

*December 3, 2015*

*Interviewed by Jesse Wakeman, MDOC Project Coordinator*

I'm Jake Denicola and graduated Skidmore last year so class of 2015 and I was an anthropology major at Skidmore with sort of a concentration on video anthropology which is sort of like using documentary, video documentary, storytelling to tell ethnographic, anthropological stories.

But I do want to go fully into the film world, specifically directing and cinematography.

*Great! So all of the students want to know, what is that next step once you leave school? Describe what that process was like for you.*

I think it's different for everyone obviously, but for me it was a little hard at first because a lot of my friends were getting, you know, were applying for jobs that were pretty permanent in some ways. They were definitely laying out what they were going to do for the rest of their lives and for me I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to do in the film world. So a lot of the jobs that I was working on were sort of freelance jobs, so doing like, freelance cinematography for some start-up people and some start-up businesses and then I also just tried to PA which was sort of like the entry level job on a film set, for whoever I could. But I mean, I'm really glad that I found this documentary story that I really wanted to tell because now I'm in the process of making my first feature length documentary.

So in some ways it's great because I'm very free and I can create my own schedule a lot of the time and I'm able to pursue my passion, but it's also a little scary because I don't have a permanent job right now, or I don't have a stable job right now. So there's really pros and cons about it, but for me the next step was to just go straight into doing what I want to do and make a feature length documentary.

*How did Storytellers' Institute play a role in that for you?*

Yea, Storytellers' was incredible. I mean, there are several things that it did. Number one, the group of people that were in Storytellers' was so supportive and really brought me outside of thinking that, you know, really brought me to a different way of thinking about my own work because people were pretty honest, but in a supportive way. Before that, because Skidmore doesn't really have a film major, it was really hard for me to get my work critiqued, or have people help out on certain things. But Storytellers' really helped me have these outside perspectives from people from all different documentary backgrounds, you know, audio, photography, video.

It really changed my perspective of what documentaries could be and what I want my own project to be. So I'm really thankful for everyone, you know, the fellows and the students, helping me workshop my ideas. And other than that, it's such a short amount of time, but there's so much that you learn, and you really develop a relationship with all these people. I mean, two of the fellows from this past Storytellers' Institute, I still keep in touch with and they've actually set me up with a few PA jobs, which I'm really thankful

for too. So it's like totally long-lasting relationships and great networking opportunities for everyone. And all of the guest speakers that came in were incredible and really established and successful people that I could see myself wanting to be.

*Describe a little bit your creative process... did you come up with the story first; did you have skills that you wanted to use first; did it begin at Storytellers'; did it begin before that...how did it all evolve?*

So I was sort of working on two projects. One of the projects was more based on anthropology and that was the one where we went into the production stage at Storytellers'. So I was working with two professors and one student on a project about Oaxacan Mexican migrant workers in Saratoga Springs, and their daily lived experience. And that one was more of a teaser that we were creating so we could maybe do more of a long-term project.

The other project that I worked on, that I would definitely call, completely my own project, I brought in with just a bare bones structure of what I wanted it to be and then I came out of it with a developed proposal. I definitely wished I had been able to work on it more because now I realized how helpful everyone was with developing your idea and taking it from an idea to something that is gonna become an actual project, you know, an actual tangible thing. That project went from something that I just was always thinking about to something that like, 'ok I'm gonna do this,' and I've taken the advice from all these people about how to develop this proposal into something that I actually can do, without having to raise tons of money. Something that I could do on my own, which I think everyone can do for a documentary. And then I did it! You know, without that help from everyone, without that point of taking an idea and turning it into a tangible actual project, I don't know if maybe I might not have actually continued and started this journey that I'm taking to making a documentary.

*So what is this story that you're chasing down?*

It's about a 1960's rock musician named Peter Lewis and it sort of tells his biographic story. It's about him, mainly about him and this band named Moby Grape, which was a very successful band in it's time, but a lot of trials and tribulations caused them to not really create a legacy like contemporaries like The Grateful Dead or Jefferson Airplane. But it also touches on his early life and his childhood and his upbringing because he grew up in Hollywood and his mother was the actress Loretta Young. And it's sort of him talking a little bit about how Hollywood shaped him and why he needed to leave Hollywood and join this sort of, free spirited movement of the hippy, 1960's, that San Francisco scene movement, which was polar opposite from what he was used to. And it goes into the story of Moby Grape and their ultimate failure.

And now it chronicles him turning 70 years old and sort of coming into terms with failure in his life, but finding a lot of meaning in his life through sharing this music that he's created with his daughter who's now a singer-songwriter. So they're approaching this project where together they're covering all of this music that he's made over his entire life and this is him feeling like he's passing some sort of knowledge onto someone, so it's like helping both of them. And it's really story about a father and a daughter making an album together.

*Is there a deeper message to your film, and has that changed from when you first wrote your proposal to now?*

I'm still searching for that, because it's changed so much. You know, we had the proposal and we had this whole idea about how it was mainly going to be about him, the relationship between him and his daughter and sort of how bringing the culture and music of a particular era to the present can positively effect a contemporary generation.

But it completely changed from that, rather than being about the music and about their relationship, him and his daughter, it's totally about this guy's life now because we got so much information about him and he's writing a short story about his life and what it was like to make this journey from Hollywood to San Francisco and joining that scene. Now that's the story, and now we need to figure out, alright, well what is the message that we want to tell because this story is what we got. So yea, it totally changed from what we had originally, but that's great because that's what it is.

*As your story has evolved, how much did you reveal to your subject? Did you go into it telling him your whole story and what the film was going to be about? Has he given you complete creative freedom? How does that work?*

It's definitely a hard thing to do, to make a documentary that you really want to make, but also really keep in mind what the people you're making the documentary about want from it.

I also sent him our proposal before we even started because I figured he was the main subject of our documentary, he was in no way a peripheral character so he should know kind of where this is headed. And interestingly enough, he sort of made the switch when he wrote this short story for us about his life. We read the short story and it's pretty long and we figured, wow, this is pretty incredible, you know, this is the kind of thing that we're really not going to be able to get in interviews about his life, we need to have this be the structure of our project.

So we totally scrapped what we were going to do because we were sort of collaborating with him, because he had this really important part in helping us tell his story. So we recorded him narrating his short story and now that short story about his life has sort of become the narrative arch of our documentary. And it's really figuring out what we keep, and what we take out, and where we mix around this narration, which that will sort of tell us the real story that we want to tell. And really hone in on what we want to tell from what he's saying because the story's about a hundred and some pages so we can't include all of it, but we definitely want to use it as the structure of it, because it's a great way to structure what we're doing.

*What does his story tell a viewer? What can anybody take from it, whether they're a musician or not, what's the greater lesson you can learn from his life?*

Well there's one line in his story that's like, 'the question has always been is there hope for the future?' and he repeats it throughout the whole story and I think that's really what

you can get from Peter because he's lived a really difficult life and has struggled with his parents, his family, his coworkers, the musicians he played with. It's been really difficult for him to find complete happiness in his life because he's just had constant trials and tribulations.

But this whole thing now is sort of hopeful with his daughter because he feels like he's passing on some sort of knowledge and wisdom to her about things *not to do* and things *to do* and especially in the music industry and becoming a musician and becoming a grown-up.

And I think that's something that people can definitely take away... is the human side of him that's hopeful and finding some sort of happiness and meaning through family and a relationship with his daughter. Despite where you are in your life, you can definitely find some sort of hope and happiness even if it's just with one person. So I think that's something that can connect to people on a human level.

*Where would you say you're at with the project right now?*

Right now we're taking a little break (laughs). We were out there, they live in mid-California area, we were out there for about 3 ½ weeks and it was pretty intensive. So now we're taking some time off, we're all kind of, (me and the other two people I work with), we're all taking some time off to work on separate projects. We're probably going to come back out to California to shoot more of them, but right now we're taking the initial footage that we got and seeing what story we have and what story we want to continue to tell so that we can really be prepared when we go back out to shoot exactly what we need and maybe sum it up somehow, but we're not quite in post production stage yet.

*Any future plans for the film if everything goes perfectly in this vision?*

Yea, absolutely. We would love to submit it to film festivals, that would be sort of our first step and then a lot of private screenings possibly and some private theater screenings. That's sort of our hope, is to get into some festivals and make a name for ourselves as people that are seriously into storytelling and documentary storytelling specifically.

*What would be your words of advice for students going into this year's Storytellers' Institute?*

I would say, take advantage of every possible thing you can at Storytellers'. Because every workshop, every faculty member, every fellow member, and every student, every guest speaker, everyone is really going to help you with a certain thing. And I would say, reach out to every single person that is in the group, and keep in touch with them, and keep in good relations with them, and learn from them, because it's a really short amount of time and it's really intensive, but if you utilize it completely it can do really wonderful things for your career and for you as a person. It will definitely shape you in about a three-week period (laughs).

*You said that Storytellers' changed for you the definition of what a documentary is. What would you say now a documentary is?*

Well, one thing is I wasn't as open to documentary storytelling to be outside of video documentary. That's something that was very kind of, closed minded of me. Now I realize that there's so many ways to tell a documentary, there's so many ways to tell a story, it doesn't have to be a video documentary. It can be through any sort of medium and I think that's something that's important to understand because even if you are making a video documentary it will make you think about every aspect of it. It will make you think about, how can I creatively tell something through sound right now, or how can I creatively tell something through a photograph, or just the way things are laid out on a table. It really makes you think about every aspect of storytelling, you know, it's not just the typical PBS documentary that you might see, it's way more broad and multi-layered than that.

*Any lasting thoughts that you want to say?*

I would say, if anyone applying has any reservations about the fact that they might not want to go into documentary storytelling, I think it's still something that everyone can learn something from. Storytelling is going to be something that's important in everyone's lives, you know, no matter even if you don't go into documentary storytelling. So if you're worried about the fact that you might not want to be a documentarian for your entire life, that's fine, you should still do it because as I said, it will shape your career no matter what it is and it will also shape you as a person no matter what you're interested in . I think it's something that can be applied to everyone, for sure.