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A roadtrip that never ended

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Not everyone has it all figured out by graduation. The uncertainty that accompanies a college degree can plague even the most focused and driven student. This uncertainty led UCLA alumna Amanda Gall and Pepperdine University alumni Mike Marriner, Nathan Gebhard and Brian McAllister to max out their credit cards and say, "Why not just go on a roadtrip?"

In 2001, the four grads set out in a Day-Glo green RV with a spontaneously painted-on blue stripe. During that original trip, they filmed a multitude of interviews on the road with everyone ranging from former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to Manny the lobsterman from Maine. After figure-eighting the entire United States, they had amassed a total of 82 videotaped interviews.

From this, Roadtrip Nation, a grassroots movement aimed at the college demographic, was born.

"It wasn't an idea as much as a frustration - with parents always telling you what to do ... society can put so much on us," McAllister said over a long-distance phone call from the RTN headquarters in Costa Mesa, Calif.

They booked the majority of their interviews pre-road trip, while the remainder transpired in the spur of the moment. McAllister said he was taken aback at how willing prominent people were to be interviewed by random 20-something-year-olds. They even arranged for an interview with the chairman of Starbucks over a cup of coffee.

Within the informal context of the interviews, the interviewees became very candid and down to earth, dispensing advice and seeming to empathize with the younger generation. The road-trippers soon learned that these impressively successful people didn't necessarily have it all figured out when they were in their college years. For instance, the scientist who discovered the human genome revealed in his interview how all he wanted to do after college was surf.

Upon returning home, Gall left the project to pursue her passion for teaching. The rest of them, no less confused about their futures but inspired by the interviews, decided to take the 456 hours of videotape they had gathered and edit it into a documentary that they would show on college campuses with the hopes of inspiring other students like them. This led to media coverage and a book deal, after which the guys decided to bring their documentary to a few production companies. However, some producers wanted to take a more scripted approach to the content.

"[We] didn't want the message to get lost in all the reality crap," he said. "There's enough 'Laguna Beach' and 'Real World' shows on TV as there is."

When they first met with WNET, the station that eventually launched the series, they were rejected and ridiculed for their poor filming and lighting. After investing in a few good cameras from a local Fry's Electronics and putting their footage together with the iMovie software, they returned a year later and were given a time slot on New York's Channel 13.

Six years later, RTN is on a roll. They have published three books and their fourth season is airing on PBS. The "Legend" green RV has multiplied into three green RVs that have touched UK and Australian soil in addition to nearly every nook and cranny of the United States. These RVs are not to be perceived as mere mobile homes but as a sort of time capsule for all of the 550 or so interviews that have taken place over the last six years of road-tripping. It is RTN tradition that every interviewee gets to step into the RV and sign the ceiling with a phrase that spoke to them when they were 21.

Their message seems to really resonate on college campuses.

"RTN has received a lot of support from universities, because we're really applying what we learn on the road," McAllister said.

A new team of roadies is now embarking across the country to spread the RTN message to college campuses. This roadtrip launched from the Fashion Institute of Technology on September 25th. They stopped by NYU the following day to screen some new footage from the Australia and Southern U.S. road trips. They also stopped to tell people about the movement since any college student between the ages of 18 and 30 can apply to either be part of an RTN team or receive a grant to take their own "Indie Road Trip."

According to McAllister, the experience is well worth it.

"We learned in retrospect that we were networking without even knowing it and opening our eyes to a creative way in pursuing our passions," he said. "You can use [RTN] as an excuse to place a random phone call to someone you admire."

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