

Syracuse University

## SURFACE

---

Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects    Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects

---

Spring 5-1-2013

### The Front Yard Economy

Jillian Iles D'Onfro  
*Syracuse University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://surface.syr.edu/honors\\_capstone](https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone)



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

D'Onfro, Jillian Iles, "The Front Yard Economy" (2013). *Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects*. 6.

[https://surface.syr.edu/honors\\_capstone/6](https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/6)

This Honors Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

## **The Front Yard Economy**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

Jillian Iles D'Onfro  
Candidate for B.S. Degree in Magazine Journalism  
and Renée Crown University Honors  
May 2013

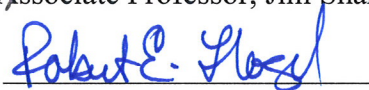
### **Honors Capstone Project in Magazine Journalism**

Capstone Project Advisor:



Associate Professor, Jim Shahin

Capstone Project Reader:



Professor of Practice, Robert Lloyd

Honors Director:



Stephen Kuusisto, Director

Date: April 24, 2012

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Body .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Project PDF.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Summary of Capstone Project.....</b>	<b>21</b>

## Abstract

I decided to write a longform, magazine style article about yard sale culture in America, especially as affected by the Great Recession. I wanted to humanize the devastation wrought by the economic downturn through my in-depth examination of the emotion and meaning involved in—and inherently a part of—yard sales. My story explores an important social issue through the personal lens of the (sometimes agonizing) choices we make as we decide what to keep and what to let go when a life transition spurs us to host a yard sale. It also reflects on the catharsis that can come from seeing a fragment of one's life become part of someone else's and demonstrates how yard sales connect people in various ways.

Along with researching, reporting, and writing this story, I also created a designed spread of what the piece would look like if it were actually published in a magazine. Finally, I created a web component for the project that utilizes a trendy web design technique called parallax scrolling. My spread can be viewed in printed PDF form and my website can be viewed at [www.jillianiles.com/finalcapstone.html](http://www.jillianiles.com/finalcapstone.html).

I found that the Great Recession affected yard sale culture in several ways. It increased the number of sales, bred more professional resellers, and brought an extra poignancy to the process of letting go.

## **Body (Reflective Essay)**

I spent countless Saturday and Sunday mornings of my youth jammed with my two sisters into the backseat of my dad's truck. We'd roll the windows down, blare his particular brand of folk-rock music, and cruise the streets looking for the telltale neon signs. The weekends meant yard sale adventures.

My dad loved pawing through other people's possessions, looking for treasures—maybe an odd trinket to bring home to my mom—and so I developed my obsession too. The once-loved objects of others felt more valuable to me because of the history behind them. Sometimes, my dad would leap out of the car before we could even unbuckle our seatbelts to survey the scene of a sale. After a quick sweep, he would either beckon us out or hop back in the car himself, deeming the overflowing boxes, heavily laden tables, and jam-packed shelves a “junk sale.” Looking back at my dad's tendency to “call” a sale after a precursory peek, I wondered about how the yard sale hosts live. How did the things that he or she was selling come into that person's life? We didn't visit the sale because it looked like “junk,” but what did those various objects mean to the person selling them?

When we look over a yard sale spread, we are drinking in part of that seller's story and getting an intimate look at an aspect of their life. This concept fascinates me. I wanted to explore the emotion inherent in hosting a sale, a seller's relationship to their “stuff,” and how even making the decision

to host a yard sale—generally linked in some way to transition—reveals something about a person’s life. Finally, I wanted to explore whether there was any sort of catharsis after hosting a yard sale.

I’m a magazine journalist with an ambition to work as a longform article writer one day, and so I figured that using the Capstone project to write a magazine article about yard sale culture would give me an opportunity to delve deeply into this topic that had so much been a part of my life since I was a young girl.

When I approached my advisor with my idea, I had, of course, already spent hours delving into my umbrella topic (“yard sales”) to see what other content was already out there. I remember marching into his office and detailing my desire to explore the deeper emotions and meaning at work at the average yard sale, with one caveat: I did *not* want to put my story into the context of the economy in any way shape or form. Funny to think about now, considering the hed of my piece literally reads “The Front Yard Economy.”

Because my advisor is a magazine professor with years of experience under his belt, he explained to me that, without the economy aspect, I would neglect one of the major staples of a piece of magazine journalism: timeliness. Why tell this story now?

At first I tried to argue that, because I would finish my story as the first signs of impending summer were creeping into Syracuse, my timeliness factor was simply the start of yet another yard sale season.

Workable? Maybe. People like yard sales and a regional magazine would probably publish a piece with that time hook, mostly because the idea is pretty evergreen on its own.

But would that be as powerful and important as tying the yard sale idea into a reflection on our now recovering economy? Absolutely not. I went into this project with the ambition of pitching my story to a national publication, and to do that I had to frame my yard sale ambitions within the context of a much larger idea.

Along with adding the timeliness element, bringing in the Great Recession would also make my piece more valuable to readers who didn't feel the effects of the economic downturn firsthand. It's hard to get an understanding of something so huge by hearing an endless string of numbers or through the context of foreclosures, bad credit, and the housing market. By looking at the Great Recession through the in-depth examination of yard sales, I could humanize the topic in a way that almost everyone has encountered. Most people don't know someone who went bankrupt during the Great Recession, but so many have experienced a yard sale, whether on the seller or "sailor" end.

Once I had solidified my topic, I had to figure out how to approach writing a story of this length (previously my longest journalistic piece clocked in at about 1,000 words and I was aiming for *New York Times Magazine* story length: around 3,000).

Since I first fell in love with magazines, I've read a large number of longform pieces and found myself especially moved by stories with a specific structure. The most effective magazine pieces pulled me into a broad idea by first putting a "face" in front of me. That personal story acts as an access point, getting the reader easily, effortlessly into the piece before the "harder" facts start coming in. Moreover, the best magazine pieces generally start with a scene lede. By beginning the journey through a piece with a vivid mental image of some aspect of it, the reader immediately becomes engrossed in the world that the journalist is trying to setup and explore for (and with) him or her.

My hunt for the perfect "face" and scene lede began last spring. I wanted to get to know the yard sale hosting process intimately by being a "fly on the wall" through someone's setup, watching as they struggled to decide what to keep and what to sell. This meant that I couldn't simply scour the paper Friday nights and attend sales Saturday mornings to try to capture the perfect scene lede; I needed to make contact early. Craigslist became my best friend in this process. I would check the local yard sale listings and send a message explaining my project to anyone who had posted their information several weeks before their sale. I sent out about 100 queries and only heard back from a handful of people. Some plans fell through but others didn't, and I had the opportunity to explore several stories in an up-close, personal way. One of my major obstacles in this process, however, was my limited window



of time. I spent the past summer in New York City and the fall semester in Istanbul.

Although, I did find and visit several sales in New York City (which I documented on my blog, [yardsalestories.tumblr.com](http://yardsalestories.tumblr.com)) I didn't make any attempt to contact anyone for an in-depth interview. I knew that I wanted my piece to work for a national audience. The New York City yard sale experience is unique enough to warrant a whole story on its own, but couldn't quite fit into the more universal story that I wanted to tell with my project (on the most basic level, a "yard sale" in New York City actually means stoop sale, sidewalk sale, or sale inside someone's apartment). I also knew that in Istanbul I wouldn't be able to find a face for my story (I'm focusing on the *American* Great Recession, after all). Because the people I talked to spring semester either weren't able to let me get deep enough into their story or didn't have a story that I thought interesting enough to take the lede, I was left with a very short window to find my perfect family to "stalk." I only had several weeks on either end of my NYC experience after school and before Istanbul; three weeks total to be exact.

I managed to find an interesting story in May, before moving to the city, through accompanying the Short family on their yard sale journey. Although I received a wealth of material and some interesting insights, I wasn't sold that the Short's story was right for my lede. After getting back from New York but before leaving for Istanbul, I managed to convince another woman to allow me to intimately join her yard sale process. Her story

was intriguing, but, again, not quite right for a lede. Since I've been back in Syracuse, I did attempt to find other options as well, but when I hadn't received any responses by the end of February (winter in Syracuse isn't great for even *garage* sales), I decided to abandon the plan to find a different lede and spend the remainder of my time really polishing the content that I had already gleaned from the Shorts. I had really been hoping to find a family that was hosting their yard sale directly because of the lingering effects of the Great Recession. Unfortunately, I was never able to find that ideal (for my project) situation, but I think that the Short's story manages to captivate my audience nonetheless.

While searching for my scene, I also sought out yard sale sources and experts from across the country. I conducted dozens of phone interviews and read articles on related topics. I also had to significantly broaden my own understanding of the Great Recession. To get the most out of my research, I used all the skills that I've learned throughout my college experience through class and real-world reporting. My interview with the Shorts presented my first ever opportunity for an extremely observational interview. Although it took great restraint occasionally—in certain situations it would have been much more natural for me to have been an active participant instead of an objective observer—I kept in mind everything that my advisor had prepped me with, and was thus capable of witnessing some really candid, organic moments.

As the research and reporting aspect began to unfold in full force, I started to sketch out various outlines for how I wanted my story to progress. In a magazine class, my professor explained to us that there are several different types of structure that writers generally use for long pieces. One of my fairly recent favorite stories, “The One in Front of You” by Sallie Tisdale, originally published in *Harper’s Magazine*, inspired my structure choice. Tisdale starts with a scene, zooms way out to give historical context, focuses the story back down on different individual narratives, and finishes her piece with a big idea explored through the lens of her original scene. This structure is so powerful because first it ignites that personal connection, then gives context for a certain issue now that the reader already cares about, shows that the issue exists on a larger scale than just through the first “face,” and ends with a final punch as it shows you why an idea matters in the larger scheme of things. When I finish reading stories written according to this structure, I feel satisfied, like the story was a gift tied up nicely with a bow. Because my topic has an overarching cultural and historical context, but relies mainly—most powerfully—on individual narratives, this structure fit perfectly.

Doing this Capstone, I learned a whole new kind of editing process. I turned in around five different, complete drafts of my piece. I had never spent so much time on one article before and I often found myself having to take a step back from the word choice to make sure that I was still keeping my storyline intact.

After turning in my first several drafts of the article, I began turning my mind towards making my piece look like something that would actually belong in a magazine. Judging by the content of my nearly-polished product, I felt it best suited for the features well of either *The New York Times Magazine* or *The Atlantic*. I started studying the different design techniques that both generally utilized and decided that I would aim for an NYT look. My spread overall needed to be very clean but peppered with bold style choices.

I'm fairly inexperienced with Photoshop and InDesign, but I knew that this was an important element of the overall project so I really used my advisor as a resource for some critical decisions. The opening spread of my initial design was much busier than it looks now in my final product. I had arranged eight different pictures on the right-hand page, depicting varied yard sale scenes (long, medium, and up-close shots) from several different sources, but all treated with a photo effect to give them the same personality. I wanted to capture an essence of the yard sale experience—I included so many diverse pictures each with an overarching, similar “mood” to enforce the idea that yard sales happen across the country, each sale is completely unique, and yet each host must go through roughly the same preparation process to make that sale happen. After conferencing with my advisor however, I decided to use the singular image on the right of the spread instead.

Yes, my multi-photo approach visually embodied a yard sale truth, *but* the layout didn't give the reader any focal point to connect with. I want my

readers to be moved by the stories that my piece tells, and so I really needed to set that precedent by displaying not just an overall idea, but also a more specific, relatable, evocative scene. Using the one, lonely looking picture will make the reader start asking questions before they even begin reading, wondering why someone is selling such an unusual assortment of stuff. I never seriously considered using any pictures of the Shorts for the beginning of the spread because I wanted to keep the universal idea of the yard sale as a very visual element.

One of the biggest challenges of my capstone project was creating a parallax website to complement my story, but I think that it is a very critical part. I solidified my decision to create a parallax web component as I began applying for jobs and thinking more specifically about what I wanted to do with my life. I often tout myself as a “new media journalist,” but what does that even really mean? To me, it means using all my possible skills and resources to tell stories in the richest, most interactive, engaging, and accurate way that I can. My dual major is Information Management and Technology with a concentration in Web Design, and so I knew that I had the potential to use my coding ability to approach the story from a different, interactive angle. Parallax scrolling effects have a strong visual impact and can take the viewer on an immersive journey through a story. I wanted to tell my story through my article, but then add an extra, different look at the same ideas through my website.

I was inspired by several very story-oriented parallax sites, including Nike's Better World site and a site about hydrofracking (dangersoffracking.com). Design-wise for my own website, I had to balance my desire to create an intense, visually complex narrative experience with the reality of my talents as both a designer and a coder.

I am a traditional journalist first and a web designer second. I knew that I could easily have spent the last two years working solely on the web element of this Capstone project and still not have created exactly what I envisioned. With that in mind, I chose a very simple design—single-color backgrounds, only half a dozen elements at most per page, and a clear, basic storyline that still managed to highlight several different immersive techniques (including the interview audios, picture slider, and infographic, in particular). I wanted the website to be able to stand alone despite being, of course, very intimately tied to my article. One of the important elements that I decided to include was the “Yard Sale Today” sign in a fixed position on every page as the viewer scrolls through the site. Even with the different colored pages, I wanted the viewer to remember that he or she was still experiencing one cohesive story; I used the sign to unify the site. Using parallax scrolling is currently a trend in the web design world, and I'm glad that I gave myself the opportunity to experiment with this fun but challenging visual storytelling method.

In the end, after my work with the article, the design, and the website, I want my reader to leave my story with several takeaways.

I want to add fresh dialogue to the discussion of the Great Recession and give my readers a unique and relatable understanding of how it made an impact on the lives of so many Americans.

Maybe my reader hasn't hosted a yard sale in years; maybe they have never hosted one before in their life. Regardless, I also want readers to use this piece as a jumping off point to thinking about their own relationships to their stuff. What things could they give away or sell tomorrow? What things do they think they'll always have to keep?

I also want my readers to appreciate and reflect upon the interconnectedness that yard sales breed and inspire. I want them to see the different ways that our stories overlap and intersect in relation to the objects that we choose to keep and the objects that we choose to sell or give away. Hopefully next time one of my readers goes to a yard sale, they won't just casually, quickly move from box to box. Hopefully, instead, they'll try to glean a few stories from every sale that they experience.

Any good magazine piece leaves its readers slightly changed and mine should do the same. By including two other elements—the design and the website—I hope to really reinforce the ideas that I'm trying to convey and allow readers to sink deep into the experience in an immersive way.

In conclusion, I'd really like to acknowledge both my Capstone advisor and my Reader. Each provided me with incredibly influential input—from high-level edits to nitty-gritty sentence structure revisions. I also deeply appreciate the editing prowess of my mother, who gave my work a final,

critical read through and helped lift some of my individual phrases from “good” to “exceptional.” Finally, I’d like to thank all those good-hearted people who received my unusual plea to essentially stalk their yard sale process through Craigslist and actually decided to help me out. Without them, I wouldn’t have any story at all.



# The Front Yard Economy

By Jillian Iles D'Onfro





When people choose which possessions to spread across their front lawns for a Saturday morning yard sale, they make a deeply personal decision between “then” and “now,” about what to carry forward and what to leave behind. But when the Great Recession hit, economic desperation drove many Americans to slap price stickers on anything they could—bringing an extra poignancy to the process of letting go.



For the first time in several hours, the house is quiet. Eric and Michelle Short sit kitty-corner from each other at the dining room table, a pile of colorfully scrawled yard sale signs flanking Michelle's left arm.

Faint strains of *The Lion King's* opening sequence filter into the kitchen from the next room where the couple's two rambunctious young boys sit zonked out in front of the television. Ben, 4, and Drew, 2, each with fluffs of blonde hair, have no idea that their comfy living room won't be theirs much longer. Unbeknown to the boys, their parents have made the tough decision to leave their idyllic home in Gardner, Mass.

Eric and Michelle met in college, fell in love, got married and both graduated with degrees in education. They planted themselves in Gardner because it was close to home, and not far from Lunenburg or Fitchburg, where Eric and Michelle found teaching jobs. Now, however, they need to move because of the city's floundering school system. Over the last several years, the school budget in Gardner was slashed, and then slashed again. The system had deteriorated. Class sizes swelled, extracurricular options shrunk. It got so bad that the Shorts decided to put their on the market in May 2012. "I love the house, and I love the street—the area, our yard. I'm going to miss it," says Michelle. "But the schools have gone really far downhill."

The two-story, three-bedroom house with the large pool in the backyard is the only one the couple has ever owned, the only house the kids have known. Over the 6 years, the family had accumulated more than they knew. Too much to take with them as they moved to a community with a better school system.

The Shorts needed to host a yard sale.

The couple hauled baby toys, old books, purses, and patio furniture into their garage. Michelle spent an hour with a bucket of soapy water, wiping down one plastic Elmo after the next. She Sharpie'd the colorful signs that Eric, armed with wooden stakes, a staple gun, and some tape, would spend almost two hours putting up around town.

Pricing proved to be a difficult chore. Determining a value on some items—such as an ill-gifted sock puppet kit from a relative—was easy. Ben and Drew weren't likely to ever open it, and the only

question was whether Eric and Michelle priced too high or too low. Other items presented a much greater challenge.

Two nights before the May 19th sale, Michelle and Eric sat at their kitchen table, sifting through their possessions, trying to separate themselves from the personal history of each belonging, trying to settle on reasonable prices. The toys could be divided into one, two, and five-dollar piles. What about the kids' old jackets? To strangers, it wouldn't be the coat their son, Drew, wore the first time he played outside in the snow with his older brother, Ben. It would just be a jacket: small, good condition.

Michelle sighed. "Ten dollars each."

The yard sale represented a shift to a new phase for the Short family. Typically, hosting a yard sale is almost always linked to transitions. Death, divorce, or a move across the country often act as the impetus to spreading one's belongings out on a blanket on the lawn, neon-orange price stickers screaming the proposed worth of each item.

In that way, yard sales tell stories. A sale can be a host's accidental autobiography: each item becoming a piece of discarded history and a clue into who that person was and is. And a person's discovery that they no longer need something—the costume jewelry sold off with the old coffee mugs and too-small t-shirts—can also hint at a shift towards a future self.

During the last four years, though, the Great Recession has hurt Americans, and so the type of transitions spurring yard sales has changed. Downsizing and an urgent need for extra cash to pay the bills motivated more and more sales. The need to sell off the excess replaced a relentless consumerism. During the Great Recession,

the tone of yard sales changed. All across America, the "yard sale story" had grown much more grim.

“It had meaning to her. But it was something she didn't need. So she was letting it go.”

The concept of the yard sale bloomed hazily far back in time. No one has written a definitive yard sale history, yet sources agree that, even hundreds of years ago, people all over the world placed items they no longer needed outside their homes to indicate what they wanted to sell or trade. The word "rummage" even offers a clue to understanding how yard sales evolved, according to an article on [GarageSaleCow.com](http://GarageSaleCow.com), a database that lists yard and garage sales by zip code. In 16th cen-

tury England, “romage” referred to how a ship’s crew packed cargo into the hold of a ship. Cargo that was unclaimed or damaged after a voyage would be hauled out of the ship and put up for sale on the docks. Eventually, the phrase “rummage sale” was born.

By the 1890s, churches often hosted rummage sales to raise money, collecting unused items from members of the congregation to sell for charity. The 1950s and 60s brought a surge of yard sales to the United States in particular. Emerging from the Great Depression and World War II with a humming economy, American industry began churning out goods—dishwashers, TVs, stereos, cars, and the accoutrements to go with them. Americans started buying. As affluence swept through newly sprouted suburbs, people took advantage of the fact that they had driveways and front lawns, neighborhoods to walk through on sunny Saturday mornings. Selling disused goods and pawing through the castoffs of neighbors became an accepted and enjoyable pastime and profit-maker. By the 1970s, yard sales were a familiar sight and firmly woven into the American experience.

Since then, an entire yard sale subculture has emerged. Newspapers and Craigslist run classified ads. An entire yard sale lexicon has evolved. The nuanced difference between an ad reading “Everything priced to sell” and one reading “Offers welcome!” isn’t lost on those constantly scouring for bargains. Saturday mornings have become sacred to packs of devoted yard sailors who spend hours each weekend digging through the detritus in search of treasure. The best bargains earn bragging rights; the most unusual find get squawked about for weeks. The amount of garage sale related television shows has spiked in the last several years. There’s Lifetime’s “Famous Yard Sale,” the History Channel’s “American Pickers,” HGTV’s “Endless Yard Sale,” and more. Some shows are meant to fuel countless quests for the two-dollar sculpture that resells for \$2,000 on eBay, others simply feed the fascination that people have with one another’s stuff. Increasingly, people have also taken to documenting their own adventures online—a Google search reveals dozens of websites and blogs devoted to yard sale enthusiasts.

**T**ake Chris Heiska, who dubbed herself the Yard Sale Queen in 1996 and has been blogging about the deals she’s snagged ever since. Heiska posts at least once a week on yardsalequeen.com, where she dispenses advice through personal stories and observations. She confesses to “personal bad buys” (a pair of shoes that squeak “as if I am slowly torturing a mouse to death”) and reports on gross things she’s seen for sale (a “feminine protection device for dogs in heat”). She also provides tips for how to shop smart (carry a small tape measurer and a bring a bag for hauling out acquisitions) and what to avoid (old baby cribs – “They often don’t have the proper spacing in the slats”).

“Not all yard sales are going to be great,” she says. Cue memories of the sale with used makeup, the sale that promised “multi-family” but had only a few measly tables, the owner with an inflated sense of the value of their possessions and an unwillingness to bargain. “It might be a while until you find a really good one. But just be persistent.”

To Heiska, it’s the lure of a steal that makes yard sailing irresistible (she also has a penchant for couponing and loves to frequent thrift stores). Did she leave her house Saturday morning hunting for a pencil sharpener? Does she even own any non-mechanical pencils anymore? No on both accounts, but when the electric device was priced at only a quarter, it proved impossible for

## Watch and Learn

Yard sales have left front yards to crowd your TV screen. But not all shows are created equal:



**Most Emotion**  
Clean House on The Style Network brings a cleanup-and-restoration crew to cluttered homes to help families decide which possessions to sell.

**Best Deals**  
Flea Market Flip on HGTV shows viewers how to make a little bit of cash go a long way by buying used goods and fixing them up to sell for a higher sum.



**Biggest Haul**  
Famous Yard Sale on Fox hosted by ‘N Sync’s Lance Bass follows celebrities as they host yard sales and donate all of the proceeds to a charity of their choice.

Heiska to justify *not* buying it.

For Seattle-based Jenny Hayes and Meghan Smith, who have double-teamed the blog Yard Sale Bloodbath since 2007, hunting the quirky and bizarre is what makes yard sale Saturdays so entertaining. Scrolling through the blog’s recent posts creates a curious collage of the kind of cast-off items people uproot from basements or haul down from their attics: Teddy Roosevelt-inspired aftershave, a three-faced baby doll, an umbrella stand modeled after a bunch of asparagus. Hayes and Smith often end posts with a “trunk shot” showing off each day’s eclectic stash. Once a year, Hayes and Smith host a sale of their own: the yard sale circle of life in action.

Tom Zarrilli used to be another committed sailor. He started his blog, Yard Sale Addict, in 2004 and kept it up regularly until May 2010 when he called it quits to focus on lining up gallery exhibits for his collection of yard sale photography (which he hopes to one day publish in a book about American yard sale culture). Having written more than 1,000 posts and visited several thousand sales, he has become known as something of a yard sale expert, oft cited in news stories and on TV. Combing through the suburbs of Atlanta, he started to view his weekend ritual as less of a hobby, and more of a sociological study.

In an age of closed curtains, post-demise of the front porch gathering place, he felt that yard sales often provided the only glimpses he ever had into the private lives of his neighbors. “It reveals things,” he says of the scrapbook of stuff people choose to sell. Once, he stopped by the sale of a neighborhood woman and it dawned on him that he could recognize various life changes she had gone through based on the remnants spread in front of her home. In her abandonment of a pile of textbooks, Zarrilli could paint a picture of her undergraduate studies.

Clues of sexual re-identification—a collection of books about lesbianism—nestled among Armed Forces memorabilia. Cast-off running gear denoted a loss of a hobby.

“My favorite mystery is why is a person selling a bartending book and a 12-step guide side-by-side?” Zarrilli says. “I discovered more questions than answers. But knowing the questions sometimes feels more important than finding the answers.”

When the recession hit, some questions started to seem more troubled.

He describes seeing ratty duplexes, forlorn-looking piles of stuff for sale on unclean porches. Romance novels. A few cassette tapes. Degrépit looking kitchen items.

“And it’s like, ‘Is this the most you can come up with?’” he says. “Is this all your life amounts to?” And for me, it was... really sad.”

He saw signs of the recession most in the professional resellers. Resellers are considered a pestilent breed to many in the yard sale world, likely to commit the sin of early birding (showing up for a sale hours before its advertised commencement). That bad reputation got worse. “As the economy started to tank, all the resellers seemed to get more desperate,” Zarilli says. “It had been a weekend thing, but then they lost their jobs, and were having to exist off of reselling stuff.”

Michelle and Steve Weaver, a couple from Lancaster, Ma, have spent the last eight years collecting extra cash by spending their Sundays re-selling goods at a local flea market. Until this summer, both Michelle and Steve also worked at a local college—Michelle as a secretary, Steve in food services. Then, the college lost accreditation and the Weavers lost their jobs. Although Steve was able to reel in some hours working security, Michelle remains unemployed. To supplement her husband’s weekly paycheck, she decided to host one yard sale a month (the maximum allowed at the couple’s apartment building).

“There’s no jobs,” Michelle says, “But I can do this.”

When the Weavers spread their menagerie of books, old furniture, and toys across their lawn at 9 a.m. on Labor Day, the blue sky seemed to promise ideal sale conditions. At the end of the day though, the couple had made only \$47.

“It helps a little,” Steve says with a tight smile and a half shrug. He and Michelle have learned to seek out deals (99 cent loaves of bread, the three-for-five dollar specials on generic cereal), skimp on what they can, and stretch profits as far as they can go.

“We try to keep good spirits about it,” Michelle says. “At least it’s something.”

Yard sales represent a kind of underground economy. There is no national yard sale registrar. Some towns require a permit to host a sale, others don’t. Yard sale purchases are tax-free, so the government has no

numbers to crunch. In his 2007 book *Garage Sale America*, yard-sale fanatic Bruce Littlefield estimated that people in the United States collectively make around 500 million yard sale visits a year.

That number likely increased during the worst years of the recession. From 2008 to 2009, garage sale postings on Craigslist increased by 80 percent nationwide, spokeswoman Susan MacTavish told *The South Florida Sun* for an article about the changing state of yard sales.

The Great Recession had its real yard sale horror stories: the neighborhoods blanketed with foreclosures or the families selling everything to avoid one. RealtyTrac, a real estate information company, reported 342,038 foreclosure filings in April 2009, a 32 percent jump from April 2008. But yard sale culture changed for everyone, not just those hit the hardest. The Saturday morning atmosphere at yard sales across the country became darker, tinged by desperation.

Michigan photographer David McGowan spent the summer of 2008 unemployed, and during that time he began noticing more and more yard sale signs cluttering telephone poles, front yards, and the classified

section of the paper. He started going to as many sales as he could, camera in hand. “I was finding people on hard times,” McGowan says, “People who needed to make adjustments to their family budgets and find different angles of revenue for the family.”

Hosting one garage sale wouldn’t provide enough money to pay off a year of credit card debt or guarantee the ability to make July’s house payment, McGowan said. But the extra cash helped. He met a woman who had just sold an old scooter minutes before he arrived at her sale. It had belonged to her husband—who had passed away from cancer just six weeks before. “It had meaning to her, it was an association with her husband,” McGowan says, “But it was something she didn’t need. So she was letting it go.”

He photographed the woman holding up a photo of her husband grinning brightly in an unbuttoned shirt, relaxing atop the scooter that, like him, had just left her life forever. McGowan snapped shots at a sale held by a couple to raise money to pay for the headstone of their son, dead at 23. He captured a young woman trying on her never worn wedding dress for the last time before sending it on its way to a new owner.

“People were departing with things that had sentimental value to them that they would have preferred to keep,” says McGowan, who created a multimedia piece with his pictures, published by the online magazine *burn*. “But they were just bleeding out and needed the money.”

Sellers needed money, and buyers needed a cheaper cost of living. The yard sale economy kept people afloat (and gave purpose to the unemployed). Today, the financial nosedive has leveled out slightly. Situations like the Weavers’ still exist, but hints of an upsurge dot the financial horizon. Yard sales have lost some of their edge. “I think no matter what year it is you’re going to be able to find people who are selling things that

“The  
happiest  
part of the day  
was giving  
away those  
shoes.”



mean something to them,” McGowan says, “But I don’t think that now there’s that same huge rush to sell stuff out of need.”

Although the difficulty of selling off one’s meaningful possessions will survive the waxing and waning of the American economy, Garage Sale America author Bruce Littlefield says that the connections between people that are sparked during garage sales can help ease a seller’s wistfulness. “Americans: we love our things, so letting go is often very difficult. We are a pretty sentimental culture,” he says. “But the one thing that is fantastic that I’ve found about garage sales is that people who are selling things love that they get the opportunity to see who is going to now give a new life or a new love to the thing that they once loved.”

Selling a once useful or favorite old object inspires a musing bout of nostalgia, but in the post-poiignant wake of letting go, many find comfort in seeing the fragment of their life take on new meaning for someone else—a continuation of its story.

D o r i s Gallant, a sixty-something single woman living in Leominster, Mass., needed to host a yard sale because ten years of being unable to get rid of anything had rendered her house hopelessly cluttered. “It’s almost choking me,” she says.

Wearing a pink tank-top (inside-out, large oval sweat-stains), she huffs and puffs in the late summer heat as she digs through boxes and lets her eyes dance over crowded shelves, sifting through the chaos of her basement. She places things in the “For Sale” pile, only to remove them again ten minutes later. A stack of “Ann of Green Gables” novels: too sentimental, she read them with her daughter. A small souvenir cup tucked away behind boxes of old software: oh, but it would be the perfect gift for an old friend—she’ll mail it to him eventually. She cradles a pair of white satin pumps that no longer fit her feet, which weight has swollen several sizes wider. “These always made me feel so sexy,” she says wistfully.

Later, outside, Gallant unabashedly haggles over the price of several lawn decorations with a potential buyer (“Nah, that’s too cheap!” she cackles at an initial offer). But when a young woman browsing her sale chats with her pleasantly, expressing interest in a variety of things, she impulsively makes a gift of the shoes.

“The happiest part of the day was giving away those shoes,” she says.

Gallant feels content with the memories she made in the pumps—the raucous evenings out with friends, the intoxicating nights of dancing—and a smile curls across her face at the thought of their continued dance on a younger woman’s feet.

Although the Shorts had posted their sale as starting at 8 a.m., early-bird pickers had arrived close to 7. The first five hours had brought non-stop traffic, car after car after car pulling up with its load of deal-seekers. Some sales that promised an object’s reinvention brought particular pleasure to the Shorts. The pool stairs that they didn’t need that would bring a new family a summer of splashing in and out of cool water. A young couple bought a kid’s car seat and the wife beamed her thanks to Michelle and Eric with her hand on her enormous, pregnant belly.

By 2:30, the sun had lowered enough in the sky for a cool shade to sweep over their driveway, over the long tables standing almost desolate. Michelle sat cross-legged on the grass while Eric sipped a beer from a chair in the driveway watching their older son motor

around the empty street in his Tonka truck. The couple had made a grand total of \$950. “It was a lot of work, but it was worthwhile,” Eric says. “I don’t think anyone walked out of

here today that it wasn’t a win-win.”

The Shorts’ even sold each of Ben and Drew’s old coats, one for much cheaper than it had originally been marked. Watching Ben cruise between the jagged patches of light on the road, those past winters—the adventures outside in those jackets—seemed so far away. In a few months, he would dress for the weather in something new—maybe a red coat this time.

Some new kid, however, would don the dark blue parka. For that first snow of the year, his mom would zip him up tight and off he’d run, prepared to unfurl a whole new set of stories of his own. ●



Michelle and Eric warned Drew, 2, that some of his old toys would be sold, but he still struggled at first when seeing strangers walk off with his old favorites.



## Works Cited

- AAPP (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners).  
 2010 The Role of Political Prisoners in the National Reconciliation Process. Mae Sot: AAPP.
- Aleinikoff, T. Alexander.  
 1995 State-centered Refugee law: From Resettlement to Containment. *In* *Mistrusting Refugees*. E. Valentine Daniel and John Chr. Knudsen, eds. Pp. 257-278. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Alexander, Amy.  
 2008 Without refuge: Chin refugees in India and Malaysia. *Forced Migration Review* 30:36
- Amnesty International.  
 2009 Amnesty International Report 2009. Amnesty International. <http://report2009.amnesty.org/en/regions/asia-pacific/Myanmar>, accessed 18 April 2011.  
 2010 The Repression of Ethnic Minority Activists in Myanmar. London: Amnesty International Publications.
- Arnold, Dennis and Kevin Hewison.  
 2006 Exploitation in global supply chains: Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot, Thailand. *In* *Transnational Migration and Work in Asia*. Kevin Hewison and Ken Young, eds. Pp. 163-190. New York: Routledge.
- BBC.  
 2011 Burma transfer of power complete. BBC March 30. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12903507>, accessed 7 April 2011.
- Bennion, Jackie.  
 2006 Burma: A Political Timeline. Frontline. <http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/burma601/timeline.html>, accessed 30 December 2011.
- Bissinger, Jared.  
 2010 Drawing the Lines. *The Irrawaddy*, July 9. [http://www.irrawaddy.org/opinion\\_story.php?art\\_id=18917&page=1](http://www.irrawaddy.org/opinion_story.php?art_id=18917&page=1), accessed 4 November 2011.
- Brees, Inge.  
 2008 Refugee Business: Strategies of work on the Thai-Burma Border. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21(3):380-397.  
 2009 Burmese Refugee Transnationalism: What is the Effect? *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 28(2):7-21.

## Summary of Capstone Project

For my Capstone project I decided to write a longform, magazine style article about yard sale culture in America, especially as affected by the Great Recession. I wanted to humanize the devastation wrought by the economic downturn through my in-depth examination of the emotion and meaning involved in, and inherently a part of, yard sales. My story explores an important social issue through the personal lens of the agonizing choices we make as we decide what to keep and what to let go. It also reflects on the catharsis that can come from seeing a fragment of one's life become part of someone else's and demonstrates how yard sales connect people in various ways.

Along with researching, reporting, and writing this story, I also created a designed spread of what the piece would look like if it were actually published in a magazine. Finally, I created a web component for the project that utilizes a trendy web design technique called parallax scrolling.

Although this project bloomed from my love of yard sales, I think that including the Great Recession element is what gives this project a larger significance. Bringing in this element makes my piece more valuable to readers who didn't feel the effects of the economic downturn firsthand. It's hard to get an understanding of something so huge by hearing an endless string of numbers or through the context of foreclosures, bad credit, and the housing market. By looking at the Great Recession through the in-depth examination of yard sales, I put the information in a context that almost



everyone has encountered. Most people don't know someone who went bankrupt during the Great Recession, but so many have experienced a yard sale, whether on the seller or buyer end of things.

To create this finished project, I first went through all the necessary steps of journalism: researching, reporting, writing, editing. I interviewed subjects both in person and over the phone. I went to dozens of yard sales. I read about The Great Recession and about how yard sale culture in America was formed. Although the methods that I used were no different than those I learned in class at Newhouse, I had never before written such a large-scale project.

Once my written portion was well on its way to completion, I designed a magazine spread for it using the programs InDesign and Photoshop. I edited all my photos in Photoshop and created a layout with the publishing tool InDesign.

The last component of my project was the website. I solidified my decision to create a parallax web component as I began applying for jobs and thinking more specifically about what I wanted to do with my life. I often tout myself as a "new media journalist," but what does that even really mean? To me, it means using all my possible skills and resources to tell stories in the richest, most interactive, engaging, and accurate way that I can. My dual major is Information Management and Technology with a concentration in Web Design, and so I knew that I had the potential to use my coding ability to approach the story from a different, interactive angle.

The parallax scrolling method essentially starts when a web designer puts different page elements onto the page in layers. The designer can then position those elements at different points on the screen and move them at different speeds across the up and down the page when the viewer scrolls. This creates an almost 3D effect and lets the viewer interact with a webpage in a new way as they scroll through it. Parallax scrolling effects have a strong visual impact and can take the viewer on an immersive journey through a story. In order to create this portion of the project, I had to use my skills in HTML, CSS, and Javascript—three different programming languages that work together to create a website. I used the program Dreamweaver (for the coding) and, again, Photoshop (for my initial design). I opted to use a “plug-in” (in other words, a chunk of source code) for part of the parallax effect. Basically, I adapted someone else’s parallax code to achieve my own personal objectives.

This project is significant in that it should leave readers considering yard sales in a way that they probably never have before. I want to add fresh dialogue to the discussion of the Great Recession and give my readers a unique and relatable understanding of how it made an impact on the lives of so many Americans.

Maybe my reader hasn’t hosted a yard sale in years; maybe they have never hosted one before in their life. Regardless, I also want readers to use this piece as a jumping off point to thinking about their own relationships to their stuff. What things could they give away or sell tomorrow? What things

do they think they'll always have to keep? Which memories can live on without a physical object as a reminder and which need that lingering presence?

I also want my readers to appreciate and reflect upon the interconnectedness that yard sales breed and inspire. I want them to see the different ways that our stories overlap and intersect in relation to the objects that we choose to keep and the objects that we choose to sell or give away. Hopefully next time one of my readers goes to a yard sale, they won't just casually, quickly move from box to box. Hopefully, instead, they'll try to glean a few stories from every sale that they experience. I think that viewing yard sales in this way—reflecting on the human aspect, not just the good deals and old toys—will create a feeling of radical amazement and an appreciation of the many ways in which all of our stories connect.

Any good magazine piece leaves its readers slightly changed and mine should do the same. By including two other elements—the design and the website—I hope to really reinforce the ideas that I'm trying to convey and allow readers to sink deep into the experience in an immersive way.

j