

Creating a Virtual Reality Experience in Service to a Non-Profit Agency

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In the summer of 2018, RIT Professors Susan Lakin and Frank Deese discussed with the principal officers of the Society for the Protection and Care of Children (SPCC) in Rochester how the new technology of Virtual Reality might be used to not only impart information to viewers, but generate empathy for those receiving services from the organization as well as those performing those services. Their ultimate goal was to create an experience that could be viewed with VR headsets at fundraising events and on a website using low-cost Google Cardboard.

I. OVERVIEW

At SPCC headquarters in Rochester, Lakin and Deese interviewed survivors of sexual abuse and domestic violence who told them how the intervention of the non-profit was instrumental to turning their lives in a positive direction. One of the women they interviewed, who was especially adept with metaphors, compared the organization to a compass that helped her find her way. It was during these interviews that they also learned about 1870s origins of the SPCC when it was created as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children shortly after the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) took on the case of ten-year-old Mary Ellen Wilson who was severely abused by her legal guardians. In a celebrated court hearing, the new SPCC was able to take her out of her New York tenement apartment and put her in the care of a farm family outside Rochester, New York. At this time, Lakin and Deese decided to intertwine the Mary Ellen story with modern SPCC testimonials to create an emotionally immersive experience that put the viewer in point of view of a variety of survivors.

Being in service to a non-profit, they had very little to no money to spend making this work. The challenge was to design an experience without complicated 360-degree filming in the field. They also knew that it would be both impossible and not desirable to film actual survivors and

therapists. They therefore moved in the direction of creating abstract Virtual Reality imagery to instill empathy using the words and voices of their interviewees. In 2021, Susan Lakin hired (using grant funding) New Media Design student Isabelle Anderson to animate the entire experience under hers and Deese's direction and scripting. As this was new to all of them, they have been discovering and learning along the way.



Fig. 1 Mary Ellen Wilson after being removed from abusive home, 1874



Fig. 2 Still from first scene of the VR Experience

II. CONCLUSION

This is an in-progress project, so Lakin, Deese, and Anderson have not yet had the opportunity to test the project with a wide audience. They plan to do this as soon as it is finished and document the viewer responses. They have also been helped on the technical side by Simar Khanna and with sound design and recording by School of Film and Animation student, Olivia Wilson-Luffman.

III. REFERENCES

Shelman, Eric A., Lazoritz, Stephen . (2012). *Case #1: The Mary Ellen Wilson Files*. Dolphin Moon Publishing.