

I think everyone involved in making films has an interesting story to tell about how they ended up actually making movies. That may be because I am one of those people so I'm naturally interested to hear how others got sucked into this crazy world of independent film making. But it's quite apparent that everyone of them has made some kind of journey to get where they are. For me it all started as a terribly painful plunge into what was supposed to be just a hobby.

In 1992, my wife, Joanna, gave me my first "real" video camera for Christmas. It was a Sony TRV900 which I still have to this day. The TRV900 was one of the first 3 CCD digital video cameras available at a true consumer price (the original retail price was \$2500). Little did my wife know that, that was the start down a long and dark road.

I started filming various family functions, and doing very crude edits, adding titles, overusing every hideously imaginable transition I could find. Along with my camera, I was introduced to true Non Linear Editing (NLE) software and I was ready to produce. At least that was what I thought. A couple of my nieces were involved with a local dance studio, and they were having a recital. A local videographer filmed and produced a DVD of the recital the year before, and after watching it I "knew" I could do better. So I got my camera and enlisted the help of a few other family members and friends who also had cameras. We covered the show, five cameras total. I thought, how hard could this be. Well, we were all shooting in full auto mode letting the camera decide how to expose the picture, what shutter speed to shoot, and even decide what to focus on. With the spotlights, extreme changes in lighting and really poor camera work, I ended up with about 20 hours of utterly awful video. But, I was determined to make a DVD. I ingested all of the footage and began my edit. The finished video was a little over two hours and to my current standards, represented a monumental disaster of a video. But, other parents saw it, and to my surprise, they wanted copies of it. They were actually willing to pay for this thing I made. And, they were genuinely impressed with it.

I was still using my old Sony TRV900 which was getting to be pretty old technology, but never the less I thought, "maybe there's a little side business here". I did a few more shows. Each time planning a little more and doing more and more research on how to properly shoot them. With each video the quality slowly improved and more people wanted to buy them. So I was on my way. That was when disaster struck. Due to a very low quality tripod, my trusty TRV900 took a nasty fall. It came right off the tripod and hit the ground with a sound that still rings in my ears today. But, now that I look back, that was the moment my wife's nightmare began. To be honest, my mind started to churn as I watch the camera fall. In the second it took for it to come off the tripod and hit the ground, I had already decided that I needed a new camera. After some hours of heated discussion, I finally convinced Joanna that I could pay for a new camera by continuing to shoot local events and that it would eventually yield a positive cash flow.

After a few months of research and countless hours of debating over which was the best camera, I purchased a "pro" HDV camera. Through my hours of research for my new camera, I visited several message boards and forums that discussed all sorts of topics related to video production. During one discussion a fellow poster suggested I check out an organization local to the San Francisco Bay Area, which is where I live. This group was made up of a bunch of video nuts like myself, with the goal of making movies. At the time, I really didn't know what I wanted to focus on with my hobby but I knew I had to justify spending what my wife thought was an ungodly amount of money on a video camera and new tripod (I was not going to let my new camera experience the same fate as my TRV900). That was my introduction to Scary Cow Productions. The group was described to me as a cooperative of people who are independent, weekend warrior, filmmakers. Up until that time I had only made videos of local theatrical presentations, kind of artistic sporting events. I had never made a movie in my life and I had no training whatsoever to make a movie. But I knew I wanted to check it out. After attending the informational meeting I signed up and attended my first pitch meeting.

A pitch meeting is kind of speed dating for filmmakers. Several people who have ideas for movies pitch their ideas to other people who want to help make movies. Then the courtship begins and everyone finds a good match or two and then the movies get made.

At the conclusion of my first pitch meeting I was on three teams to make two narrative shorts and one documentary. One of the narrative projects got only as far as the planning stage, then it died. The other narrative was a sci-fi story about three people living in space with a ship full of donor sperm waiting to repopulate the earth because humans back on earth couldn't reproduce due to the apocalypse. Yes, that's about how it was pitched. I was the "Director of Photography" on that project primarily because I had the nicest camera, but I had no idea what I was doing so I just consider myself the cameraman. It turned out ok but as you can imagine it was not destined for any major awards. The documentary was a very fun project to shoot. A group of Tuvan throat singers were recording a CD in a famous recording studio in Berkeley, CA. We were to shoot the "making of" video. It had a very small budget and as happens in a lot of those situations, there wasn't enough money to complete the video. So, I got to see and listen to a lot of really cool throat singing but the video to this day has not been completed.

However, even after those minor setbacks I knew I found my new passion. Since then, I've worked on several films, some good, some not so good. One documentary I was the Director of Photography on, got put online and caught the attention of one of Oprah Winfrey's producers. The subject matter was very relevant to the times and it looked relatively good considering it was made with no budget. The producer of that project has been interviewed on radio talk shows and has had a few national articles written up on her. So far nothing has come from Oprah but we're all still hoping.

Now, after several projects working in various capacities on different films, I've started to produce my own projects. I am now the one pitching the ideas and getting the crew together. And, at the same time I help to crew other people's films. Along with a wife and two kids, it really keeps me busy. But it also keeps me dreaming, which is what's most important for independent filmmakers. It's what will push us to explore new subjects, experiment with different techniques, or invent new ways of telling our stories.

And, I think that is the real allure for independent filmmakers. The ability to tell a story, that we've created, to an audience that appreciates it. That is what makes us want to continue to making movies. It's that desire to get what we see in our imaginations out there so that others can experience it too that keeps us writing, and filming, and editing late into the night. It's also what my wife, who likes to watch a good movie just as much as the next person but doesn't share my passion for making films, cannot understand. For her, it's just my crazy hobby that's gone bad.