

When TV Teaches

The professor took a risk. The students took the challenge. It changed their lives forever.

By Ned Eckhardt

Ned Eckhardt has been a producer at WCAU-TV, Channel 10 in Philadelphia for seven years, and an award-winning freelance documentary producer and director. He has been a teacher of television production and the coordinator of the television program at Rowan since 1979. His latest documentary, "The 1998 Odyssey of the Mind World Finals" covered the largest event in the history of Disney World.



In their 1990 documentary class photo, clockwise from back row: Scott O'Leary, Keith Gale, Scott Chew, Scott DePace, Dave Friedman, Karen Thomas, Don Roman, Jill Stone, Lori Libutti, Jennifer Calhoun Baker, Mary Weydt, Michelle Decker Venverloh. Scott O'Leary also appears on this issue's table of contents, page one.

In the spring semester of 1990, I took my walk on the educational wild side. Looking back on it, I probably took one of the biggest risks of my life with 12 exceptional students who had no idea their work and the new documentary production course would change their lives and the Radio/TV/Film department forever.

Sometimes life has a way of compressing important events into a short, intense time span. This class was about as intense as it gets.

So when Scott Chew did a funky impression of me the first day of class and everybody laughed, I didn't take it personally. Hey! Life's too short, and besides, I started working on my Scott Chew impression.

The 12 Radio/TV/Film students who made up this maiden voyage of the documentary production class were truly a special group. The course was half writing and research, and half field production.

We spent the first six weeks studying the documentary form and watching documentaries. I found a copy of "Nanook of the North," but it was not a big hit. When

I showed a low-budget documentary on blue-collar workers getting laid off in the steel industry called "Second Chances," there was a big, positive response. It was obvious this was a reality-based class.

Documentaries are personal statements on life, and passion and concern for the human spirit are necessary ingredients. The form gives documentary makers an opportunity to make meaningful observations on an area of the human condition they care about. Often young people in their early twenties don't get a chance to express themselves. I found out quickly that this class had a lot to say.

Each member of the class had to find a documentary subject of his/her own then generate a detailed documentary proposal. This included informational research, identifying who the principal subjects would be, where the interviews and B-roll would be shot, writing a narrative line, and creating a rundown of the 20-minute documentary by timed segments. The students' work—and my supervision of it—was a new pre-production experience for all of us.

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We decided in the seventh week to do three documentaries. The class broke into three production crews of four people each. The subjects of the documentaries seemed to be diverse and exciting. But none of us knew at that point where the documentary journeys would lead or how we would get there.

Sometimes when people do something for the first time, a creative energy emerges that is almost mystical... Although I'm not sure Keith Gale was that mystical. He had a part-time job as a bartender at Down on Main Street and wrote a lot of his narration copy late at night in between breaking up fights.

Reflecting on the experience 10 years and 22 documentaries later, the three original documentaries are still three of the best we ever did.

The Bridge

Michelle Decker was the producer and the one with the vision. She was a member of the campus Newman Club, and Father Mike, who was the resident priest at the time, had told her of a teenage support group in Camden that was dedicated to helping teens cope with the struggles and pressures of growing up poor in Camden. An inspiring woman named Renee Pindaro was the founder and leader of this group, which was called the Bridge.

Michelle wanted to make a documentary that would present the philosophies, people and activities of this courageous group. Michelle is a quiet person with a lot of drive and determination. She also ate a lot of oranges, which gave her a healthy skin tone.

Her director was Mary Weydt. Mary was Michelle's right hand and helped plan the production. Somehow she found the time to fit in all the shoots and edit sessions. I don't know how she did it, because she was also president of the senior class. Mary was from Boston, which in those days was an exotic place to be from.

Scott O'Leary was the camera operator and editor. Scott loved all of the production gear and pushing the buttons on our new, \$50,000 A/B-roll edit sys-

tem. Scott lived in the Rowan TV Production facility. He was involved in so many productions I used to wonder if he went home at night.

Jennifer Calhoun was the technical assistant and editor who took care of the VTR, sound and lights. Jennifer is a short person who takes no prisoners. She and Scott became a well-oiled team that shot in locations all over Camden.

The crew did an interview with a Camden police officer while driving around Camden in his police cruiser. This was a few years before the TV show "COPS" made its appearance. The students practiced for this rolling interview by driving through my neighborhood and identifying me as a local drug lord. I happened to see the tape and erased it immediately. I was going up for a promotion that year.

When the documentary was completed, Renee Pindaro and the teenagers in the Bridge liked it so much that they asked if they could use the documentary to recruit new members. Ten years later there are many Bridge groups throughout southern New Jersey. The documentary has been seen in over 20 high schools and has been a big part of the success of the Bridge organization.

In those days all of our documentaries aired regularly on the CTN Network in New Jersey. CTN was New Jersey's interconnected cable network that came into more than 1 million homes. "The Bridge" won Program of the Year for 1990.

The Cost of the Crown

Karen Thomas, the producer of this documentary, had spent many years as a contestant in beauty pageants. She wanted to document the behind-the-scenes world of beauty pageants, and have people associated with the pageants comment on the "price" of competing. Karen was able to win the confidence of many beauty contestants and ended up with revealing interviews with two former Miss Americas and other beauty contest winners.

Karen was the driving force that led the crew all over South Jersey and to the

Miss America pageant in Atlantic City. Karen hosted the documentary and I could see it was only a matter of time until she made it in the television world as talent. I remember her great laugh and how she always wanted to know why I couldn't fix any of the equipment.

Jill Stone was the director. She had also been in some beauty pageants when she was younger, and she helped Karen keep a wide perspective during the taping and editing. She had a calm manner that helped everyone keep cool. The previous semester Jill had co-hosted "Teleriffic," our kids' TV show, with Marvin the Dragon, one of Dr. George Neff's puppets. Working with a one-toothed dragon had challenged everyone's reality base. She was still recovering.

Scott DePace was the shooter and editor. He definitely enjoyed the behind-the-scenes beauty pageant shooting. Scott was also a creative graphic designer and animator. He spent hundreds of hours working on the new computer animation machines in the Art Department. He would create an animated sequence, click on "record," and the VTR attached to the computer would take all night to render the animation. The electronic equipment in the Art Department was so new Scott was teaching the teachers as he worked.

Dave Friedman was the VTR, sound and light person. He had a breezy way about him and was always good for a laugh. In another course Dave had been a reporter for a story on a zoo for kids called The Popcorn Park Zoo. The footage was good and I've used the footage for training editors for the past 10 years. The editors always ask what happened to the guy standing next to the ostrich.

What Jeannie Didn't Know...

Keith Gale was the producer of this amazing documentary. Prior to the spring of 1990, he had produced and hosted a show on WGLS-FM called "Campus Call In." While exploring the subject of campus crime, he discovered an organization in Philadelphia called

Security on Campus. This was a small, local group of dedicated people trying to make college campuses safer. The founders of the company were Harold and Connie Cleary, whose daughter had been raped and murdered while attending college in Pennsylvania.

Keith managed to win the Clearys' confidence, and he and his production crew created a documentary that told the tragic story of Jeannie Cleary's death and the brave fight by her parents to make college campuses safer. At one point, Keith had done so much research on the story that he knew more about the details of the murder and subsequent trial than the lawyers or the judge. When the pathologist who performed the autopsy on Jeannie Cleary repeatedly turned down Keith's requests for an interview, he threatened to sleep on the doctor's lawn until he relented. Keith got his interview.

Don Roman was the director. He brought a film approach to staging and lighting the interviews. To this day they are the best lit and composed interview set-ups that the students have ever done. Don was a little older than the other students, and his mature presence was important to the success of the documentary. Don was also working at a film development lab somewhere. That explains why I have snapshots of all my other classes and 22" x 30" blowups of Don's classes.

Scott Chew was the videographer and an editor. Scott is a big guy, and he enjoys life a lot. He is related to the South Jersey Chew's Landing Chews, so of course I was always asking him how the lighthouse was. Scott's sense of humor helped keep the crew in balance during some very emotional taping.

Lori Libutti was a great mixture of technical and creative talent. She handled all of the sound and VCR operation, and co-edited the piece. Lori was also a member of a rock 'n' roll band and had to schedule the shoots around her band's gigs. I remember the crew would kid her about the spandex outfit she would wear on stage on Friday nights. I didn't kid her about it,

though, because Lori had told me her father was a state trooper. Lori composed and recorded a beautiful music track for the documentary.

Security on Campus is now a large, successful organization that is responsible for most of the major legislation that has resulted in requiring colleges to fully disclose every crime committed on their campus. They have been using "What Jeannie Didn't Know" as a presentation piece for the last 10 years.

During the summer after the class graduated, we all learned that the documentary had won a student Emmy from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences' Philadelphia Chapter—the first student Emmy for Rowan. Later, excerpts from the documentary aired on national television on a USA Network Special on campus crime.

The Premiere

After six intense weeks of planning, scheduling, video-taping, writing and editing, the three documentaries were finished. If you added up all of the hours the class had spent on their productions it would probably total more than a thousand. Their work ethic and dedication established a tradition that carries on to this day.

To showcase the completed documentaries, we held a premiere in the basement of Newman Center. More than 100 people attended and The Philadelphia Inquirer covered the event.

The success of the class is astounding, but not unexpected. These 12 young people set the standard and led the way for all of the classes that have come after. They seemed to develop a bond during the 15 weeks of the course that would link them together forever.

Two unsung heroes of the documentary class experience were Carl Frandino, our video engineer, and Terry Coyle, our production coordinator. Carl made sure the new video equipment was ready when needed. Terry coordinated the production schedules and equipment training. Carl is still here, but Terry moved on to produce programming for

the Travel Channel.

From my vantage point as the creator of the course and the teacher, it was one of the highlights of my life. We took the unknown journey together, and we all learned a lot about documentaries, life and each other.

In my office I have a picture of that first class. Underneath are nine pictures of the nine documentary classes that have followed it. Of the students in those pictures, 90 percent are working in the television/media business today. I've kept in touch with almost all of them. They are part of a vast Rowan Radio/TV/Film network that continues growing. I think all of them would say Rowan is a pretty special place to come of age—and learn the basics of radio, television, film and communications while you're at it.

Epilogue

Over the past 10 years, Rowan documentary students have earned 20 awards—including a student Emmy—in regional, national and international competitions, usually vying with graduate students. National networks and major-market stations have aired the documentaries, and schools, community groups, historical collections and universities distribute them for educational use [see WWII Vets, p. 6].

In May, the 1990 documentary class will reunite on campus and attend the screening of the spring 2000 class projects in Bozorth Hall. In a notable coincidence, one of this year's documentary teams chose to produce a video on the problem of binge drinking for the Security on Campus organization ("What Jeannie Didn't Know") and after its premiere at Rowan, their project will be used nationally to combat alcohol abuse on college campuses.

For details on attending the spring documentary screening or information on titles in the documentary library that are available for school and community use, please call 856-256-4415 or e-mail eckhardt@rowan.edu. ■