

# UC Riverside

## UCR Honors Capstones 2018-2019

**Title**

Elsie the Wonder Dog

**Permalink**

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**Author**

Yamanaka, Jasmine

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A capstone project submitted for  
Graduation with University Honors

University Honors  
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

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Dr.  
Department of

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Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair, University Honors

## Abstract

Dear University Honors,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to complete a capstone project under your direction. Here is the link to my project, the documentary titled *Elsie the Wonder Dog* created under the faculty mentorship of Dr. Jack Eichler (Department of Chemistry). It was an incredible learning experience.

*Elsie the Wonder Dog:*

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rY49jz-s6islA6CXJdHX0PJrSm5VUWUx/view?usp=sharing>

Sincerely,

Jasmine Yamanaka

In the beginning of my junior year when most other Honors students in my grades were starting to plan out their projects, I had little idea of what I would do for my own capstone project. Whereas other students who had the privilege of settling into Honors with a stable, fruitful occupational goal and related major, I was still within the cusp of determining if I wanted to stick with something I had always known I was good at — writing — or if I wanted to branch out and pursue something that inspired me but that I didn't know much about — film. As someone who had just switched their major into Theatre, Film and Digital Production and who was new to the department, its people, its knowledge and its culture, I not only felt lost within my Honors trajectory but within the greater field of film in general. Thus, since I had to start acting on my capstone soon, I had the choice to either — for this one project in which I could choose anything — play it safe and stick with my old, familiar major of writing or put a step forward in my new, exciting, yet intimidating field and take advantage of the Honors capstone project to expand my knowledge into something I knew very little about, felt miniscule within in comparison to my more “cultivated” TFDP classmates but that nonetheless opened my eyes (literally) with the amazing movies I've watched and that, if anything, invigorated me knowing how much of a challenge it would put me in.

Obviously, the latter sounds like the more fulfilling choice to follow, but initially, I did not put this into consideration when simply just trying to get an idea out there for something — anything — I could do for my capstone project. Pressured to get started on something that everyone else in the Honors community seemed to already have an idea for, I went with what I knew best — writing — and reached out to a creative writing professor to be my capstone mentor on a book that I planned to write.

In the beginning, it all went well considering it was only my junior year and I still had plenty of wiggle room to refine what I wanted to do with my project further. My thinking was that I could stick with this book idea, write about a chapter or two every month, dedicate a few months of editing in my senior year and have a complete product by week six of my spring quarter.

In April 2018, Dr. Jack Eichler from the department of chemistry held the two trees trail engagement event. Although Dr. Eichler is a chemistry professor, the conversation I had with him was not limited to this topic. He also asked about my own ambitions, to which I replied that I am a film major. He asked me further about what about film peaks my interests and what I do within my major, and I realized that a professor can be invested in the activities of a student even if their field does not relate to their own. Finally, at some point after a long hike, climbing rocks and cleaning up the trail, Dr. Eichler informed me about a documentary project he had been thinking about for a while but had not had much luck in finding a student who could assist in it. I told him that I was interested, but still being within the

When Dr. Eichler asked me if I would be interested in helping him with his documentary, I was immediately excited with the mere concept of being involved with a film, not to mention one that would be under my own direction. However, even with the internship experience and having had being somewhat immersed in the film department at this point, I had only ever made films under the wings of another entity. Although I could watch a movie and always having the same thought after — “I wish I can make a movie” — when it came to the actual production of a film, it still seemed like something that was too complicated for my current level of skill and

knowledge, something that was reserved for a person with film connections, education and experience, something I could only hope for but not yet do.

In the summer of 2018, I had my first internship of my life for a tech company called Udacity as a video production intern. From the beginning, it felt strange to think that while I was planning my senior thesis around writing, I was pursuing a film/video career.

By the end of the internship, however, it was clear that my heart lied in the visual media industry and that any time spent centering an encapsulating project of my educational experience on writing was displacing my passion into something that I merely felt pressured into doing but that would not have any long-term gain nor would it motivate me to challenge myself, learn more about the field in my independent studies and ultimately, through the difficulties, make my interests in pursuing this activity even more. Perhaps before my internship experience, the fact that I had never applied my own abilities within the art of moviemaking set my film ambitions within the mindset that it was something I could only ever observe from the outside, something that I had always enjoyed watching but that I myself did not have the potential for being an impactful advocate of myself — or at least not yet. While being the source of education, information and preparation, perhaps something that holds students back from being proactive with their dreams is the standpoint that we are only learning now, we do not have a voice yet and that once we have been trained and fully absorbed the wisdom of our professors, we can then apply what we have learned to finally go out into the world and follow our ambitions.

However, my internship showed me that I have the capability of being a filmmaker now. If I am a focused, attentive worker — which not merely requires me to do what I'm told but to do what I feel compelled is right and best for the product at hand — I can make some great

videos and content largely by myself. Being a filmmaker, which I arguably view myself as having become that summer, was not something I had to wait to end my school experience and training for: It was something I simply became because I wanted to and put the energy and time into doing, and I could pursue my greatest goal and making a film any moment I wanted to.

When I returned to school following my internship, I knew that continuing with my writing capstone project was a mistake: I knew now that I could function in a professional environment at the same skill level as my peers, if not sometimes even outperforming them when I had the confidence to propose an idea and had the work ethic to follow through with it. I re-thought about my capstone project and confirmed with myself that I did not want to go back to a passive state in my college experience in which I settled with the comfortable and did not think thoroughly about the opportunity to establish my competence as a filmmaker with the capstone project. In my reflection, I had to swallow the fact that not at any point with my writing capstone project did I feel compelled to work on the book nor did I imagine that anything would happen to make me do so in my senior year: Instead of waiting for change from something external, I had to accept that my passions were not in writing and make the first step in my own determination and power to change my capstone project for something within this responsibility-filled, proactivity-necessitating new ambition of filmmaking.

So I kindly communicated my change of aspirations to my previous capstone mentor and re-contacted Dr. Eichler about assisting him in his documentary. I was so relieved when Dr. Eichler responded and graciously accepted my proposal to create the documentary. Almost immediately, he sent me dates for agility trial training. From the beginning, I have been proud that Dr. Eichler had accepted my request to serve as my faculty mentor because despite initially



having turned down his offer to collaborate on a documentary in place of my previous idea, he was already being so driven toward the documentary despite the fact that he didn't have to do it for a project. He was doing it out of his own inspiration to make a documentary even if he is not a film professor or even associated with the field. He recognized an opportunity to make something great, went after even if aware of the sparse knowledge he had with the field and, most importantly, acted upon it, and because Dr. Eichler made the first step in being bold and driven, I followed his lead and made it a point for myself that, like with me creating my first film, I would go after my goal, try my best and never give up despite the many obstacles — figuratively and literally — that I would encounter.

When I first met Elsie before the first agility trial, I was expecting to view her in the professional sense — not “professional” as in that I would socialize with her but that she was my subjective, my heroine, the protagonist as all stories have. In screenwriting classes, I learned that the character is more important than the plot because it is within the human emotion, conflict and strife for the ultimate goal that compels the viewer to feel a connection with the movie, want to watch more and be impacted. All I could think about in the moments leading up to the first training session was how I would make this documentary entertaining, memorable and, most importantly, centered around a main character who the audience would love. I was thinking in very technical terms, as I had not had much filmmaking experience up to this point and thus relied on the knowledge I had learned in classes to make an audience-worthy documentary.

However, the need to plan and be precise withered away when I opened the car door and saw a dog panting at me. Coming from a household unfamiliar with pets, most of what I knew about pets came from media depictions or random dogs in passing — certainly very surface level

observations that didn't involve any deep or close interactions. When Elsie climbed over the seat and approached me, almost as if asking for me to pet her, I thought that she was not like what I usually see from dogs and instead is like a human: Friendly, polite and owning the ability to see the goodness in another person. Perhaps it is true that many dogs see the best in people and that's why some people have pets in the first place, but Elsie, as Dr. Eichler would later mention in a commentary regarding Elsie, seemed to just have something special. Even if I didn't know how to pet her nor did I speak to her like other humans are able to do with dogs, she still sat there panting, almost as if smiling, at me and I felt like even though she was aware that I wasn't as affectionate or interacting around her as her owners and probably countless other humans are toward her, she still accepted me and enjoyed my presence. Or at least, I hope she did, because I enjoyed hers even though I didn't know how to express that.

And so, having met and somewhat bonded with my protagonist, my first decision as a filmmaker arose: What I would film at the trial.

Speaking retrospectively, a difficulty that many filmmakers have, especially when shooting on location, is the ability to anticipate what the subjects will do and, hopefully, if they will do something interesting as opposed to a repetitive or non-motivation-indicating action. This is something that I entered the arena of Elsie's first agility trial nervous about since everything I had learned about film in my classes leading up to this moment had taught me that shots must be deliberate and planned out through storyboards and shot lists. It was easy to rely on these things when knowing exactly what the actors can do to make the best story. However, everything about these scenes at not only the dog agility course but perhaps in the entire documentary as well would have to be on-the-spot, spontaneous, genuine — lived in the moment and with full

sincerity. Not only would this require me to know the subjects (Elsie, Dr. Eichler, the trainer, the other trainees, etc.) well but it would also require that my attention be maintained for every moment, never once letting my focus down, so that I could shoot the documentary as though living through it.

In retrospect, this ability to shoot without plan or prediction has helped me with many other films and videos since. It has taught me to breeze over the monotonous and to go for intention: What does the character do that expresses what they want? Because someone could do something boring or active in the sense that it is filled with movement, but no action would be compelling or purposeful if it does not express something about the character, and since people are constantly doing things in the pursuit of obtaining some sort of gain, that action should be filled with goals. It can be easier to define these goals when shooting a narrative story because you know the characters through the script and have a firm gage on their personality just as we humans are able to understand one another through conversation.

However, for the Elsie documentary, learning about her ambitions and which actions to seek in filming were a little more difficult since, of course, she is a dog and either cannot communicate what she wants as comprehensively as a human can or ... she really does not have a desire aside from that of a food treat.

So what does the audience want from Elsie? What is something which the audience would advocate for Elsie to do that would make her a more admirable competition dog, even if she was not aware of this?

In screenwriting class, we learn that conflict is what drives the character. It is the interruption in the familiar that compels them to do something different, jump out of their

comfort zone, fight against the impossible and, ultimately, do something amazing. What could Elsie's conflict be? Well, I asked myself this in her first agility training session back when she was, for the most part, completely new to the competition scene. While I watched the other dogs successfully jump over the hoops and hurdles, I myself was impressed even though it shouldn't have been those dogs I was rooting for (though, it doesn't hurt to admire them). It was clear that these other dogs had been training for a long time and were already at a very competitive level, not to mention, a level that would be a challenge for Elsie to defeat later on in the agility trials.

So I looked at Elsie as she jumped on Dr. Eichler whenever he walked anywhere and wondered what she would be thinking right now if she were a human — or what she would be thinking in any way in which I could understand her on a deeper level and empathize with her performance-level at this moment. And I realized that, at least if I were her, I would feel nervous. I was a complete beginner in this scene and yet I would have to go up in front of all the competitors, who have been training for months, if not perhaps even years, and show how beginner-level I am at all of this (the way that these training sessions are formatted is that the trainer helps each dog individually for about three-to-four minutes for each obstacle section).

Hence, I decided not to cut whenever Elsie made a mistake or when she took a long time to finish a course. Generally in film, we cut a scene when the subject is doing the same thing for a long amount of time, such as walking, writing, reading a book — anything that involves a repetitive action — because once we know what they're doing and there is no new emotion involved, we do not have to linger on this moment.

However, for Elsie's first training, if not her first few training days, I kept the camera on her for an amount of time that otherwise would have been uncomfortable for a human subject.

Elsie's sessions were full of errors and the trainer had to spend extra time explaining new techniques to Dr. Eichler in order to direct her toward the correct path of training.

As Dr. Eichler would later explain in the training log portion of the documentary, the trainer did not always communicate her advice in the kindest of ways. There were some times when the trainer told Dr. Eichler that he was talking to Elsie too much in his training or saying things that were interfering with her training. Although these are completely valid points that a trainer should be aware of in aiming for the best for the training of their dog, it was the way the trainer communicated these concerns that were at times discouraging and frustrating, especially when it seemed at times that she was accusing him of doing things that he wasn't (but that were later cleared up as a miscommunication).

It was particularly in this beginning phase of the training sessions that I had some doubts regarding Elsie's progress. First of all, not having any experience with this kind of activity at all, I didn't know how long these other competitors had been training for nor how long it might take Elsie to reach their level and even exceed it.

All of these doubts, however, proved to be surface level because somehow, at the end of the day, when I would see Elsie once again approach me with a panting expression that made her look like she was smiling (and I don't know why she would always be so friendly to me considering I never knew how to show my affection like other people), I would be reminded of a brave, misunderstood little warrior who had just come out of a brutal training session but still wanting more. In some ways, I thought of her as being like Olive from the film, *Little Miss Sunshine*, in the sense that she would never give up no matter how hard the world would press down on her and try to urge her to turn around on her dreams.

In other words, even though Elsie was clearly behind the other dogs at the beginning of the training sessions just as Olive clearly did not look or act like any of the other contestants at the beauty pageant, it was simply her attitude that made me never once doubt her ability to win. Even so, this term “win” is subjective, just as the entire movie of *Little Miss Sunshine* essentially centers on this single word: Olive’s dad is a struggling motivational speaker who even starts the movie off by explaining the definition of “win” to a non-existent crowd. During this opening scene, he provides the typical definition of a “winner” being someone who never gives up until eventually they succeed, yet he is hypocritical to his own definition when, at multiple points in the story, he tries to convince his daughter to back out of the competition (but at the fatherly concern that she might get her feelings hurt if she continues any further). At the end of the movie, Olive does reach the highest point she can reach in terms of beauty pageants, which is that she participates in the beauty competition which the entire road trip/bulk of the movie aims toward, but she gets kicked out of the competition following a very outlandish dance scene. However, even if having lost miserably in the terms of the competition, the most important thing is that Olive won in her own terms: She fought her hardest, danced her fiercest, and believed her truest. Because of that, she won more than any of the other competitors there who entered the competition knowing they would risk nothing, knowing they could only gain something from that point forward from their plastic surgery-botched faces, perfect tans and professionally done hair, the perfect formulas for a much less satisfying definition of “win.”

The way that Elsie reminded me of Olive was Elsie’s neverending smile despite her missing from left foot. Even though Dr. Eichler’s wife, Lisa, shares that it seems as though Elsie does not remember the accident before which she had to get her leg amputated — or, at least, she

gives no indication of remembering this prominent event — there is no doubt that some form of trauma must have occurred in Elsie’s life that necessitated her having to get rid of one of the most vital body parts for a dog, especially one that would be engaging in an agility competition. And yet, it is really as if Elsie is unaware of any shortcoming. She is one of the most friendly dogs I have ever met and seems to hold this unspoken knowledge of how the other person is feeling — that even when they cannot express their mutual liking toward her, she understands and still comes to appreciate this person no matter how minimal in interaction. It is almost pitiful to see this tiny dog without a front left foot yet she is panting (smiling), running up to people and rolling over (as she might do as one of her many tricks, such as sitting or completing a game, or as she might do in request of getting pet on the stomach). She asks for no sympathy whatsoever nor does she listen to (or seem to notice) anyone, like the trainer, who discourages her from reaching the end of the course smoothly, adequately and thoroughly. Elsie just does what feels right, tries her best with the most ebullient of behaviors and is very quick at learning, all of which alone made her a winner after each training session, no matter how she might have struggled that day.

When I visited Elsie at her classroom setting at Poly High School in Riverside, I was expecting to meet students and faculty who love Elsie’s presence because of her adorableness and sunshine-y disposition. However, what I did not expect that day was to see how much Elsie has the power to make an impact on these students’ academic experiences. Several of the students who I met that day and whom the faculty described apparently have trouble with motivation, mood and focus — although, none of these things are associated nor are each one found in each student: Rather, these are just examples of somethings the students I met or were

mentioned struggle with. However, whenever Elsie appears in the room, the anxiety, stress, sadness or anger just fades away and the happiness is elicited from Elsie and onto the students, faculty and even parents who want nothing more than their child to be happy and to do well in their pursuits. One student who was mentioned by a faculty member was said to have been having a bad day and was being uncooperative with the teacher; however, when Elsie entered the room, something just uplifted in him and he began to answer the questions. Hearing about this behavior reminded me of the times when I feel like I am in an unretrievably dark place and only the best things in my life — the things which let me know that the world at large is not so bad, which informs me that if I can find hope in this thing then I can still find hope in achieving my goals, which let me know that there is still some motivation left in me to go back out into the world and continue chasing after my dreams — can possibly have any effect on me. Elsie means so much to these students in that they not only rely on her for comfort in having a ceaseless companion but also of being reminded of their potential to find the goodness in the world and to continue fighting — no matter how hard the path — because no impairment can prevent someone down from accomplishing something that can show how strong and full of potential an individual is.

Before I even realized it, Elsie began to breeze through the agility courses before my eyes. I don't think there was any specific point in which I remember seeing her get through each course for the first time. Perhaps from day one, starting from the core of her being, which was her bright, positive attitude, I had the feeling like she was always a winner at the end of the day. But somewhere around February when she became able to go through the entire course — the hurdles, the tunnels and the weave poles — without making a mistake, I had a flashback to her



very first day when I saw the other dogs accomplish the same feat and only hope that I could see Elsie do the same. Eventually, that day did arrive, yet it was not much of a surprise nor did it feel like anything new, because I had a gut feeling from the beginning that Elsie could do it.

With Elsie now having the qualifications to compete at the CPE, or the Canine Performance Events, agility trials in April, I had to reflect on my film at large since the ultimate decision day was now being planned and approaching very quickly. I wondered if all of the footage that I had gathered so far was enough to make an impactful film and I wondered if Elsie would actually reign victorious at the trials or if something terrible would happen and she would forget everything on the spot. I had no idea being someone with very little knowledge about animals. Anything could happen, and as I had to learn from the beginning with having to adapt an “on location” style of filmmaking, in which the film is the lived experience of the filmmaker, I just had to keep my guard up at every moment and capture for the audience what I was feeling rather than relying on the subjects to be able to convey this in a passive state of filmmaking on behalf of the director.

From the beginning of the agility trainings, Dr. Eichler has been mentioning to me the *Best In Show* documentary which depicts dog trainers as the eccentric yet interesting stereotypes that we would imagine. The first dog trainer who we trained with back from Elsie’s first agility training session and for a few sessions after admittedly suited this description.

And immediately, the dog trainers who I saw at the CPE event reminded me of these trainers: They were doing exercises around the field as though they were the ones going through the obstacles rather than their dogs, they were talking to their dogs and they were coordinating the paths they would take with their dogs in very energetic, enthusiastic fashions (such as, as I

show in the CPE portion of the documentary, one man running around the field like an airplane). This was a world which other trainers had been living in thus far yet that I had no been exposed to — only in my training with Elsie — and immediately I was intimidated that these trainers who took their craft so seriously would blow Elsie and Dr. Eichler to dust. But if anything, the fear from those few first moments made me rethink the past months of training and how much all of the hard work had gotten Elsie to this moment in the first place: How, like a child, she had grown right before my eyes. Even though these trainers might seem intimidating on the outside, everything came down to their craft and the execution on the field, and Elsie had proven from the beginning that she could do this despite coming from moderate beginnings and in a field full of more qualified competitors.

In those moments before Elsie's performance, I could feel the adrenaline of a filmmaker about to film their supposed "martini" shot, or the final shot in the film. Perhaps I not only felt it because Elsie had the potential to "win" big or "lose" big, but more closely to how Olive felt in her final scene of *Little Miss Sunshine*, all of Elsie and Dr. Eichler's hard work would be put to the test in these moments even though they had done so much to deserve recognition in itself. It was possible that others who would not know the time, energy and efforts they had dedicated themselves to and could so easily give them failing scores.

Yet, as I felt when I first saw her panting at me in the car and smiling at me as I could only sit there and watch, as I felt when the students at the high school asked if Elsie was in today only to brighten up at the mere sight of her, as I felt when I saw, not even with surprise but with expectation, Elsie complete her first thorough rounds of the entire agility training course as if she had been training for years rather than months, Elsie was glorious in both the competitive and

individualistic sense. She had no doubt the smoothest run throughout the entire course that at least I had spectated that day and most people did not know that she was missing a front left leg until they came up to congratulate and pet her after. I felt so proud of seeing Elsie prove in a measured test of strength, willpower and ability that she, in the most definite of terms, had the potential to accomplish the greatest of feats that even those without disability or impairment could not do.

And to this moment, Elsie has impacted me in ways that have imprinted unconsciously but that have stuck with me from my months of training and recording her. As I edited the documentary and saw her growth within a matter of minutes rather than a matter of months, I see with the click of my fingers that anyone can create anything as long as they are dedicated, consistent and, most importantly, begin the process by believing in themselves. I began my journey with this documentary never having created a film before and yet, I was given the opportunity and strived after it. Like Elsie creating the greatest performance within a matter of months and with the conditions that some dogs or even humans could imagine putting themselves through, I created a documentary that I stuck with, directed and stitched together through ending in the end, and that, most importantly, has shown me that I can create a film that, no matter how it may turn out or the fact that it is my first film, is a win in itself.