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feature article

We Are Who We Are: How Filmmaker and UNH Student Anna Bruning Captured the “Will to Be” Basque

—Matthew Kingston and Travis Taylor, *Inquiry* assistant editors (Edited by Brigid C. Casellini)

Premiering a film to any audience is nothing short of nerve-racking. Everyone staring down at you from the theater—professors, mentors, friends, students, the general public—all wondering what kind of film you’ve created. Your entire college career and everything you’ve spent the past two years working on are soon to be on display, to be judged by people you may have never met.

If you are Anna Bruning, a senior communication major, Spanish and cinema studies minor, and Honors student at the University of New Hampshire, you stand apparently calmly at the front of the theater in the campus Memorial Union Building. Your documentary on the Basque people of Spain, two years in the making, included traveling to Donostia–San Sebastián, Spain, in the summer of 2008; filming interviews in Spanish and translating them into English; collecting data and information on the Basque region and culture; and single-handedly editing the entire documentary, from start to finish. It’s now spring 2009 and the film’s première. Anna looks up at an almost full theater and smiles, then presses play.

It is a tricky business living in a country like Spain and feeling you have your own culture and language, which make you wholly different from the people surrounding you. Anna explores this theme in her documentary *Omendu Basques: Beyond the Bombs*. (*Omendu* means “salute to.”) She takes us to the Basque region of Spain, where she filmed from June to August, showing us interviews with locals about what it means to be Basque. We also see many aspects of Basque traditional life through ceremonies and parties Anna attended with video camera in hand. She chose not to focus on the widely known organization ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*), whose aim is Basque independence and whose methods are sometimes violent. Instead Anna looked at how citizens of the Basque region relate to Basque culture, to Spain, and to each other, mainly through the Basque language of Euskara. She explores the relationship between Euskara and Basque-ness, showing how many people all over the world consider themselves Basque because of their language. The last line of the film, spoken by an older Basque man in Spanish, brings thoughtful closure when he smiles, shrugs, and says: “We are who we are.”



Anna Bruning shoots the Bay of Biscay, right outside of Donostia–San Sebastián.

At the end of the roughly thirty-minute film, it is obvious that the result of Anna’s two years of preparing, traveling, filming, and editing is a rousing success. As the lights come up in the theater, loud applause fills the air. Anna then answers many questions from the audience, willing to continue the conversation well into the evening.

Four days later, we were fortunate enough to sit down with Anna and talk about her documentary, film-making in general, the Basques, and what comes next. Following is our edited conversation.

Inquiry: Where did this interest in the Basque culture come from?

Anna Bruning: During my sophomore year of high school I went to the [Spanish] Basque region with my parents for two weeks. My dad always likes to read about the places we visit, so he was reading a book by Mark Kurlansky called *The Basque History of the World*. It talks about how Magellan died in the Philippines, but it was his Basque second-in-command that completed the trip. And how the Basques resisted Romanization, the Visigoths and the Muslims; and that they were the first commercial whalers. So I learned all this history about the Basques.

Then I studied abroad in Spain my sophomore year of college, and that was what cemented [my interest] because I was reading about the conflict in the Basque region. Every night I would watch TV with my host family, and every night we would hear about some ETA leader being captured. Learning about that, I saw the Spanish perspective. I had already read about a more Basque-friendly perspective, and I saw the conflict between the two and wanted to explore that more.

INQ: Why was it important to do a film about the Basque culture and the language specifically?

AB: I think the language is the most significant part of their culture, and it's what most Basques use to define their culture. I think the Basques are a fascinating culture that is not well known; and when they are known, it's because of ETA. I wanted to educate people about the other side of Basque culture and show that ETA is really the minority. I think if you look at the conflict with the IRA or even look at the wars we're in now, a lot of it has to do with misunderstanding cultures. So if I can do something to spread interest in learning about the culture and educate people about who the Basques are, I think it can only help the situation.



Anna made use of a TV dinner table for a makeshift work station at her hostel in San Sebastián, Spain.

INQ: Have you always been interested in film?

AB: I first became interested my junior year of high school. I was accepted to Saint Paul's School's Advanced Studies Program [in Concord, NH] to spend the summer studying some subject intensely. So I spent five weeks doing mass media, and I got to make short films and clips. That was when I decided I had a knack for this, or at least an interest. I didn't know what I really wanted to do when I came to college, but I enjoyed making films so much that I got involved with SCAN TV [at UNH] and that's when I got into making more films. Then I did an internship with Ken Burns, which cemented my interest in documentary.

INQ: How did the internship come about?

AB: I didn't know Ken Burns was in New Hampshire, but I've always been interested in history and academics. I was talking with Lisa McFarlane, the head of the Honors Program at the time, and told her how much I wanted to do film, and she suggested I contact him. She knew Ken and his writer, Dayton Duncan, because they were on the board of the New Hampshire Humanities Council together, so she was the one who got me in contact with Florentine Films.

INQ: How did the internship help you conceive and complete this project?

AB: They made sure I got something out of the experience, that it wasn't just doing menial work. The executive editor spent a whole day going over different films he had made, shot by shot, explaining all his decisions. The writer spent time explaining his process. I sat down with Ken Burns for an afternoon to pick his brain about why he makes films, his inspirations, and his thoughts. So I got an idea of what the industry is like, at least Ken Burns' industry, which is unique. I also sat down with the editors, who taught me how to edit. They would explain why they were doing the things they were doing, what they were thinking, what the process was. And they taught me how to use the editing software, so that really gave me a foundation to understand what is involved in making a documentary and what different problems I might come across.

When I was talking with Ken Burns, he said, "When you make your first film, or start out making films, you're definitely going to make mistakes. You just have to be aware that you're going to come across these mistakes and deal with it. It's not going to be the end of the world and you just move on from there." So I knew coming into this project that it was going to be difficult. I thought, *no, I'm going to rise above it*. But I made mistakes, and I learned to live with them or work around them.



Anna traveled around the Basque countryside to film images such as this one taken in the Valley of Leizaran.

INQ: Was there a single piece of advice or tip or trick you learned that stuck with you through this project?

AB: When Paul Barns, the executive editor, was explaining the entire editing process, I took a lot of notes. I tried to remember his strategies of editing with music: don't be completely predictable and make sure that if you're introducing something that's important, give people a chance to pause, to grasp that information and make sure things aren't too busy. So I tried using that [advice] in editing.

INQ: You mentioned in the introduction to the film that this was a two-year project. Can you give us a brief timeline?

AB: I studied abroad my sophomore year of college [2006–2007], and that was when I started thinking about [UNH's] International Research Opportunities Program (IROP). I knew

I wanted to make a documentary, but I didn't know what the subject would be. I was talking with friends, and that was when it finally came to me that I was so interested in the Basques, why not document their lives and their struggles? I was awarded the IROP grant in fall 2007 and spent all of my junior year preparing for this. Then in the summer of 2008 I went [to Spain] and did the interviews and the filming, and then I came back and started editing. I spent a lot of time reviewing the footage to get a grasp on what I had to work with. Then I went about editing it until I finally finished the day before the première.

INQ: How much filming did you do while you were in Spain?

AB: It was sporadic. I didn't have contacts at first, so at the beginning it was about finding people to interview. It started out slow because it was rainy. But when it was nice I would go film on the beach, or I would hike up a mountain and film. Unfortunately, the weather in St. Sebastian was really rainy, and then when it wasn't rainy it was often very hazy because it was so hot, so finding good days to film the mountains was rather impossible.

INQ: Could you speak to the actual filming process? Were you lugging around a lot of equipment by yourself?

AB: I had a professional camera and tripod, and they are both very heavy. Huge! So carrying those around was definitely a nuisance. I barely fit in the elevator to my apartment. Everyone in Spain carries around tiny little things; they don't carry around a lot of stuff. So I was this tall redhead walking around with these gigantic bags. I tried to enlist help from other people when I could, but most of the time it was solo.

At first I thought, *This is a student film, maybe it will be artsy if I just hold the camera.* I tried not using the tripod, but I soon realized that that was no good, because while doing an interview you want to nod or say something to encourage people but every time I nod the camera moves. So I decided I had to grin and bear it and carry the tripod. When I did the log chopping scene, I didn't bring my tripod because my friend drove me up on a moped and I didn't have space to carry it. The entire time during filming I was just holding the camera up in the air; my arms wanted to fall apart. In retrospect I would have done more pushups before filming.



Anna's view of the wood-chopping competition in Igeldo, where three teams of two men each chopped wood for 20 minutes straight.

INQ: You're fluent in Spanish?

AB: I can manage. I don't think I'm completely fluent, but I'm proficient.

INQ: But you translated all the interviews yourself?

AB: Yes. I had a Spanish professor go through and check my translations—there was a word here and there I didn't understand, but I translated everything.

INQ: So, have you started to try to learn Euskera?

AB: It's an agglutinated language...

INQ: That's a great word.

AB: Yeah. Where English has almost a million words, Euskera has roughly 200,000. But they have around 200 suffixes. So their language adds suffixes to words so that an expression like "Going to the northeast coast" is one word. They just have one word that they keep adding things to. So it's a whole other way of constructing a language. It's a bit challenging. I learned "hello," "goodbye," and "thank you." And that's kind of where I left it.

The first few days I was there, I interacted with a lot of people who were Spanish and consider themselves Spanish and not Basque but they still said hello and goodbye in Euskera, which I thought was interesting because I assumed there was going to be some contention between the two languages. But it seemed like the Spaniards living in the Basque region had no problem adopting some of the language.

INQ: What was one of the most surprising cultural aspects of being in the Basque region?

AB: I was surprised by how infrequently I heard Euskera. Even though it's such an important part of their identity, I was surprised I could get around speaking Spanish. I think one of the coolest things I went to was the *Noche de San Juan*—the longest night of the year. They spend the whole night dancing around bonfires, and it was cool to see that even though people talk about how they live life pretty much like the Spaniards, they have

these very strong Basque customs. And at all of these places, even though they are celebrating all these wonderful things, there are banners all over the place talking about releasing Basques prisoners. Everywhere you go, there is this pressure that they need to separate from Spain.

INQ: The sub–title to the movie is “Beyond the Bombs.” You are saying, *Yes, ETA is there, but that’s not important, that’s not everything.* Do you think you’ll continue that angle? Are you done with the Basques? Would you go back?

AB: I would love to go back to the Basque region. I have friends there and I keep telling them, if they find me a job I’m totally up for it. I’m not exactly sure where I’m headed right now, but I definitely don’t want to stop doing things with the Basque culture because I loved living in the Basque region and found the people to be very warm and welcoming and I think the culture is fascinating. The more I study them, the more I appreciate them.

Click here to see a clip of Anna Bruning’s documentary, [Omendu Basques: Beyond the Bombs](#)

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Author Bios

Matthew Kingston is no stranger to travel. His academic studies have taken him around the world from his hometown of Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Seattle, Rome, London, Maine, and now Durham. He earned bachelor’s degrees in business administration and English at the University of Washington in Seattle, and a master’s degree in English at the University of Maine. Now a graduate student at the University of New Hampshire, Matt is working toward a master’s of fine arts in creative writing with a concentration in fiction. Though he describes writing as his “one true love,” he also is fascinated by painting, sculpture, and music. A self–described coffee addict, Matt hopes to become a writer and professor sometime in the next five years. If that’s not possible, however, he will settle for pursuing a doctorate in literature while working toward that ultimate goal.

A native of Kingsley, Michigan, **Travis Taylor** came to the University of New Hampshire to pursue a master’s of fine arts in creative writing, focusing on fiction. He completed his undergraduate degree in fiction and philosophy at Grand Valley State University in southern Michigan. Travis became an assistant editor for *Inquiry* in the fall of 2008 because he likes working with both writers and the editors that work with writers in developing a piece of writing. When he’s not reading fiction by authors such as William Faulkner, Charles Baxter and Stephen King, Travis enjoys running, kayaking and canoeing. He also enjoys attending plays and musicals and watching the Chicago Bears. In the coming years, Travis plans to finish his master’s degree along with his novel, for which he hopes to find a publisher, in addition to starting a family with his wife of five years.