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# For What It's Worth: Uncovering the Hidden Value in Work

#### By Lara Lepionka

Ina sounded uncertain, but was willing to give me an interview before her shift started. I pulled into the parking lot of Miss Flo's diner to meet with Ina, a waitress for 37 years. I climbed into the booth with the red vinyl cushions and classic jukebox, ordered a coffee, readied my sound recorder and interview questions and awaited her arrival. I knew it was Ina the instant she came through the door because she walked into the place as if it were her own home. She sat down across from me and unfolded her story.

Ina's interview was part of "Hidden Value," a temporary public art project for Pulaski Park, in Northampton, Mass., commissioned by the Northampton Arts Council. My intention was to interview five individuals who represented a range of occupations to measure the real value of work in community life. I also wanted to ask these workers to define their own impact on others and the community and find out what actually happens because of an individual's effort. I hoped to create



Detail of stool from the installation "Hidden Value." Photo by Lara Lepionka. Click here for slideshow.

recognition that the subtle things people do in their work lives make a valuable contribution to the whole. These subtleties are the substance of our daily lives.

In addition to Ina the waitress, I interviewed four other residents of the Northampton area—a college professor, a trash collector, a public librarian and a grocery-store owner. I learned that the participants were not generally aware of their impacts on others through their work. As the librarian said, for example,

Just day-to-day I get caught up in the challenges of the moment, and when I was first approached to participate in this project I definitely thought, "Hmm, what can I offer? What can I talk about?" I know we're a service profession, and that we impact lives, but I don't often take the time to just look back and see my part in it. I'm a librarian whether I'm brushing my teeth or whether I'm here or at home cooking dinner. It's definitely part of who I am.

In addition to their narratives about their work, I administered surveys to attempt to quantify what the participants did and to enlighten them and their community by sharing these unseen facts. For example, in her 37 years as a waitress, Ina served an estimated 945,000 cups of coffee.

Through recycling, the trash collector single-handedly saved Go here for additional reading...

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Through recycling, the trash collector single-handedly saved approximately 149,760 cubic yards of space in the local landfill. These are the kinds of statistics you do not see in other media or when job performance is being evaluated.

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Armed with these data, I selected and transferred narratives and facts to objects emblematic of their work. I put Ina's story on diner barstool seats, placed in a row along a park path. Using vinyl lettering, I put the trash-collector's text on trashcan lids, grouping the trashcans on the lawn. A row of engraved desktops under the trees told the college professor's story. The grocer's text was printed onto vinyl and wound around the rollers of a grocer roller conveyor. A bookcase with faux books told the librarian's story on gold-stamped spines.

#### Forming the Question

The idea for this project came out of a conversation with a friend where we talked about our lives and how we had gotten to the point we are at today. Individuals who had helped us along the way or had impacted ours lives in a positive way, knowingly or not, punctuated our stories. These people were part of our everyday lives—family members, teachers, colleagues, friends—or people we had less intimate relationships with, such as the guy at the corner store where I buy my milk, the woman who helped me with my health-insurance application, the bus driver I see everyday. We realized that most of the people we mentioned had touched our lives through their work.

Our conversation led me to a series of questions and thoughts: How do you measure an individual's impact on a community or in society? What has worth? In our fame- and scandal-obsessed culture, everyday people continue to go about their lives, contributing to their communities in subtle and quiet ways through their work, civic engagement and family life. In many instances, these people may not consider the valuable contributions they are making, and the greater



Detail of trash can from the installation "Hidden Value." Photo by Lara Lepionka. Click here for slideshow.

society may not recognize or value these contributions either.

Our culture is equally obsessed with evaluation and assessment—annual work-performance assessments, product reviews, nonprofit program evaluations. These are our main tools for determining what has value, deciding how money should be spent, and where improvement is necessary. But what about under-valued measures of work success, such as personal satisfaction, interpersonal interaction and impact on others and on the environment? How could I adapt evaluation and assessment tools to get new definitions of achievement and success, and thus get closer to seeing a city's social capital through individuals?

# March-April 2006: Unexpected Answers

All of this looked good on paper, but now it was time to put the concept into action with real people, a real deadline, real money, etc. For me, there is something simultaneously thrilling and terrifying about going from the concept, so clearly outlined in a proposal, to putting it into action—for it to take shape based on variables not necessarily in my control, and knowing that ultimately, lack of control is what makes the work.

Selecting five participants presented a challenge because I was looking for a range of everyday

My interviews

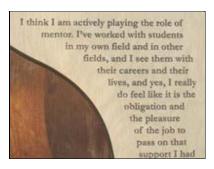
people, not local celebrities. The Northampton Arts Council helped me find interviewees based on time on the job, so I could gather long-term data. I conducted the interviews in Northampton over three days. I was amazed at how simple,

seemed to reflect the human search for meaning in everyday life.

innocuous questions, such as "How do you start your work day," quickly led to declarations of life purpose, deeply held beliefs, core values and unexpected overwhelming emotion. My interviews seemed to reflect the human search for meaning in everyday life. Here are some of the questions that proved most helpful in my interviews.

- · Why do you think you are attracted to the work you do?
- · Are you in this field by accident, as part of your career plan, or because of family tradition?
- · What do you think people who are not in your line of work think or believe about the work you do?
- If there were one thing you would want people to understand about the work you do, what would it be?
- · How much is your job a part of your life? Is work where you have your friends, where you pursue your interests?
- How do you personally assess your performance on the job?
- · Please tell me about a time when you knew you were having a positive impact on a customer / student / co-worker at work?

Unexpectedly, the interviews also created a snapshot of our moment in time. Peppering the interviews were contemporary issues concerning recycling and landfill use, big business pushing out local retailers, healthcare expenses preventing retirement and threatened democracy in our country. These issues were not the subject of the interviews, but emerged as the underlying framework in which our lives are taking place.



Detail of desktop from the installation "Hidden Value." Photo by Lara Lepionka. Click here for slideshow.

For me, the interview process was surprisingly intimate. The interviews left me exhilarated and drained all at once. The participants were so generous with themselves. Each time I interviewed someone, I felt like I had received that person's story as a gift.

Another gift: little did I know that during my three-day visit cellular division was underway, and soon I would feel the familiar signs of early pregnancy. This baby, my second, was going to be my companion throughout the project.

I asked the five participants to also give me a contact name and number of someone they believed they had affected through their work. The people I contacted reveled in sharing their stories. The grocer's contact reported,

The store is so much a part of my life in this community. I don't like to shop in the supermarket, and I know I pay a little bit more, but I don't have to fight the crowds. I run a business, too. We could go to one of the chain discount places to get our wine received that for our events and save money, but I want to support him. He's been good to us and very supportive. I feel like he's a friend. My

Each time I interviewed someone, I felt like I had person's story as

husband talks about the flavor of a store and how the flavor is so reflective of the owner-the way products are displayed, the items he chooses to sell, the people he hires, the local products he sells. He really thinks about the decisions he makes.

# May-June 2006: Tracking Tangents and Revelations

After the interview process I had the laborious task of going through hours of sound recordings and transcribing text—stopping, rewinding and playing back again. I was fascinated again to see the connections the participants were making from one thought to the next, and how different people approached the same questions in utterly different ways. I tracked tangents, followed winding stories to their ultimate message, and altered text to take it from the spoken word to the written word while still maintaining the voice and sentiment of the participant. Each participant in his or her own way seemed to reveal things to me and to themselves that they hadn't articulated in that way before.

I made difficult choices about what to include, and communicated with the participants to ensure I was using their words in the spirit in which they intended them. I chose and purchased objects for the installation, completed the participant surveys, laid out text, negotiated with vendors and completed producing the objects. My four-year-old daughter questioned the presence of the roller conveyor in our dining room, the trashcans filling our hallway, barstool cushions



Detail of conveyor from the installation "Hidden Value." Photo by Lara Lepionka. Click here for slideshow.

on every surface and desktops and faux books strewn on my studio floor.

At this point I was in the thick of my first trimester. The morning sickness was far worse than with my first child, but I kept going. I will spare you the details.

## July-August 2006: Monuments in the Park

Akin to going from proposal to action, is the act of taking the finished objects out of the U-Haul truck and installing them in the park. The installations did not necessarily stand out as "art" at first, but upon closer inspection people saw that each object had been transformed to illustrate an individual's impact on the community. Some of the participants came to the artist's talk, and I was gratified to see audience members ask them questions about their experience—what it was like when they first got the call to participate, what the interview experience was like and what they thought of the finished pieces. The participants took a real ownership of the final works, and were surprised themselves to see the facts that emerged and the narratives that were chosen.

When I was doing a tour in the park, my daughter was playing on the barstools going from stool to stool spinning each one. Each time she vacated a stool a local woman followed behind to read the text. When the woman got to the last stool she was elated to discover that she had figured out who the waitress was that was featured in the piece. The woman had come into the piece neutral and, through the process of spending time with the installation, had had a discovery.

Now I'm in the "glowing" stage—feeling good and showing. My husband and I start preparing our first-born for the new addition.

## September-October 2006: New Life for Hidden Value

The project had an unexpected further life. Because of the "Hidden

Value" project, I became the visiting artist for the Gates Expeditionary Learning School in Springfield, Mass. The faculty has developed a curriculum for the ninth graders that examines what jobs tell us about society. When one of the faculty members saw my installation, she saw that my project dovetailed with their curriculum. I worked with the students in a number of ways: slide presentations on "Hidden Value" and my work in general, presentations



Detail of book spines from the installation "Hidden Value." Photo by Lara Lepionka. Click here for slideshow.

on public art projects by other artists, skills for interviewing and working with participants to create public art, and skills for writing public art proposals. The students are creating public art projects based on interviews with workers in their community.

The "Hidden Value" installation was up from July to October. The pieces will not be displayed together again, but many of the pieces have found new homes. The conveyor belt and barstools went to the grocery-store owner—he is now using these as equipment in his grocery store and home. The trash collector now privately owns the trashcan lids. The bookcase had to be discarded after four months in the weather; and the desktops are on display at Smith College in their studio building.

I was too big by then to deinstall. The fabulous Northampton Arts Council staff and volunteers completed the work of deinstallation.

#### March 2007

Now, as I type this essay one-handed (with baby in arms), I'm reminded of the "everydayness" of our lives, and how within the necessary activities and routines of our everyday work there is richness and meaning to be found—and the awareness that we are all touching one another's lives through our work.

Lara Lepionka is an interdisciplinary, community-based artist living in Gloucester, Mass. She studied at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2000), The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (MFA, 1999) and Bard College (BA, 1994). She will be featured in the upcoming anthology "The Object of Labor: Critical Perspectives on Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production," published by MIT Press.

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