Summer 2017 Liberalis

Hacking Life

As comic, videographer, and fashion designer, Dave Ackerman finds ideas are his best resource.

Dave Ackerman -- comic, writer, and videographer -- says the creation of Tobacco Motorwear is the most creative thing he's ever done.

Dave Ackerman's life journey seems like one crazy mountain road of switchbacks.

At one crook, for instance, he paused to portray a life-sized talking tongue in a Youtube Video.

Dust clouded another curve as he skidded around the bend, pulled behind a motorcycle, the rear pockets of his jeans shredding and smoking.

But you can't call this road a bit eccentric. Or aimless. Or even haphazard.

It's inspired.

Once, for a speech to high school students in Utah DECA, a statewide marketing and entrepreneurship club, the introducer described Ackerman as a writer, producer, actor, stand-up comedian, fashion designer, and entrepreneur.

Ackerman's response: “That’s all?”

If he could, he says, he’d look each youngster directly in the eye and say, “Hack your life. Every step of the way.”

Ackerman’s childhood heroes, boy detective Encyclopedia Brown and scheming Ferris Bueller, would not have understood this modern-day notion of reprogramming your brain to improve life. But it’s their advice that still inspires Ackerman: Above all, be resourceful. That remains the principle behind the 36-year-old’s flourishing non-linear career.

These days, Ackerman is living what’s always been his career dream: Doing pretty much whatever he wants to. “I've just always known,” he adds, “that I would make my own way.”

Now, his latest venture is Tobacco Motorwear, a company that manufactures and sells exclusive motorcycle clothing lined with Kevlar. And if this seems just a zig from Ackerman's zag of comedy and writing, he explains, it’s “the most creative thing I've ever done.”

Lessons from a shy teenager

This story begins with a shy high schooler in West Jordan, Utah. “I had one friend,” Ackerman recalls. “He wasn’t in my lunch one of the days, so I’d eat lunch in the library so nobody would see me eating alone.”

Those awkward years cemented a lifelong attitude that he now describes this way: “If a crowd is doing it, I have a problem with it.” So he heartily agreed when that lone friend suggested, “Hey, everybody’s trying to get into yearbook. Wouldn’t be funny if we tried not to get into yearbook?”

For the next couple of years, he said, “We gloried in non-participation.”

The adult Ackerman now reflects on this shy, curly-haired sophomore who took wardrobe advice from Scooby-Doo’s friend Shaggy: “If I wasn’t trying to fit in, then no one could make fun of me.”

That same year at Bingham High, one of Utah's largest high schools, he crashed the annual school club kickoff. As other, more normal clubs tacked up their signs, Ackerman set up his own booth. He donned his grandfather’s musty class sweater and gathered up the dryer lint he’d be saving for over a year (yes, bizarre is his badge). He displayed the lint — sorted into categories like green lint and rainbow lint — under a sign advertising The Lint Club.
“We got more signups than any other club,” he remembers. “It was this idea of laughing at all these institutions and the way things are always done.”

Thus began a high school career of pushing bullies off-kilter by buying their lunches and trying out jokes on anyone who’d listen.

No one was more surprised than Ackerman when he was elected prom king. He realized, he adds, “that I’d become weirdly popular.”

That high school pranksterism was “all in fun,” he says now, but the lesson from those years was very serious: “It’s how you look at your world. Are you seeing opportunities and creatively taking advantage of them?”

The nirvana of video

Ackerman is one of nine children of Jim and Susan Ackerman, who met while both were students at Utah State University. The younger Ackerman was enthusiastic to follow family tradition.

He enrolled at USU as a business major because, he says, “Everybody tells you that’s the responsible move.” Classes were just “OK,” he said. Then, one course required him to write and film a commercial. So he headed to Al’s Sporting Goods, his chosen subject, where he angled actual discounts on hats to make his student commercial more “real.”

“I thought, ‘This is the funnest thing I’ve done!’” he said. “I was like, ‘This is way closer to what I want to be doing’.”

That prompted his shift to the broadcast track in the Department of Journalism and Communication, a much better fit for his style of thinking.

In JCOM, he finally found himself among students who shared his outlook.

“A lot of the types who end up in communications like talking to people,” he says now. “They like working on different things, maybe showing off, like ‘Look what I can do for you’.”

His experience in video editing, gained during college and as an Aggie TV reporter, earned him his first “real” job with the Utah Jazz. His single duty was editing tape of the team’s mascot, Jazz Bear. “I felt like it was a cool job,” he says. “But I’ve always had problems with hourly work,”

Plus, he adds, “I was working for a man in a bear suit.”

What’s your brand, man?

As a budding contrarian, Ackerman soon discovered that he was not a clock-puncher. What would be even better, he decided, would be for people to ask him to work for them. “I thought, if I’m good enough at something or if I have a personal brand,” he said, “people will come to me.”

The foundation of Ackerman’s own brand began with gigs as a stand-up comedian — a natural result of his high school lab experiments of testing his few jokes on new targets. “I was always working the room,” he said.

The gigs eventually landed him in Chicago, where he began studying with The Second City improvisational theater and training center. Among his lessons there was the concept of 2- or 3-minute sketch comedies. Those short comedic skits, he soon found, perfectly meshed with a trend that had just exploded on the scene: YouTube viral videos.

Ackerman found opportunity with a Utah company badly in need of some cheap marketing for its product, the Orabrush tongue brush. YouTube, says Ackerman, was cheap. With his brother Joel Ackerman, a film graduate from Brigham Young University, they created “The Diary of A Dirty Tongue,” a weekly vlog that posted more than 100 4- to 5-minute episodes from 2011 to 2012 or so. Dave Ackerman appears as Morgan, a sloppy, smart-alec tongue the size of a football player.

The series quickly floated to the top of video viewership, he said, becoming the third largest branded channel on YouTube behind Old Spice’s “the man your man could smell like” campaign and a blitz by Apple Computer.

He and Joel moved to Los Angeles and embarked on a successful course of creating video advertising spots. Eventually, an amiable split between the brothers left Joel with their original joint venture, Ackerman Creative, and Dave launching his own social-content studio, Spaceman Creative.

Ackerman’s expertise soon became creating branded viral videos. “We used to call them commercials,” he says. “Remember commercials?”

“We’re now in a market, he says, where “you can’t think about commercials like you used to.”

Ackerman’s videos have often been swept up by the viral stream, like “The Dangers of Selfie Sticks,” a so-called “public service announcement” that’s actually a soft commercial for Pizza Hut. Ackerman wrote and directed
the two-and-a-half-minute video that became one of the most shared ads of May 2015.

**Cycling through fashion**

![Dave Ackerman, a native of Utah, loves the open road.](image)

With a growing family — his wife, Lisa, a toddler named Ila and baby Forrest — Ackerman decided to “reinvent” himself a couple of years ago, this time as an offbeat fashion designer.

The result, Tobacco Motorwear Co., specializes in high-end jeans lined with Kevlar, a plastic textile designed to stop bullets — and road rash. More recently, Tobacco Motorwear has moved to manufacturing Kevlar-lined shirts.

Ackerman took his playbook right out of an Encyclopedia Brown novel. This is the thought process he recommends.

**First: Recognize a problem that needs solving**

“Fixing problems is a billion-dollar industry. That’s the world today,” he says. “You can fix a problem in seven different ways, and all of those can be million-dollar companies.”

In the case of Tobacco, that need was on the part of motorcyclists who had to “sacrifice style for safety,” he said.

(Disclaimer needed: Ackerman chose the name tobacco for its reference to the vintage color, a leatherish brown hue, not as a reference to tobacco use, which he does not endorse.)

**Then: Analyze your resources**

In Ackerman’s plans for a potential clothing line, his most valuable resource, he found, was his home base in Los Angeles, the hub of thriving fashion manufacturing, denim providers, and distribution channels.

Another resource was his own familiarity with the motorcycle community. And finally, he jokes, he uses a resource that Encyclopedia Brown would have relished: Google for everything he didn’t know. For instance, he says “Google, where can I get Kevlar?”

**Next: Try it**

To Ackerman’s way of thinking, “There’s nothing sadder than an idea hoarder.”

Don’t worry, he admonishes, “whether the idea is good or original enough. For my brother and me, it was never a question of whether ideas were good or not; it was just, ‘Let’s try it.’”

An idea can have tremendous value, he adds. “But you can’t eat it and you can’t spend it. So now you’ve got to start doing some work.” Have we mentioned Ackerman’s drive to work hard?

**Finally: If you fail, determine what did work, and begin again.**

Ackerman is known, and frequently hired, for his ability to brainstorm. One recent client was a Silicon Valley app maker. He remembers:

* *I went to a meeting with about six important people after an app they’d created failed.*

*They began by saying, ‘These are the available resources. Maybe the app failed, but there’s some good technology in it.’ I said, ‘What are some other applications we can design, leveraging what’s good about our failed app?’ We came up with 20 ideas. The company was elated.*

*But if they’d called me earlier and said, ‘Hey Dave, give us 20 ideas for apps’, I don’t know if I could have done it. But I could sitting with the people who know what’s possible. Ideas create ideas.’*

Later, he wanted to know if something like Tobacco Motorwear would actually grab an audience. So he took his idea to Kickstarter, a crowd-funding platform for people who want to try out ideas. “We thought, ‘If we put this out here we’ll know if it succeeds, or we’ll know it fails — because there’s not a market, or because we suck,’” he says.

The money came in from more than 500 backers, reaching $120,000 in two months.
“If you have an idea,” he adds, “try it. You always win because you learn something.”

No robots here

Ackerman says his training in JCOM gave him the versatility he needed to “hack” his life. “JCOM graduates are poised to take the world by storm,” he says. “They are the problem solvers the world needs.”

JCOM students are articulate and creative, he said. They understand creating stories and are more willing to wade through puddles, he says. That’s exactly what Ackerman himself looks for in employees. “Creative people are like a Swiss Army knife. They just have a little bit of everything. They ask questions, and they understand how people’s minds work.

“JCOM majors should be optimistic about their future,” he says. “Robots may replace everybody except creative people. We have the longest time before we’re obsolete.”

Lofty Dreams

Hill Aerospace Museum Curator draws on USU lessons

History grad Justin Hall has curated the Hill Aerospace Museum since 2015 Justin Hall is a classicist. He double minored in Greek and Latin. His master’s thesis explored intellectualism in ancient Greek drama. He’d created for himself “a niche in the ancient world.”

But at the moment, he is pointing to a machine gun with a barrel as wide as a soccer ball protruding from the nose of a large, solid and sleek marvel of technology, the Warthog.

“This A-10 is my favorite aircraft here,” he said. “When I arrived, I didn’t even know that the A stood for ‘attack’.”

Since he joined the Hill Aerospace Museum as its curator in 2010, he’s learned loads about planes — and helicopters and the veterans of American wars.

And, in his former position as curator of the Zion National Park Museum, he became versed in ancient pottery, red rocks, and mountain goats.

There’s one thread that weaves together the papyrus of Euripides to the clay pots of the Southwest to the museum’s SR-71, the world’s fastest airplane.

Humans. Their nature, their innovative thinking, their optimism.

As a curator, Hall’s job is to preserve history, whether its makers were dressed in togas as they invented philosophy or in 20th-century suits engineering the technological marvels that freed us from earth-bound constraints.

“I appreciate human nature, and I enjoy seeing what humans do as a species,” he said. “The questions and stories don’t change much, regardless of the era.”

A classic move

Hall was introduced to Utah as a young soccer player, traveling with a team from his hometown of Anchorage, Alaska. He left the state with plans to return.

He did, to Utah State University where he registered as a psychology major. After one semester, however, he switched to philosophy. Psychology, he found, was all about the brain, when what most interested him was “the life of the mind.”

And the most essential, purest cerebral world he could find was in philosophy.

During those years, he was enticed down the halls of Old Main to the History Department’s Classics Studies. His first impulse had been to learn Latin, primarily as a foundation for romance languages like French or Italian. He soon discovered, though, “that you can’t learn a language without learning about the people who speak it,” he said. “It just drew me in.”

His next move may seem a foregone conclusion for a student who, if he could, would create a time machine to carry him to ancient Athens. He remained at USU to earn a master’s in history, which he saw as just a step on his way to a doctorate in classics.

Ancient Greece offers countless beaten paths through philosophy — Plato, for instance, or the Stoics and Epicureans. But Hall enjoyed more the chuckles, gaffs and human insights of the folks in the cheap seats of popular theater. “The average person on the street probably wasn’t
an expert in Platonic ideas,” he said. “When you look at how philosophical ideas were presented in theater, you get a much better sense for what the popular attitude was.

“So in some ways,” he adds, “my thesis was like looking at American politics by watching ‘The Simpsons’.”

As he neared the end of his master’s work in history, the “real world” began to leak in at the edges. He decided the odds of becoming a professional classics scholar were slim. But what does one do with a degree in philosophy and other topics in the humanities? Hall never doubted he had one sizable advantage in his favor.

“It may seem like a degree in nothing,” he said of his schooling in philosophy and history. “But it’s like having a degree in everything because so many of the things you learn can be applied to just about any job you have. You don’t learn a specific skill, like accounting but you learn how to think.”

He pauses to add, “I’ve never regretted it.”

The next steps on his career path took him to the USU Museum of Anthropology, and he eventually earned a master’s in Museum Studies from Johns Hopkins University.

Learning to appreciate it all

With his museum studies focus, Hall traveled to Zion National Park for an internship as a summer museum tech. That stint turned into a full-time job, and in 2010 he was named curator of the Zion National Park Museum.

The position involved oversight of not only Zion’s collection, but also collections at Bryce Canyon National Park and Cedar Breaks National Monument. The National Park Service has a “robust museum program” with a mission to preserve and protect access, says Hall. Unlike many private-sector museums, however, curators of federal institutions are forced to be Renaissance men and women.

At the Zion museum, for instance, “nobody can specialize in all that stuff,” he says. The museum’s collection sprawls to include paleontology, ancient peoples, wildlife, early pioneer settlers, unique plants — and that’s not to mention the many times the sheer red cliffs of Zion have inspired modern painters and photographers. At any given time, he says, just 2 or 3 percent of the museum’s artifacts are on display.

One thing, however, held up Hall’s appreciation for all the wonders under his control: His heart was still in the classics.

He remembers one “crown jewel” of the Zion collection, a clay pot excavated in the 1920s. It was completely intact and wrapped in the original yucca cordage, plus it was filled with ancient corn – all in all “an amazing archaeological find,” he said. Scientists placed the pot’s age at between 1,100 and 1,500 years.

But Hall was “just coming out of the huge classics thing,” he recalls. “And I’m doing the math in my head.” As every classicist knows, in this era, about the year 500, the Coliseum in Rome and Parthenon in Athens were already centuries old.

“I thought, ‘Monumental achievements had been going on in Europe for thousands of years, and these guys are making clay pots.’”

He stops right there. It’s the stories behind the artifacts that matter most. He says, “It took me a while to appreciate (Southwestern U.S. artifacts) in their own context and not compare them to these other cultures I had been living in for so long before that.”

And in going through such a restructuring of one’s thought process, he adds, “You learn a lot about yourself.”

And that applies to museum work in general, he adds. “You learn to appreciate this stuff and its stories, regardless of where your own interests lie.” It helps, he adds, to be around the enthusiastic and passionate scientists and researchers who would show up at the Zion Museum for their research. “Other people’s enthusiasm can rub off on you,” he said, “especially when they’re really passionate about something and express the significance” of the artifact.

It’s a perspective he’ll remember when he’s creating the next exhibit or doing outreach — drawing in that reluctant museum visitor.

On the record

Hall moved with his family — wife Lisa and their two children — northward to Layton in 2015 to accept the curator position at the Hill Aerospace Museum. Both Hill & Zion museums are federally funded — the Hill museum is part of the U.S. Air Force Museum System based out of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. But Hill Aerospace, says Hall, “is much closer to what a regular public museum is.”
At the Hill museum, surrounded by aircraft the height of a two-story building, Hall had to readjust again.

Unlike the museum’s conservator, who dusts and repairs damaged artifacts, a museum’s curator is responsible for what Hall calls “preventive conservation.”

He’s pledged to create a stable, safe environment for artifacts. Just as vital is documentation, the behind-the-curtain structure that keeps the collection relevant and, more importantly, searchable by researchers across the world. He collects and records stories behind the artifacts and confirms their provenance. It’s good, old-fashioned record keeping for good, old-fashioned objects.

“Things become less and less accessible if they’re not documented correctly,” he said. “In a collection of thousands of items, regardless of what museum, when someone says, ‘I’m looking for a projectile point or this uniform’ it helps to have a consistent nomenclature and maintain consistency in the kind of details you record.”

A curator’s job is also, in a sense, about picking and choosing the future of the museum. With a museum like Hill Aerospace, which gets far more donations of war and aircraft artifacts than it can accept, “it can get tricky,” he said.

“It’s easy to gloss over something because it doesn’t seem all that significant right now,” he said. “So, we have to guess, ‘What about this (artifact) might be significant down the road?’”

It’s particularly in this regard that Hall draws on his training in philosophy and history. “Both my history and philosophy background have come into play in a lot in these sorts of subtle ways you wouldn’t necessarily expect,” he says. “It has definitely helped with different types of skill sets that are very applicable to the kind of work I do.”

The Hill Aerospace Museum, with its aircraft representing every American war since World War I, has a different vibe than, for instance, a natural history museum. Here, the artifacts and historic aircraft connect with many visitors in a way a dinosaur skeleton never could.

The museum presents “an interesting dynamic because you have technology and innovation really meeting history,” he said. “We get to walk in both worlds.”

In the dual world of museum visitors, one camp is made up of children who “just go crazy, running around and who think it’s so cool to see this or that airplane.”

Then, there’s “that older generation who may have a very somber experience here,” he adds.

“They knew people who died in these planes,” he says. “It will bring them to tears because it brings back such strong memories.”

Despite his love for history, he says, the most rewarding part of the job is these living, breathing beings who visit museums. “It’s great to actually be part of something that can impact people on such a personal level,” he said.

Indiana Jones never felt that.

OK, Hall admits, his job actually bears little resemblance to that of Indiana Jones.

“Despite what my mom might tell you.”

Kindling a desire to learn

“Everything is self-evident.”

That statement’s author, philosopher René Descartes, has obviously never struggled through a college philosophy class. Or tried to read Nietzsche.
Philosophy is demanding, says professor Charlie Huenemann, Ph.D. It begins with the seemingly simple questions we all ask — “What’s real?” or “Am I just a speck of dust in the universe?”

“Of course,” says Huenemann, “things get complicated quickly — because life gets complicated.”

We spend our lives skipping across puddles, restricted by time and inclination, simply splashing about. But philosophy is a deep dive many of us don’t have time to bother with. Unfortunately.

Even Nietzsche is ready to hand out guilt: “The doer alone learneth.”

Huenemann’s new venture makes philosophy, not necessarily easier, but definitely more accessible to those of us who seek to learneth.

He’s an expert on philosophic thought of the Enlightenment (about 1450-1860), and he’s had his scholarly work published by such established and ivy-covered institutions as Oxford and Cambridge. Still, he hasn’t hesitated to jump into our modern culture’s roiling and breakneck digital stream.

The internet, he says, has been “hugely transformative” in the way we humans communicate and learn. “With the invention of the printing press,” he says, “Gutenberg changed the world, no question about it.

“And we’re in Gutenberg 2.0.”

Johannes Gutenberg printed chapbooks. So does Huenemann. His primers, however, are electronic novella-length essays that explore such concepts as doubt, justice, the rational life — and they’re all instantly downloadable from Amazon. These modern-day chapbooks can be attained for a couple of dollars — or free if you’re a member of Amazon’s KindleUnlimited.

At 50 or 60 digital pages, the e-books can be read in about an hour — the length of a plane ride or a couch break on a Sunday afternoon. They instruct, as well as entertain. “My essays are meant to be something that might entertain readers and give their thoughts going in different ways,” he says.

Huenemann’s first volley in e-books was inspired by Minecraft, an international computer gaming phenomenon and obsession of his then 9-year-old son. Huenemann, too, was drawn in. Minecraft players create their own virtual worlds, happily building palaces with resources they hunt down or engaging in combat against zombies and huge spiders. At one point, struggling to escape a mineshaft and evading skeletons carrying bows and arrows, he realized, “There’s some interesting philosophical ideas at play here.”

Scholarly publishing houses weren’t interested, unsurprisingly, in a book looking at the philosophy in Minecraft. But Amazon was. “They were very enthused,” remembers Huenemann. “They said, ‘This is exactly the kind of stuff we’re looking for — something that’s not a book, but is creative and engaging with contemporary life. And it’s also connected to great big ideas.’”

He followed up How You Play the Game: A Philosopher Plays Minecraft, with what he calls the Stacks of Books series. The four books now in the series began life with Huenemann’s self-taught technique of learning through writing. “I find that the way for me to understand something is to write about it,” he said. The resulting essays became the e-books Inventing Justice, released in October 2016, followed in short order by World as Idea, Doubts, and To View from Eternity. Just released in May was Sloterdijk’s Spheres, exploring humans’ eternal obsession with, well, spheres.

There is really no theme, said Huenemann, except for a casual thread of “the interplay between knowledge and doubt.”

“I thought, ‘Let’s see if people are interested,’” he said. “And they have been. That’s been gratifying.”

At 99 cents or so a pop (minus Amazon fees), Huenemann isn’t getting rich. “I already have a salary,” he says. “My main interest is in making these ideas and essays available.”

He’s found that the audience for these digitally shared ideas is twofold.

First, there is the casual but educated reader who has only a Wikipedia-deep understanding of such thinkers as Spinoza, Hegel, and Nietzsche. These are people who “want to engage more with the questions and further ideas of famous thinkers,” he said.

Then, there is the army of Huenemann’s former philosophy students. “I have a lot of students who after they graduate write back and say, ‘I miss college. I’d really like to get back into discussing ideas.’”
“Part of the reason I started writing the Stacks of Books essays is for those students who would like to basically sit in on another philosophy class,” he said.

That description pretty much describes Justin Hall. “Now that I’m not in academia anymore, my brain starts starving to death,” says this former student, who earned his philosophy undergraduate degree in 2006. “I can’t always commit to reading a big book on Nietzsche, but these little bite-sized books are fantastic.”

Huenemann plans to spend the summer months writing. The e-books, he says, are “great and fun and important,” But, he adds, “I have to also keep my scholarly life going as well.”

He’s still likely to find some time to fit in another Amazon Single, perhaps on the relationship between science and magic — yes, the kind of magic that takes in astrology, potions, and wizards. “Harry Potter-like magic,” he says.

“In the history of science in the 16th and 17th century, the dividing line between what we would call magic and what we know as science was very blurry,” said Huenemann. “Kepler was doing his astronomy, but he was making astrological star charts at the same time.”

We’re looking forward to Huenemann’s next chapter.

Tina’s walk of life

For winner of CHaSS Legacy Award, each step displays courage -- and moxie

Haskin graduated this May with her bachelor’s in American Studies. She’s here in Logan because of her academic achievements, and because she’s learned to understand and stifle her fear.

“That’s the book I want to write,” she says, “about reaching out to that empty space to try and grasp something that will help me, or hinder me and what I can learn from it.”

She’s now been accepted into the American Studies graduate program to pursue a master’s degree where she says she will ground her continuing advocacy for others who are visually impaired. She’s been named a graduate teaching assistant, so she’ll soon have her own classrooms. And, says Jeannie Thomas, English Department head, Tina will continue to teach all of those around her, in her calm, cheery, and matter-of-fact style.

A friendship with Tina is itself a gentle lesson in “how our own experiences can be limiting,” Thomas says. “I thought, boy, in some ways working with Tina is about finding the areas where my imagination is limited and where I am blind,” she says.

“In her patient way,” adds Thomas, “she’s helping us grow because that’s not a world we know. I’ve really appreciated her because she’s opened up my world.”

Limitations are what Tina confronts daily.

In April, she earned the Legacy Award from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. This annual award recognizes “a student who represents the heart and soul of the university.” And as she sat down for an interview recently, it’s obvious there’s a lot of heart and soul here. She’s composed, chatty, and cocks her head at any curious thought. She carries the sunglasses that protect her eyes from searing light. A scarf loops her neck, her lipstick is neat, and her flip-flops bounce. She’s a regular texter and Facebooker.

Curiously scanning the faces of those around him is Butch, her 8-year-old guide dog and closest companion — so close, she laughs, that “I had to get a full-sized bed.”

She’s leaving the next day to fly to Manhattan to speak at a conference of Guiding Eyes for the Blind, an international organization. Before an audience of donors, puppy raisers, and guide dog users, she’ll tell her listeners “about the concepts of using a guide dog, advocacy and policy, and cultural norms and how to deal with difficult people and situations.”

Tina Haskin does not know if each step into the dark space before her will be helpful — or hurtful.

“There’s fear there,” she says. “All the time.”

The Quad is especially immense for this 24-year-old who’s has been blind since birth. Each step carries shadows or flickers, obstacles, or phantoms.
Here’s just one indicator of her widespread efforts as an advocate for blind people: Butch has flown on more than 250 flights.

So when Tina looks back to describe her life, her story comes as shocking, even discomforting.

Tina’s blindness is called retinopathy of prematurity, blindness caused by undeveloped retinas, the part of the eye that captures images and sends them to the brain for translation.

As a newborn, three months premature, her retinas never developed as they should have. They never had a chance. Tina was discovered as an infant, placed in a pile of garbage in New Delhi, India.

Her early months were spent in an Indian orphanage, sick and tiny, a premature baby with little attention and no medical care. When an American woman visited the orphanage, “she saw me and had a strong feeling to adopt me,” Tina says now. Her new adoptive father was a pilot in the U.S. Air Force, her new mother a dedicated worker among India’s poor. After a long paperwork battle with a government known for its corruption, Tina ended up with her new family first in California and later in Chicago, where she spent her high school years.

Tina’s origins remain mostly a mystery. Her adoptive parents dispatched private investigators to find the birth mother, concerned concerned that she was ill, desperately poor, or a victim of sexual violence. All they discovered, says Tina, was that the woman likely had died shortly after. A genetics test identified Tina’s forebears as Indian and European.

Encouraged by her LDS faith, Tina traveled to Utah alone, first attending LDS Business College in Salt Lake City. In early 2014, she transferred to USU because, she says, “This school seems like the right place to be.”

**In her own words**

On May 6, Tina Haskin walked with the Class of 2017 to receive her bachelor’s. She’s accompanied by Christine Cooper-Rompato, associate professor of English.

Because Tina’s own words most profoundly reveal her wisdom, self-awareness and optimism, what follows are transcribed excerpts from our interview with her.

**Tell us about your blindness:**

The retina in the back of my eye didn’t develop; my eyeballs aren’t affected. I can see sunlight and some shadows when they’re close enough to me. When I enter a building, I have to make that transition and be ready for it. It can be confusing because, often, I think there’s something in front of me or to my side. My sunglasses block out that distraction of flickers.

**What do you tell others who struggle with vision disabilities?**

Your only limits are those you think internally about yourself. So, to elaborate — and pontificate — on that, blindness should not be the thing that holds you back from pursuing a college degree, a marriage or a career you love. If anything, that should be the least thing that limits you. You can do things you put your mind to and use imagination and determination.

**What responses do you get from strangers?**

I get various degrees of people who treat me like I’m a baby, like I don’t know anything or who treat me like I’m helpless. People will grab me on campus, but they don’t say anything. They just grab me by the arm and pull me places with my dog because they think I’m going to walk into something.

**If you were the queen of the world, how would you like people to treat you?**

Like a queen! What is so healing to me, and everyone with a disability, is just to be treated like everybody else, like a normal human being, somebody with feelings, somebody who gets frustrated, somebody who loves to hang out and just be included in friendships.

**Do you think people respond to you in negative ways because of misplaced kindness?**

It does us a disservice to treat us like that. People don’t realize what they’re doing, whether it’s out of ignorance or out of pity. I’m nobody’s service project. I just want to be
included. And I just want people to see who I really am, a person just like them, somebody with a job, somebody who has hopes, feelings, and desires.

**Do you blend in well with your fellow students during class?**

In certain ways, yes because of my age and gender. But with my disability, I’m a minority. I feel like teachers haven’t known how to help me, so they often either point me out in front of the class, or they don’t know how to include me. So it makes for a very awkward experience.

**Do you raise your hand often with questions or opinions?**

I love my classes, and I love speaking my mind and elaborating on concepts we’re talking about. I found that when I talk and I include myself, it opens people’s hearts to accept me more. I really try to work hard on speaking.

**Yours is definitely an uncommon perspective:**

All my professors have said that — in my nonfiction workshops, in my fiction writing classes, the way I portray fantasy, the way I see things. I love fantasy. It’s a world I can escape into, and it’s so full of imagery that I can just think up in my head. I especially love J.R.R. Tolkien. He is amazing. He’s so descriptive; he can take a picture of a tree and just elaborate on its roots and its branches and, metaphorically and symbolically, turn that into something beautiful.

**How has technology changed your college career?**

It’s made it easier. When I was growing up, my teacher or a student took notes for me, and I just didn’t have the independence I really needed to be successful. Now I can write on a braille computer and have that output come through braille right below the keyboard. That’s really helped me. The Apex Braille Notetaker has a display with six little pins that pop up — there are 18 rows of six pins. As soon as I type something, it types it in braille and then refreshes. Then I’ll download those notes onto my computer via Bluetooth.

**Do you look forward to future innovation?**

Yes, I’m so excited. One of my blind mentors said that now is the best time to be blind because the technology is so innovative and readily available. There’s really no excuse to not succeed in what you put your mind to.

**What do the next five years hold for you?**

I want to get my doctorate, and I want to defend my dissertation. I want to be a stronger advocate and more educated so I can help other people see their potential. I want to prove to myself — and maybe to others, but not in a negative way — that blind people are respectable and that it’s respectable to be blind. We can be parents. We can be leaders.

There’s no manual for life, and there’s no manual for life with a disability. But we figure it out by pushing ourselves past our limits, maybe getting pushed down, but getting out of our comfort zones and taking risks.

**One For All**

Applying democratic values to cooperation

Avery Edenfield was on the board of directors for a small neighborhood grocery cooperative when a co-worker’s offhand remark hit her with one of those lightning bolts of life.

Avery Edenfield was on the board of directors for a small neighborhood grocery cooperative when a co-worker’s offhand remark hit her with one of those lightning bolts of life.

“I’ll never forget one of my colleagues who has a master’s degree,” she says of that back-and-forth discussion long ago. “We’re working together, and he’s like, ‘I never really learned how to do this.’”
She sees no irony in the fact that a director of a cooperative was unclear about the actual practice of cooperation. “We’re all just expected to collaborate,” she says. “But no one says, ‘This is how you do it in an effective way.’”

“So here’s this master’s student and, somewhere along the line, through all those years of schooling, that lesson didn’t get home.”

Collaboration is a habit, a skill that we “develop like we would a muscle,” says Edenfield. None of us sits through Collaboration 1050. And that’s unfortunate, adds Edenfield, because, just like grammar or math, collaboration is essential as we strive together as coaches, church-goers, siblings, co-workers, or employees. “It’s such a critical skill for even being a good citizen and living at peace with your neighbors,” she adds.

Edenfield herself “took it up as a goal — to teach people to work together democratically.”

Edenfield joined USU’s English Department in 2016 after earning a doctorate in professional writing from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

She was a graduate teaching assistant when she joined a neighborhood cooperative that was created as a natural foods market, bar, and community gathering spot. Her first role was as a bouncer. “For sure, I’m much more persuasive than physical,” she laughs. Later, she was elected as a member of the board. Her doctoral work and continuing research on the language of cooperatives are a direct outgrowth of this experience.

Cooperatives allow like-minded people to gather and solve a local issue; the majority bring groceries to communities without supermarkets. With one vote per owner, their decisions are “democratic,” says Edenfield. That extends to nearly all communication produced within co-ops, whether it’s, for example, bylaws or job descriptions.

Indeed, says Jeannie Thomas, English Department head, “The work Avery does with democratic and non-hierarchal communication is unique.”

To visit her classroom is to see those principles in action.

On this day, a circle game of Zip Zap Zop has a dozen or so students clapping, hooting, and shouting hints. “Zaps” and “zops” bounce from one player to the next in an energetic, off-beat rhythm.

A few “zips” later, these individuals have melded into a team.

This is where the hard part comes in — reshaping a simple game into real-life collaborative work. “My job is to make those ties explicit and to show how ‘this’ maps to ‘that’,” says Edenfield. “Students aren’t always going to make those connections. That’s where I come in.”

The game wraps up with a happy buzz. Edenfield herself is clapping, nearly doubling over in laughter.

“I learn so much from doing this with you,” she exclaims.

And that’s the point, she explains later. “We’re co-creating this learning environment and, hopefully, we can build new knowledge together. I’m learning alongside them, and they’re teaching me. Sometimes it can get messy and chaotic, but it’s really cool to see them teaching each other.”

Such out-of-the-chair lessons are the norm for Edenfield, who adds that she “feels the energy drop when I launch into a lecture.”

Student Jonathan Toronto, a junior with a double major in philosophy and English, nods in agreement. “It’s not necessarily a conventional approach to teaching,” he says.

Edenfield’s most useful technique is what she calls improv, like you might see in a live performance of improvisational theater. Her version of “tech comm improv” has a single, basic rule: Participants must always respond: “Yes! And …”

Line by line, the players build a story, à la the comedy series “Whose Line is it Anyway?”

An idea is unlikely to come out of your mouth perfectly formed, she says. Even if it does, an idea is not someone’s property, she explains. “I take what you give. Then I build, and we build, and we build together.”

This is where, she adds, “improv becomes a useful skill in teaching democratic teamwork.”

“It’s teaching people to work in a way where I’m respecting your whole humanity and all of the good and the bad you bring to a group,” she says. “Innovation comes from that instead of just defaulting to the managerial model.”

We’re all familiar with — or have been victims of — that managerial model. Or maybe we’ve been that bossy person who takes charge. Edenfield instead wants her students to be practiced saying, “‘Hold on. Let’s see what
kind of ideas people have.’ But that means everyone else has to step up.”

When looking at improv as a democratic teaching tool, Edenfield notes that the technique comes with its own “good-or-bad-news-first?” question. The bad news? It’s unpredictable. The good news? Well... “Improve creates a constantly changing atmosphere,” said Edenfield. “It’s dynamic and never predictable.”

Recently, she shared her techniques in a workshop attended by faculty members at Utah Valley University in Orem. The initial groaning (as in “Oh man, I hate group work”) soon became, she says, “‘Oh, I see how this works now. I have to build on what you say, but I can’t think too far ahead.’ Like you can’t have in your mind what you’re going to do before it gets to you, because it can change before it gets to you,” she said.

Like improv in Edenfield’s courses, problems are seldom predictable. “You can’t always hold on to control of the problem,” she said. “Sometimes it gets away and you have to figure something else out. You learn that through doing improv.”

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