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A FILMMAKER'S JOURNEY

There are so many different factors that contributed to where I am today. I think some of the best things in life take time to discover, especially when it relates to yourself. In my case, I was always drawn to imagery, to the arts, when I was young. But I didn't grow up in a community in which that was celebrated.

BY PAUL KIM



To me, film is a conglomeration; it's a tool that collectively utilizes photography, design components, traditional modes of communication, and collectively brings it all into, perhaps, the ultimate method of storytelling.

We struggle with the arts, educationally. As a result, I think it's one of those things that people often don't discover until later in life. It's kind of interesting, right? When you are young and in preschool and kindergarten, maybe even first and second grade to some extent, there's a lot of fun, creative activity going on. But, at some point, your educational experience locks you in to certain areas like the sciences, math and humanities, and you lose that focus you developed intentionally when you were young.

It was during my high school years when I found myself falling in love with photography. I was the kind of person who went to an exhibit or a museum and could just stare at an image for long periods of time. There was a story. There was detail. There were things I just felt were speaking to me that I wouldn't get anywhere else. But I didn't know what that meant. I did take a photography class in high school, but it wasn't really a serious class.

I remember looking at a few photography programs, but didn't know anybody in photography. I didn't have photographers in my circle who could advise me. I didn't have artists, visual artists, to guide me. And so when I went to college, I looked more seriously at the sciences. Because I was very active in sports, I ended up studying physical therapy.

Physical therapy was fantastic. But when I finished the program, I was about 20 years old, and the idea of having an 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. job, making pretty good money, actually freaked me out because I believed I hadn't experienced life. I ended up leaving that career path, and began to study religion.

I worked for a small church with a really young, energetic, creative bunch, and we always did creative stuff together. I spent time dabbling with photography, with storytelling. I started doing some film and video work as a hobby. I found myself doing more creative work, but, additionally,



Pieter Damsteegt

listening to the conversations of this age group. They were all about the mainstream pop culture and media they were consuming at that point in their lives. So half the things we talked about related to the music they listened to, films they watched, television shows they consumed, and what they watched online.

I spent time doing creative things I didn't have time to do while I was in school. Additionally, I started to realize the developmental and social implications of all this visual culture with which we were surrounded. With that realization, I decided I could do one of two things: 1) study about film and the arts, or 2) actually study the creation of the arts, the making of the arts, to study it as a practitioner.

I'll use the analogy of music. If you listen to music, you certainly can appreciate music. One might even study music so much that they become a music critic. But I came to this realization: Does one really know about music unless they actually create it? I made the same application to the visual arts. If I really wanted to understand the arts and the influence on these young kids around me, upon myself and society, then I should really pursue the making of the arts.

This was an easy decision because I really enjoyed creating; the tough choice was leaving a stable job. I also was doing something no one I knew imagined I would do. The conversation in my head was not a conversation I had with the friends around me, or even with my family. They didn't

know, they couldn't understand, they couldn't appreciate these sensibilities I had and that I had begun to revisit. So when I made the decision to drop everything, to leave these kids and go back to school to study the arts, it was a very controversial one within my community, within my circle of friends. It was by far the hardest decision I've ever made in my life. I think it was instrumental though, because had I never made that decision I never would have come to discover this part of me that never truly had bloomed that I knew was there, but had never opened that door and given it a chance to flourish.

That was the first year I truly found the biggest part of myself. That year turned into two years, which turned into another degree, which turned into job offers, which turned into an opportunity to get a wonderful scholarship to pursue graduate school, which turned into more job opportunities, which turned into me being able to create a new program at Andrews University in documentary filmmaking.

When I left my previous role, one of mentorship, relationship building and counseling young teenagers about life, life decisions, spiritual dimensions, and all the issues that teenagers deal with, to study the visual arts and film, there was a lot of doubt in my mind. I doubted what it meant for me and whether or not I could really do the arts, and whether I could create the kinds of things that spoke deeply to me and to a larger audience. I didn't know



if I could create something that would significantly impact a person's point of view or understanding of a particular topic. I didn't know if I could create something that would motivate someone to action.

But then I tackled a major film project about a doctor in Chad, Africa, then the poorest country in the world. I spent almost an entire year away from a lot of my friends, away from a lot of young people I was mentoring. I asked myself very intentionally whether or not it was worth it, all the way until I screened the project for the first time.

The night before I screened the film before an audience, I completed some last-minute edits. I walked away, absolutely convinced it was a terrible film. I think, in part, because I was dealing with a lot of emotional and psychological things at that time. I had a lot of insecurity, a lot of doubt. There were other forces at work. Also, after watching the film hundreds of times, I hated what I saw and thought it was an complete failure, a flop. When it came time for the screening the next day, I was as nervous as could be.

A couple hundred people were there. I gave a short introduction, and we screened the film. Somehow, during that screening, I received the gift of being able to watch it as if for the first time. It was incredible; I found myself moved by my own creation, which is a strange thing. I felt what the audience felt, and realized there is something different about watching a film with people rather than watching it on your own.

It was a very heavy film, not the kind of film you walk away from and say, "Hey, let's go catch a meal! Let's go hang out!" It's the kind of film you leave feeling very heavy-hearted and challenged by witnessing something you don't witness on an everyday basis. It was a film about people living in circumstances we're not exposed to here in the States.

When the film ended, the room was dead quiet. I realized, for the first time in my life, the satisfaction of communicating how I'd always wanted to communicate my whole life. Through the screening experience, the audience and I bonded. By sharing the story together, we now had a perspective through which to engage in conversation.

I went back to my little dorm room and wrote an email to a select few people. I simply wrote, "Everything I have been trying to do in the last few years — the various jobs that I've had, the various roles I've played, the various studies I've taken, I feel like this is what I've been trying to do. Finally, I was able to do something I was never sure I could; tonight my life could end, and it could end completely." That's how I felt.

As much as I love film and filmmaking, the part I love most is connecting with people. I've always been interested in mentoring, working with a population of young people who, in many ways, have been misunderstood — misunderstood in school because they think differently, they feel differently. Maybe they are not as overtly gifted in areas

that some portions of society value. Maybe they're not going to be lawyers or doctors or nurses. Maybe they won't be teachers. These are the traditional roles some use to define success. Part of that depends on where you've grown up — what community, what city, what part of the country; but in my world and in my school, I think the arts have been downplayed.

You won't find elementary schools and high schools with a whole lot of art classes — that's what they cut first. That's a shame because, in doing so, we make the decision to only feed a certain kind of giftedness, and that we're not going to acknowledge a population of people who have different traits, maybe even different nuances to their personalities that allow them to think, breathe and feel in ways the average person doesn't. Some are more sensitive to things like the image, to story. They have deeper intuitions than the average person, and I think they're special.

I think we need to acknowledge this very important population and ask the question, "How can we empower them to do what they were born to do?" I want to create a great program in which students can use storytelling and visual storytelling — film, cinema. I believe it is the mode of communication today. But equally, I want this documentary film program at Andrews University because I want people to have a chance to discover a part of themselves that no one's really aided them in before. This program may not be the most obvious program in a school like this, but this dimension of education is absolutely essential.

This is one of the most exciting times in which to grow up, maybe also a scary time. It is exciting because things are happening in our day and age that were never possible before. The world is a smaller place. We now have access to information and experiences, literally, at our fingertips. That wasn't possible 15 years ago. We're able to create things we've never seen before, partly due to the advent of technology. We can create experiences that never have been seen before.

The changes in technology are transforming the visual arts; it changes how we communicate and how relationships are built and developed. People text, but we also send images about what we're doing, what we're seeing — we call it a "selfie" when you hold up the phone and take a picture of yourself. People now communicate through imagery. And with imagery comes the narrative. I can't think of a single business, a single nonprofit institution, which isn't desperately trying to capitalize on ways to communicate their mission, ideas, products and who they are in ways that will capture this tremendously large, captive audience that's now available in never-before-possible mobile ways.

To me, film is a conglomeration; it's a tool that collectively utilizes photography, design components, traditional modes of communication, and collectively brings them all into, perhaps, the ultimate method of storytelling. The documentary filmmaker usually is someone who passionately cares about a particular topic, about a particular pressing problem in society which needs to be addressed; they care so much about that subject and the people who are suffering as a result of this problem that we need to deal with. They want to share that story so the public can be more informed, empathize and, therefore, be in a position to relate to, love and support those wrestling with the particular issue in ways they weren't able to do before.

Some of the best films available simply have been made by some of the most passionate people alive. They want to make an impact, and they do it through a very wonderful, powerful, provocative tool: documentary film. To me, that's a perfect fit for a community of people, for an institution like Andrews University which, within its mantra, claims that it truly wants to change the world.

I'm really excited about what our students can do, and about the possibilities. Perhaps, that's what drives me; maybe so much so, that it sometimes pulls me away from focusing on the present to being more intrigued by what people will end up doing when they leave this place. I want to see

I want to see my students walk away with the satisfaction of being able to . . . connect their audience with people, places and culture to which they never would have been exposed.

my students walk away with the satisfaction of influencing other people, to deliver experiences and perspectives that their particular audience has never had before. And in so doing, connect their audience with people, places and culture to which they never would have been exposed.

I feel like my students have the power, talent, capabilities, and maybe even the mandate, to bring the world together in a way we never have seen before. They can bring perspectives together to help us understand and appreciate the person that maybe, even unknowingly, we've all had this kind of prejudice against because of ideas about who they are and what their circumstances are, or lifestyle choices we judge because we are ignorant. I think that's one of the greatest callings a person could ever have, to perform the role of bridging people and communities as we've never been able to do before because the medium, the form, the technology

was never available before. I think students can play that role from a lot of different platforms. They may work for a social enterprise, human rights development agency, local church or an educational institution. It doesn't really matter where one is in society. Every corner of society needs people who perform these kinds of roles.

That's what I want my students to do. That's where I want them to be. And that's the kind of satisfaction I want them to feel when they go to bed at night. I don't want them to have any doubt about the time they spent that day and, collectively, that week, month or year, or whether or not their roles are incredibly valuable.

Paul Kim is associate professor of documentary film at Andrews University. Prior to starting the documentary film program in 2012, Paul was senior producer of Adventist Media Productions and executive director of the SONscreen Film Festival.



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