

Creative energy, determination drive student's inspired projects

Part of a series profiling undergraduate researchers provided by University of Pittsburgh Office of the Provost.

By Niki Kapsambelis

When Elana Schlenker was preparing to go to London as part of her study-abroad program, she went searching for a travel guide to suit her personality: something funky that would offer tips on where to shop, practical advice such as using an American hair dryer on a European circuit, and ideas for places to shop or visit that weren't tourist traps.

She came up empty-handed, but not discouraged. Instead of settling for something she didn't want, she decided to make her own, using notes she took on her trip.

The result was a dazzling 80-plus page book, complete with wall-mounted visuals, which Schlenker produced with the help of a grant from the Office of Experiential Learning and presented at the Studio Arts Department's annual student exhibition in 2006.

"It was just me sitting and writing," says Schlenker, a double major in studio arts and marketing, who is scheduled to graduate this spring after completing dual degrees, a feat that requires more academic credits and organizational chutzpah than the average undergraduate experience. "It seemed like a fun project, something that would be useful."

Delanie Jenkins, who has worked with Schlenker in the Studio Arts Department, says such results are characteristic of Schlenker, who brings an abundance of creative energy to any project she dreams up — and there are many.

"She thinks things up on her own," says Jenkins. "She moves forward, draws in other people, builds community around an idea, and sets it free and lets it happen. She's incredibly resourceful and motivated."

Professionally, Schlenker is interested in graphic design, and hopes to one day work in art direction for a magazine or publisher.

"I never intended to be an art major, but my whole life, people always assumed I would do art. I have preschool teachers who come up to me and say they remember my drawings," she says. "Marketing comes into play doing advertising. I thought it was sort of a good combination, understanding the business side, especially if I wanted to get into management."

Originally from Kutztown, Pa., Schlenker was drawn to Pitt by the opportunity to study abroad, as well as the chance to attend a good school that was

affordable and far enough from home to appeal to her sense of adventure. Once she arrived, she found that she was able to further tap into her imagination with the help of research grants and independent study.

"If you have something you're excited about, (Pitt is) excited to let you do that," she says. Funding "is there, and I believe in taking advantage."

As a junior, she first dreamed of her current project when a friend's mural, painted in downtown Pittsburgh as part of a competitive program, was ignored by local media.

"I was a little ticked off, and that was my motivation," she says. The result was *The Original* magazine, a student publication that she expects to have ready for distribution in March.

That's vintage Elana, Jenkins notes.

"If you were ever to say no to Elana, or 'That's a ridiculous idea,' she would probably go out of her way to prove you wrong. There is no stone unturned for her. A barrier is something to go over, or around, or through," Jenkins says. "There are few students who approach (projects) like that and take the time to do the research. She's exceptional in how far she takes it."

Schlenker hopes *The Original* will fill a niche by presenting creative ideas from multiple sources.

"The long story short is I made the magazine to promote students and faculty on campus who are doing interesting things," Schlenker says. "It's really for everybody, because I think the idea behind a liberal arts education is that you learn from many disciplines, and we're trying to reflect that."

Thanks to Schlenker's art background — sharpened by a summer internship at *Esopus* magazine in New York — drives *The Original's* design, while her business acumen helped the project win approximately \$4,500 from the student government. The magazine hopes to raise a total of \$17,000 to print its desired quality and quantity, and has applied for a grant from Pittsburgh's Sprout Fund, which supports grassroots projects.

Eventually, Schlenker hopes the magazine will publish once or twice a semester and generate advertising revenue. Another undergraduate student is already preparing to take the reins when she graduates.

"It's so young right now. The first issue took forever, but once we get it down, hopefully it will increase to twice a semester, as long as the money's there," says Schlenker. "I'm pretty proud of it, and what everyone's done for it."



Photo by Ben Filio

Undergraduate Elana Schlenker applies a unique view of the world to her research design projects.

CHANGING THE FACE OF RESEARCH

Undergraduate students at Pitt have more opportunities:

- ◆ To work with world-renowned researchers
- ◆ To explore the important questions of our time
- ◆ To share in the joy of exploration and discovery

It's no wonder undergraduates are changing the face of research at Pitt.

For more information on Pitt's opportunities for undergraduate research, visit www.pitt.edu/~UGR.

Undergraduate
Excellence in Research



University of Pittsburgh