

Our Own

RELIGION, FAMILY ALBUM, SCHOOLS, BUSINESS, ENTERTAINMENT

We are the Young Americans

Local boys scour country to document their generation

By Laura Kenyon

As the sun set over the broken levees of New Orleans's Ninth Ward, splashing the sky and the destruction below with dazzling shades of gold, pink and tangerine, 22-year-old Matt Heineman realized no words could fully capture the magnitude of his three-month cross-country adventure.

The New Canaan resident, who moved from Darien in 2003, makes up one-quarter of the Young Americans Project, a group of friends who spent this fall scouring the country in an RV named "Harvey" documenting their generation, which has only been characterized in such follow-the-leader and hollow terms as Generation Y, Echo Boomers, and the Millennium Generation.

Mr. Heineman, fellow Dartmouth graduates Ben Grinnell of Vista, N.Y., Adam

White of Damariscotta, Maine, and Boston College senior Matt Wiggins of Darien returned in December with more than 100 hours of video footage, thousands of photos and a novel's worth of interviews and personal observations. They will create a documentary and a book about the people and places they encountered during their 49-state journey. (Ben Grinnell took a solo jaunt to play lacrosse in Hawaii.)

"To some, America's youngest adult generation is viewed as a nameless and voiceless band, unified only by clustered birth dates," their mission states at www.tyap.com. "But the young men and women of America are in fact a burgeoning and dynamic class that is coming of age in the post-9/11 era. They are working to find their place in a changing world, growing into their adult skin, and yearning to be heard."

The young men want to give America's youth a microphone, so the world may better understand what



TALKIN' 'BOUT MY GENERATION — On a mission to give their generation a face and a voice, the Young Americans Project recently returned from a three-month journey throughout the Continental U.S. and Hawaii interviewing their peers. A documentary and a book are in the works. Pictured, from left, are Dartmouth College graduates Adam White of Damariscotta, Maine, Matt Heineman of New Canaan and Ben Grinnell of Vista, N.Y.; their new friend, Scrappy, and Boston College student Matt Wiggins of Darien.

they stand for, worry about and dream of.

"Our goal is to shed light upon our generation both to ourselves and to older generations," Mr. Heineman told the *Advertiser* on a Friday afternoon earlier this month. "(We're) trying to break the stereotype that we're apathetic and not doing anything, and show people that our generation is incredibly diverse and working hard.

lacrosse players who thought that while many young people plan trips to Europe and Australia after graduation, they often know little about their own country. It all came together when Nantucket Nectars became the first of many sponsors in the spring of 2001.

The Young Americans' adventure officially began on September 21, 2005, as the first rays of the sun

"It just goes to show that everyone has a story. You just have to find them, or stumble upon them."

— Matt Heineman

Our goal is to provide a porthole into our generation in the fall of 2005."

The group's Web site, which has received more than one million hits, already contains profiles, photos, video clips and many blogs that the guys took turns posting throughout the trip.

The idea began with three Dartmouth

stretched over Cadillac Mountain in Maine's Acadia National Park. A copy of Jack Kerouac's "On the Road," some caffeine and a talking GPS machine in hand, the guys hit the road.

With help from family, friends and "yappies" (YAP groupies), they had already scheduled peer inter-

views with entrepreneurial organic farmers in Maine; a college student trying to cure cancer in Boston; *Playboy's* Miss October in Virginia; an 11th grade English teacher and hip-hop activist in St. Louis; editor-in-chief of the nation's largest independent student newspaper in Wisconsin; the founder of Facebook in California; an HIV-positive student in Oregon, a 24-year-old NFL running back in Carolina, and many others.

But each bend of the road brought with it new and interesting faces, and the young men found themselves walking the streets with a video camera, a smile, a "business card" and a lot of questions.

"It just goes to show that everyone has a story," Mr. Heineman wrote in one of his blogs. "You just have to find them, or stumble upon them."

On Venice Beach in California they met a group of homeless 20-somethings, some dying and many addicted to drugs, but all completely content with their simple and authority-free lifestyle. In Indiana they stumbled upon a punk rock couple on their own excursion, both adamant believers in love and magic despite difficult childhoods. They got to know April, a young stripper in Las Vegas who dreams of having a family and kids, and they randomly fell upon a group of outspoken anarchists sipping Frappuccinos in a Colorado Starbucks.

When they asked older adults what they thought of their younger counterparts, they received answers like "soft," "apathetic," "spoon-fed" and "Generation Entitlement." Two older men in a Binghamton, N.Y., bar said

See AMERICANS on Page 10C



Americans: Documentarians on the prowl to record their generation's mark

Continued from Page 1

America's youth had "no cohesiveness, no agreement of beliefs, nothing we rallied upon as an age group," Mr. Heineman wrote, unsure how much of this was true and how much is repeated with each aging generation.

Mr. White wrote about this lack of unifying factors (such as World War II or Vietnam) in response to a *Vanity Fair* essay contest, calling the events that have shaped his generation "disorienting and sometimes stratifying." America's youth watched as two of its members went on a killing spree in Littleton, Colo., and listened as post-September 11 "adults told us that we were inheriting a changed world, but we hadn't even had a chance to figure out the old world yet."

Individuals are still fighting for what they believe in, he wrote, even if that differs from one person to another. "With no great cause to be a part of, we've turned inward to be the best we can be," from joining the Army or Teach for America to traveling with service groups to make a difference in impoverished countries. "We give back in so many more ways than were available to our parents or grandparents."

Mr. Heineman saw his peers "standing up and demonstrating for what they believed in" during a Portland, Ore., protest, which he quickly joined.

"We're the post-9/11 generation that is dealing with all these global issues that past generations have created for us," he said, "whether it be the environment, global warming, population growth or global terrorism. These are all issues our generation will have to tackle."

The Young Americans Project is itself an example of active youth, struggling for insight into the world in which they live and hoping to somehow improve it.

The guys pitched in at many Habitat for Humanity projects, including one outside of Biloxi, Miss., where Hurricane Katrina rampaged just three months earlier.

They reached New Orleans just before the Ninth Ward was to be re-opened. Mr. Heineman wandered through the devastation as the sun set on the last day of quarantine, November 30.

"That was pretty intense," he said. "It was like walking through Nagasaki or somewhere the atomic bomb had just dropped, seeing this flattened ghost town filled with rubble and destruction."

The next day, Mr. Heineman met Frank, whom he accompanied to see his shattered home for the first time since Katrina forced him to evacuate.

"He was probably one of the most amazing people I met," Mr. Heineman said. "His whole life was basically devastated by this storm and he just had the most optimistic and bright outlook on life."

His experience in New Orleans was the most powerful, he added, but there were plenty of other moments that overwhelmed the group in some way, whether with fear (wandering around a Sacramento ghetto or navigating a 30-foot RV along the narrow, winding, 2,000-foot-high Pacific West highway), laughter ("We got out a lot of our passive aggression through puppet shows."), tranquility (driving on a deserted road by nothing but moonlight) or kinship with their fellow Americans.

"I can't help but feel invigorated by the America we have seen," Mr. Heineman wrote on October 28, "by the America that takes in a group of strangers they barely know, by the America that wants to make the world a better place, by the America that is accepting of differences, by the America that has ambition, love, fortitude, passion. It is hard to digest all that has happened, but I know I will never forget any of it."

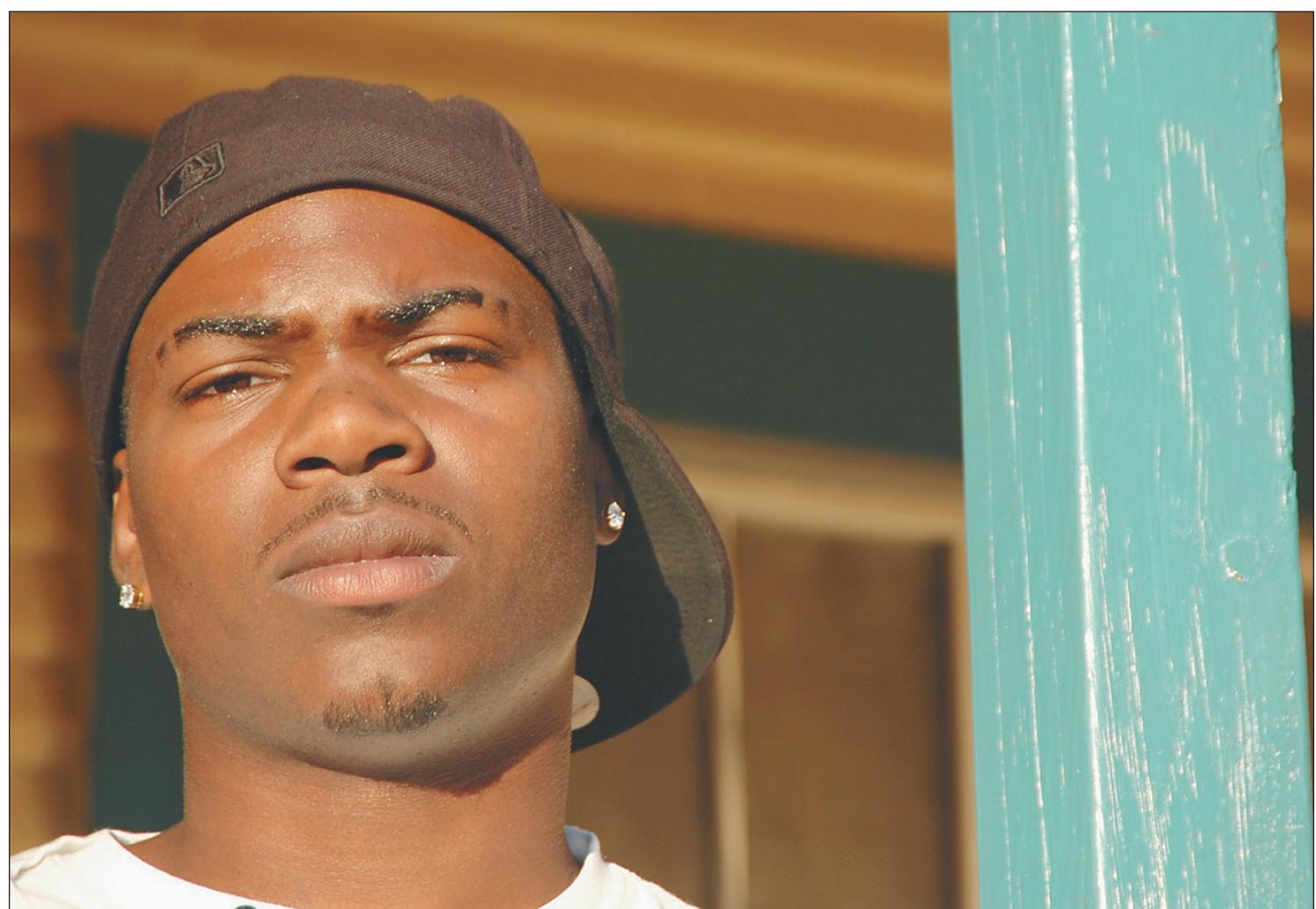
They dropped off the RV in Long Island, N.Y. on December 21, with full rolls of film and a dog named Scrappy that Mr. Grinnell had picked up in Florida.

Mr. Heineman recently returned from working as a runner for NBC at the Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy, and will spend the next six months helping Matt Wiggins assemble the documentary in Cambridge, Mass. They will submit it to the Sundance Film Festival in the fall, and the entire group will eventually work on the book, for which they are seeking a publisher.

With so many different answers to questions such as, "What do you see as the most pressing issue affecting the U.S. today?" and "What defines our generation?", Mr. Heineman does not know what themes will emerge during the editing process.

Technology and the ability to be heard "across geographical, religious, and social barriers" will play a major part, he said, but it is so hard to put a label on a generation that is so diverse.

"The country we saw was not black or white; it was not blue or red; it was not fat, skinny, rich, poor, Christian or Muslim," he wrote in his last blog dated December 20. "We saw a mosaic of individuals that in some way melded together to form our generation."



IN AMERICA — Images of scenery and life around America as captured by the men doing The Young Americans Project.

