SMU’s Second-Century Image Problem

New campaign calls to mind school’s longtime contradictions

Jakob Schwarz
Editor-In-Chief

If there is one thing you can count on at SMU, it’s that nothing stays the same here for long. Having lived on or near the main campus of SMU for 19 years, it has been remarkable to witness a campus that just refuses to be stagnant. From the birth of the Embrey Human Rights Program, to the beginning of the construction of the George W. Bush Presidential Center, movement here is as diverse as it is continuous. As SMU begins the five-year process of celebrating its 100th birthday, it strikes me that our beloved university has run into something of a image problem.

At least to the outside world, SMU has become somewhat synonymous with conservative ideology and intolerance. In August 2011, the Princeton Review labeled SMU the 12th most LGBT unfriendly campus in the country. I could continue from here and provide an in-depth analysis of the Princeton Review’s methods, as I think I’m not alone in questioning them. However, I would like to look at this from a different perspective. It strikes me that, as questionable as the Princeton Review’s methods may be, it would be nearsighted of us not to look at ourselves. Because a ranking like that doesn’t just come out of nowhere.

Outside Dallas, SMU has long been viewed as factory of conservative thoughts and leaders. The Bush Presidential Center certainly doesn’t help. I would note that a quick look at the names of our last commencement speakers also seems to support the notion. Though we will have to work overtime to resist this characterization now, the image problem goes further than our political reputation. SMU is becoming increasingly defined by athletics. I would by facilities and dorms—dorms which will undoubtedly be difficult to afford for many students.

Truly becoming the “Harvard of the south” does not happen by hiring splashy sports coaches and building big sports complexes—the movement must be academic. Improving the important dimensions of SMU’s reputation requires fostering programs like the University Honors Program and Hilltop Scholars. It happens through creating a community that is safe, secure, and welcoming by ensuring that we have sweeping anti-discrimination policies in place which protect all students, faculty, and staff no matter their gender, sexual orientation, religious preference, etc. Positive image work happens through the arts. It happens through bringing in diverse and exciting speakers and events that challenge us and make us see and hear things and parts of our culture that we might not always see or know. I, for one, would much rather our grass be a little less green if it meant more resources for bringing in interesting speakers like JAC Stringer, the transgendered speaker SMU’s Spectrum wanted to host.

Like many, I have been excited to hear of the planned changes and renovations coming to SMU. In particular, the plans for the renovation of Fondren Library are welcome news. But there are still many things this university can and should do to change its image. As I graduate this year, I encourage the powers that be to work swiftly to get anti-discrimination practices in place, and, as Harvard does, to throw their full weight behind the values of liberal arts.

However, this is not something that lies solely in the hands of the administration. We the students must be willing to step forward to fight for our community, to fight for equal educational opportunities in a stratified city, and to fight for free and open discourse on campus. Much of this is already happening and that’s great. But there is still more that can be done. As I prepare to graduate, I can’t help but wish that I had done more in my four years here. I think that I was able to be involved to some extent, most notably as president for SMU’s chapter of Amnesty International my sophomore year. But I find myself wishing that I had gotten more involved in efforts to change SMU for the better. I think this university can have a bright future. We just have to be willing to make it happen.
Kony 2012: Genuine, strategic, or neither,

Opinion: Kony 2012 campaign flawed in focus and methods

Anonymous contributor

Nothing is more powerful than an idea.

Thus begins KONY 2012, the now-viral video produced by the non-profit organization Invisible Children (IC), which has found itself the center of controversy in recent weeks. The video, with over 80 million YouTube hits, has sparked a media firestorm due to allegations that it misrepresents the truth and Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda. It is true that nothing is more powerful than an idea, but by this token, nothing is more dangerous than an idea, especially one that finds its basis in half-truths, misrepresentations, and oversimplifications.

KONY 2012, with a running time of approximately 30 minutes, is a very slick and well-crafted piece of advocacy, if not propaganda. This is no doubt attributable to the organization’s $700,000 media budget. Although it is spilling over with style, it is a bit lacking in substance.

First, the film suggests that Joseph Kony, head of the Lord’s Resistance Army, a guerilla rebel group operating since 1986, continues to plague the people of Uganda. However, Joseph Kony has not stepped foot in Uganda for the last six years and has fled from Ugandan military forces to the jungles of neighboring countries. The film only hints at this, but when doing so, it suggests that his migration to these nations is actually an expansion of his influence and power. In reality, the LRA has seen a decline in its power, and estimates put Kony’s army at a mere 200 active fighters, which are subdivided into smaller groups of 10 to 20 men.

Second, in the six years since his departure, Uganda has experienced what Foreign Policy describes as a “tremendous recovery.” This is simply not communicated in KONY 2012, which recycles film from its founders’ 2003 trip to the country depicting the nighttime commutes of children to the cities in order to avoid being captured and recruited into the LRA. The viewer is left with the impression that the commutes are still happening; however, the number of commuters has plummeted in his absence.

It is no wonder that Ugandan journalist Rosebell Kagumire said of the film, “this paints a picture of Uganda six or seven years ago, that is totally not how it is today. It’s highly irresponsible.”

Another Ugandan journalist weighed in on the matter, declaring, “to call the campaign a misrepresentation is an understatement… Its portrayal of his alleged crimes in Northern Uganda are from a bygone era” [emphasis mine]. Foreign Affairs accuses the film of “manipulating facts for strategic purposes.”

The film does not touch upon the issues that are actually facing the Ugandan people; namely, a government permeated with corruption and plagued by massive debt, an army that has committed as many atrocities as Kony’s, and the...
squalor of the remaining IDP (internally displaced person) camps. Joseph Kony is no longer the direst threat facing Uganda, and it’s time to stop pretending that he still is.

Another image of the organization being advertised by its supporters is that IC is a charity dedicated to helping children in Africa. The truth? It’s not. “The truth about Invisible Children is that we are not an aid organization,” says Jedidiah Jenkins, IC’s “Director of Ideology.” “We don’t intend to be. I think people think we’re over there delivering shoes or food. But we are an advocacy and awareness organization.”

A quick trip to the websites of Invisible Children and Charity Navigator provides a breakdown of the NGO’s 2011 budget, which confirms this.

During the fiscal year, IC’s total revenue was approximately $13.8 million, and its expenditures totaled $8.9 million. Of this $8.9 million, 80.5 percent went toward its own programs. When stripping away the money spent on the merchandise sold at its events, awareness campaigns, and other things, only $3.3 million went toward its Central Africa programs (37.1 percent of its budget).

The other 63 cents of every dollar you give goes to fundraising, media and film creation, awareness programs, and administrative costs. But at least this money is used wisely, right? Perhaps not.

The money spent on films like KONY 2012 constitutes 8 percent of the budget alone. Travel and transportation costs (over $1 million) were another 12 percent.

Is this a wise allocation of funds? Also, Invisible Children has over $6 million extra dollars on hand because of several years of budget surpluses, and due to the sales of their action kits, has another $15 million coming in. There is no indication about what they intend to do with this $21 million. The fact that an organization with an annual budget of $9 million has this amount of cash on hand should make one wonder if it is putting its money where its mouth is.

The final issue with KONY 2012 is the assertion that Kony must be captured, brought before the International Criminal Court so that justice might be served, and that the U.S. government needs to do more to achieve this. Further, when this happens, peace will reign. There are multiple problems with this broader picture.

First, pursuing Kony will most likely reignite conflict in the region, threatening the shaky peace that exists today. We should not expect Kony to come down quietly and should consider alternative approaches to dealing with him.

Second, the film does not explain the sociopolitical structure of Central Uganda, which plays a key role in the dynamics of the region and how increased intervention would affect this. Prior to involving ourselves in another region of the world, we should first understand the relations between the peoples in the region. No one wants another Vietnam or Iraq.

In short, there has been a great deal of mischaracterizations about Invisible Children and its mission in Africa. Yes, Kony has committed terrible crimes against the children of Uganda, but he is less of a danger now, and aggressively pursuing him could only serve to throw the region back into chaos. We should instead focus on the greater issues facing Uganda and Central Africa and dedicate our time, money, and resources to addressing these issues and supporting organizations with stellar records at doing so.

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Hilltopics is a student opinion magazine supported by the University Honors Program. Our mission is to provide SMU students with a free and open forum for expression. All students are welcome to email us editorial and creative pieces for publication.
Recently, I had a fun conversation with some classmates about the images that define the sororities on campus. (It so happened that none of us felt qualified to talk about the fraternities.)

What stood out was that each person in our group perceived different “stereotypes” attached to each sorority. Everyone believed there were widely accepted stereotypes, but our own perceptions of them did not overlap. For example, someone would name a sorority with a reputation for parties, and another person would say that was the most studious sorority. On several counts, personal lists of “the stereotypes about X” directly conflicted.

This is unexpected, of course, because stereotypes are usually agreed upon. (If they weren’t shared, they would be monotypes, right?) The stereotypes of sororities are perceived as universally apprehensible and shared, but apparently they aren’t.

So then who creates these “stereotypes,” what factors go into the judgments, and how does an imaginary consensus arise?

Maybe a good place to start is membership criteria.

The most salient criterion for distinguishing sororities from the outside is, I was told, the cost of joining. Apparently there are top-tier and bottom-tier sororities, marked primarily by three factors: 1) the amount of family money it takes to be worthy (worth-y) of membership in the first place, 2) the amount of cash in hand required not to default on one’s membership, and 3) actual membership requirements. The latter occasionally include GPA or academic achievement—I heard mostly about personal appearance.

I was told that, in recruiting, it’s the cost of membership that determines outright the “correct” tier for a new pledge. In a distant second, two other factors are considered by current members: 1) the “kindness” or sociability of potential recruits, and 2) their physical attractiveness. I heard the second can make or break the deal.

Specifically, I’m curious about how freshman or sophomore women choose a sorority in the beginning, what the sororities think and know about each other, and especially how sororities regard their own “stereotypes” and their roles at SMU and in the world.

But there’s something else. Until three weeks ago, I never knew there was a separate category of “multicultural” sororities (governed by the Multicultural Greek Council) different from the most visible category on campus: those governed by Panhellenic Council. That is, I knew there were many kinds of sororities with all kinds of people, but I just heard from a member of a “multicultural” sorority that the governing boards are separate—and that the two categories are sometimes perceived as a binary opposition among minority students: in other words, the “white” versus the “multicultural” sororities (i.e., everyone else).

So, I’d also like to know who’s pursuing the issue that there is an almost all “white” group of sororities, which exercises the vast majority of influence on campus, and a “multicultural” group of sororities which, from several accounts, contains less than 100 total members. What does this do to sororities’ conceptions of each other, and how does it shape Greek life? How does it shape non-Greek students’ perceptions of Greek life?

What “images” does each sorority aim to promote about itself? What is the Greek system aiming to symbolize to its members? Please email us and let us know.

Coda:

Perhaps this is nitpicking, but on the Student Affairs website, the photo of the Panhellenic Council members is saved under the file name “all greek,” while the Multicultural Greek Council photo is saved under “All MGC.” If we were doing some kind of linguistic analysis, this might mean something.
Rabbit Ears and Caramellldansen

Book Review: The Girl in the Park

Mayisha Zeb Nakib
Staff Writer

The Girl in the Park is about confronting death and overcoming limiting self-images. It is Katherine Patterson’s Bridge to Terabithia for the teenage soul—both explore the question “why do young people have to die?” But unlike Bridge to Terabithia, this is not a child’s fantasy land. This is real life. This is a body found in a playground, a party girl, a former best friend, and the girl who told shy Rain, “Speak up, girl!”

Wendy, despite her horrible choices and unhealthy craving for attention, spent a large part of her life inspiring the kids around her. However, most everyone around Rain frowns upon Wendy, thinking she deserved her fate. Despite social pressures, Rain pieces together the true story and confronts Wendy’s murderer. In the process, she leaves behind her shy, timid self, and for the first time ever, finds her voice.

High school was just a year ago, and I forget already how tender-hearted and timid I was, without the added complexity Rain faces with her cleft palate. I forget how much my self-image depended on my peers’ opinions of me. I forget the moment when I learned that my peers’ opinions of me depended on whether or not I demand respect from them, and my self-image depends on my own confidence.

Through this book, Mariah Fredericks reminds me of how I felt when one of my also-distant-but-good-friends committed suicide my senior year of high school. I actually pulled out one of my application essays from last year after reading the book. Unable to forget him, I had decided to write about him:

“Hi Mayisha! How are you doing today?”

“I’m alright, just stressed…” Of course, I have an English test later today. I am sick of drama in the debate team. My father is out of the country. There are a million and one reasons to be stressed, and obviously, my face shows it because I couldn’t hide my emotions if my life depended on it. Why else would he be asking me how I am today?

“Jye milady’ and somehow two or three seconds later we were standing side by side with our hands above our heads like rabbit ears swinging our hips left and right. I learned the fastest way to get a flat stomach. It is not fifty crunches a day; it’s caramellldansen with a few friends and giggling until it hurts to laugh.

That is Will Smart. He has a fairy tale like voice that sounds like a cross between Scooby Doo and Captain Jack Sparrow. He is instinctively and spontaneously hilarious. He is not afraid to use random accents. He is man enough to wear a pink tutu to raise money for special needs children. He is lighthearted, free spirited, and frankly the opposite of my serious self. I suppose he is somewhat like Fred and George Weasley from Harry Potter, except Will doesn’t need magic. I forgot to tell him that day, but every day I knew him, I was happier.

We all forgot to tell him.

On Saturday November 13, 2010 Will Smart went up to his room, took a gun, and shot himself. He died instantly. “Will died.” Those words shouldn’t sound so abstruse. It’s a two-word statement with a subject and a verb. I acknowledge the fact, but I refuse to understand it. It has been weeks since his funeral, and I still have trouble swallowing the idea that Will is dead."

I wrote those words in my 2010 college application essay. Like Rain with Wendy, I did not understand why Will had to die. Like Rain, I realized that “it could happen to anyone.” I would have never thought of Will as the type to commit suicide.

I recognize that even I could be naïve and trusting enough to end up in a park with someone who seems to care about me but could also hurt me. It is easy to trust, easy to be blinded by love, but hard to suspect that people you want to trust might hurt you.

Like Wendy with Rain, Will taught me to speak up. He taught me to make sure that I let my friends and loved ones know how I feel about them. He taught me not to take my friends for granted. He taught me that happiness is more important than stress and that to love is more important than to judge. He taught me to trust the journey that is my life. He taught me to be grateful. He taught me to stop every now and then with my hands above my head like rabbit ears and swing my hips side to side caramellldansen.

About the Book:

THE GIRL IN THE PARK
BY MARIAH FREDDERICKS

In the span of a little over 200 pages, Mariah Fredericks sends her message home. The Girl in the Park reminds us of the value of living for today. Wendy is a party girl, but she also wants to be loved and has a meaningful friendship with her best friend Rain. Flashbacks develop the context surrounding the situation. They show readers how Rain can’t stop thinking about Wendy after hearing about Wendy’s murder, while telling us more about Rain and Wendy, their friendship, and how they drifted apart. The structure makes readers all the more curious about the circumstances surrounding Wendy’s murder.

Rain, the former best friend, is an easily relatable narrator. Like Wendy, she also wants to be loved. Unlike Wendy, she listens and observes carefully. She never tries to be someone that she isn’t. And when people start saying mean things about Wendy after Wendy’s murder, Rain is the one who tries to find out what really happened because she is one of the few who knows the complexity of Wendy’s character. Through Rain’s character, we get a better understanding of who Wendy Geller is and of human nature.
Samantha Kingston has it all: from a crush-worthy boyfriend to first pick of everything at her school.

While she lives a pretty normal lifestyle, I couldn’t relate to her because of her snobby attitude. The girl believes that she deserves to rule the school. Nevertheless, I continued reading just to see what happens. And I loved the book.

Lauren Oliver intentionally creates Sam to be an unrelatable character at the beginning. Readers need to see her the way she is at first because they need to see how reliving her last day changes her. It gives us hope. That no matter what mistakes we make, it’s never too late to change.

Initially a story about another unfortunate accident for a teenage snob, *Before I Fall* comes to tell the story of a girl who learns to accept that sometimes having it all isn’t that great, not compared to what we might have if we only open our hearts.

*Before I Fall* is slow to develop; frustrating and heartwrenching, it forces you to question if you’d regret your life should you die today.

Crystal Chen
Opinions & Literature Editor
The Hunger Games

The Hunger Games, starring Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss Everdeen and Josh Hutcherson as Peeta Mellark, is a breathtaking cinematic experience. The film follows the experiences of Katniss and Peeta after they are selected as tributes to represent District 12, the most poverty-stricken of 12 districts in the dystopian country Panem (formerly North America), in the annual "Hunger Games."

The Games are put on by the Capitol, the nation's authoritarian center of power, as a reminder to each of the 12 districts that rebellion would be brutal and pointless. In the Games, 24 child contestants are forced to fight to the death until one remains, for both the viewing pleasure of the Capitol and to remind the districts of the hierarchy of power. Katniss, the main character of the series, must not only survive the other competitors in the Games, but also maneuver through political intrigue in the Capitol.

The movie was a very faithful adaptation of the critically acclaimed novel, so fans of the book should be satisfied. It may even draw in new fans for the books. All actors were well-casted; one truly feels for the tributes and others as they face a number of challenges. Visually, the film was stunning due to elaborate sets; especially the scenes in the Capitol.

The movie, while reveling in the horror and violence of the Games, is much more than a cinematic bloodbath; it also presents a commentary on issues such as poverty, oppression, war, and the accompanying helplessness. A memorable line delivered by Panem’s president illustrates this when he says that the Games are meant to be a spark of hope for the districts. This spark is meant to motivate the districts enough to go on living and working, but not enough to ignite a revolution.
The preceding opinions, dreams, and whimsy belong to their authors only.

This has been *Hilltopics*: “A magazine for people who summer.”