UNNATURAL CAUSES

THE FILM & DISCUSSION SERIES
CONSIDERING HOW SOCIAL FACTORS INFLUENCE OUR HEALTH

Program Partners

The Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia
Richard B. Russell Library
for Political Research and Studies

The Knight Chair in Health & Medical Journalism, Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication, UGA

Clarke County Health Department

University of Georgia Alumni Association

Athens-Clarke County Public Library

The University of Georgia:
College of Public Health
Biomedical & Health Sciences Institute
College of Family & Consumer Sciences
School of Social Work
Department of Geography

Athens Regional Medical Center
Introduction

In the fall of 2008, The Russell Library participated in a national initiative among presidential libraries and partners to offer a series of forums centered on the issues of health care, the 2008 issue selected by the National Issues Forums Institute. During this project, Russell Library staff members Jan Levinson and Jill Severn, with longtime associate Margaret Holt, conducted nine forums in cities across the state of Georgia, three focused on healthcare, employing the NIF issue guide, “Coping with the Rising Cost of Healthcare.” These wide ranging considerations of health and health care at these forums inspired the Russell Library team to develop a programming initiative to extend these discussions in the Athens area. After viewing Unnatural Causes, a documentary film suggested by Holt that explores health inequity in the United States as well as the social and economic factors that shape conditions such as diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and infant mortality and illness, Levinson proposed that the Russell Library develop a discussion series around screenings of the documentary. Severn concurred enthusiastically with Levinson’s proposal and asked her to lead the work in developing this exciting outreach program.

Assembling the Team

The major goal of this program series was to begin a community dialogue about health inequity, both at the University of Georgia and in the Athens community. At the outset, the Russell Library determined that the 2009 Unnatural Causes Film & Discussion Series should be a collaborative effort that capitalized on the diversity of academic departments at the University of Georgia and the numerous organizations in the surrounding community concerned with issues of health equity. Therefore, the Russell Library assembled a planning committee comprised of representatives from campus and community organizations with expertise and missions relevant to the project. The committee consisted of: Dr. Claude Burnett (Director, Northeast Georgia Health District), Dr. Margaret Holt (retired faculty, Department of Adult Education, UGA), Peter Hossler (graduate student, Department of Geography, UGA), Dr. Su-I Hou (College of Public Health), Sharon Gibson (Multicultural specialist, Cooperative Extension, College of Family & Consumer Sciences, UGA), Patricia Thomas (Grady College of Journalism, UGA), Sandra Yudilevich (graduate student, School of Social Work, UGA), and Dr. Claire Robb (College of Public Health, UGA).

Planning & Logistics

The planning committee convened for its first meeting on December 12, 2008. In the months that followed, the committee determined the format, participants, and logistics (time, place, dates, snacks) for the project. The group chose to offer 7 screenings each followed by lecture or moderated discussion with panelists and the audience.
participants. To mark the opening of the series, the group invited Dr. Camara Jones, Research Director on Social Determinants of Health and Equity at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to present a lecture in conjunction with the screening of “Episode 1: In Sickness and in Wealth.” The six subsequent programs paired the screenings with community and campus speakers whose professional interests and activities complemented the topics addressed. After these screenings, a skilled moderator collaborated with panelists to generate questions and dialogue with the audience. The end goal was to create a space where the audience could engage these challenging topics in an open forum of deliberation and begin to consider strategies to address these problems in their communities.

To attract an audience for the programs beyond the students, faculty, and staff at the University, the committee determined that five of the seven events would be hosted at the Athens-Clarke County Public Library – a place where community members would feel comfortable. The remaining two events would be hosted at the Paul D. Coverdell Center, home to the College of Public Health on the campus of the University of Georgia. All events were free and open to everyone. Further, the committee chose to offer healthy snacks – fruit and vegetable trays served with bottled water at each program to affirm the healthy choices advocated by the film.

The committee planned the event series to take place on Sunday afternoons, from 3:00-5:00 PM, kicking off on March 22 and concluding on May 10, 2009. With the exception of the Easter holiday, the series was continuous to maintain consistency and build a loyal audience.

Once the committee determined dates, times, and locations, Jan Levinson began to review possible panelists for each of the events. She and the committee selected all panelists by the end of January and issued invitations. The committee confirmed the participation of three individuals who appeared in episodes of the documentary, as well as one other out-of-town speaker; the remaining seventeen panelists were drawn from the local area. All served on the panels free of charge, save the cost of travel expenses for those individuals traveling from outside of Athens. Severn took on the responsibility of arranging moderators for each of the events. The final schedule appeared as follows:

**March 22, 2009**
**Episode 1: In Sickness and in Wealth**
Keynote Speaker: Dr. Camara Jones, Research Director on Social Determinants of Health and Equity, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

**March 29, 2009**
**Episode 2: When the Bough Breaks**
Panelists: Dr. Carol Hogue (Epidemiologist, Emory University), Dr. Fleda Mask Jackson (Atlanta Regional Health Forum), Dr. Maria Faase (Athens Regional Medical Center); Moderator: Jill Severn (Russell Library).
April 5, 2009
Episode 3: Becoming American

Panelists: Coti Perez-Espinoza (Positive Impact Atlanta), Sharon Gibson (Multi-cultural specialist, College of Family & Consumer Sciences and Cooperative Extension Services, UGA), Sister Margarita Martin (Oasis Católico Santa Rafaela); Moderator: Patricia Thomas (Grady College of Journalism, UGA).

April 19, 2009
Episode 4: Bad Sugar

Panelists: Connie Crawley (College of Family and Consumer Sciences, UGA), Dr. Claude Burnett (District Health Director, Northeast Health District), Dr. Alex Anderson (College of Family and Consumer Sciences, UGA), Melanie Cassity (Diabetes Education Center, Athens Regional Medical Center); Moderator: Delene Porter (Athens Area Community Foundation).

April 26, 2009
Episode 5: Place Matters

Panelists: Dr. Nik Heynen (Department of Geography, UGA), Dr. John Vena (College of Public Health, UGA), Dr. Robert Nielsen (College of Family and Consumer Sciences, UGA), Chrissy Marlow (Georgia Department of Community Affairs, Office of Planning & Quality Growth); Moderator: Matt Murphy (Affordable Housing Administrator, Athens-Clarke County).

May 3, 2009
Episode 6: Collateral Damage

Panelists: Dr. Chris Whalen (College of Public Health, UGA), Dr. Larry Nackerud (School of Social Work, UGA), Dr. Lynn Beckman (Infectious Disease Coordinator, Northeast Health District); Moderator: Rebecca Cheney (College of Adult Education, UGA).

May 10, 2009
Episode 7: Not Just a Paycheck

Panelists: Mr. James Shrum (Athens Regional Medical Center), Dr. Katheryn Davis (School of Social Work, UGA), Peter Hossler (Department of Geography, UGA); Moderator: Dr. Margaret Holt (College of Adult Education, UGA).

While Levinson worked to confirm panelists and make travel arrangements, she and Severn also began to approach various University and community entities to help in fund the series, using the connections of committee members and confirmed panelists as leverage. With small monetary contributions from a variety of campus and community funders, along with significant donations from the Russell Library, the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia, and the Knight Chair in Health and Medical Journalism at the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, the program series had legs. All sponsors pledged to help publicize the events through various online and print media, with information supplied by the
Russell Library’s staff. Both the Public Library and the College of Public Health made in-kind donations, waiving all rental fees for their auditorium spaces.

The final list of sponsors included:

The Knight Chair in Health and Medical Journalism, Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, The Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia, The Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, The College of Public Health, The Biomedical and Health Sciences Institute, The College of Family and Consumer Sciences, The School of Social Work, The Department of Geography; The University of Georgia Alumni Association, Clarke County Health Department, Athens Clarke County Public Library.

**Event Promotion & Advertising**

In February, Severn designed a brochure and poster for the program series, outlining the dates, times, locations, topics, and panelists for all events in the program series. Severn and Levinson distributed approximately 1500 brochures to people living in or near the Athens area, as well as to the elected officials from the ten counties of Northeast Georgia, local, state and national representatives.

In early March, the Russell Library launched a webpage describing the event and relating dates, times, locations, and panelists for each program in the series. Levinson and Severn sent press releases on the opening event to all local media outlets. Levinson provided two interviews to local radio stations, one in collaboration with committee member Dr. Claude Burnett, to be aired during the run of the series. In the weeks leading up to the opening event, they sent out email blasts to relevant listservs, invited people to attend the events via Facebook and the Russell Library blog, and had articles on the series appear in campus and community newspapers. Further, all events in the series appeared in community calendar listings throughout the Athens and Atlanta area.

7 Events, 2 Locations, 8 weeks

From March 22-May 10, 2009, Severn and Levinson hosted seven events. They provided logistical support at each event (welcoming attendees, providing related materials, providing refreshments, setting up audio visual needs, collaborating with public library staff, directing panelists and moderators, and providing introductions and concluding comments). A total of 400 people attended the event series, with the opening event and keynote speaker Dr. Camara Jones attracting the most (95 attendees), but all public library events drawing crowds of 50-70.
The events at the Athens-Clarke County Public Library attracted diverse audiences (ethnicity, age, affiliation), evenly balanced between community members and individuals affiliated with the University, as well as a regular contingent of attendees from past Russell Library programs. Following the film screening, moderators asked panelists to introduce themselves and describe how their experiences, both personal and professional, connected to the topics of a particular episode. After this introduction, moderators opened the floor to questions or comments from the audience – directed to a specific panelist, the entire panel, or other attendees.

At the first few events, the audience seemed tentative at first but the pace of questions picked up over the course of the discussion portion of the program. The audience responded most frequently when something personal prompted their question (often accompanied by a short personal story or situation to describe their question more fully) or during episodes that approached the broader problems of health equity. It was not until the fifth event, the screening of Episode 5: Place Matters, that organizers began to discern tension and uneasiness in the audience. This portion of the film addressed social determinants of health and health outcomes as they relate to physical location – proximity to grocery stores, safe areas for exercise, clean air, access to transportation, etc. Questions from the audience expressed overwhelming frustration at the enormity of these interconnected problems and their unfair outcomes for many of the people living in the local area. The scope and complexity of these issues proved challenging for panelists and audience members to address in part because no one had authority and responsibility for dealing with the problems as a whole. The politicized nature of the issues made it difficult for participants to trust the neutrality or openness of one another as well. Certainly, it was a tense issue that sparked some difficult and unanswered questions, and left attendees feeling uncomfortable. Of course, often tension is endemic to deliberations as people wrestle with difficult questions. Organizers will continue to focus future attention on this aspect of health disparities in an effort to untangle these issues and make some headway.

Overall, attendance at the public library was strong and the post-screening discussions were robust. More commentary came from episodes that touched broader topics that related to the interests and concerns of attendees (ex. unemployment, the role of stress in physical health). The more focused the episode (ex. Episode 4: Bad Sugar, discussing diabetes), the more limited the questions appeared.

The events hosted at the Paul D. Coverdell Center on campus attracted fewer attendees; this was likely due to a mixture of hesitancy on the part of community members to venture onto campus, difficulty in locating the on-campus building, or confusion in dates and locations. Typically, there were 30-40 participants at these gatherings, with more attendees who had a direct connection to the University (students, faculty, retired faculty, etc.). The two events in this location proved that the content of the episode and the
dynamics of the panelists had much to do with the direction and tone of the conversation. For the April 5th event (Episode 3: Becoming American) which investigated the health of recent immigrants to the U.S., the panelists were all individuals who work in communities, not strictly with the University. The commentary and vivid anecdotes shared by these panelists about the daily experiences of the immigrant communities with which they were associated established a basis of authenticity and trust with the audience, which in turn energized their participation in the discussion. By contrast, the May 3rd event (Episode 6: Collateral Damage) that traced the impact of poverty, displacement, and globalization on inhabitants of the Marshall Islands proved to spark limited discussion. The geographical distance of the Marshall Islands and its problems with tuberculosis from overcrowding and inequities derived from the proximity to the U.S. military base there did not appear to engender the same level of engaged discussion among the audience that the immigrant health episode did. Clearly, location played a role in shaping the audience make-up and numbers, but the content of the program and the efficacy of the panelists shaped the quality of the program discussions.

Documenting the Unnatural Causes Series

The Russell Library arranged to film each of the seven programs. These films will be made available in the future to researchers and may appear in edited form as content on the Russell Library Web site. Following each Sunday event, either Levinson or Severn summarized and commented on the highlights or key discussion points from the program in a blog entry on the Russell Library Web site.

Final Thoughts & Reflection

At the beginning of nearly every program in this series, Jill Severn would begin her introductions by posing a simple question: why is a political archives interested in sponsoring a film series on the social determinants of health? The simple answer is that the Unnatural Causes series connects to and expands on the outreach mission and activities of the Russell Library.

The Russell Library’s mission is to build a collection that represents the intersection of policy, politics, and culture – this film series created a space and format to facilitate that intersection. The documentary exposed facts about health in America and some of the underlying policies that shape how healthy an individual can become in this country. The audience turnout, as well as the comments of panelists and attendees, demonstrated that these are indeed issues that concern local citizens. Their discussions indicated that this series has motivated them to work towards changes in policy, perhaps by putting greater efforts into making themselves known to local legislators and wielding their right to vote and engage in deliberative discussion to work towards change.
This program series certainly built upon the discussion models and topics that the Russell Library explored in its Fall Forum Series (2008) and the civic engagement projects it has hosted with support from the Kettering Foundation and National Issues Forums during the past several years. The Russell Library is committed to creating safe spaces for public, deliberative discussion – that is what the Unnatural Causes series accomplished.

Future Plans

The Russell Library has announced a public “next steps” meeting, scheduled for Sunday, June 7, 2009 at the Athens-Clarke County Public Library. Using the same location and time, sponsors hope to attract loyal film series attendees to this follow-up discussion, where they will recap the program series and provide a structured format to discuss options for future discussions and actions in the local community. Health inequity and social determinants of health are not topics that the Russell Library is interested in abandoning; staff members want to see the discussion sparked by the film move forward into positive change.

In addition to helping facilitate ideas that come from the “next steps” discussion, the Russell Library plans to partner with OneAthens to host a series of ten public forums over the course of the next year. These forums will utilize National Issues Forums guides, with topics that address many of the key focus areas of the OneAthens initiative – healthcare, poverty, housing, transportation, etc. These gatherings – formatted much like those in this past year’s Fall Forum series – will take place once a month at the Russell Library’s auditorium on weekday evenings, beginning in July 2009.

Another plan on the immediate horizon is to host a Public Policy Institute in October 2009. This two-day workshop will introduce participants to deliberative discussion and train them in moderation. Cooperative Extension agents and public library employees will serve as the target attendee groups, as these individuals are on the frontlines of communities across the state of Georgia.
Print Media Coverage

Red and Black Newspaper
[University of Georgia Student Newspaper]
http://tinyurl.com/pmakw

Athens Banner-Herald Newspaper
[Main Newspaper for Athens, GA]
http://tinyurl.com/cyt9wm
http://tinyurl.com/r86ftj
http://tinyurl.com/psy9zn
http://tinyurl.com/otydbq

Columns [Faculty-staff newspaper for University of Georgia]
http://tinyurl.com/qy8eqt

Beyond the Pages, [University of Georgia Libraries newsletter]

Flagpole [Free weekly newspaper, Athens, GA]
http://tinyurl.com/pnen3g

Atlanta Journal-Constitution Newspaper
http://tinyurl.com/o3228y

Creative Loafing – Atlanta [Free weekly newspaper, Atlanta, GA]
http://tinyurl.com/pwkdwe
http://tinyurl.com/rex6af

Radio Coverage

WUGA [local Athens NPR affiliate]: Host Mary Kay Mitchell conducted a live interview with planning committee members Dr. Claude Burnett (Director, Northeast Georgia Health District) and Jan Levinson (Russell Library) about the program series on March 19, 2009. WUGA also announced Public Service Messages for each of the programs in the series.

WGAU [local Athens talk radio station]: Host Barbara Dooley interviewed Jan Levinson (Russell Library) about the program series on March 26, 2009 [interview aired on April 2, 2009]

Web Presence

Russell Library Website
Area dedicated to the program series (including event overview, date/time listings, panelist bios, co-sponsors, and RSVP feature)
Unnatural Causes
Film & Discussion Series

Publicity & Promotion
By Jan Levinson

http://tinyurl.com/qu2qxk

Russell Library Blog
Reports on each event with photos
http://rbrl.blogspot.com/

Facebook
All events were posted to the Russell Library's facebook page
http://tinyurl.com/pwzmkj

Listservs
For each event, Russell staff sent email blasts to relevant listservs:

Russell Library listserv (@ 1000 members, individuals interested in Russell Library programs; national and international membership).

NIF Russell Forums listserv (@95 members, individuals involved/interested in NIF)

UGA Staff listserv (@900 members, staff and faculty at UGA)

Grapevine (@225 members, UGA libraries employees)

Northeastern Georgia Elected Officials (@60 names)

Area Organizations (@ 45 names involved locally in issues of health issues)

Direct Mail Advertising
1000 brochures mailed to people on Russell Library mailing list (living in Georgia), area churches & other relevant organizations (free clinics, hospitals, etc.)

500 brochures provided to planning committee members for distribution as needed.

Other Public Relations/Communication Materials
Press Releases
Email Blasts
Brochures
Posters
Russell Library Blog Posts