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Facing Facts

Liisa Silander
Rhode Island School of Design

Simone Solondz
Rhode Island School of Design, ssolondz@risd.edu

RISD XYZ
Rhode Island School of Design, risdxyz@risd.edu

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FACING FACTS

Andrew Freiband
and a team of alumni
work with USAID to
humanize the impact
of extreme poverty.



by Silander/Solondz

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE IN EXTREME POVERTY for your entire life? How does chronic deprivation affect the body? And the mind?

Over the summer **Andrew Freiband** '97 FAV and a small team of fellow alumni got a clearer sense of not only what it means to live in poverty, but how it feels. At the same time, they got an intense schooling in what's at stake when a well-respected Western organization like the US Agency for International Development (USAID) attempts to communicate about the estimated one billion people worldwide living in extreme poverty. And the learning went both ways as the team of alumni convinced decision-makers at USAID to reconsider their latest approach to bringing attention to "Extreme Poverty."

The project got off the ground last spring when several representatives from the new Global Development Lab at USAID visited RISD to sit in on FAV crits and attend the junior and senior film screenings. "They were intrigued by our critical culture and our process," explains Freiband, a longtime adjunct faculty member who has a background in immersive and humanizing storytelling through film and is serving as an assistant professor of Film/Animation/Video this year. The professional aid workers were especially inspired by studio walls covered with notes and drawings detailing the thinking that goes on at RISD.

Wanting to communicate more effectively about its own work, USAID invited Freiband to propose ways to get RISD involved in its major biannual event in Washington, DC—the *Frontiers in Development* forum, an early fall gathering of global thought leaders and practitioners in the development field.

"This represented a surprising openness to art, design and critical thinking from a federal agency," Freiband says, explaining that after lobbying ideas back and forth, USAID agreed to fund an "artist research and exchange project—something like a residency." To gauge interest, he solicited portfolios from current students and recent grads, receiving "a tremendous response" in less than two weeks and confirming that "there's a huge appetite in the RISD community for this kind of profound, big-picture work."

"USAID wanted to humanize the amazing work they're doing," Freiband explains, "and to communicate with forum participants that they're connecting to art and culture." So, with the explicit goal of making work in response to USAID's theme for the 2014 event—eliminating extreme poverty in the next 15 years—Freiband invited two former students with multidisciplinary practices, **Peter Pa** '11 FAV and **Nathalie Jolivet** '12 BArch, to join him in traveling to Bangladesh and Malawi to meet people who are struggling to survive on a daily basis.

Just as the RISD trio was about to travel abroad in July, USAID lost the primary event producer contracted for the September forum—and turned to Freiband to up his commitment beyond contributing to a single exhibit. "I was suddenly asked to produce the whole event," he says. "This meant organizing information panels, presentation spaces, projection spaces and stations for 80 USAID partners to set up and exhibit their materials or stage demonstrations—across more than 10,000 square feet of exhibition space at USAID headquarters."

“We tried to go there as blank slates and then respond naturally to what we found.”

Andrew Freiband 97 FAV

IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

In what proved to be a whirlwind two months, Freiband, Pa and Jolivert not only met and connected with individuals living in extreme poverty, they then returned to the US to produce a breathtaking multimedia event that gave forum participants a very real feel for the individuals at the heart of the matter.

The team’s idea from the start was to zero in on personal stories about poverty as a means of translating more abstract concepts and statistics into something forum participants could relate to on a deep level. “Focusing on one person’s experience allows each of us to become more engaged,” Freiband says.

“You can expand on that story so it becomes a metaphor for the larger one you’re trying to tell, but if the narrative starts out being about hundreds of thousands of people, it’s harder for people to pay attention.”

In other words, “we had to persuade USAID to turn their narrative on its head,” Freiband explains. One way of doing this emerged in Malawi, where the RISD trio hoped to experience something close to the reality of village life as a means of understanding rural poverty at its most intense. While a visit by USAID reps typically inspires joyous song and celebration

among villagers, his team wanted to see behind the veneer.

“It was a learning process for all of us,” he explains. “We tried to go there as blank slates and then respond naturally to what we found. And USAID was incredibly accommodating in helping us have that immersive experience.”

Rather than following typical protocol—arriving in a white van and spending an hour in the village asking people to fill out questionnaires—Freiband, Pa and Jolivert showed up equipped with cameras, paint and other art supplies. “We wanted to use art—as opposed to detached questionnaires—to collect concrete data about the human condition,” Freiband explains.

In the villages, when kids would follow them out of curiosity, the RISD team would give them a few art supplies and ask them to draw anything they wanted to. The results? Just like American children their counterparts in Malawi made pictures of “cars, superheroes and helicopters,” Freiband reports, “even though they’ve never seen these things and don’t have TV or reliable electricity. But that commonality is exactly the point: these children are not exotic foreigners; they’re ordinary human beings just like the rest of us.”

Peter Pa 11 FAV (*right*) showing some of his smart phone photos to curious kids in Mali. He and **Andrew Freiband** 97 FAV

(*below*) traveled to both Mali and Bangladesh with **Nathalie Jolivert** BArch 12 to get a better feel for the realities of living in extreme poverty.





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In under six weeks, a core group of alumni pulled together a powerful, multimedia visual presentation for USAID's 2014 *Frontiers in Development* forum, held in September in Washington, DC.



Freiband's team also had the opportunity to visit university-level art students in both countries, working with them on tapestries and other group projects. And despite cultural differences, he was struck by how much "artists everywhere share a similar self-image as outsiders," he says. "Our USAID colleagues saw that and understood for the first time what it means to be part of an artistic community and how valuable it is to connect with artists in order to tackle complex social problems."

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

To mount the September event in DC, Freiband turned to a number of other RISD alumni—including multidisciplinary designer **Andy Chen** MFA 12 GD of Isometric Studio, a former student of Freiband's with a longstanding interest in humanitarian causes. Together, they worked to design graphics, build custom furniture and staging, install special lighting and hang a series of 20-foot banners, among other

things. Freiband exhibited two pieces—in photography and video—with Jolivet making a 17 x 9-foot allegorical tapestry and Pa contributing a large sculptural piece integrating the work of students in Malawi and Bangladesh.

In pulling off an event "unlike anything USAID has done before," Freiband says, Chen and his business partner at Isometric, Waqas Jawaid, really rose to the challenge. "People walked into the exhibition hall and were simply floored," he says, noting that among those people were US Secretary of State **John Kerry** and former British Prime Minister **Tony Blair**.

"In the end, I'm very pleased with how it all came together," Freiband sums up—"with how our team of alums performed above and beyond every expectation and with how USAID itself left us huge openings to create work that was not static or constrained." That's precisely the kind of collaboration needed to help convey the urgency of solving this complex humanitarian crisis. ■



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