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Library Award Essay

Curiosity has always been one of my strongest personality traits, but it wasn't until I became immersed in American Studies that it became applicable to research. Taking my junior research proposal course gave me the option of pursuing a topic so long as it complied with the course objectives. I've always had a fascination with the local history as a New Jersey native, which ultimately led me to pursue my thesis on the state's oldest existing native community, the Ramapough Mountain Indians. Their long history, one overshadowed by racial interbreeding and European settlement, manifests itself today through their marginalization in dominant society. After discovering their ongoing battle with the government for federal recognition I became active in uncovering their enigmatic history, one branded by a low socioeconomic status and bereft of reservation rights.

This project required me to find interdisciplinary sources, primarily revolving around newspaper articles, government documents, and literature I found through the tribe's website. Surprisingly, the esoteric literature was accessible through the U.M. Libraries database. Additionally, I used the Academic Search Premier and JSTOR databases to find dated journal articles, using search terms like 'Jackson Whites' and their respective tribal name. While at home, having the opportunity to visit the Ramapough Indian tribal office and nearby Ringwood Public Library gave me access to exemplary documents including dated newspaper publications and books written by local historians.

Consulting with my American Studies professors enabled me to better comply with the thesis specifications. Taking the junior research seminar last spring under Professor Paoletti's guidance trained me to understand the specificity of research inquiry and to distinguish viable sources from otherwise. Meeting with Professor Caughey early last fall semester was pivotal to narrowing the topic to focus on the tribe's inside versus outside perceptions--an overarching theme in the fieldwork. This shift prompted me to find a balance of references that would include the tribe's voice as well as sympathetic outsiders, and those like the government who were mainly apathetic. Thus, my selection criteria had changed to focus more on contemporary works.

Perhaps the greatest benefits to my research were interviewing others and the power of word of mouth. My subject informants, grouped by tribal members and outsiders, were able to give me feedback regarding certain sources and refer me to other materials and contacts. Even through attending events like the university's American Indian Symposium I was able to establish connections and discover more information. What's more, digital sources like documentaries, including one produced by HBO this past summer, played a visual reminder in revealing the tribe's present circumstance. Essentially, being able to view material and talk to others inspired more ideas to ponder in this particular context.

The time and effort going toward this thesis made its completion one of the proudest moments of my college career. My careful scrutiny of the sources helped initiate a deep commitment to the subjects involved, igniting within me fervor to change this tribe's state of affairs. I developed an aptitude for learning to maintain integrity to the documents and interview subjects. Working with human participants taught me how to delve into sensitive subject material and how to inquire effectively to seek desired responses. Upon submitting my thesis to the interviewees as I had promised, the tribal chief connected me to a producer creating a documentary on the tribe and who wanted to interview me. He also connected me to the tribe's lawyer who offered me an internship opportunity for the summer. Overall, this opportunity led me to discovering the agency I had in committing to an active project, and how to effectively build relations which I am hopeful will last a long time.