

# How Deirdre Heavey Found a Community Beyond Manhattan College on the 1 Train

by Jilleen Barrett

As the spring semester comes to a close, graduating communication majors are wrapping up their senior seminar projects— and some are even getting recognized by the Eastern Communication Association.

Deirdre Heavey, who is finishing the journalism concentration in the communication department, presented her thesis “There’s Only 1 Train: All Aboard the Cosmopolitan Canopy from 242nd St. to South Ferry” for the association’s conference on Friday, March 26 at 4:30 p.m.

Heavey credited communication professors Thom Gencarelli, Ph.D and Michael Plugh, Ph.D with helping her find an idea for the project, researching and writing it, and eventually submitting it to the ECA’s annual conference.

“I started thinking about what I wanted to write about in Plugh’s media theory class, because he really sets up the class to have your thesis ready for senior [seminar], so I started thinking about it then,” Heavey said.

Heavey explained that while many of her classmates chose to work with areas such as television, she wanted to write something more connected to journalism. Tying in aspects of a sociology class she took during her time at Manhattan College, she decided to study interactions between passengers of the 1 train.



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“I remember riding the subway every day, going to my internship this summer before and just thinking about the way people interact and always just being fascinated with New York City, utilizing the subway as this means of...culture almost, and community, and how it’s just so ingrained into the basis of New York City community and culture,” she said.

She went from Manhattan College’s home at 242nd Street to South Ferry for 10 days on a loop, studying the interactions between people riding for a total of 20 hours of research.

“I just sat in the same spot in the same car at the same time every day and just observed the subtle interactions that people had,” she said. “And so basically my thesis is within the imagined community of the 1 train.”

An imagined community, she explained, is “when a group of people will never know each other, beyond the community that they find themselves in, but while they’re in that space and share that time and place, they are a part of a bigger community.” This is what helped her study the process of communication among people who do not know each other, but nonetheless see each other repeatedly when they take the subway downtown.



She detailed how her sociology class strongly influenced the way she thought about these interactions when it came to the way people communicated in this bigger community.

“...my framework was defining what are the critical moments of communication, and those are subtle and gestural cues that determine whether somebody is acting with civility or not towards one another,” she said. “So let’s say, for instance, a homeless man is sleeping across the pews on the subway, and every person who gets on the subway looks at him and walks away and sits on the other side of the subway. I would say about the moment that doesn’t necessarily reflect civility just because it’s other-ing a person and saying, ‘I can’t share a space with them.’”

She noted that there was a problem during her research: the pandemic. Although it affected how people travel, if at all, she was still able to continue with her research and find that there was a sense of a “cosmopolitan canopy” or, a sense of community regardless of background within a cosmopolitan city.

“I was really happy to find that it did exist, and even in the pandemic, which completely obstructed my research—not completely but it definitely took it to a sidestep because you can’t talk about anything in 2020, let alone 2021 without talking about the pandemic— so that had a lot to do with it too,” she said.

Although many would feel pressured about presenting in front of an important audience, Heavey presented her research confidently. She described how she felt when she heard that she had been selected to speak.

“I was not nervous,” she said. “I was excited... ‘I was like, this is the thing that I really care about and excited about and nerding out about, and now I get to like presented to all these distinguished communication people and I just get to like gab about the 1 train’— like, that is awesome, that is a dream come true. I’m so excited.”

Heavey advises other communication majors to pick their research topic based on what they enjoy and can find resources on within Manhattan College.

“I would say [research] something that you actually like and care about— don’t pick something because you think it’s going to be the easiest to write about or it’s going to be, you know, what other people are doing,” she said. “Think of something that is unique to whatever your major and minor and your interests are, and use that, use your full Manhattan College education, you don’t have to restrict it to the communication field which I think is one of the coolest parts about communication is you can pull from so many different disciplines.” ★