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Chapter 3-1

Throwing Away the Syllabus

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A haunting quiet filled the classroom on a Wednesday afternoon at Robert Morris College, just outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as we waited to begin our Television Production II class. I remember sitting in my chair along with my classmates and feeling uneasy. Our professor, Dr. James Seguin, walked into the classroom in that uncomfortable stillness. He, too, seemed unsettled. But he put down his folders and books, calmly moved the trash can from the corner of the room, and placed it in front of us. "I want you to put your syllabus in here," he instructed as he pointed to the bin.

It was September 12, 2001. We did not know it then, but that simple moment of walking to the front of the room and dropping a packet of paper in the trash can began an experience that changed many lives. That experience affected not only those of us in the classroom that day but many other college students, faculty, and alums, all thanks to Dr. Seguin's leadership and courage. Domenic Burello, a recent graduate of Robert Morris College and working as an assistant in the school's Academic Media Center at that time, revealed to me years later that he remembers that day vividly. "[Dr. Seguin] pulls me aside and said, 'I need your help. The world changed, and I can't just sit here. I don't know yet, but we have to do something,'" Burello wrote. "We walked into the class and…out came the trash can! What an amazing thing to be part of" (Burello, 2023).

Dr. Seguin instructed us to split into small teams, grab cameras, and disperse to talk to people about the previous day's events. My team of four left campus—without permission, I might add—and drove to a nearby blood bank, where the line of people waiting to donate reached into the parking lot. There, we met a man who told us a chilling story as he fought back tears:

> "At 9 o'clock yesterday morning, I was telecommuting to the 67th floor of the World Trade Center, working for a brokerage firm headquartered there. Half an hour later, I had no client" (Robert Morris University Documentary Center, 2008).

When we returned that footage to the edit bays for review, Dr. Seguin was shaken yet determined. He told us that this was what our class would do that semester. We would talk to everyday people and capture their thoughts, feelings, and reactions for historical records. Immediately, we returned to the classroom; Dr. Seguin started putting a plan together on the whiteboard. Who could go to Washington, D.C., on Saturday? And that is how, four days later, I found myself interviewing tourists at the gates of the White House, standing in stunned silence in a parking lot overlooking the Pentagon, and speaking what would eventually become the opening words of our documentary while walking down the steps of the U.S. Capitol: "September 11, 2001, was a day that will live in infamy."

From there, the rest of the semester was a whirlwind of scheduling trips and shoots and editing into the early morning hours. We traveled to Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and New York City, the sites of the other plane crashes. We talked to students on campus, senior citizens at a local bingo hall, and musicians participating in a benefit concert. The result of our work would be a 45-minute documentary titled *America Talks*, released in January 2002. It won awards, received national attention, and sparked the creation of a center for documentary study at Robert Morris University. None of it would have happened without Dr. Seguin's willingness to trust his instincts and throw away his plans for the semester. As time passes—and now as an instructor myself more than 20 years later—I am even more appreciative of Dr. Seguin's teaching and leadership that made this life-changing experience possible.

First, Dr. Seguin showed his vulnerability by asking us to discard our syllabi. He was equally as confused and shaken as the rest of us by the situation we found ourselves in. But that simple act did something quite profound—it flattened the traditional hierarchical structure of the classroom. He was no longer the professor, nor we were the students. We were a team, learning together and collaborating to solve a problem. His demeanor carried throughout the entire project, as Dr. Seguin often stayed late with us as we edited, pitching money into the "pizza pool" so that we could order food. We had many deep conversations as we tried to structure the narrative and flow of our interviews, attempting to craft a story out of the words we had captured. He did not instruct us to create this documentary and then leave us to assemble it ourselves. He was in the trenches with us every step of the way. We spent so much time together that he told us to stop calling him Dr. Seguin because it felt too formal. We could not bring ourselves to call him by his first name, so we affectionately nicknamed him "Gwinney," a name he still embraces. We were all on the same team.

Next—and this was something I did not realize until many years later—Dr. Seguin offered a safe place for all of us to process our feelings. Working on a documentary about a traumatic subject can challenge a person's mental well-being. To hear the tragic stories, witness the devastation, and watch the horrific footage over and over again is emotionally exhausting and draining. So, when we needed silence, Dr. Seguin offered us that space. When we needed to laugh at an inappropriate time, he showed us grace and allowed us to do so. He laughed at himself when we got dreadfully lost in Washington, D.C., and laughed at us as we sang "Row, Row, Row Your

Boat" while waiting for lighting to be adjusted during a studio shoot. He often joked our documentary needed a companion satire short film created using our outtakes and bloopers from our creation process. Those moments of levity and space made creating the documentary an enjoyable experience despite the challenging subject matter. I did not understand that then, but I now admire and appreciate his leadership.

Finally, Dr. Seguin leveraged his personal and professional connections to enrich our experience. When we needed professional assistance in our editing, he invited former colleagues to help us. When we traveled to New York City, we stayed with members of his extended family, so we did not have to pay to stay in a hotel. Because he had a connection with a high-ranking official in the New York City Department of Transportation, we had the stirring experience of receiving an escorted tour through Ground Zero, which, while we were not allowed to record, was one of the episodes I remember most vividly to this day. Dr. Seguin was not afraid to share his deep wealth of connections with us, and we all benefited from his generosity.

After we completed the documentary over the semester break, we found ourselves in January 2002—an entirely different semester at the newly renamed Robert Morris University— on a crazy media and publicity tour. We screened the documentary more times than I can remember, including an incredibly moving evening in Shanksville I will never forget. We were overwhelmed with newspaper and television interviews, and Dr. Seguin and I had the opportunity to return to New York that month to appear on the *CBS Saturday Early Show*. A new semester had begun; we were all juggling new schedules and unexpected demands, but Dr. Seguin again was unwavering. He was with us every step of the way, happy to take a backseat and let his students take their moments in the spotlight while coaching us in media training.

While those of us who worked on the project had a sense of the impact it was going to have, I do not think any of us grasped the effect it had on Dr. Seguin himself until well after the fact. "Creating *America Talks* was a life-altering experience for both my students and me," Dr. Seguin wrote in a press release celebrating the documentary's fifth anniversary in 2006. "We jumped headfirst into the project in an attempt to create something positive from a devastating event. I don't think any of the students will ever forget their involvement with it" (Robert Morris University, 2006).

He was right. We have not. Every year, on September 11, many of us who participated in the project send notes to each other via social media to check in and remember. Dr. Seguin created so much more than a typical classroom experience. Those lucky enough to be a part of the creative process became a family, which we remain even to this day.

Shortly after my experience in this project, I decided I wanted to become a professor someday. I earned my master's degree (also from Robert Morris University) on May 9, 2009; during the same ceremony, the university awarded Professor Emeritus status to Dr. Seguin. It was not a literal passing of the mantle. Still, Dr. Seguin's leadership in the *America Talks* project is now the foundation of my own teaching philosophy statement:

"It was pretty clear to me even back then: When I became a professor, I wanted to teach from the same heart as Dr. Seguin and have the courage to throw away the syllabus when necessary" (Fox, 2023).

Dr. Seguin could have made the safe choice as he walked into the classroom on that fateful Wednesday afternoon. He could have stuck with the known quantity, a familiar syllabus filled with projects he had designed months in advance. He could have simply ignored the uneasiness in the room that day and pressed on with the day's scheduled agenda. Instead, he showed us how to lead and teach with vulnerability and courage. He chose the path of uncertainty, listening to his internal need to "do something." In the process, he taught us how to respond to uncertain times with a sense of resolve. Because of these things, Dr. Seguin will always be my hero and mentor. I have not yet had my opportunity to throw away a syllabus, but if and when I do, even in my fear, I will smile a knowing smile as I reach for a trash can of my own and think about the person who inspired me to take the uncharted path: *Thanks, Gwinney. I could not do this without you.*

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