

Sundance Film Festival 1997

The Stories of Our Lives

by Ellen Schneider



Who's affected by independent nonfiction film? Try four hundred-families in Little Rock, Arkansas, who sought advice from the local Alzheimer's Association after seeing *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*. Or the slew of previously isolated women with mental illness who began "meeting" on the internet after seeing *Dialogues with Madwomen*. Or the AIDS service worker who was successful in advancing a needle-exchange program after showing *Heart of the Matter* to formerly skeptical Los Angeles policymakers.

Each of these films was recognized for its artistic merit and premiered in recent years at the Sundance Film Festival. Each was driven by complex characters and punctuated by moments of breathtaking drama and spontaneous humor. Each

was produced by vigilant filmmakers who battled debt, doubt, and disaster to complete the story. But once the story had been told, and after the critics had heaped their praise, the work began again: to make absolutely sure that the film had its maximum exposure and intended impact.

Docs That Rock

Documentaries have been shaking audiences up for a long time – just check out the pioneering work of New Day Films, Kartemquin, California Newsreel, and others which have built and now maintain extensive distribution networks with universities, public libraries, and grassroots organizations.

But today, notes Patricia Aufderheide, associate professor of communications at American University, "there are new possibilities for networking and community building. But it's not always clear what works, or even what's really possible. And the challenge for filmmakers is something

like the challenge of desktop publishing for writers."

Indeed, the changing market-place, new technologies, and economic trends have inspired many filmmakers to expand their strategies, and nontheatrical distribution is now only one part of the mix. Many independent documentaries are now leaving the festival and theatrical circuit to become centerpieces of vibrant campaigns involving grassroots community networks, large mainstream organizations, the Internet, and national broadcasts.

Plugging in Television

When I joined the staff of the PBS series "P.O.V." in 1989, questions about the potential role of independent nonfiction film in public life were prominently on the table. As we worked with titles as diverse as *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, Christine Choy's and Renee Tajima's investigation into the murder of a Chinese-American engineer at the hands of a white Detroit autoworker, and Kate Davis's

Girltalk, a portrait of three teens living on the streets, the questions become more interesting. We began to think of “P.O.V.” not simply as a television series but also as a laboratory. What tangible influences can powerful independent films have on communities, we wondered? What partners are necessary to ensure that programs reach target viewers, and what long-term outcomes might result? And exactly what is it about some independent work that motivates people to get involved in the world around them?

We call our strategy High Impact Television, in which we ask national and community organizations to tell us how selected broadcasts might raise awareness, foster citizen engagement, and trigger ongoing activities. It’s hardly a science – we stick with projects that arouse broad public concern (aging, health, youth leadership) – and we’ve got a lot to learn from our colleagues and our own mistakes, but we’re uncovering opportunities and roles for independent nonfiction films that we had barely imagined a few years ago.

Consider *Heart of the Matter*, Gini Reticker’s and Amber Hollibaugh’s stunning film about women, sexuality, and mixed messages in the age of AIDS. Reticker, a seasoned filmmaker, and Hollibaugh, an AIDS educator, had done their distribution homework. They had topflight advisors on the project and kept them updated throughout production and postproduction. They knew that they were the first team to tackle the complicated social issues of women in the epidemic, and advised “P.O.V.” on how to connect the broadcast to a recently released Center for Disease Control report on growing rates of female infection.

With a small grant from the Ford Foundation, and four short months before the broadcast, “P.O.V.” worked closely with the producers and a brain trust of health care professionals who helped determine broad objectives for the effort. With their guidance, over 750 national and local organizations, government agencies, religious groups, and public television stations and other media made the connection between a superb

independent film and community engagement. Public television station KETC/St. Louis and the local American Red Cross chapter organized a prebroadcast event; by the end of the evening, the membership of a then-fledgling Women and AIDS Task Force had tripled (they were still going strong over a year later). The Martin Luther King Academy for Youth in New Jersey held a sneak preview to initiate a difficult, but long overdue, dialogue with African-American churches about their role in the epidemic. Other organizations used our sample press releases to generate local stories on women in their own communities, stories that would be difficult to sell without the “hook” of a national broadcast.

From Park City to Little Rock

Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter is Deborah Hoffmann’s Oscar-nominated, Emmy-winning, first-person account of dealing with her mother’s Alzheimer’s disease. I doubt that the caregiver organizations and senior citizen groups which joined the High Impact Television campaign had thought much about independent

filmmaking; what they knew was that Hoffmann's very personal story about her changing relationship with her mother captured the pathos, tension, and irony of coping with a loved one's altered realities. On the Internet, isolated viewers were encouraged to log on to "POV"'s website for discussion, links to relevant databases, and information on how to get help. Volunteers at the Little Rock Alzheimer's Association answered record numbers of phone calls to the local public television station for hours after the broadcast.

It doesn't take much scrutiny to figure out why some independent nonfiction films are "crossing over" to foster policy debates, community involvement, and support activities. It's precisely the passion, the intimacy, the empathy, and the filmmaker's authentic voice that make viewers feel, "That could be me," or "I must do something about that." Gini Reticker applied some lessons from her *Heart of the Matter* experience to her recently completed *New School Order*. "The most important thing is to choose the right characters and the right story...one that's a

paradigm for all the research you've done," she observes.

A look ahead at some new nonfiction films indicates a growing sophistication among filmmakers and their allies. For some, the question of impact is informing the creative process itself.

A Healthy Baby Girl is Judy Helfand's intimate, personal account of dealing with cancer caused by DES, a drug her mother was prescribed to prevent miscarriage. Unwilling to suffer in silence, Helfand chose to join a DES survivor support group and publically link her situation to broader issues. "But I wanted to make sure that groups involved with workplace safety, reproductive health, even consumer issues would be able to emotionally connect with this story of my middle-class family in Merrick, Long Island," Helfand says. Representative focus groups actually helped Helfand shape her on-screen character; she plans a robust broadcast-driven campaign.

Family Name is Macky Alston's journey to break the silence surrounding the legacy of slave owning in his own family. While filming,

executive producer Nicholas Gottlieb and producer Selina Lewis developed an ambitious goal: to push audiences to confront their own preconceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in light of a shared history. Gottlieb recalls, "While we were filming, we interviewed local church leaders, went to family reunions, even asked regional funders how this film could be used in their communities. Now we've got a database of fifteen hundred churches and grassroots organizations, and each is invested in the success of the project."

The Fight in the Fields, César Chavez and the Farmworkers' Struggle, by Rick Tejada Flores and Ray Telles, faces a similar challenge: how to use history to reach out to working-class Mexican-Americans, labor organizations, and church groups. Tejada Flores imagines mailings to farmworkers and rural-community screenings. "I want this generation to know what happened and what was accomplished...I want them to know about David and Goliath," he says. (The Independent Television Service, which funded *A Healthy Baby Girl*, *The Fight*

in the Fields, and other documentaries in this year's competition, is known for creative community-involvement strategies, especially the use of the Internet.)

Obviously impact needn't, shouldn't be always defined as producing measurable outcomes (think about any number of recent Sundance hits: *Paradise Lost*, *When We Were Kings*, and *Crum*). But anyone who loves documentaries and knows how hard they are to make should be heartened to learn that some of these jewels are triggering more than reviews and tiny box-office revenues. From nursing homes to elementary schools, from on-line discussions to the family dinner table, independent films are busting assumptions and building bridges. That's not bad for an art form!

Ellen Schneider is the executive director of *American Documentary*, the organization that produces the "P.O.V." public television series. She is also executive producer of "E.C.U./Extreme Close-Up," a video diary series copresented with the *Independent Television Service*, and wrote a feature

article about "E.C.U." and the personal documentary for the 1995 Sundance Film Festival catalogue.