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## HEROES AMONG OUR OWN: THE ART OF DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

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Across Normal Street and at the corner of Madison Avenue, there's a small building with stain glass windows. Through the wooden doors, past a hallway walled with pictures of

trees by cemeteries and a girl on the train tracks, up the stairs from a digital art studio rests a loft with a big round table and walls covered in film posters and tacked notes. On the back wall there's a white board with act one and two scenes carefully planned out while three and four have yet to be written. It's in this loft, in the building across from a street named "Normal," where the cinematic magic of The Film Consortium team happens.

Jodi Cilley is the founder of the Film Consortium, a film production company in San Diego that acts as a networking organization to connect all the different student filmmakers as well as the new up-and-coming movie creators. The consortium hosts events such as San Diego Film Week and San Diego Film Awards to help bring local cinemaphiles together and to give more recognition to the filmmakers.

"The goal is to set them on the paths to success," said Cilley. "As well as to increase screening opportunities for their films here in the San Diego community." Cilley also teaches film courses at City College and the Teen Producers' Class at Digital Gym's media arts center.



PHOTO BY JANNA REZNIK

The Film Consortium production company focuses more on locally produced films. "While commercial and television production are prominent in San Diego, the film industry is grim," said Cilley. "Even more so for documentary filmmakers." But the consortium has grown from hundreds of attendees at the events to thousands and now Cilley wants to see not only more local filmmakers get recognized, but also see real local stories get told.

Cilley and her team are developing a contest, The Film Con Challenge, which will take place later this year. The purpose of the challenge will be to tell real stories of real people in San Diego but in extraordinary ways.

“I’ve been making short documentaries forever,” said Cilley, who has created and produced over 40 short documentary films. “There’s plenty of amazing everyday stories that go untold and I think these kind of films are important and are missing from the landscape of the film industry.”

Cilley describes herself as a community oriented person and believes the beauty of film comes alive when people work together to make it happen. This collaborative art form has been Cilley’s life’s work for over 11 years and her life’s passion for even longer. The Film Con Challenge, she hopes, will fuel the cinematic passions of other filmmakers in San Diego.

The contestants will be given a list of stories produced from a writer’s organization called So Say We All, which collects real stories from everyday people in San Diego. From that list creators will chose a story then choose from a list of genres to tell the story in while using creative techniques developed by past filmmakers. The contest will be timed over a six month period and played at film week next year, eligible for film awards. Jodi is striving to collaborate with KPBS, a local PBS television network, to air the films.

“It’s about telling real stories of real people in non-traditional ways using interesting, creative technical devices,” said Cilley. “With the goal of telling overlooked local stories of normal everyday people.”

Jared Callahan, a documentary filmmaker and Point Loma Nazarene University alum, has devoted his life to tell just those kinds of stories. Since graduating with a Media Communications major in college with an emphasis on production, Jared has worked with San Diego film festival, has produced numerous documentary films while managing his own production company and is currently serving a three-year term as an ambassador at the Atlanta Film Society in Atlanta, Georgia. Though he does freelance script writing jobs for feature length movies, Jared’s main passion in film is documentaries.

“Documentaries act like teleportation devices,” said Callahan. “It puts you into someone else’s life and their own unique journey for two hours. In real life you could never access that information. Through film, you can access that story.”

Some of Callahan’s completed signature documentaries include *Janey Makes a Play*, the story of Callahan’s 90-year old playwright grandmother and her theater troupe, *American Moderate*, which follows a young woman named Liz Lehr through her voting process in the 2016 election, and *The Many Friends of Sommer Caffarella*, a profile on a young

woman with special needs who loves to perform. Callahan also has two documentaries still in the works. The first, *I Watched Ricardo Clement Get Off The Bus*, is an animated documentary about the capture of a Nazi war criminal, and the second is called *Clean Slate*, which dives into the lives of three drug addicts who try to reclaim their lives and find sobriety through filmmaking.

All of Callahan's films are rooted in the concept of what it means to be human. "I think people are more complex than the tidy pop-corn stories on the big screen," said Callahan. "With documentaries you can dive into the depths of what it means to be a human being, which is what we are all living through."



PHOTO COURTESY OF JARED CALLAHAN

Callahan is not the only filmmaker with a life's mission to tell untold stories of real people. PLNU Senior and Media Communications major Braden Haycock is juggling a handful of documentary projects, including a documentary about his great uncle, a naval captain during the Vietnam War who defied his orders to rescue several dozen Vietnamese refugees, many of whom are now living as American citizens in southern California.

"They actually contacted him with their own homemade video showing what everyone had done since they'd been rescued," Haycock said of the Vietnamese Refugees. "I think it's a beautiful story that needs to be told."

Haycock is currently applying for grant funding for his documentary film through PBS. If accepted, the network will connect Haycock to film organizations that will fund his movie and will give him an opportunity to exhibit his documentary for the public. But Cilley's Film Con Challenge would provide Haycock with another outlet and further his opportunities.

With ample stories to tell and no shortness of filmmakers anxious to give them life with a lens, the road to success might seem wide open for documentary films. But there are numerous stumbling blocks and hoops still to jump through.

“Most film studios are strictly a business,” said Callahan. “You’re either there to make a hundred million dollar superhero movie or a no-budget documentary. There’s not a lot in between.”

According to Jared, Cilley and Haycock, documentaries are considered “no-budget films.” Even after the strenuous process of going through hundreds of hours of footage, color correcting around 30,000 still-images, tweaking sound design, scene cutting, creating soundtracks, sound effects and after producing multiple versions of the same film to get feedback and edits from test-viewers, at the end of it all, if the movie costs less than a couple hundred thousand dollars to make, it’s considered a no-budget film.

“You do your best scrapping to get everything filmed, and when you start running out of money you just pray for the phone to ring,” said Callahan. “You have to appease the gatekeepers of the film industry and convince them your movie is worth investing in.”

Callahan currently has three documentaries stuck on financing and he says right now he is living on a hope and a prayer. Filmmaking can’t just be a hobby in Callahan’s eyes. It’s a collaborative effort that he says is going to take big-hearted people with a lot of hope in the art they make.

Cilley adds that many of the narrative “pop-corn films” that audiences see in theaters make a lot of money not necessarily because of the special effects or story-line, but because of the famous individuals who are the stars of the movie.

“Hollywood has a tendency to tell fantastic, amazing, creative, giant stories about superhuman people that appeals to audiences in order to make a lot of money,” said Cilley. “They make a Superman movie because everyone knows who Superman is. They don’t make a movie about *that* guy—“ Cilley motioned to a man in a blue dress shirt walking down the side-walk—“because nobody knows who *that* guy is.”

Callahan said he ran into the same problem when he first tried to get *Janey Makes a Play* distributed. “I was told by a distributor who watched my film, ‘Well, you’re not famous and Janey’s not famous so we’re not interested,’ regardless of the fact that he liked the movie,” said Callahan.

But for filmmakers like Callahan, Cilley and Haycock, filmmaking is about more than making money. It's about telling stories that change lives.

“Hollywood is forced to make movies with famous people or famous characters because they have access to those people. But we have access to *that* guy,” said Cilley as she motioned again to the same blue-shirted man walking past the Thai food restaurant across from her team's offices. “And he has a story only *we* can tell. We don't need a lot of money to tell real stories of real people and the impact of that can be incredible.”

Callahan's documentaries had a significant impact on the subjects of his films. Sherry Caffarella, Sommer's mother, said Callahan's documentary gave her usually very shy daughter more confidence since she was able to see herself perform. “She dreams of being a superstar,” said Caffarella. “Jared is out making her dreams come true with this documentary.”

Katie Rivera, Janey's husband, and Janey, the star herself, all said that *Janey Makes a Play* made the statement that any little company or town can do big things if they have big hearts and strong passions.

“We're all actors that don't know how to act, singers that don't know how to sing and dancers that don't know how to dance,” said Janey. “And we still do it. This film encourages others to do the same.”

*Janey Makes a Play* was also dedicated to a 16 year old girl in the theater company who died in a car-crash while the film was still being edited.

“At the end of the movie, it's the 16 year old girl that dies, not the 90 year old woman. It shocks people and forces the question in front of them of ‘How are you investing in the lives of others now?’” said Callahan, smiling down at a birthday invite he received in the mail from Janey which read, “*Alert the fire department! 95 candles!*”

“We never know where life will lead,” continues the filmmaker. “That's the difference between a documentary and a fictional movie. You really never know how it's going to end.”

Callahan's documentaries are spreading optimism for Cilley's Film Con Challenge goals. *Janey Makes a Play* won an audience choice award at Santa Cruz film festival and



played at over 20 other film festivals. The film premiered in theaters in Los Angeles, San Diego, and Atlanta in June. Callahan's documentary is currently on iTunes and Amazon available for purchase. JMAP also has a screening at the film week in San Diego February 14th and American Moderate was just accepted to the American Documentary Film Festival in Palm Springs and the Oscar-qualifying 41st annual Atlanta Film festival. In addition, Callahan said that many narrative films that hit the big-screen began as documentaries, including some of the films premiered at Sundance Film Festival this year. In an article published by [PBS](#), eight movies were noted as having started out as documentaries. Films such as, *Man on Wire*, *Our Brand is Crisis*, *An American Family*, *Grey Gardens*, and *The Times of Harvey Milk* all began as documentaries that never made it to the big screen.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JARED CALLAHAN

For people like Cilley, Callahan and Haycock, filmmaking is about more than payment returns. It's about enriching the experience of living and noticing that there are superheroes right next door. Though "pop-corn films" might bring in more revenue, Haycock and Lehr, the star of *American Moderate*, both believe in the desperate need for documentary films to bring connectivity among people and communities today.

"Now more than ever we need stories of real people making the right choice even when it's against what they've been told to do," said Haycock. "We need stories that celebrate the average, normal human."

Lehr adds, "People are so divided right now. We need something that shows people's, all people's, humanity."

Moisés Esparza, curator, or programmer as he prefers to be called, of the Digital Gym, says that seeing a movie is not just going in a dark room and shutting off one's brain for two hours. It's about much more than that.

“What you're really doing is connecting emotionally to what you see on the screen,” said Esparza. “I think documentary film really allows that to happen, even more so than narrative films.”

The Digital Gym is a non-profit organization with a 46-seat venue that has become a screening for locally produced films and documentaries. Cilley says she aims to get real stories of real people on the big screens, starting with San Diego's Digital Gym. This colorful and community oriented theater is currently working on a project called “The Locals” where the theater will screen a local feature every month. The Locals had its premier with *Janey Makes a Play* and Esparza believes Jodi's Film Con Challenge will provide more content and more regular screenings for The Locals monthly viewings.

“We are constantly working on our outreach efforts and I think our partnership with Jodi will help to let local filmmakers know that we are here and available to screen their features,” said Esparza. “Local filmmakers who work within the confines of a certain budget and resource availability have to be super creative and engaged in the process and what they come up with is really impressive and amazing.”

Back at her desk, Jody Cilley types away at her keyboard with ideas for film industry expansions swimming through her mind. With the Film Con Challenge in the works and a partnership with Digital Gym showing a promising advance in the screen time for local films, each real story Cilley gathers and each new filmmaker she attracts is another building block towards her goal; seeing real people with extraordinary stories on the big screen. And it all began right across from a street named, “Normal.”