2015 TEDx University of Richmond

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“I love TED talks. They’re these short and pithy glimpses of life,” Timothy Donahue, a participant of UR’s first TEDx event, said in consideration of the inaugural presentation. He echoed the event’s theme of exploration by referencing his favorite poem by Rainer Rilke: “it’s been a journey of widening rings, walking over and around things.”

Thanks to the efforts of a proactive group of students, Thursday, November 12, 2015 marked the first time a TEDx event has been held at UR. The event hosted a group of speakers engaging with attendees on the topic of exploration. For two hours, students, faculty, and visitors listened to personal successes—earning a PhD at age 58 or even participating in the Olympics—all in an effort to foster discussion on campus.

For years, Molly Field, Community Engagement Program Manager for the Chaplaincy and Interim Deputy Title IX Coordinator, had wanted (to organize) a TEDx event at UR. Field describes the platform as the “Youtube of inspirational stuff,” and often uses her favorite talks for programs that she organizes. “Peer institutions,” she adds “host their own [TEDx events] so why not us?”

For Yoo, exploration came in the form of learning a new language. He first started to learn English in elementary school and would bother his classmate, Jessica, for help. Eventually, “Jessica got annoyed,” and she took a less active role in giving Yoo answers to workbook exercises and instead empowered him to discover the language for himself.

Conveniently enough, Yoo had “heard through the grapevine that [Field] had been trying to do a TEDx event on campus,” so when Yoo obtained a TEDx license “it was natural for [them] to get together.” From there, Yoo recruited fellow students to organize the event with the sponsorship of the Chaplaincy.

The students shared the same goal of wanting to bring TEDx for the benefit of students. “Just like a businessman can go to an art museum and appreciate Picasso,” Yoo explains so too could attendees “find inspiration in ideas different from what they’re involved in on campus.”

Ryan Fox, sophomore and member of the organizing board, reports wanting to “broaden students’ perspectives” while working with different campus resources, including the Chaplaincy and the student government associations.

Maren Miller, sophomore and TEDx leader, was similarly excited to organize the event because of the opportunity to learn something that you didn’t know before. She explains that “especially for this [TEDx], you have the time to absorb what you’re learning. You don’t have to take notes. There’s no paper due the next day, and you become completely engaged in what someone’s talking about.”

As it was an ambitious event, Yoo explains there was “lots of doubt of not pulling it off.” From the administrative standpoint, the committee originally wanted to host the event in the Modlin Center for the Arts, but because of the flooding of the theaters in the building, the event had to be rescheduled for a different day and time. Although the difference was by only one day, a couple of speakers were forced to withdraw from participating.

Even with the difficulty of scheduling speakers, sophomore David Painter served as the TEDx point of contact for the presenters and reached out to over 100 candidates. He ultimately arranged for six speakers to come and present at the inaugural event, including a three-time Olympic skier and an orthopedic researcher. “As per TEDx values,” Painter explains, “I aimed for a diverse group of speakers, so I targeted politicians, athletes, musicians, businesspeople, academics, etc.”

Miller adds that they would “find out about legal matters like speaker contracts during the process” without knowing the exact method of progressing through the TEDx process, “especially since we’re a new organization on campus.”

Once the speakers arrived on campus, a new world of complications came with them. Miller said that as soon as the visitors stepped on campus, they, as TEDx facilitators, assumed responsibility of them. “You have to know what they’re doing on campus and
where they are—really having a complete itinerary for them.”

Nonetheless, the TEDx committee opened registration at 6:00 p.m. on October 19. Within four minutes, the event was sold out. Yoo and his team offered students to sign up for a waiting list or to gain entry based on will call the day of the event. Yoo and the committee were happy to know that UR community members were so excited for the event.

The TEDx event began with an introduction by Yoo himself. He shared a story from when he was first learning English in elementary school and would bother his classmate Jessica for help. Eventually, “Jessica got annoyed,” and she took a less active role in giving Yoo answers to workbook exercises and instead empowered him to discover the language for himself. His anecdote opened up the theme for the TEDx discussion: exploration.

Yoo proceeded to invite to the stage the day’s myriad speakers starting with Andy Stefanovich, a speaker, author, consultant and Richmond’s TEDx facilitator. Stefanovich took to the stage and focused on talking about his exploration of time with family. He started by asking members of the audience to visualize life with a set of parentheses interjected in between: “Life,” as it were. To Stefanovich, the empty parentheses symbolized an opening to “put more life in your life.” As an example of imperfect outcomes of planned events, he offered a family trip to New York City filled with spontaneous outings to specialty restaurants and leaving a Yankee’s game. To him, the “imperfect is perfect,” and a loud dinner and leaving the Yankee’s record-setting game allowed him to spend more time with his wife and children. Stefanovich ended his talk by asking the audience members to similarly explore life’s unexpected moments.

Dr. Timothy Donahue, assistant professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), followed Stefanovich’s talk with a more academic focus. “You aren’t yourself at 22 or even 28,” Donahue introduced as he spoke about discovering his passion for physiological psychology later in his undergraduate career. He nonetheless continued higher education and received a Master of Education from VCU to then teach AP Psychology at Henrico High School in Henrico for 34 years: “You’ll never know where you’ll end up, and young people need to hear that” Donahue added.

Donahue still wasn’t done exploring, though. He would take classes over the summers and during the school year, receiving a grant to tour neuroscience labs throughout the country. Inspired by the work he saw, Donahue decided to retire from teaching high school to pursue a PhD program in biopsychology at VCU, which he admits is not “anyone’s idea of a retirement plan.” However, he hopes that “students are thinking ‘Hey that’s a guy who got a PhD at age 58!’ and hopefully that’s inspirational.”

Following Donahue, Yoo ushered a series of speakers to the stage. Tracy Evans, a three-time Olympian and casting director for AthleteSource Casting, advised attendees to “take an idea, turn it into an action and to follow through with the commitment to impact someone’s life.” To her, exploration meant to discover a passion and cultivate that passion into a means to help others.

Orthopedic surgeon, Kenneth Zaslav, M.D., followed Evans. Zaslav discussed cutting-edge discoveries in orthopedic surgery, highlighting the use of stem cells to help repair articular cartilage. “What truly matters to me are my patients,” Zaslav said, and he attributed his exploration of new surgical techniques as a way to accelerate the recuperation of his patients.

The next two speakers represented different departments at UR. Chris von Ruden, assistant professor of leadership, spoke about his anthropologic studies on status hierarchy and leadership in small-scale societies. His exploration of different cultures has provided information on how larger-scale societies function with particular interest on “conspicuous consumption.” Thus far, he has observed a positive correlation between stress and status, and “in human hierarchies, we attribute dominance to prestige.” Von Ruden concluded his presentation in saying, “there’s an Australian fashion company called Stress Anxiety, and to me, that says it all.”

Lastly, Martha Merritt, Dean of International Education at UR, discussed her travels abroad. She cited the journals of Alexis de Tocqueville as a means to explore foreign countries—“to focus on people, not places,” as Tocqueville did. Merritt, for instance, mentioned a trip to Cairo: “Palm trees, sunshine, talking about fear and implications of a changing government.” To her, those conversations made Cairo memorable. Based on his works and her personal journeys abroad, Merritt encouraged the audience to “meet people, talk to them take the paths they walk and write about it nearly every day,” and in that way, one can explore new cultures and new ways of life.

The organization looks forward to planning next year’s event, especially with the greater liberty they’ll receive from TED’s regulations. Until then, the group expresses their satisfaction in offering the speakers to start conversations among the attendees. “The point is that after the TEDx event,” Yoo explains, “it’s up to the people. I can’t explore for anyone else.”