

Interview with Kirsten Johnson

Kirsten Johnson has worked as both director and cinematographer on social media documentaries, as well as narrative shorts with a message. In 1999, working with Big Mouth Productions, she directed *Innocent Until Proven Guilty*. At a time when the number of young African-Americans under criminal justice supervision had soared to one in three, this film explored the criminal justice system through the work of activist James Foreman, Jr., son of the civil rights leader James Forman, Sr. As a public defender in Washington, D.C., Foreman not only defends the kids who can't afford representation but also works with them at See Forever—an alternative high school for juvenile ex-offenders that he co-founded intending to help them break the cycle of incarceration through education.

Kirsten Johnson spoke with Jana Germano of the Center for Social Media from New York City in January 2003.

How did you first become involved in social media?

I've always been interested in race issues from the time I was a child. Probably because I went to an integrated but Christian private school that was full of racism, which was very confusing as a child. In college I was trying to be a painter and although I kept trying to put social issues into the paintings, it wasn't working. So I discovered film as a place where you could use both imagery and still be able to deal with social issues.

How did you connect with James Forman, Jr.?

I first met James Foreman in college as he was someone whose parents had been involved in the civil rights movement. I felt that he was lucky to have politicized parents and that he felt himself to be a part of history and saw what he did as an extension of the civil rights movement. So I was interested in working with him to look at the criminal justice system.

Was the initial impetus behind the documentary to follow James' journey or did you intend to pick out a student to follow their path?

When I left college, I went to live in Senegal for two years and I lived in France for seven years, which is where I went to film school. So I felt a bit disconnected from the United States in some ways, and I had kept up with James through the years and felt that he was intimately connected with what was happening in the United States with his inside view of the criminal justice system. I felt that in him there was an embodiment of someone who had social and political obligations and desires and that he was looking for a way to do something beyond himself.

What's interesting is that I did conceive the film as a portrait of a public defender. But the Public Defender Service in Washington, D.C., while they were interested in my working with James, were rightfully protective of his clients, since most of them were juveniles. So we had a lot of negotiations on who and what we could film. We already had the whole crew in Washington and as negotiations went on and on, we started to film more at the school that James and David Domenici had started. It became clear to us that so many of the issues that we were interested in were right there at the school.

What I love about this film is the way in which it lets Bobby, one of the kids at the school, take over and have a position like James', so that he is fully interesting as a person and to be listened

to in the same way that James is. That was something we built structurally into the film. One of the things I fought for was the four-minute interview with Bobby. Letting someone talk for four minutes straight is somewhat unheard of in film but he takes you on a journey from his not caring to caring, and I worked to keep that in.

Samantha was a great counterpoint to some of the kids and in some ways she echoes a form of conservatism that gets taught to these kids — that it's all their responsibility. I thought it was important to include the way in which kids internalize a lot of the ideas that society's putting out about their successes and failures.

Did you know the message you wanted to convey going in or was it more of a discovery process?

It was important to me to specifically talk about race within the criminal justice system. But I discovered a great deal through the film and one has to do that to make a film interesting. You can see it in the film in the way it formally shifts and it's clear that the story was leading us, and that Bobby was leading us into his story.

But there were choices I made such as those formal, empty interior shots of institutions that I had conceived of early on to show that this is a larger phenomenon and to help people remember that there are thousands and thousands of kids like Bobby who are being incarcerated. There was a big debate on whether we included statistics or not. In the end, the film worked without them emotionally, but I felt the audience should know that now we have 2 million people incarcerated.

Have you followed up on the kids you filmed?

What's fantastic about the school is that they really have extensively kept track of people and it's through the school that I have kept up with them. Samantha was doing some work at the school but Bobby has been hard to keep track of, since there's been a lot of moving and changing telephone numbers. I showed the film to all the kids who were in it before it was released. When I took the film to Bobby's house, his father, who he hadn't seen since he was eleven years old, happened to be there and sat down and watched the film with him. So his father got to discover things about his son watching it with him. I think that Bobby, who was very philosophical about the choices he made, was proud of how articulate he was in film.

Why did you choose titles over a voice-over narrative?

I didn't want to go too far in positioning some outside authoritative voice in the film and I was interested in developing a multiply-voice perspective. My voice is there in the shots of the institutions, and James clearly has a voice and people like Bobby and Samantha have a voice. I like the fact that there are many voices speaking. But the statistics were facts that I wanted to leave in a more neutral position.

Is the outreach component attached to this film still active?

It is. The film was picked up by an educational distributor called Filmmaker's Library. They actively market through their educational network. But what we did in the first two or three years of the film was very actively reach out to programs for kids at risk all over the country, all kinds of prisons, detention centers, reinsertion programs and public defenders offices — anybody who could be vaguely connected or interested in the film. We received a number of outreach grants so we supplied a lot of free tapes to people and developed a packet that could accompany the film

—questions to be asked after the screening and information resources. We also accompanied the film to dozens and dozens of small screening groups around the country. On Martin Luther King Day this year, we'll be in D.C. screening the film to American University students, law students, and community members. It continues to move in that kind of way and it's really pleasing to see that the film has some kind of staying power.

Bigmouth Productions developed their Mediarights.org site out of our experiences with this film. It was the first film that we did distribution and outreach on. We realized you could reinvent this wheel many times and so now Mediarights offers a service that provides links to filmmakers according to subject matter, such as criminal justice, to all the appropriate foundations, the films made or being made on the subject, and the places interested in screening those films. This is to save other people from having to go through the same steps that we did.

When did you first start being concerned with outreach or activist components for your films?

When I lived in Paris I got commissioned by a group of lawyers to make a film on female genital mutilation and its impact on the African immigrant community. It was specifically made for outreach to young mothers. The illegality of female genital mutilation is having this horrible side effect of mothers having it done to their infant babies instead of their pre-teen girls and there have been a couple of cases of babies hemorrhaging to death. I purposefully made that film a narrative, not a documentary, because of the response I saw to a lot of documentaries while living in Senegal. People there were always asking me why everyone made documentaries about Africa, why people never looked good in them and why they couldn't have more movies about Africa. So I made it into a melodrama about a young mother caught between her mother-in-law's wishes and the wishes of her sister, who is a nurse. We did extensive outreach to immigrant associations and health clinics and it ended up being shown on African television. That was my first film and it was a film made specifically for outreach.

Outreach is a whole different job from filmmaking and I would encourage all filmmakers to find partners in the outreach portion, because it's really social activism and you can't do all the jobs yourself.

Through the films you've made, what have you discovered regarding social media strategies?

I think on a certain level you can't predict what's going to resonate with people. I feel that it's important to know what you care about and what you're interested in but I'm not particularly interested in making films where you start out with such a strong agenda that you don't discover things in the filmmaking that surprise, contradict and disturb you. The fact is that any social issue is unbelievably complicated and your ability to make a compelling film requires that you remain open and you don't approach it with a hammer to knock people out with.

I love the surprise of not knowing whom your film is going to matter to. At a film festival in Europe, I met a Basque man who had seen my film about female genital mutilation and said it had changed his life. All I could say was, who could have predicted that?

What's your next project?

I'm working with Katy Chevigny, who's one of the producers on *Innocent Until Proven Guilty*, on a film about the death penalty. We're specifically interested in 1972, when the death penalty was abolished by the Supreme Court and over 600 people's sentences were commuted

from death to life and more than half those people have been let out of jail. So there's a huge community of people who we had intended to kill but didn't kill and we're looking at why nobody's paid attention to that. Bringing that to the present with what is happening in Illinois with Governor Ryan, who is deciding whether or not to grant clemency to everybody on Death Row. We'll be flying out to Chicago next week for this. It's called *Life after Death Row*.