

DEERFIELD

MAGAZINE

THE BOTTOM LINE / 6

THE PAUSE AND EFFECT: OF TEDx / 22

SCALING WHAT WORKS / 34

DEERFIELD MAGAZINE REPRINT
"The Pause and Effect: Of TEDx"



The Pause
and Effect:
of TEDx



BY JULIA ELLIOTT



Beatriz Labadan '16 paces the stage of the Elizabeth Wachsman Concert Hall, which is bare except for three bright red circular carpets. Projected above her is an image of an hourglass and a sundial. "Have you ever thought about why it takes so little time to destroy, yet so much time to build or create something?" she asks.

As Beatriz glides confidently through her talk, only occasionally glancing at the notes in her hand, the audience could be forgiven for not recognizing that behind this unique opportunity to celebrate the life of the mind at Deerfield, there lies a lot of sweat. Each talk represents months of planning, preparation, and good old-fashioned practice on the part of the speakers and the students who organized the event: Deerfield's first-ever TEDx.

It all started in a leadership training session two years ago. A junior and a new Student Council member at the time, Haidun Liu '15 wanted to create a platform for "students who have some sort of reflection or idea to share—to give them a microphone, so to speak." He was particularly interested in encouraging dialogue across social circles. "I felt that what I hear at Deerfield and what I learn from my friends could change a lot if there was a more public way of sharing . . ."

"We were also talking about how some people who do really cool things at Deerfield aren't necessarily recognized," says fellow Student Council member Nahla Gedeon Achi '15. "We started talking about how to find a way to recognize those people within the busy Deerfield schedule . . ."

"What about TEDx?" someone asked.

For those who have never clicked on a TED video shared via Facebook or in an email, "TED" refers to a set of global conferences where luminaries deliver short talks on what are loosely billed as "ideas worth spreading." TED began as a conference in 1984 organized by architect and graphic designer Richard Saul Wurman. That gathering, which featured

one of the first demonstrations of an Apple Macintosh computer as well as the Sony compact disc, explored the convergence of technology, entertainment, and design—hence, "TED." Now run by the non-profit Sapling Foundation, TED talks have expanded to cover a wide range of topics, including science, culture, and academics. The foundation began streaming the talks for free in 2006 on TED.com, and recorded its billionth video view in 2012. TEDx events, in turn, may be thought of as grassroots versions of TED talks; they encourage "communities, organizations, and individuals to spark conversation and connection;" definitely something that Haidun and his fellow council members were hoping to accomplish.

Haidun and Nahla, along with Megan Retana '15, also a Student Council member, began looking into what it would take to pull off a TEDx event at Deerfield. A lot of work, they discovered; so they decided to start with a sort of pilot program. "We said, 'What could we do to get ready and warm up, and practice and iterate, that would move us in the direction of doing TED talks?'" explains Academic Dean Peter Warsaw, who became the group's faculty advisor.

The answer? "Deerfield Talks."

Those first Deerfield Talks, beginning in the winter of 2014, were guided by the simple rule that every presentation must pose an open-ended question. Faculty and students participated, and there definitely was a learning curve that included some technical glitches and even questions over authenticity—situations that would have been embarrassing to Deerfield, had the talks been available

outside the local community. The organizers learned that they needed to impose guidelines that required each talk to be original, have a personal connection, and be well rehearsed.

“It was really a good plan to practice going through the steps of preparing these talks,” says Mr. Warsaw. “Vetting them, making sure that they were ready for performance, and that they were going to be a credit to Deerfield. The prize was always TEDx; the question was: how to get there responsibly? Iteration was incredibly important.”

By the fall of 2014, the trio of organizers, now seniors, was ready to apply for a TEDx license. Taking the Deerfield Talks to a public platform via TEDx, says Haidun, was akin to going for a black belt in kung fu; it set “a high target that motivated us to do more—the organizers, but also the speakers.

It forced us to challenge ourselves.”

“There’s always a danger,” says Mr. Warsaw, “that we can live inside our bubble, our ivory tower, in which we measure ourselves against each other.” He sees TEDx as a means to test Deerfield’s intellectual life on a global standard

“There’s always a danger,” says Mr. Warsaw, “that we can live inside our bubble, our ivory tower, in which we measure ourselves against each other.” He sees TEDx as a means to test Deerfield’s intellectual life on a global standard, well beyond the bubble.

“And that’s the start of great things,” he continues, “when students are taking themselves seriously as not just consumers but creators of knowledge.”

...

A few months later, Megan Retana is nervously double-checking her checklist in the lighting booth above the concert hall. She’s wearing a walkie-talkie headset so she can communicate with the other organizers as well as the production crew that will be filming the event—three cameramen, a sound person, mixer, and a director. The video production is a crucial component, not only because the talks will be simulcast in the Large Aud, but because each talk will be edited and uploaded to the TEDx site. It means the talks will reach a much wider audience—it also means a lot more work.

Megan and Haidun spent hours in the concert hall the day before, overseeing final rehearsals and working with the film crew. Now Haidun is racing around: directing speakers, answering questions from the crew, and, when he can, glancing at his own talk—“Breathing As We Pray.” Nahla, who will act as event moderator, is pacing throughout the Hess Center, rehearsing her remarks.

With Mr. Warsaw’s guidance, Megan, Haidun, and Nahla have accomplished a lot. One of their first tasks—after completing research and paperwork and carrying out all the details related to holding a TEDx event—was to come up with a theme. They solicited suggestions from the school community, narrowed the topics down to three, and then students and faculty voted online for “time” as the final theme.

“Time was tied with, I think, heritage and community,” says Nahla. “We decided at that point that we would make an executive decision that it was a less talked about and potentially more interesting topic.”

An online submission form revealed about thirty strong proposals from students and faculty, which the organizers whittled down to ten. Then it was time to start rehearsing.

“They scaffolded the process of preparation for the actual talk,” says English teacher Peter Nilsson, “and that’s crucial. They were really good about checking in frequently and asking people to bring an outline, to have a first read through with the committee, a second read through, a dress rehearsal.”

Adhering to a “practice makes perfect” model, adopted as a result of the Deerfield Talks, led to presentations that were more polished in delivery and more thoughtful and engaging in content.

Mr. Warsaw—admitting to telling a tale out of school—reveals that Mr. Nilsson’s initial proposal was so vague that the organizers worried it might not yield a powerful presentation. He reassured them that Mr. Nilsson was up to the task and, sure enough, “every time Pete would take the feedback that he’d gotten,” Mr. Warsaw explains, “and come back with the next iteration just head and shoulders above. He kept getting better and better. From the first time he shared his prototypical ideas to that finished product, he covered the entire gamut from rough thinking to really polished execution.”



“In our hectic Deerfield schedules . . . we rarely have free rein to delve into subjects about which we are truly passionate. This TEDx event is an opportunity for teachers and students to come together and discuss topics that are out of the ordinary, all under the unifying theme of time. We hope this event will spark conversation among community members about a wide variety of current and relevant issues.”

TIMELESSNESS

HISTORY

INFLUENCE

RACE

PHYSICS

TEDxDeerfieldAcademy

x = independently organized TED event

February 22 2:00 p.m. Elizabeth Wachsman Concert Hall

2:00 - 2:10 Opening

2:12 - 2:22 Speaker #1 Nilsson Peter
"Pause and Effect: Becoming Who We Are" → 1
bill sound of music

2:24 - 2:34 Speaker #2 Matt Morrow and Tarek Deida
"Let's Talk About Race in America" → 2

2:48 - 2:58 TED Talk Playback → *

2:36 - 2:46 Speaker #3 Beatriz Labadan
"Summun Bonum" → 3

3:00 - 3:10 Speaker #4 David Payne
"Timeless or of its Time: Appropriate Architecture for the 21st Century" → 4

3:12 - 3:22 Speaker #5 David Thiel
"The Landscape of Thought" → 5

3:24 - 3:34 Speaker #6 Liam Gong → 6

3:34 - 4:04 Snack break: 30 minutes

4:05 - 4:15 Speaker #7 Abigail Lupi
"Your Middle School Physics Teacher Misinformed You (Yet Again)" → 1

4:17 - 4:27 Speaker #8 Austin Parenteau
"Immortal Influence" → 2

4:29 - 4:39 TED Talk Playback → *

4:41 - 4:54 Speaker #9 Josh Tebeau
"In Search of Lost Time" → 3

4:56 - 5:06 Speaker #10 Haidun Liu
"Breathing as We Pray" → 4

5:08 - 5:30 Closing

TEDxDeerfieldAcademy
x = independently organized TED event

PRESENTERS

PETER NILSSON (Faculty)
Pause and Effect: Becoming Who We Are

LIAM GONG '16
Playing for Time

MATT MORROW '15 & TAREK DEIDA '15
Let's Talk About Race in America

ABIGAIL LUPI '18
Your Middle School Physics Teacher Misinformed You (Yet Again)

BEATRIZ LABADAN '16
Summun Bonum

AUSTIN PARENTEAU '15
Immortal Influence

DAVID PAYNE (Faculty)
Timeless or of its Time: Appropriate Architecture for the 21st Century

JOSH TEBEAU '16
In Search of Lost Time

DAVID THIEL (Faculty)
The Landscape of Thought

H Aidun Liu '15
Breathing as We Pray

That willingness to risk is so counter-cultural to the world that we are seeing more and more. What I love is when we see some evidence that there are students who are willing to risk failure, willing to risk embarrassment, for possibly something great, because that's the way we will lead the world.—Peter Warsaw

Presenter Abigail Lupi '16 also changed her script significantly after input from the student organizers. "After the first draft," she explains, "it was apparent that my talk mainly consisted of aimless—but enthusiastic!—ramblings about somewhat alien concepts." Abigail, who delivered her talk on black holes (a longtime interest fueled by courses at the MIT Splash program), ended up throwing out anything not directly relevant to her main point, including wormholes, red-shifting of light, gravitational lensing, and an initial plan to center her talk around the movie *Interstellar*. Careful editing led to what she felt was "a more systematic and coherent" finished product.

Beatriz Labadan seconds the value of revision. "In preparing my TEDx talk," she explains, "I was able to structurally formalize and condense my views in such a way that I came to a deeper understanding of what I was talking about. Many times I have thoughts or ideas that make sense in my own mind, but when you have to present it to others, it forces you to make the idea much clearer."

2:00 pm: TEDx day: The sound and video equipment have been tested, the speakers are ready, the lights go down in the Concert Hall, and Nahla steps to the stage. "Hello everyone, and welcome to the first TEDx Deerfield Academy event," she begins. "In our hectic Deerfield schedules . . . we rarely have free rein to delve into subjects about which we are truly passionate. This TEDx event is an opportunity for teachers and students to come together and discuss topics that are out of the ordinary, all under the unifying theme of time. We hope this event will spark conversation among community members about a wide variety of current and relevant issues."

Mr. Nilsson is up first. Titled "Pause and Effect: Becoming Who We Are," his talk employs literature, music, psychology, science, and educational theory to explore "how rest and pause and a slower pace of life influence

us creatively, cognitively, and in an educational setting." His initial idea, assessed as vague in its first iteration, evolved into a tight, engaging talk that was a clear audience favorite. Other speakers include juniors Matt Morrow and Tarek Deida talking about issues surrounding race in America; Beatriz with the story of her nonprofit; Studio Arts Teacher David Payne on the question of whether 21st century architecture is "timeless" or "of its time . . ."; and another audience favorite, Liam Gong '16, speaking about procrastination.

Backstage, the organizers barely have a moment to rest. Haidun and Megan dart up and down stairs, chasing after lost PowerPoint clickers and escorting speakers from the lighting booth, where they are outfitted with a special microphone, to the basement wings of the concert hall, where they wait before giving their talk. Nahla stands with them before they go on stage, listening as they whisper their talks to themselves in a final moment of preparation.

"I admittedly was very nervous when I first got on stage," says Beatriz. "The lights are bright and there are people filming you. But that all kind of disappeared, and it was like I was having an individual conversation with each member of the audience. It's indescribable how truly liberating and empowering it is to be on stage and to be able to share your thoughts and your views. To have a venue where you can have your voice be heard is such an amazing feeling."

After intermission, Abigail takes the stage. Standing on a trampoline and rolling marbles around her feet, she illustrates how objects can get trapped into the orbit of a black hole by its gravitational force. She is followed by Austin Parenteau '15, who brings the audience on a journey that begins in ancient Rome.

"On behalf of the organizing committee," says Nahla as she closes the event, "I would also like to thank you all for taking time out of your busy lives to pause and reflect, as Mr.

Nilsson urged us to do in his talk. Matthew and Tarek discussed the issues surrounding race in America, will you? Dynasties rise and fall, civilizations flourish and then disappear, political systems grow and sometimes collapse, but do ideas ever die? As you rest your head on your pillow tonight, will you think of three things you are thankful for? We hope you leave the Concert Hall with more questions than you entered with."

As she watches the audience filter out of the Hess Center, Nahla declares the event a success by TEDx's standards. "I think it definitely sparked conversation," she says.

For Abigail Lupi, not only was TEDx a great way to learn about others' passions, it was a chance to gain important skills. "You've got to come up with ideas, so it requires creativity. It requires organization. It requires memorization. It requires time management and commitment."

Abigail spent almost every free moment during an already busy month preparing for her talk. Still, even after so much hard work, Abigail—and several of her fellow presenters—had moments where she momentarily forgot her remarks. "I learned to be definitely more prepared with memorization," she says with a laugh, adding, "I think my recovery was decent!"

For Mr. Warsaw, such stumbles are far from evidence of failure. "To some extent," he says, "every one of the presenters willingly elected to put themselves in harm's way. That willingness to risk is so counter-cultural to the world that we are seeing more and more. Students believe that their chief strategy for success is avoiding any mistake, any lapse, and of course they are wrong—that's a recipe for mediocrity. What I love is when we see some evidence that there are students who are willing to risk failure, willing to risk embarrassment, for possibly something great, because that's the way we will lead the world. TEDx was a microcosm of that." //



DEERFIELD ACADEMY