

QUESTIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT FILMMAKERS:

What generally inspires you as a documentary filmmaker?

(Kelly)

Originally I was interested in using media to express political points of view that weren't articulated in the mainstream media. To that effect, I am interested in putting the voices of our characters in *Every Mother's Son* forward, and hope the film can contribute to the debate about policing and to having it be part of the process of change.

After 15 years of making documentaries, though, my interest in the creative process of documentary-making has grown, and become equally as important to me as the "message." The process is so engaging and so challenging to both sides of my brain - the analytical and intuitive.

I love the fact that you never quite know what you are going to find. People never cease to amaze me, and inspire me, and the experience of throwing myself into someone else's world and to communicate their experience and point of view is a big responsibility and also very rewarding.

(Tami)

I came to documentary through painting, and I was introduced at a young age to the Cuban documentarian Santiago Alvarez, and I learned the documentary could be a public canvas, a way to speak to hundreds if not thousands of people at one time.

I'm inspired by the ever-present nature of people's ability to fight injustice, no matter what the odds are. There's this little spark that some people have, and I'm attracted to the spark, and I want to focus the camera on them.

There are two ways to approach documentary. In one, the idea generates within yourself. The other way, people approach you and you're working with an already existing concept. Either way, you have to feel passionate about the work or it won't materialize.

When and how did you decide to undertake this project?

(Tami)

I often feel like topics choose me. What happened with *Every Mother's Son* is that police killings were on my mind because they were so much a part of our environment in the city, and the discourse in the media was so polarized, that when Amadou Diallo was shot at 41 times in his own vestibule, I felt I had to get out there with a camera and talk to people, even for my own sanity, to find my own bearings. The camera gives me the ability to talk to people that I wouldn't otherwise be able to approach with any level of comfort. It was like the topic chose me.

(Kelly)

I was concerned about the high level of visibility of the topic, and the challenge was to find a unique angle on something that had had a lot of media coverage already. Then we found the mothers as a way in that was different, and decided to focus on their

enormous transition from this terrible experience to speaking out to changes in policing, and decided to look at what was it in them that pushed them to do that.

(Tami)

We both felt that it wasn't enough to make a documentary about police brutality alone, we wanted it to deal with these issues but also to have a human component, and to have an aspect of hope. The three mothers in *Every Mother's Son* - Kadiatou Diallo, Iris Baez and Doris Busch-Boskey - have found a resilience in themselves that is remarkable and can provide inspiration to others.

What were your goals in making "Every Mother's Son"? What would you like a viewer to understand after seeing the film and what would you like to see happen with the film?

(Tami)

For a while, we wanted to do a series called "Policing in a Democracy," which looked at the history of policing in the United States and asked whether policing can be just in the kind of political and economic system that we have here. It became such a monumental project that we decided to focus on a narrower topic that would still allow us to get at the important questions.

(Kelly)

Tami and I are always attracted to stories that explore large societal / political questions through the intimate personal experiences of people affected by them. Policing was such a dense topic, with so much history, that we decided that focussing on New York City during the Giuliani years, and on the stories of three mothers (though they were part of a larger movement), would allow us to get at the big issues through a very personal lens.

After seeing the film, I'd like the viewer to understand that police brutality is a problem that extends far beyond individual "bad cops," and that many of the problems facing us, particularly in the cities, are systemic in that they have to do with policies that put police officers in situations where abuses are likely to take place.

And I'd like to have Americans who don't live in poor urban areas to have a sense of what people in those communities experience from the police on a daily basis, because I think it would be shocking for them to see how unequal policing is in terms of its effect on citizens.

(Tami)

I'd like viewers to feel motivated to take very specific action where they live in terms of the creation of independent citizen review boards that have teeth, the creation of independent prosecutor positions where they don't exist and the building of coalitions with organizations that are fighting to reform policing in America.

What were some of the difficulties and challenges you experienced in making this film. When filming, how do you hold your emotions back when you see injustice or suffering?

(Kelly)

There was so much going on in the city that it was difficult to balance the individual stories of our characters with the collective story of what was happening at that time. There were so many killings between 1994 and 2000 that it was difficult to find a balance ... we didn't want to lose our characters, but they were part of a large movement of family members and we didn't want to lose the sense of that collective either.

(Tami)

I really wanted to see the police officers involved in our cases appear in the film. After years of trying, it became evident that they were not going to cooperate. Short of that, I wanted any cops, and we spent a long time going to any event where police would be, so that we could get their perspective into the film. We went to everything from police solidarity rallies around contract negotiations to a retirement party for a police officer in a Queens bar. We wanted to put a human face on the police, and to understand them as workers in a system that is so flawed. But ultimately it didn't work to include cops that weren't part of the specific stories we were telling, and it was a very difficult thing to let go of.

(Kelly)

We really didn't want to make a didactic film about how bad the police are. We wanted to really explore what is a complicated reality with a lot of nuances and contradictions. I think we succeeded, but in different ways than we thought we would.

(Tami)

In terms of difficult emotional or political situations, we listen profoundly and make very little judgment about what people are saying. Sometimes it's appropriate to cry with someone.

(Kelly)

Documentary filmmaking is not that different from life in general. There are difficult moments, and you try and have empathy and be open.

Did your initial theories or feelings towards the subject change during filming? If so, how or in what ways? How do you incorporate (or ignore) those changes into the filmmaking experience?

(Kelly)

I became aware of how the justice system doesn't work when it comes to cases involving police officers, regardless of the evidence and how clear-cut the situations seem. Though we did not intend to include so many of the details of the cases in the film, we decided to focus on them more when we realized that the most difficult challenges our characters faced was in trying to get justice through the legal system. A lot of the drama of the documentary actually took place in this arena.

And I also became aware of how much the problem in policing is really a legacy of the deep problems of race relations in this country.

These realizations just made me want to tell the story even more, and to move it beyond the stories of the individual women to something that could speak beyond them and beyond New York City.

(Tami)

My feelings have not changed, but I've become more aware of the magnitude of the problem, that it's really the unfinished work of the civil rights movement.

I realized that people have strong pre-conceived notions about policing, and that to break through those preconceptions requires a lot of details around the cases and the situation in the NYPD during the 1990's. That took up more screen time than we initially anticipated, and as a result we were able to focus less on the impact of this kind of crisis on people's internal and family lives.

What are you currently working on or what would you like to be working on?

(Tami)

I am currently working on a documentary with Larry Shore entitled RIPPLE OF HOPE, which explores the impact of Senator Robert Kennedy's visit to South Africa in 1966 immediately following the ban on the African National Congress and all organized forms of resistance to Apartheid. In addition, I am working with James Ridgeway of the Village Voice on ACTING PATRIOTIC, about the Patriot Act.

(Kelly)

I have just completed OVERCOMING THE ODDS, a short documentary about the World Health Organization's groundbreaking Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (the first-ever global public health and corporate accountability treaty), which premiered at the World Social Forum in Mumbai, India, this past January. I also have a few documentary ideas in development.

on 2/12/04 12:10 PM, Jeanne Houck at jhouck@earthlink.net wrote:

Dear Tami,

I hope you are well and having a good new year. I am writing with an update and request. We had tried to connect before the holidays and I apologize for not hearing

from us for awhile. Other parts of this project became time consuming, but things are moving along quite well. I am now clear to focus on launching the website for the series and over the next month we hope to have materials in place. I'll try to touch base with you on Friday, tomorrow about a few items. Here is a preview of what would be great to have you help us with:

1. **STILLS:** Any stills that you would feel comfortable with us putting on the site, sent in digital or hard copy, with some brief captions identifying what a photo is. The site itself will have a summary of your film and various essays on human rights issues and suggestions for how advocacy groups and libraries can present your film to the public.

2. **INTERVIEW:** I am asking all of the filmmakers to respond to an interview sent to them in email form. There are a set of questions, such as "What drew you to this subject matter." Filling it out is not meant to be too time consuming for you and we hope you can do it. We will put it on the site. I will send the questions in a separate email.

3. **BETA SP:** We have a budget to put 3-5 minutes of streaming video up for each film. Provided it is OK with you and the distributor (which might be you in this case), we will need a BETA SP sent to us. We'll pay for costs involved. I was planning to choose the segments, but appreciate any pointers from you that might work.

Thank you in advance for your response,

My Best

Jeanne Houck

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