Year Seminar program at Columbia College Chicago. She holds an MA in Theology and Arts. To contact DiFranza, see clips from readings of THE LIVING NEWS: SHELTER, and get news about the next stages of the project's development, visit lisadifranza.com. Photos above by Photo by Kris Brailey, who is a lecturer in the First-Year Seminar program.