

AT WORK

The Magnum Opus of

ONE OF THE MOST transformational journeys in my life began while I was standing in front of a class of first-year college students at the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford in the fall of 2017 with a question echoing in my mind: “Who is Generation Z?”

Four years later, I’m still synthesizing the answer with The Gen Z Time Capsule, a global online participatory project that I recently launched in collaboration with the Learning and Public Engagement department at The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Like with any great journey or pursuit of an answer, it’s not only about the destination; the real magic happens along the winding branches on your way there.

Walking into that freshman seminar course, I thought we were still in the Land of Millennials. I was unaware that we had only moments earlier crossed a new threshold on campus. When I playfully referred to my students as Millennials, they corrected me: “We’re Gen Z!”

An uncharted universe suddenly expanded in front of me. I would spend the next several months beginning to decipher this heuristic new tide. And I haven’t stopped since.

While at the Ed School in 2001–2002, I had my foray into researching the world of young people — at that time, they were Millennials — when I wrote *Black-Out: Unpacking the Meanings of the Black Clothing Worn by the Youths at the Harvard Square T-Stop* for Mica Pollock’s course, Youth Culture(s): Building Difference, Breaking it Down. The weeks I spent interviewing teenagers in Harvard Square planted a seed.

Fifteen years later, Gen Zers — born between 1997 and 2012 — captivated me with their raw honesty in courageously sharing their stories unlike any generation before them, especially pertaining to mental health.

I was now an explorer, determined to excavate layer by layer.

From the start, as essays were handed in and presentations given, my students told me about their anxiety, depression, fears, struggles with sexuality, addictions, bullying, miscarriages, eating disorders, abuse, cutting, rapes, disabilities, encounters with racism, seeing friends gunned down, having to get jobs as their family’s main breadwinners, and surviving cancer, as well as the parents, coaches, and teachers who had berated them as “too dumb,” “too lazy,” “worthless.”

And, for the first time in my academic career, a few students confided that they were contemplating suicide. Eventually, one would die by suicide. Yet, the challenges these young people have endured aren’t what sets them apart from previous generations. What differentiates them is their fearlessness in speaking aloud “suicide,” “anxiety,” “depression,” “rape.”

In smashing through stigmas by saying the words and inspiring the rest of us — for whom such topics were taboo and stifled — to follow suit, Generation Z is gifting the world with the biggest leap forward ever in mental health advocacy. And they’re providing me with a rare, eye-witness master class.

Their example emboldened me, a 48-year-old Gen Xer, to go public with my own lifelong struggle with anxiety, as well as to speak about my family’s long-hushed history of suicides and the ripples there dating back generations. My students have reinforced for me that we each have a platform, beginning with our voices.

Equally potent is the way in which Gen Zers are processing their traumas to fortify themselves. What they’re doing in 18 years to translate challenges into strength has taken me more than four decades to understand.

These were the foundational roots of The Gen Z Time Capsule to come, long before The Warhol Museum and I conceived it. Yet, I was already collecting.

A teacher’s journey documenting his students lives led to The Gen Z Time Capsule collaboration with The Andy Warhol Museum

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Gen Z



Schlimm channeling his inner Warhol in the lobby of the museum

At the start of the fall 2018 semester, I handed my new first-year students two blank sketchbooks with only one rule: Nothing is off limits!

Four months later, the sketchbooks were filled with their humor, fears, venting, scribbles, conversations, declarations, scriptures, F-bombs, favorite quotes, tic-tac-toe games, acronyms I had to Google, and, of course, the sketch of a penis that another student later modestly covered with masking tape (which made me chuckle and reminded me that while wise beyond their years, these students were still teens prone to mischief).

I was continuing to discover, layer by layer.

2019. Inspired by the 610 time capsules that Andy Warhol had assembled in cardboard boxes, I kicked off the fall semester by handing each of my students a large manila envelope. I instructed them to fill their envelopes. Just before finals week, everyone shared the contents of their first-year time capsules. Sunglasses. Math tests. A laminated casino card. *Guitar World*. A Nerf dart. SpongeBob drawings. Domestic violence booklet. A parking ticket. More pieces of the Gen Z puzzle fell into place, and I inched closer to the larger oeuvre that soon would spark.

Also, throughout these past few years, any time I've traveled — from spending the day with students at Newtown High School in Connecticut to group discussions at universities across Iowa — Gen Zers everywhere added colorful new brushstrokes to my canvas.

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However, as I also shared my adulation for Gen Zers with older adults for whom this generation often remains both stereotype and enigma, I realized that I had to be careful to not place them on pedestals like precious figurines to be oohed and aahed at. That would be unfair, and antithetical to who they are: authentically and unapologetically imperfect.

In fact, the more I understand Generation Z, the more questions I have for them, like “What’s the real deal behind your Finsta accounts?”; “How has your generation navigated the pandemic?”; and “Since Gen Zers are so open about mental health struggles, then why does your generation have the highest suicide rate?” There’s much unpacking left to be done.

On the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, I shared my Gen Z work with Nicole Dezelon, associate director of learning at The Warhol Museum. I suggested we collaborate on something that would be a living, breathing, evolving portrait of Generation Z and further help these young people reveal themselves to the world.

In the spirit of Warhol’s prolific interest in pop culture and personalities, and as a follow-up to his museum’s groundbreaking Collecting Youth Culture: 15 Minutes Eternal project, during the fall of 2020, The Warhol Museum and I launched

the first phase of The Gen Z Time Capsule project on the museum’s website. In that space, we invite all Gen Zers to submit photos and videos of items, activities, places, and people most important to them. In a full-circle moment, my students were among the first to contribute.

The Gen Z Time Capsule is now in an ongoing second phase where we are still collecting submissions while also curating them and populating the time capsule with content, spanning categories like art, music, fashion, gaming, social media, politics/current events, food, and mental health. Our third phase is exhibiting the contents of the time capsule for public viewing online, where it will grow indefinitely, each addition a new clue.

I’m not a social scientist, nor a formal researcher or marketer, so I’ll leave the clinical analysis and commercialization of Gen Z up to those folks. My pedagogy as teacher and advocate is much simpler: I always ask my students, “What do you want me to tell the world about your generation?”

The replies are consistent: “We just want respect and people to listen to us.”

So, I respect and listen, and learn. In doing so, I find the better angels of my own nature. All the while answering, “Who is Generation Z?”