TEN9EIGHT

SHOOT FOR THE MOON

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

HOW THE SEED WAS PLANTED.

I began this journey with a chance encounter years ago with Steve Mariotti, a visionary, a genius, and the person who founded the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (which teaches students from low income communities how to become entrepreneurs – www.nfte.com). I had just finished a film, *Lemonade Stories* (www.lemonadestories.com) which explored the impact mothers have had on igniting entrepreneurial spirit and innovative thinking. I met Steve after a screening of *Lemonade Stories* – and he told me about his work with inner city teenagers. And then he said three words. "Would you ever…" I think he was a little bit startled when I interrupted him, shouting, "YES! YES! Count me in!"

That conversation with Steve was back in 2004. The concept of teaching teenagers from low income communities how to become entrepreneurs – and the transformative nature of what happens when these students are taught skills that are relevant to their lives – and how they are then re-energized to study math, to study English, to stay in school – I found it remarkable. I also thought that a film about these young entrepreneurs would enable people to have a discussion about race and class and privilege and opportunity – but one that could be done in an uplifting manner.

It was not until 2008 when the concept of this film became reality with the support of the Templeton Foundation (as well as the Kauffman Foundation.)

THE JOURNEY BEGINS.

This is how it starts. A kid takes an entrepreneurship class in school and learns how to write a business plan. This year, 24,000 students wrote business plans. The next step is a business plan competition which starts in classrooms. Students then advance to city-wide competitions, and then advance to state or regional wide competitions. This is where I jumped in with a small camera crew – roaming from competition to competition across the country. It is where I also spotted students with great charisma, personality, drive – students who would jump off the screen. And, in fact, I found students that I thought might not advance to the finals in New York (only 35 students advanced to the finals) – but that were colorful and compelling characters. I also saw presentations that blew me away – and I immediately thought I knew who was going to walk away with the brass ring in New York. If only I had known how wrong I would be …

I made the decision early on to shoot this project on film. We were telling such compelling stories about kids who were trying to achieve – and I felt that they deserved to be captured on film as opposed to video (which is the medium of most documentaries focused on the inner city). Video can often feel gritty and bleak – which was not how I had envisioned this project. Film is more expensive, of course, but has such a rich, complex, visual texture and I thought it would more accurately reflect the spirit of these kids. As a result, all of the interviews with the kids and their families were shot on film. The competitions themselves were filmed in high-definition video.

At the outset, I had intended to feature the stories of only 6 kids – and I could not contain myself. We followed approximately 14 kids from the start of the regional competition until the finals (which were six months later). Part of this was because there were so many great kids. And part of this was to hedge my bets – I wanted to make sure I included the kid who would ultimately win the finals in New York. I also armed several students with video cameras so that they could keep a video diary of their lives, both as they formulated their businesses and business plans – as well as to document what they were dealing with on a day-to-day basis. (The video diaries came back with both moving and funny moments – as well as moments in front of air conditioners where voices could not be heard; and moments when someone stuffed the camera, still on, in a knapsack, picking up all sorts of interesting audio tidbits.)

But as the project developed, I also grew in unexpected ways. First – we were going into some challenging neighborhoods with very expensive equipment. After a lengthy discussion with our team, we decided not to hire a bodyguard to protect the camera gear – as it would send a mixed signal of fear and distrust. And that decision was pivotal for me. I became comfortable going into these neighborhoods and began to expect that I would be received in these neighborhoods with ease. I felt no sense of fear and now I feel no hesitation. I think you're brought up with these stereotypical views of what certain neighborhoods and certain kinds of people are like, particular in the inner city and it is, in fact, a stereotype. (That being said, there were and are certain areas where you need to be cautious after dark.) But on the other hand, to make certain assumptions about wide areas of geography – I have learned to break through that stereotype in itself.

Secondly, I had a moment. We had been filming in a remarkable area of Brooklyn where about 50 kids were doing these great performances (slam poetry, dance, rap) about their experiences and what they faced in their day-to-day lives. In front of me, four handsome African-American boys are rapping. I say to them: "Do you guys know the Sugar Hill Gang?" And they're like "Huh?" And so I said "You know, Hotel, Motel, Holiday Inn?" And they laughed, "That's so old school." One of them pulls me in front of the camera – and we start rapping (at the top of our lungs) bits of "Rapper's Delight." I am shouting, "Have you ever gone over a friend's house to eat and the food just ain't no good?" And one of them sings a call-and-response: "Say what?" I am grinning from ear to ear, thinking about what a remarkable scene this is – a white, 40-something hockey mom – and I've got four teenage African-American rappers from the Bronx behind me. It was such a powerful moment because it was a connection that transcended race. That transcended age or gender or anything else that could have separated us. And it was a moment of pure fun.

THE KIDS.

The kids in the film spanned a wide array of color, ethnicity, religion, height, weight, and personality. Rodney Walker, the narrator of the film, is a tall young man with elegant features.

His story is among the more dramatic as he battled bouts of homelessness after spending most of his childhood in the foster care system. Rodney and his partner, Gabe Echoles, formed "Forever Life Video Productions" – a business which incorporated Rodney's passion for film with Gabe's original musical compositions. Amanda Loyola, the daughter of Brazilian immigrants, and the founder of an organic dog food company, was quiet – but steely in her determination, a trait inherited from her father. Mac Harlis, a football player with movie-star looks, was soft-spoken with a brilliant concept: a football visor that changed with light. Alex Niles, from Miami, blew away the regional competition in Florida, with a guitar riff on his custom-made Niles Guitar – and when we filmed Alex, we were accompanied from location to location by an entourage consisting of his mother, grandparents, cousins, neighbors – many of whom were immigrants from Uruguay. Tatyana Blackwell, from Washington DC, who called herself a "strong black woman," was the front runner. Tatyana had been designing and manufacturing cheerleading team uniforms for years – and her business ran up and down the East Coast.

These were such great kids. They were honest and raw and determined. And talented. Every one of them.

THE FINALS.

24,000 were winnowed to the final 35, who descended on New York. Nearly all of them had never been on a plane or stayed in a hotel. Shan Shan Huang, a student from Boston, was overwhelmed with the luxury of the Marriott Hotel in Times Square. "This is the best hotel in all of New York," she declared.

On the morning of the finals, the kids were fidgety and nervous – all keenly aware of the $10,000 first place prize. But from my vantage, all 24,000 kids who started this journey were winners. They were winners because of the adversity that they had overcome in their lives, because they were trying to achieve, and because they were trying to do something with their future.

For these kids to get in front of adults that included bankers and corporate chieftains … I certainly could not have done that at the age of 17. For me, watching these kids perform and knowing that they had overcome obstacles far greater than I ever had to deal with, to watch them perform … it made me want to cry.

THE TAKE-AWAY.

I think what these kids took away from this experience was two-fold. One – they mattered. That what they were doing and saying was important. And second, that they could envision a different future. These kids are also learning how to present to adults, how to look people in the eye, how to be articulate. They're also learning sophisticated financial concepts.

And by learning these skills, these students can see a different future for themselves. This program and this type of education is such a compelling tool in the anti-drop out tool bag because it can change lives and change destinies.

I have three hopes for the film. First – that lots and lots and lots of kids see it – and are inspired to think differently about themselves, their capabilities, and their futures. If one teen is affected and motivated, then we have all won. (An incarcerated young person in jail for 10 years will cost the system more than $600,000 on average.) But more importantly, we are losing a generation of students to drop-out statistics. A high school dropout, as US Secretary of Education, Arne

Duncan, has said, is "condemned to a life of poverty." By learning these skills, these students can become productive citizens, which will also make our country more competitive.

Secondly – my hope is that anyone watching this film will understand that with the right stimulus, anything is possible for any child.

Thirdly – NFTE is doing something that is at the cutting edge of education because it is such a powerful concept; this type of education should be embedded in high school economics curriculums, at least in low-income community high schools. For policy makers and politicians, if they agree that this type of education is remarkably effective as a tool in the anti-dropout tool kit, then it should be mandatory in traditional high school education.

THE WRAP.

We first screened the film in the summer of 2009 at the Aspen Ideas Festival – where Rodney Walker stole the show. After the screening, which was packed, everyone wanted to shake his hand. Arne Duncan gave such a passionate introduction to the film (see this link here).

We also had another sneak peek recently with an audience of students – and one comment left me humbled and touched. "I am so glad I saw this movie," said a 16-year-old inner city student. "I am going to become a Queen, a Diva ... people are gonna know my name." And the fact that a single student felt more optimistic about her future after seeing the film – well – that was the whole point of making this movie.

I also feel so fortunate to have a new set of teenage friends – those who graciously agreed to let me interview them and prod them (and their families) about their lives and experiences. My new friends leave me Facebook messages and text me. And what struck me so profoundly is this fact: There are millions of kids just like Rodney and Mac and Jessica and Ja'Mal – in every state, in every city. All of whom are seeds. Seeds with the potential for an explosion of color and vibrancy.

All they need is just a little bit of water.

- *Mary*

Mary Mazzio, 2009
Director, Producer, Writer – TEN9EIGHT