

TEN9EIGHT

SHOOT FOR THE MOON

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Mary tells us about TEN9EIGHT.

It was rewarding to work on a film that deals with race, class and privilege – and to be able to address these subjects in an uplifting and hopeful way, it is so personally meaningful to me. The kids that we chronicle in the film are so remarkable and many of them have demonstrated such extraordinary resilience in their lives. The fact that they have this wonderful will to achieve has been so inspirational, for me as well as for the judges of the business plan competition. I love all of these kids, but Rodney Walker, a young entrepreneur from the South Side of Chicago, stood out as one of the more inspirational journeys of this film. Rodney entered the foster system at the age of 5 – and was homeless for a period of time. To see a charismatic articulate young man overcome such challenging circumstances – frankly, he embodies the American Dream.

This film truly profiles a personal journey for each of these kids. Was the process a journey for you as well? How so?

We went into some of the most challenging neighborhoods around the country as we were making this film. I remember talking with my director of photography, Richard Klug, and discussing if we should be concerned about whether it was safe for us, particularly with expensive equipment – wondering if we should have security or body guards to safeguard the crew and the equipment.

After thinking about what sort of message a body guard might convey, we decided against it – and charged in. And I discovered that all of my pre-conceived notions about the inner city were wrong – we were warmly welcomed into these areas, into their communities and families. I felt no sense of fear and now I feel no hesitation. I think we are all brought up with these stereotypical views of what certain neighborhoods and certain kinds of people are like – particularly in the inner city. That being said, there were certain areas you do not want to go into after dark. You have to be smart. This singular experience helped me break through my own stereotypes and assumptions that I had formed about “bad neighborhoods.”

Going through this incredible process with these kids must have been an amazing experience. Did any experience stand out for you?

Brooklyn! We were planning to film several business plan competitors from all over New York, who were also slam poets, artists, and dancers. The location was a remarkable set of buildings with graffiti art. We pull up at 5am in the morning and start pulling out all of our equipment, rushing to try to catch the beautiful, early morning light. Suddenly this silver limo, the size of a kitchen, pulls up, just as we are ready to begin shooting our first performance. A very smartly dressed gentleman (with bodyguards) steps out and said: “Yeah, so you’re on my property.” The crew of 20 – plus about 50 kids – all of a sudden fall silent. I am thinking to myself, “Well – we have our permits – and I hope I don’t lose my breakfast in front of all these people.” Not good.

The gentleman and I had a private conversation – and after some back and forth, fortunately were able to strike a deal so that we could stay there for the morning to film the performances. What an amazing day – these performances were some of the most heartfelt and raw and honest moments– each person articulating through poetry, dance, and rap – about their experiences living in poverty and in the inner city.

Tell us about the young rap artists, EMPIRE.

The last performers were filmed were four young African-American teenagers who rapped sequentially. They were fabulous. After they finished, I asked them – “Hey, do you guys know The Sugar Hill Gang.” For a moment, there was a blank stare – and then big laughs. LeRoy shouted out – “Sugar Hill Gang?” and I shout back: “You know, ‘Hotel, motel, Holiday Inn?’” I was told in no uncertain words that I was old school.

I was laughing so hard – and they pulled me out in front of the camera and became my backup band. There we were, a white 40-year-old hockey mom, with four African-American teens from the Bronx – and I rap (if you can call it rap): “Have you ever gone over a friend’s house to eat and the food just ain’t no good.” And then Sadeek and LeRoy croon “Say what?” And it was one of those moments that I will remember and treasure for the rest of my life. It was so powerful because it was a connection that transcended race and time and age – it was just exhilaration, and pure fun.

What do you think someone watching this film will take away with them?

I would hope that anyone watching this film would take away two things. Number one is that with the right stimulus, anything is possible for any child. Number two - no matter your circumstances, anyone can be an entrepreneur. You don’t have to be book smart, you don’t have to play basketball or hockey, and you don’t have to play the violin. What you do have to do is be able to take risks and be adventurous . . . which is really at the heart of being entrepreneurial. And for me that’s really the embodiment of the American Dream.

The judging panel is very impressive. Do you think there was anyone in particular that really impressed them or surprised them?

NFTE had a remarkable set of dedicated judges at all levels of the competition, from the city-wide finals to the state-wide finals. For the nationwide finals in New York City, several famous entrepreneurs joined the judging ranks including Arthur Blank (who co-founded Home Depot and owns the Atlanta Falcons), Wyc Grousbeck (owner of the Celtics), Ralph Schlosstein (co-

founder of BlackRock), David Fialkow (founder of General Catalyst), Tom Scott (founder of Nantucket Nectars and PLUM TV); Kay Koplovitz (founder of USA Network), among others.

The judges were so impressed by the presentation skills and innovative ideas that they witnessed during the competition – and nearly all of them admitted that they wished they had had those skills and confidence at such an early age.

What did the kids take away from participating in this competition?

I think they took away a number of things. How to present to adults, how to look people in the eye and how to be articulate. And they're learning really sophisticated concepts about return on investment. These kids can now go out and form small businesses and take charge of their destiny. They are empowered – and many of them stay in school. What NFTE is doing for these kids by teaching them entrepreneurship skills – they are changing lives and destinies, which is why it is so compelling.

I also think the kids took away two other things. One, people were paying attention to them, and most importantly, what they were doing was important. And two, to be a good entrepreneur, you have to be really prepared, you have to be really articulate and you can never give up. They will all make mistakes – we all make mistakes. We will all have detours but it doesn't mean that opportunity should end.

The reality is all these kids are winners. They were winners because of the adversity that they had to overcome in their lives, the fact that they were trying to achieve, and the fact that they were trying to do something for their future. I do not think that I could have gotten up, at the age of 16, in front of 300 adults that included bankers, and corporate chieftains. Just watching these kids, all of whom overcame obstacles far greater than I ever had to deal with, it made me want to cheer and cry at the same time.

How did you become involved with the project?

I had just finished *Lemonade Stories*, a film about entrepreneurs and their mothers – and I met Steve Mariotti, the founder of NFTE, which teaches kids from low-income communities how to become entrepreneurs. Steve told me he was in tears after seeing *Lemonade Stories* – and told me about his work and how for many inner-city kids, that Shakespeare was irrelevant, that math was irrelevant to their lives. But when they were given the chance to learn how to start a small business – maybe it was buying a set of watches for \$25 and selling them for \$100 – that all of a sudden, math was important, writing was important, presentation skills were important – and the first thing that came to my mind was this: WOW. I have got to do a film about this.