

Making Documentary Films

By Mark Duncan

The speaker at the February 19, 1997 Image meeting was Dorothy Fadiman, a documentary filmmaker whose works include: *World Peace is a Local Issue*, *Why Do These Kids Love School?*, *When Abortion Was Illegal*, *From Danger to Dignity*, and *Fragile Promise of Choice*.

Dorothy sees herself as a visionary first, and a filmmaker second. About three years ago, she helped start Image, with the first meeting being held in her living room.

Back in 1975, Dorothy's husband would write a book whenever he had an insight. Following his example, when Dorothy had a vision of light, she tried to write a book, but discovered after accumulating file cabinets full of information, that she simply couldn't communicate in this medium. A guy suggested making a movie as a solution to enable her to describe her vision.

Spending \$3,000, she created a slide show called, "Do Saints Really Glow?" On the basis of this, she raised \$35,000 through a limited partnership, resulting in her first documentary, "Radiance." She observed, "You're incredibly lucky just breaking even when you make documentaries. I learned to ask for all money as a gift." It took two years to make the film, during which time she learned techniques such as step printing, printing two frames for each image to slow down images of jellyfish. She decided to have no words at the end, to minimize thinking, to focus the viewer on simply having the experience.

RADIANCE, 22 minutes, 1977

Challenge / Goals	How We Solved Problems
How to create a documentary that penetrated the viewer's mind and heart with an understanding of the phenomenon of, as well as an experience of the spiritual	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To create an overall mood - Slow motion jelly fish with music tugs the heart2. To give an example of how spiritual light is described in religious texts - Recreate images to illustrate religious text re: "light after death"3. To give an experience of being drawn into light - Kinetic Mandalas
How to end with a feeling of integration, so that viewers can take the experience with them	To balance the natural and supernatural images of nature were presented in ethereal manner... returning to earth, but with a new understanding of the energy that flows through everything
Raising \$35,000	First phase - all slides, paid out of pocket (\$3,000); Then twelve friends at \$2,500 each - we formed a limited partnership, finished project by borrowing

An important point made by Dorothy is that you really don't need much money to get started, you can do incredible things with a Hi-8 camcorder.

Dorothy's next documentary was the result of videotaping a Palo Alto City Council meeting with a handheld 1/2" VHS camcorder. The subject was establishing a Nuclear Free Zone in the city. The

city councilmen were against it, but 300 people had showed up, to one by one, say a few words regarding it. At the end, one by one, the councilmen changed their votes.

After the meeting, a 89 year old man walked up to her, and asked what she planned to do with the tape. He loaned Dorothy \$5,000 to initiate work on what subsequently became the 20 minute documentary, **“World Peace is a Local Issue.”** Due to the poor sound quality, much of the film is captioned. The video was bumped to a 1” video tape. But despite the poor quality, the documentary had 3 screenings before the United States House and Senate, as well as being played on TV.

“Why Do These Kids Love School?” ultimately required \$75,000 in funding raised over several years, raised from 25 individuals and two small foundation grants. After taking 3 years to film shots at the Peninsula School, she did feedback screenings to educators who hated it, because they felt it was an indictment of any other form of education. Dorothy decided to travel around the country to other alternative schools, ultimately selecting a school in Harlem to show the opposite extreme, the technique working in a poor, black environment. But still, she found her tried-and-true 1/2” VHS camcorder coming to the rescue on a critical graduation shot, when the 3-chip, 1” videotape recorder blew the fuses at the school!

WHY DO THESE KIDS LOVE SCHOOL? 57 minutes, 1990

Challenges / Goals	How We Solved Problems
Conveying the core philosophy of an alternative approach to education	To set the stage for exploring non-traditional teaching and learning - Edit together one scene which “says it all” the nursery school
Illustrating that these kids do love school	To show the commitment the students have for their school Demonstrate a class project, then graduation
Showing that this kind of education can happen in the ghettos	To illustrate how this education is carried out in low income neighborhoods - Interview with superintendent and visit a classroom in Harlem
Providing coherent overview of an educational approach considered elusive	To delineate the different features of the schools which the film documents - Follow the building of the list of key concepts
Raising \$75,000	Two small foundation grants; plus 25 individuals with gifts ranging from \$10 to \$2500

“Fundamentally, the challenge of filmmaking is how to say volumes in minutes,” observed Dorothy. “Each film has forced me to grow. I learned I had to make a larger statement in order to reach a larger audience, that you have to take an idea as far as you can take it, if you want to have more than local appeal.”

The next six years saw Dorothy create three documentaries on abortion, **“When Abortion Was Illegal,” “From Danger to Dignity”** and **“Fragile Promise of Choice.”** She noted, “It took months and months to give the entire history of abortion in 90 seconds. We did countless feedback screenings, editing and reshooting each time, until we finally got people to say, ‘wow.’ You have to choose interviews that say it all.”

WHEN ABORTION WAS ILLEGAL, 27 minutes, 1992-1993

Challenges / Goals	How We Solved Problems
How to portray a century of history in less than two minutes	To condense the facts of a complex history - Black & white dissolving montage with narration to weave together key elements of the climate
How to give an intimate portrait of the emotional climate of that time from a personal perspective	To hear from people who lived through the era of illegal abortions- Two interviews: one who went through the search himself. then helped someone else; a family member of someone who died.

A particular challenge for Dorothy was that since abortion is regarded by shameful, it was very difficult finding people willing to talk about it. But as word spread, people actually started calling, wanting to be interviewed.

FROM DANGER TO DIGNITY, 57minutes, 1994/1995

Challenges / Goals	How We Solved Problems
How to capture the emotional and professional toll of fighting the system	To hear from people who challenged the restrictions - Sherri Finkbine - who attempted first to work within the law, and was stopped; George Michaels - who risked everything to help legalize abortion
Raising \$125,000 for both When Abortion was Illegal and From Danger to Dignity	5 foundations - more than 200 individuals with contributions from \$10 to \$10,000

Dorothy stressed the importance of feedback screenings. “You have to trust the inner nature of the viewer. When they say, it’s too long, ask them, where can I cut? I don’t stop until we get to the point where the majority of people are moved.” To the surprise of some of the audience, Dorothy does screenings of raw footage to diverse audiences ranging from close friends, to professionals, to people she’s never met.

FRAGILE PROMISE OF CHOICE, 57 minutes, 1996/1997

Challenges / Goals	How We Solved Problems
How to demonstrate the personal courage of those who are in the trenches today providing abortions	To hear from someone who has been punished for her stand, but whose spirit is not broken - - someone who was excommunicated from the Catholic Church for providing safe legal abortions.
Raising \$125,000	8 Foundations plus several large individuals grants

Asking friends for donations is always the first step for Dorothy in a new film. She notes, "You get your friends to buy into your project, giving you a base of support." But much of her fund raising was the result of hard work. She had 49 rejections from foundations, before she obtained her first grant from the Ford Foundation, which subsequently resulted in 11 more foundations providing money.