

## SOUND BYTE

School of Film faculty member and documentary filmmaker COURTNEY HERMANN talks about homicidal nutcrackers, underdogs, and devotion to process.

### **How and when did you first become interested in film?**

As a kid growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, television enraptured me. I loved it all—cartoons, commercials, sitcoms, sporting events, old movies, soap operas, game shows—you name it. It wasn't until I was studying mass communications at James Madison University that I fell in love with film. At the Virginia Film Festival, I attended a screening of Ross Spears's *TO RENDER A LIFE*, a documentary whose subject is documentary filmmaking itself. A lecture by Harvard professor Robert Coles is woven into the film, and though it complicates the practice of interpreting someone else's life experience, I was hooked—not just on documentary as my chosen form of expression but also on the study and teaching of documentary as a subject.

### **Tell us about one of your first films.**

When I was in high school, I shot a short film on a VHS camera, which I then edited by recording individual clips from the camera to a VHS deck. The film was called *THE NUTCRACKER NOT SO SWEET*, and it was about a homicidal Christmas nutcracker. It was a dark comedy, and it was super dumb. I still like the title, though. The first “real” film I made was a short documentary called *TOMMY*, which featured a man who, much to his amazement, survived the San Francisco AIDS epidemic of the 1980s despite indulging in risky behaviors.

### **Your specialty is documentary production. How do you choose your subjects, and what are some of them?**

I like stories that showcase the integrity of an underdog, characters whose value systems require a dedication to a losing (but worthy) cause, and topics that subvert the dominant culture. I hope to depict subjects that on paper may be foreign or unfamiliar to a viewer but on film are very relatable.

### **What are you working on now?**

I'm co-producing the documentary *CRYING EARTH RISE UP*, a project being made in conjunction with the PBS minority consortia member Vision Maker Media. It's about two Lakota women from the Pine Ridge Reservation who are trying to stop the expansion of the uranium mining industry in their region. They epitomize disenfranchisement, both economically and politically, but their resolve doesn't waver because they both believe that clean drinking water is worthy of every effort to succeed.

### **What is special about the Portland community? Why have you chosen to make Portland your home?**

In my experience, people here tend to treat others humanely and generally without a lot of attitude. That's important to me, personally. Bad behavior and discord distract me. Also, the community values the DIY ethic, which, as an independent media maker, I live by.

### **You've taught at the adult level for many years. As an educator, what's the most important thing that you try to impart to emerging filmmakers?**

Bringing a film from idea to reality requires a sheer force of will. And making a worthwhile film requires dedication to the details of every stage of production. What this adds up to is cultivating a devotion to the process of filmmaking, not just the end product. The end product is fleeting and won't sustain you on its own. Having made something isn't what you spend your time doing—it's all process all the time, and if you don't love that, well....

### **Are there barriers to entry and/or success for women in film? What advice do you have for aspiring women filmmakers?**

Working in film can be very challenging. There's a lot of competition, which makes it tough to begin with, but the industry itself, with all of its diversity and variance, can be pretty opaque, so it takes a lot of fortitude and networking acumen to navigate it successfully. My advice would be to seek out as wide a variety of film-related experiences as possible, say yes to every opportunity that comes your way, never burn a bridge with anyone, finish every project you start, and approach your work with equal parts confidence and humility.

### **You're teaching a class for the School of Film this winter called *Planning Your Documentary*. Do you really have to plan a documentary?**

Yes! If you've started working on a documentary of any length or you want to begin one, having a good game plan prepares you to handle what's coming—the inevitable twists and turns of the project. Also, it's tough to get others on board with your project, whether they are collaborators, subjects, funders, or even yourself, if you don't have your strategy dialed in.

### **Speaking of strategies, how do you develop one?**

Close your eyes. The projector flickers to life, and your film appears onscreen. What do you see, moment to moment, from beginning to end? What does it look and feel like? I'm not being flippant here—truly, getting specific is a prerequisite. Too often, filmmakers will say, “I can't tell you exactly what it is, but it's going to be great!” That won't help you decide who your intended audience is or make a budget, plan for equipment, or market it successfully. When you can envision the finished film, at least as you hope or think it will be, you have created a breadcrumb trail of details that will allow you to navigate through the process. And it can always take you back to your starting point if you lose your bearings along the way.

