

## **Pull Focus: Gerry Wurzburg**

Erin Finicane and Nick Ray

### **What was your personal motivation for making a film about autism?**

I had known Larry and Tracey, and was very interested in the issue of - I see this as a civil rights issue, and I very much have seen how people take - whether it's autism or it doesn't matter what the label is - and a lot of people who are very very capable, are never even given a chance. So Larry and Tracey, I was with them about a half a year before we started filming. It was a conference, and we were in front of about 500 people, and they were talking and riffing through their typing, and it was really funny. That was the moment that I realized that they could tell a story in film.

### **How did you first encounter Larry and Tracey?**

I knew them because of other work that I had done, and they knew me because I'd done a film that got an Academy Award nomination called "Autism is a World" so they knew who I was. Sue knew them, who was in that film. So we knew each other and we were kind of in the same "orbits." After that meeting and I saw them at that conference, I realized that they had the mojo that it takes to be on-camera characters in a documentary that could really electrify people. I said "Okay, we have to talk." A month later I went up to Vermont to visit them (they both live in different parts of the state). I spent days with each of them and then together, talking about what the film might be and what they wanted it to be, and it kind of evolved out of that.

### **How did you work together?**

I always describe the film in terms of what the voice was going to be, and I wanted the voice to be their voice. So it's all from their experience and - they type and they take you on the journey and people that they meet around the world. As soon as you make that decision, that means you don't have experts, you don't interview the parents, you narrow the field. As a filmmaker I really wanted to create a box, because that's how you create a dramatic line in a film. So that's how I framed it.

### **Over the course of getting to know both of them, what has been the number one takeaway for you regarding people with autism?**

I think the most important thing is the presumption of competence. As we've worked together, and as the film came out, I therefore was putting even greater challenges. "Okay we're going to do an NPR radio show, we're going to do TV appearances." They were up to every single challenge, and then we sat down to talk about social media. We had a two day meeting on social media: "What is social media, what do you think you want to do? If you want to do a blog how often?" All these questions we had a discussion about, and they chimed in. Where we are now is that because of where they were and then where they've come through the journey of making the film, which was not, for them, with autism, a simple thing - They have grown tremendously, and they have developed even greater confidence. It's all about the bar; if you put a ceiling on people, they hit the ceiling, if you take the ceiling away, you don't know what will happen.

**I found scenes where they were in a room communicating with each other typing extremely powerful. What was your first experience with this event [with them] like? What was going through your head?**

I think a really interesting story is, during the research phase I went around the world and visited the places where we were going to go film. Some of them were people that we knew and some of them were people that my fellow producer knew about so therefore I had access to. So I was in Finland meeting with Antti and he's sitting in a room at the adult service center where he would spend his day. And he's sitting there playing a game, and makes no approach to me. So I sat down here, and I just started talking to him like i'm talking to you. Who I am, why I'm here, and at a certain point he started to approach me. As I walked down to meet him, I walked down this long hall and in this hall they have pictures of everybody, like you were in kindergarten, and this man is in his 20's.

So within an hour or so we sat down to talk, we probably went to eat - I like to eat because it's a good way to get people to relax. And at a certain point I said to him "What is it with all of these little signs of you in the hallway, these little pictures? It's like you're in kindergarten." And he typed out to me "They treat us like we are dogs."

So this is a man - I knew he was listening to me for the hour that I sat in that room over there, and he was assessing whether I really believed him and whether I would develop a condescending tone or something about the way I approached him would give him a warning that she's just like all the other people. When I walked in that space, when I saw those kindergarten-like pictures, I realized they were infantilizing them, which is what usually happens. And you saw when we filmed him, it was basically a locked-down facility he was in. That's how he would spend his day, I mean he didn't go out - it was insane.

So it's also very difficult because you know Larry and Tracey and how they are able to lead their lives, and then you go to another country and you see that it's not the same.

**I thought I had heard that Finland had more advanced facilities?**

Proof is in the pudding, up close.

**From a production side, it seems it would be difficult to make people sitting around a table typing, visually interesting and yet you do it so well. Can you explain how you**

**overcame that challenge?**

It was a very big challenge. It could have been a very boring film. I have to frame everything by saying that I always work with a really talented group of people, I'm only as good as that. I have a great cameraman, Gary Griffin, who you may have taken a class with, great sound guy, Bob Silverthorne and a wonderful editor Barbara Ballow. So when I knew I was going to do the film the first thing I do is I call the three of them. We get together and I say, "the next assignment, if you decide to accept it is this project". So they're in from the very beginning and they kinda of understand where I am but even they when we were filming didn't really know, they have to cover everything b/c they don't know A, when the good lines are going to come in, B, where you should be when we've got 4 or 5 people typing. A lot of times I would be behind Gary, seeing what people are typing and I would say "get over here". He has an incredible instinct though for where to be. but the way I approached the text was to view it as poetry. So you don't need to necessarily have everything. I needed to have enough of it so people would not doubt that they had typed it. But once you had established that it was their voice, definitely, then you could be more poetic. in certain cases I would have text on the screen. I work with a great graphic designer. I would say I just want a title like ebb and flow. I also work with a wonderful composer Jay Ralph so it was the same thing, it was like getting that sense that it was a pulsing organic poetic experience not a literal concrete experience.

**You had a poet as one of your characters.**

Oh yeah, Larry. Larry's a great poet. and Chammi too.

**I'm curious to the response to the film in the general community but also in the autistic community?**

We opened in a 140 cities nationwide. We opened first in AMC theaters, so we had a very high profile. NY, times square, LA, the big theaters so that worked really well. Then in releasing it, we worked very closely with the Autism Society of America and there was a senior executive there that saw it and really got it. It's not a simple film. The fact that they were pushing film about adult autism, everyone talks about children with autism, this was about adults with autism and it was really talking about a very large percentage of people with autism that have difficulty with communication. It's not that they're unknown but they're often forgotten and often it's said that that's the group we can't reach, can't educate. So I wanted people to see that that's perhaps not the case. It really resonated with people with autism, with families, and with people who care about the topic. But what was really wonderful was that it resonated with people who knew nothing about the topic. They would come out and say, "I just went on a journey I didn't even know about" and in my mind that's what a good documentary does, it takes you where you as the viewer have never been and into a world you would never be able to see, so that was a great success. We got great reviews and things like that but it had a real impact. Then following up, Larry and Tracy have been out doing speaking engagements across the country and they're doing the keynote. People contact me and I'm like, "you don't want me the filmmaker, you want the guys". So that' s been quite wonderful.

**Can you elaborate a little more on the 100 cities one night of autism campaign, how that came about with the partnership with AMC and the Autism Society?**

Well it was actually a total of 140 cities and the first thing that we did was I met with Autism Society and they decided they wanted to come on board and then I had a group called the Area 23A I was

working with who work with theatrical and movie event things. He's a really good guy out on the west coast. So once Autism Society came on board we decided we were going to target AMC because they (Area 23A) had a relationship and we had a relationship with AMC so we kinda came from the LA side and the community side. They saw it as a community function and they saw the benefit for the community. They were already once a month showing a film where they would make it sensory friendly, they make the sounds more dimmed down, they don't have all the previews, so the families with kids with autism can be there and if the kids are shouting out to the screen it's ok. But the first thing we did was we had the AMC relationship and then it opened and it was a huge hit. Literally, the night it opened, I had already been on "Morning Joe", we'd gotten lots of press, the Wall Street Journal, lots of places and as we're having dinner, before we went to the opening, I'm on the phone because Screen Vision is interested in it and Screen Vision could bring it to another 100 cities. So basically, I framed it I said, "ok we're going to do a hundred cities one night for autism, I want it to happen like that" which is like asking for a bit much and it's April 1st and it happened May 12th, don't ask me how we did it and we're a small group but the way we really did it was community organizing. We reached out and got people on the ground who were really excited about the film and were talking about the women Lafayette, LA, the folks in Honolulu, the people in Grand Rapids, I mean real community organizing and people just got folks out. and in fact it's continued to have a release. I was just down in Blacksburg, near Virginia Tech and they had a 500 people packing a theatre, so it continues to move along.

**Was there anything aside from the film that you and your partner had in that community engagement toolkit that you used to push the message of the film in collaboration with the screenings?**

We used a lot of social media. We had our Facebook and twitter linking to the website, all the kinda obvious things. We had on the side several short interviews with the guys talking about the film, which are really wonderful because they talk about some of the tough scenes in the film and the process of working so those were things also available for people. But a lot of it was electronic pushing of a toolkit which included you know the usual things for the web. We were very fortunate also that we had an album come out. We had Norah Jones, Ben Harper and a whole bunch of other people did work with my composer Jay Ralph and so we had these very talented musicians who recorded original songs and so then an album came out. That happened the beg. of Jan and that started to build the buzz. It shot up to no.3 on iTunes so that started creating buzz. So we released the album first then the film opened then Warner Bros. picked us up and we were picked up by iTunes for streaming then Netflix bought us, which is really good. The model for distribution has really changed in three years.

**Can you explain what film as a medium might be able to offer a social issue or bigger outreach campaign that another format isn't able to offer?**

I think the important thing about doing a film and doing theatrical, because it's a little old fashion in one sense, but people, social media builds communities but people really want to get together and that's what happened when we did these theatrical releases, is that people got together and that community of people who were interested in the topic and then people who didn't know anything about it but it became a community organizing event and I think that's something we cannot lose sight of with all the social media stuff that we're all doing is that people still like to get together. You can do it up to a certain point and it can move mountains as we've seen but people still need to socialize and interact physically. So that's why it was a really important thing for us to do. We really wanted to change the community and you really need to change the community by getting people

physically together so you can get conversations started.

**Concerning social change in general, from your experience, what would you consider the key or one of the crucial elements to get people inspired to care, and not just care but take action?**

Well the key element is you have to know your audience. Niche market can be a very powerful thing. So you have to know your audience and know who the key players are in whatever your topic is, and bring them in early to the process. Then you have to figure out if people really will come to the table and do something. Because you may be dealing with a big organization, they may say, "Oh yeah, we're really behind you", but will they really deliver? My experience with Autism Society is that they really deliver but we are very clear about what they will deliver. We worked very closely with their social media people so we knew that we were sending out blast to 150,000 people every Tuesday. We knew that they had a mechanism for getting things out. So you've got to have someone you partner with who cares about the issue. You basically are creating an element that is going to expand whatever it is they are trying to promote. So it's really, I try and remind people it's really a collaborative effort. We do what we do really well and they do what they do really well in terms of for the advocacy effort and this is a tool for their advocacy effort. So you really have to be sure that they buy in and really get that. Because sometimes I've had some organizations that say but don't really do and my experience Autism Society is they got right on board and really came through so I think that's the key thing. Who are the other people out there that might care about the issue. Now when I choose a film to do I don't choose because I think there is an organization out there, I choose them because I think they are important social issues and I'm going to frame it and I'm going to have control over how I frame it b/c if I did it under their watch it would be a very different film. So that's an editorial thing you've got to understand, you have to control your editorial vision. That's the other piece of the pie.

**Do you have any specific tips about formalizing that relationship with the partner so it doesn't become you doing a film for a client?**

It really has to do with the chemistry of you and the people you are working with. You have to be very professional about it in that you come in with a clear pitch. I came in with my guy from LA who was going to handle the film theatrical distribution and another person who was handling my social media who was on my staff, we had sent them copies of the film ahead. I said, "I want to make sure we had all your key players at the table" So I knew we had all the key players and I knew ahead of time, she and I had talked and I knew we both wanted to see this work. The interpersonal is all very important in this. Then we came in the meeting and we talked and everyone in that room had some connection with autism. Most of them had a sibling or a child with autism. You need to do a contract, you always do a contract and those contracts need to be very clear and lay out what the understandings are and you have to be very clear about what the time table is and the schedule and who's accountable. Money is always an issue, In this case, when we did the theatrical we did a split, with Autism Society, so they got a piece of the theatrical. I also shared the backend on the album. so the album was a split between the Autism Society and the guys. So we set up a foundation for the guys so that any proceeds split out to those two and then something to the artists eventually. So I didn't get anything out of that equation. So you've got to come to the table ready to give people things to make it a win for them and a win for you and you've got to think about that ahead of time.

**Do you have any other tips for young filmmakers?**

I've done films where I've come up with it and gone to people, but I've also done films where - like I did a campaign for American Legacy, where all the tobacco settlement money goes; you probably know them from all their anti-smoking campaigns. I did a whole campaign for them called "Code Blue" So that was an example where they wanted to do something but then I was able to come in and frame it for them, and give them a way to disseminate it and think about it differently. So I think that's the other thing: You have understand all of your distribution options. In that case, I'd work with National Association of Broadcasters before on another campaign, and I got NAB to come on board. So basically we did a film called "Code Blue" on lung cancer. And I got all the major affiliates all over the country to pick it up and run it, and then we did a big event on the hill. So that had a political function, as well as getting a message out. And then we did social media with that.

So you have to understand: What are your distribution options? Think creatively about what your distribution options are in terms of the internet, television, and other non-broadcast ways of getting things out.

**Could you elaborate on "framing thing differently?"**

When I went in to meet with them they just knew they wanted to do something about lung cancer, because a lot of people get lung cancer who never smoke (most get it because they do smoke). What I proposed is that we would do a very high end, high profile film, but the unique thing was that we would distribute it by getting the National Association of Broadcasters to see it as a public service event, and therefore, they would then feed it out to every affiliate. ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, all over the country. And then all those local affiliates would place it.

So it was a way of controlling the distribution. People think "Oh, you just have to get it on PBS" but you have to control the distribution. I try and think very creatively, so I have things on CNN, on HBO, things in theaters, I have things like this NAB, some things that are public television or APT. So you just have to think creatively about a range of distribution.

And now I really believe this film - when this film came out you could download it off iTunes, you could download it off Amazon, it went out to every cable provider in the country as On Demand. We had every major cable provider in the United States and Canada picked up the film as on-demand. That blows all the other ways of distributing out of the water because then you're making it a very personal experience because "I'm interested in getting to this film." Then you have to make sure people know about it which is conventional PR and other methods- word of mouth and all that.

**If you had one thing to say about this film, what would you want people to take away?**

After people have watched this film, I want them to go back out into the community and approach people differently. So if they see someone who looks different from them, to not just throw a wall up. I've had many people who watched that film and said to me "You know, I used to see people like Larry and Tracey and I would go to the other side of the road." So now these people are on the same side of the road and conversations are starting. We only change by human interaction, and that's

one-on-one. So I think that's the difference that I want to see made. The other thing I've seen happen is the people who provide "services" to people with autism - their attitudes are changing, because they are realizing that they perhaps underestimated the person that they are "serving." So those are pretty big changes.

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