

An American Tale

11 students bus across the country to create an Internet political documentary.

By Erin Dionne

Eleven students. Four months. One bus. Sounds like "Road Rules" meets "Survivor," only instead of being in front of the cameras, these students are behind them. Most of the group is from Simon's Rock College (a small liberal arts school in Massachusetts), although other members attend Duke and the University of Chicago. Born of late-night chats about politics and the upcoming election, the group decided to take their conversation to the road.

Their adventure is called The American Story Project. Student volunteers are interviewing people in 32 communities across the country to find out what influences their political beliefs. The interviews will then appear on the group's web site, americanstory.org, and this winter the site will be redesigned so that users can access film footage, interview transcripts and still photos based on whatever topic interests them—from gun control to skateboarding laws.

"We're looking to make connections between private lives, community life and local and national issues. We ask people about their past, like where they grew up, and that leads into current events and politics."

The students are doing all the work for the project on the road: they have a network server hooked into the bus' generator, cellular modems in their laptops, and other volun-

teers waiting to receive documentary footage to upload onto the site.

A project this big requires two main things: organization and money. American Story has both. They've been planning their trip since February, and they have a lead car that precedes the bus by a day. The people in the lead car (they rotate) set up interviews and make hotel arrangements. The money—\$100,000 of it—comes from a combination of investors: some from Simon's Rock faculty members, some from grants and funds, and some comes from Eastman Kodak and Paul Newman's daughter, who heads up the Newman's Own foods branch. The bus is packed with Newman's Own snack foods—the group has already gone through 50 pounds of "Fig Newmans."

Their converted school bus is a mobile workstation. It has work tables and bench seats, bunk beds, coolers on rollers that

slide out from under seats, bikes under tarps, tables that convert to beds, and pieces of wire and electronic equipment everywhere.

Steamtunnels spoke to three of the project volunteers—pictured below—at their stop in Boston, the first leg of their journey.



From left: American Story Project volunteers Paige Jennings, Cheil Stefanski and Mark Liffiton.



Tom Webb

STS: Why put this project together?

ASP: We wanted to give people a platform that's not covered in the media, provide space for people to have a say without reducing it to sound bites.

STS: What do you hope to find out with the interviews?

ASP: Well, we have no set list of questions, but we do have a set interview style. We're looking to make connections between private lives, community life and local and national issues. We ask people about their past, like where they grew up, and that leads into current events and politics. We want to get a broad spectrum of ideas, not necessarily enter into a discussion about specific candidates.

STS: What's the response been like?

ASP: It's funny—some people think there's no connection [in their lives to politics]. Then you ask them about skateboarding, if they're into that, and where they can and can't skateboard. They see how politics affects their everyday life and community.

STS: How did you go about choosing what communities you were visiting?

ASP: We're trying to emphasize areas that aren't in the media and don't get as much exposure. For instance, San Francisco and San Jose are in the media, but Oakland doesn't get that much [media attention].

STS: What was the motivation for the interactive web site?

ASP: This whole thing is native to the Internet. It can't be done normally because it's a non-linear documentary. We wanted the users to be able to follow the lines of content that interest them on the site. And we want it to be a catalyst for communication—not issue politics. This is about lives, places and communities.

STS: What about the political apathy that's seemed to grip people lately?

ASP: We're obviously not apathetic. We're getting out there, trying to get into things. This whole project was born out of our frustrations with the political system. •