

## Three Macalester alums' video about N.D. oil boom featured on New York Times website

**St. Paul, Minn.** – An excerpt of a documentary by three Macalester alumni is being featured on the *New York Times* website.

James Christenson '11, Eliot Popko '11, and Lewis Wilcox '12 produced "Running on Fumes in North Dakota" about the oil boom in that state at the Bakken Oil Range. The short features Jonnie, a 38-year-old female truck driver, who tells it like it is, being a woman in a place where few others of her gender exist.

The short is a part of their "Project NoDak" study. They've been working for the past 18 months on a yet untitled feature-length documentary still in production.

A couple facts: the crude oil industry now unearths one million barrels a day by fracking North Dakota, and thousand of migrants come to the oil fields looking for work.

Last fall, the three alumni won a video competition sponsored by the *New York Times* which then led to their documentary being featured on the newspaper's web site. We asked them a few questions about the documentary:

### **Q: Why did you pick this topic?**

A: We got the sense that something important was happening in North Dakota, something that might be a preview of things to come for other resource-rich and population-poor areas in the U.S. heartland. It's a huge conglomeration of some of the most important foreign and domestic policy issues of our time.

### **Q: You focused on Jonnie. What's her job? A driver?**

A: Jonnie, the subject of this short, is a hotshot truck driver, basically a round the clock special delivery driver. A friend back home suggested she get a Commercial Driver's License (CDL), which is like a golden ticket if you absolutely need to find a job. Trucking is one of the major job sources in Northwestern N. D., along with construction. As a hotshot driver, Jonnie is on call 24/7. When a rig or a pump jack breaks down, they call a hotshot and have them rush a new part out to a site, often in very remote areas. Jonnie calls it "UPS on steroids." She's expected to go fast, because operators are missing out on so many dollars per minute any time a drilling operation is stopped.

### **Q: Why did you choose her story?**

A: We have spent enough time with her to have a good understanding of what she's been going through. We migrated, too, and have spent a long while now just barely scraping by - like Jonnie, so we have an idea of what it's like. We chose to release her story sooner because it sets up some of the wider-scope issues we plan to address later on. The migrant labor story has been the mainstream media's favorite thing to cover about the boom, and so often it's just mindless recycling of the same stuff - anyone can get a job, everyone is making 100K plus - it's almost like the media wants everyone to think that the oil boom is magic. But that ignores the fact that even in a boomtown people are fighting for even a decent living and often still falling through the



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cracks. The oil fields require a lot of skill, whether it's petroleum engineering, welding, or pipefitting, that sort of thing. I think most North Dakotans want people to know these things before they just get in a car and show up in Williston.

**Q: How did your association with the *New York Times* come about?**

A: There's not a ton of money in documentary filmmaking, so over the summer we were pouring over every grant and opportunity we could possibly find. We applied to a couple "pitch" competitions at a little doc film festival in Camden, Maine in the fall. We were selected among six finalists out of almost 200. We pitched our movie to a table of big shots on stage at the Opera House in town, which was a little nerve-racking. We also pitched the New York Times video staff on a short, and were thrilled to be selected. We're looking forward to doing another one this summer.

**Q: What else have you all been doing?**

A: This has basically been our crash course in filmmaking and business. We've been fundraising non stop for a while now, writing grants, and also dealing with LLCs (limited liability company) and taxes and investment contracts, producers agreements, legal and accounting - all on top of figuring out how to tell a really broad and complicated story in a personal and entertaining way. And everyone's always telling us to be thinking about the next one.

**Q: How did Macalester prepare you for your work now?**

A: Can't really imagine doing this without the education we got at Mac. The subject we're tackling feels like one big case study in applying everything we studied: planning and development, urban and rural geography, sociology and ethnography, the micro and macro level politics of it all, social and economic justice, geology and environmental science, the list goes on. Add to that our time studying film, screenwriting, discursive analysis, and critical theory...we're well prepared for this line of work.

Macalester College, founded in 1874, is a national liberal arts college with a full-time enrollment of 2,011 students. Macalester is nationally recognized for its long-standing commitment to academic excellence, internationalism, multiculturalism, and civic engagement. Learn more at [macalester.edu](http://macalester.edu).

[Running on Fumes in North Dakota \(http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/14/opinion/running-on-fumes-in-north-dakota.html?hp&rref=opinion\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/14/opinion/running-on-fumes-in-north-dakota.html?hp&rref=opinion)

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