

# First Flame: An Interview with the Creators

Marley DeRosia

Real World Geneseo is a class in which participating students engage and challenge each other and themselves to explore issues related to social justice and privilege. Consisting of an intensive retreat and weekly academic seminars, one of the primary goals of the class is to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become effective advocates for inclusivity. Based on their experiences in Real World Geneseo 2016, a group of six students worked with a number of collaborators to craft a spoken word performance (poetic verse designed to be read aloud) titled *First Flame*.

The six students behind *First Flame* were Nana Boakye, Elizabeth Boateng, Seung Kim, Jenny Sou-dachanh, Skyler Susnick, and Jawad (Momo) Tazari. The stories they told in their performance dealt with personal experiences with deeply-rooted societal expectations—from stereotypes that pigeonhole entire groups of people, to expectations of behavior based simply on appearance, to hope that something will change. Through their work, this diverse group of

students show the courage to keep moving forward in a world that tries to hold them back. In *First Flame*, they let you know exactly who they are, what they think, and what they have been through.

The students worked with guest artist Mariposa Fernandez during a weekend retreat to create and hone a script for their eventual spoken word performance. The performance was directed by Dr. Mark Broomfield of the Department of Theatre and Dance, with accompanying music composed by Professor Glenn McClure.

I took the time to interview some of the individuals involved in the creation of *First Flame*, including Dr. Broomfield on his direction of the experience, Professor McClure on his experience writing the score, and the students who put their hearts on the line to write this piece. Through my questions, I hoped to unravel some of the motivations behind each individual's participation and shine a light on how one's experiences can be made into art.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. MARK BROOMFIELD, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF DANCE STUDIES

Sitting down and meeting with Dr. Broomfield, an interdisciplinary dancer with a passion for diversity, offered a fresh, wholesome take on what Real World Geneseo can do for students attending SUNY Geneseo. The 2016-2017 school year marks his fifth year at Geneseo, though this was only his first time leading Real World Geneseo. Through his work with the students and his interest in the project, Dr. Broomfield was able to support his students as they honed personal pieces and created a piece of art.

### What made you want to get involved with this project?

*Broomfield:* I was an observer at the previous year's Real World Geneseo through their extreme learning program. This time marks my second time work-

ing with them but I was an observer the first time. I did participate, but I didn't want to fully immerse myself in order to get a sense for what the program was doing. The second year I fully immersed myself and facilitated; I worked with a lot of great people, Fatima Rodriguez Johnson (Assistant Dean of Students, Multicultural Programs & Service), Susan Norman (Director of the Xerox Center), and Glenn McClure (Professor of English). Even collaborating with the English department and Celia Easton (Dean of Academic Planning and Advising and Professor Of English) made it quite extensive in interdisciplinary work. They [Susan and Fatima] spear-headed the project and I was able to see the full scope of what the program does during the intensive weekend retreat the students went on.



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The diversity of the program drew me in: it's rich, it's so rich. That's what attracted me to it too. You can see in Geneseo, an institution with thousands of people, that programs like this have an impact, particularly in those students' lives. Bringing the guest artist in was new and we thought it would be a great fit. I wanted to work with Mariposa before and this just felt like a great way to also build on what the dance department does; the spoken word didn't adhere to dance as we typically know of dance performance and I'm all about open access. Everybody can write and tell their story. That, in terms of a threshold to the stage, you couldn't ask for anything more. We wanted students from diverse backgrounds to offer their perspectives that wouldn't normally be on that stage.

### **What's your take on Real World Geneseo?**

*Broomfield:* It's quite powerful. It's called an "extreme learning course" and I think it does great work. I think all students should go through it. It's limited to about thirty students, but all students should go through it. With all the issues we're thinking about currently, nationwide, issues of diversity, inclusivity, there's no question that this should be a class that all students should have access to. The testimonies of student participants always discuss it as transformational; they're not the same after. It's just doing such important work. The makeup of the students is mostly diverse; I think so much of the young generation today relies on content, your education, but no one is teaching you how to live. No one is teaching you how to relate to other people. You can't have assumptions about the way we relate to other people. We come from various backgrounds of all kinds, and that's what is revealed in the retreat: the diversity and their perspectives. If you don't have a space to facilitate inside classes that don't coincide with real issues happening outside, they still impact what goes on inside the class. Part of the reason students want to participate is so they have a space to talk about these issues, because, by and large, they don't have a space to do that on campus that affirms where they come from or their marginalization: race, sexuality, gender identity, whether or not you're an immigrant—we have many students who go through many experiences that the program works with.

### **What was the structure of the course for students involved?**

*Broomfield:* Six students were involved with the final performance. The max number of students in the course was thirty. It was focused around students that showed an interest and there were two different tracks the course could take: one was the performance track or they could take the course without the performance component, where they had to do service instead. That weekend that Mariposa was here was very intense and we created the performance literally from scratch. It wouldn't have existed without Mariposa. She created the environment for all the students' experiences to emerge the way that they did; writing autobiographically through writing prompts, we created a script in the week following the retreat as the students worked directly with Mariposa. Getting feedback from her and their peers was courageous.

### **Did you have any expectations going into the project?**

*Broomfield:* I had no expectations. I didn't even know who I'd be working with. I had a vision of what I wanted to accomplish, but I wanted to see where the project could go. I didn't know what we were going to do. That's what creativity is, that's what theatre is. You get into an empty studio and you create, you play, you make something happen out of nothing. They had to trust the director and trust the guest artist but many students wanted to see where this project would take them and it was a risk. They weren't familiar and they were worried but when the performance occurred, the students were transformed. It was a testament to their courage too, to go on stage and perform. There were quite a few vulnerable stories. Because of the topics—it wasn't wildly controversial—but it was definitely for an adult audience, we were dealing with adult material. We got feedback that people loved it, but dance and performance come in many forms. People asked, "Why is there spoken word in a dance performance?" but it's about a destroying the barrier to access for students that don't normally have the opportunity to go on-stage. They were completely welcomed by the dance students and it was a mutually inspirational process between the speakers and the dancers. That's what interdisciplinary work does. Everybody is affected by

doing the work, and to witness that was like, “Wow.” For myself certainly, it was great. To see where the students started, to witness the process and later, the reward, it was affirming.

**Would you like to lead a class like this again?**

*Broomfield:* We should clearly do more of this. I would love to lead a class like this again. It’s like Safe Zone training, everyone should experience it. You can be exposed to different perspectives and you learn to question assumptions you may have about other people and yourself. It’s an important contribution on campus with diversity being such a critical component at this time nationally. It’s even more important for the institution to continue to show their support and bring awareness to issues people might not be aware of.

**What other GREAT Day projects have you done in the past?**

*Broomfield:* It’s usually an outgrowth of what the students are doing in class. Last year, we did dance eth-

nographies and one group presented on Kaplan’s tai chi class, and they put so much work into it, we had to put it in GREAT Day. In the fall, classes consist of student-choreographed works and in the spring, it’s faculty and guest artists, so it’s a mix of the outgrowth of what our students do. GREAT Day is a chance for students to present their work, but last year, I wanted the students to interpret faculty’s work. They might have been dancing to someone else’s work, but it was about the process: what they learned even though they didn’t make it. It’s a wonderful opportunity to have the students interpret. Just like you read someone else’s work and interpret it and write an essay to present to the audience, we’re doing the same thing, we’re just performing it. It’s requiring them to think in a different way even though it took them time to see that distinction; that it’s still about you, not about the faculty. People are coming to see you and what you do, how you interpret it. You can speak about the history, the culture, or whatever in the process that you were learning it.

This year, I’m creating a choreographic duet for the dance concert—a spiritual—and I think it’s an excellent opportunity for students to talk about the process and what interpretation of a work needs.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH GLENN McCLURE, ADJUNCT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

Glenn McClure’s expertise and professionalism shined through as I interviewed him regarding his experience with *First Flame* and past GREAT Days. Providing a wonderful score that dipped, moved, and danced through the performance along with the stories of the actors, Professor McClure’s pride for his college and the students involved resonated during the interview.

**How did you get involved with this class’s performance?**

*McClure:* Dr. Broomfield attended one of my presentations and later asked me if I was interested in working with *First Flame*. After he described a multidisciplinary, collaborative, artistic exploration of big issues affecting Geneseo students, it was easy to say “yes.”

**How did you choose the music that would be utilized in the performance?**

*McClure:* My musical contribution was created with the same process as the script and dance. I participated in early visioning sessions surrounding student writing pieces. I responded to the spoken word with music, but like any other creative process, the first draft wasn’t very good. As the writing and dance evolved, so did my musical responses. This was not a top-down process. It was a lateral collaboration with the students, professors, and guest artists.

**What kind of collaborations have you done within SUNY Geneseo in the past?**

*McClure:* I have a long history with Geneseo. As an undergraduate, I played in the String Band, Jazz Ensemble, Wind Ensemble, and Chamber Singers. I

also played both on and off stage in several musical theater productions. Over the years, my collaborative work with the college has stretched beyond pure artistic projects to include helping develop study abroad experiences in Ghana and Nicaragua, philanthropic work for a variety of regional charities, work with the migrant center, writing grants with the Sponsored Research Office, and more. I am happy to be part of the Geneseo community in a variety of capacities.

**What are some of your favorite memories from past GREAT Days?**

*McClure:* The key note address by my friend and colleague, Dava Sobel, was a highlight, but as a professor, I am always partial to the presentations of my students. These have ranged from health initiatives in rural Nicaragua to teaching Humanities with great music. GREAT Day is one of the best ideas we have ever had. It is so refreshing to hand the college over to the students for a day, while the professors sit, listen, and learn.

**Professor McClure closed the interview with the following statement:**

SUNY Geneseo's reputation as a top-notch liberal arts college shines through in projects like *First Flame*. This may not be the thing that ends up in our college marketing materials. It may not be the first thing that

president mentions in state wide forums, but it does represent the best of what we try to do here. *First Flame* pushed students and professors to ask deep, difficult questions about ourselves and our community. It was joyously self-critical, functioning under the assumption that a challenge to our assumptions is an opportunity to understand more deeply what we really believe. The performance, while guided by faculty and our guest artist, was driven by the participating students. Their exploration of racism, sexism, miscommunication, resilience, perseverance, justice, and hope was at the same time beautiful and unsettling. They did not create artwork that preached a point of view. They smashed stereotypes with personal narratives that demanded their audience's attention (and mine as their composer). Their work confronted our culture's increasing acceptance of the notion that unfiltered thought is somehow more authentic than deep, careful, thoughtful, and patient artistic creation. These students did more than "like" an unsubstantiated Facebook post or "unfriend" someone who challenges their assumptions. They followed the long, uncertain path necessary to creating art that matters today and endures for years to come. This is the kind of art that is truly authentic and subscribes to no cliché or easy slogan or ideology. They did the stuff that goes way beyond our test scores, our awards, or our college rankings. These students are the real deal. I was proud to be with them on a small part of their journey.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH THE STUDENTS OF *FIRST FLAME*

**What inspired you to write this piece?**

*Elizabeth Boateng:* The inspiration came from a series of writing prompts that Mariposa gave us. One prompt included writing three words that described us, then having one minute of free writing to expand on the prompt. We then worked together to edit our writing into this final piece.

*Jenny Soudachanh:* There were several different aspects of the piece that I had written on my own, but I also collaborated with my group members as well as Mariposa who tied our thoughts into one big piece. I drew my inspiration from the RWG7 [Real World Geneseo 7] retreat I attended. I thought about how society ignores many different -isms (racism, classism,

sexism, etc.) when it does not impact them directly. Another case is that it is easier to ignore differences and pretend they do not exist or are unaware of how they exist. I wanted to express that this isn't an issue that has been solved yet.

As I went through the retreat, I remembered my own upbringing in New York City: how segregated the city can be but also how accepting it may be. It was easier for me to relate with people who had been exposed to diversity because I had been through something similar. I had thought I knew everything there was to know about diversity but this retreat proved to me how wrong I was, how I had unconsciously participated in acting on stereotypes. I chose to speak about my own experiences because I wanted



to inform individuals of the subtle things that can be discriminatory as well as the big things; because continuous small jabs over a lifetime can hurt just as much, or even more, than one huge punch.

*Skyler Susnick:* I wanted to share my story. I wanted to expose people to a variety of stories that they may have not heard before.

**Obviously, this is a very personal piece: how did you feel expressing yourself in such an intimate way?**

*Elizabeth:* At first I was hesitant to be open and honest, especially with the writing prompts. But once I realized my words were important, and my voice would be heard, it was easier to share my intimate thoughts.

*Jenny:* It was completely intimate, horrifying, and vulnerable in every sense. There were many different aspects I felt that I had never fully expressed to others until I wrote it on paper and had to say it out loud. However, the group made it a safe space and Mariposa had encouraged this expression—to speak out because we all matter. It was validating.

*Skyler:* It was very nerve wracking. By expressing myself in such an intimate way, I felt very exposed. It was also very exciting and, in a way, liberating to be so open about personal things in such a public way.

**Did you expect to create something like this at the start of the class? How did you feel jumping into this project?**

*Elizabeth:* I had no idea that I would be performing or publishing my work at the beginning of class. I was under the impression that the performance would be choreographed and that the lines would just be fed to me. So, I was kind of blindly jumping into this project since this was the first time a project like this was done at SUNY Geneseo.

*Jenny:* I had not expected such an intimate piece, as our first couple of writing prompts did not go as in-depth as our final project. However, as we kept writing throughout the project, they became deeper, more intimate, and more revealing to each individual's feelings and psyche that we may not have known at first glance.

*Skyler:* I expected to create and perform a spoken word piece at the start of the class, but not quite like what we did. It really altered and exceeded the expectations I had at the beginning of the class. I felt excited and a little wary jumping into this project, not really knowing what to expect.

**Have you had any experience in theatre before? How did this affect the process of writing and performing the piece?**

*Elizabeth:* I've had experience with theater in high school performing small parts. It somewhat affected the process, but I wasn't consciously writing with audience entertainment in mind.

*Jenny:* I had experience in theatre in elementary school and middle school, however, I started to develop stage fright in middle school because of a mistake I made during a school play, thus I started to stay away from it. At Geneseo I worked as a TA for Johnnie Ferrell for four years in his technical theater class. I think that because I was already so familiar with the stage, this project wasn't as daunting of a task, but I was still nervous. Every night right before our performance, I would have to remind myself to breathe in deeply, to remember that if I could hold onto the emotions and my beliefs, then the words would always come to me.

I love to write, so it was wonderful for me to be able to express myself through this process. I enjoyed the self-expression on paper, how liberating it felt to write about topics that aren't the norm. However, sometimes during the performance, the writing is exaggerated. There's a visual aid of how the speaker is portraying their story. It was a little awkward when it wasn't my piece and I had to act in it; I always felt a little ridiculous at times when I had to exaggerate, but I knew it also had to happen to have an impact.

*Skyler:* I had done some improv in high school with a group that tackled the issues that teens face using a combination of humor and more serious conversations, which was definitely the lens through which I entered this project. I think it made me more comfortable performing and being so open with the people I worked with and our audience.

**Do you wish you did anything differently?**

*Elizabeth:* I wish I wrote about different experiences.

*Jenny:* I wish I had taken a more proactive role in making our performances more known.

*Skyler:* I don't think I would do anything differently.

**How did working with Mariposa Fernandez aid the creative process? What was it like working with her?**

*Elizabeth:* As I stated earlier, Mariposa guided our writing with her prompts. Working with her was really amazing, she had the ability to spark a flame I didn't realize I had. Especially with prepping for the actual performance. She helped us gain confidence and stage presence.

*Jenny:* Mariposa is an inspiring individual who helped me find the confidence to express my voice. She encouraged us to express ourselves and validated our experiences. I felt empowered after our sessions together where I learned a lot about how to purposefully use my body to convey my emotions to others. She said that she wanted to hear more about our stories and that other people should know about our experiences.

*Skyler:* Working with Mariposa was instrumental to my creative process. She had many prompts to get us writing, and her encouragement gave me the confidence to write in ways I never would have been able to otherwise. Working with Mariposa was an incredible experience I feel very lucky to have had.

**How do you think people will feel reading this piece, or seeing it performed? What was the message you hoped to get across to the audience?**

*Elizabeth:* There wasn't an exact reaction I expected from the audience. The message I hoped to convey was that we can all relate to each other within our different life experiences.

*Jenny:* As diverse as Geneseo is, there are still cases of prejudice that exist though people may not realize it. Stereotypes, microaggressions, and biases still exist on campus and I believe many people sweep it under the rug. However, denying it is invalidating. I think if a person wants to truly be empathetic and really understand another's background and diversity, they have to sit in that discomfort and face it. So, granted, there were some nights where we were well-received by the audiences. During some performance nights, there were cheers, sassy positive comments, and applause. I remember strangers telling me that they enjoyed the performance, and that it was the most unique performance they'd ever seen. But other nights, it was quiet and we could see how uncomfortable the audience became. But they sat through it and watched it, and I hope they understood the message we were trying to send.

My own message aimed to target the micro-aggressions and biases I have faced in the past, including during the time I've spent at SUNY Geneseo. I am a mix of Laotian and Chinese, but I was born and raised in New York City. I've faced biases and stereotypes from my professors who assumed I was an international student, from those that assume I can speak for an entire culture when topics of race come up, and from other students who tell me that I "speak English very well." These small things can seem harmless and may have good intentions, but they can build and make a person feel unwanted—like a foreigner, like an "other." I wanted people to recognize these microaggressions and be conscious of it. I wanted to make a statement of awareness.

*Skyler:* To me, the purpose of the piece was to expose the audience to new and different identities and stories. I think people are all more alike than different but it can be very important and powerful to share life experiences that they may not have had. I know I loved hearing the stories of the other cast members and I hope the audience liked it as well. I hope they learned something from hearing our stories.