

3-1-2018

Lives in Motion: DePaul's all-star cinema arts faculty teach the art of documenting life on film

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-magazine>



Part of the [Film Production Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2018) "Lives in Motion: DePaul's all-star cinema arts faculty teach the art of documenting life on film," *DePaul Magazine*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 412021 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-magazine/vol1/iss412021/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in DePaul Magazine by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

LIVES IN MOTION

DePaul's all-star cinema arts faculty teach the art of documenting life on film.

By Kris Gallagher

Documentaries are not the cinematic equivalent of vegetables.

"They aren't always just good for you," says Susanne Suffredin, award-winning editor and a professional lecturer in the School of Cinematic Arts (SCA) in the College of Computing and Digital Media (CDM). "There are great films out there. Documentary filmmaking is filmmaking. It's about telling a story. It's about being as polished and together and as great a director, a producer, an editor as you would be on any feature film."

"I've always had a passion for documentary films," says Anuradha (Anu) Rana, assistant professor of cinema production, directing and screenwriting in SCA. A former journalist, she's won awards and acclaim pursuing stories that interest her, from female boxers to a wilderness preserve endangered by the oil reserves underneath it. "Some things you produce as an insider because you grasp the issues and some things capture your attention because they're totally different for you."

"There are many types of documentaries. There are slice-of-life documentaries, where you're capturing what's happening right now, and there are longitudinal ones, where you follow the subjects for years," says Dana Kupper, an award-winning cinematographer and a professional lecturer

in SCA. "Either way, it all goes back to your big idea. What are you trying to say?"

Last summer, SCA students shouldering cameras sought to document young adults with mental health challenges in search of stable homes. They met quirky, complex people not much older than themselves and dedicated Depaul USA staff and volunteers who were trying to help them. Along the way, they learned a lot about homelessness, filmmaking and themselves.

"I'VE ALWAYS HAD A PASSION FOR DOCUMENTARY FILMS."

—Anuradha Rana, CDM faculty

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Chuck Levesque had a problem. The executive director of Depaul USA, which provides services and housing for people experiencing homelessness, needed to raise money to

DePAUL IMDB



Anuradha Rana

Rana has produced, directed and filmed documentaries in her native India as well as in Ecuador, Japan, South Africa and the United States. She is co-director of CDM's study abroad documentary program in India and program coordinator for Diverse Voices in Docs, a professional development and mentoring program in Chicago. Her films include "Variations," "Preserves" and "For the Records." She is currently in production on "Language of Opportunity" and "Superdogs" (working title).



Dana Kupper

Kupper has worked on feature films, television shows and commercials, as well as documentaries, for more than three decades. She was a primary cinematographer for both "Stevie," which won the Documentary Cinematography Award at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival, and "Life Itself," which was about film critic Roger Ebert. Her most recent film, "Grace," will be released later this year.

build permanent supportive housing in St. Louis for young adults with chronic mental health issues. He hoped that by telling their stories, he could gain the support of civic leaders and donors. He wanted a compelling documentary.

Rana needed a project. She is both founder and director of the new MFA in documentary at DePaul. She wanted students to experience the complexity of making a film, from pre-production to the finished product.

JoAnne Zielinski, associate dean in CDM, knew an opportunity when she saw it. When staff in DePaul's Office of Mission and Values (OMV) approached her about making the documentary, she agreed. After all, she had previously produced many other projects for OMV, including other out-of-town movies. Zielinski connected Levesque and Rana, worked with Rana and Suffredin to secure grants, and worked out the logistics of shooting a film 300 miles from Chicago.

The result was not one, but three short documentaries and a dozen experienced, self-assured future filmmakers.

"By the end of the third day [of filming] I felt way more confident in my abilities," says **Katie Scheuber (CDM '17)**, who graduated the quarter after shooting wrapped in June. "It brings out the filmmaker within you."

PRE-PRODUCTION

As with a feature film, a documentary requires months of careful planning and a strong team. In fall 2016, Rana and Zielinski recruited two award-winning faculty members to their team: Kupper, cinematographer for "Stevie," which won the Documentary Cinematography Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2003, and Suffredin, post-production supervisor for "Hoop Dreams," which won the Audience Award for Best Documentary at Sundance in 1994. Both films were produced by the legendary Chicago film collective Kartemquin Films.

"Everybody brought something different to the table," says Zielinski. "What was great about working with these seasoned professionals is they all knew how to manage the process, from story development through delivery of the final films."

From the dozens of students who applied to work on the project, the team chose 12. In spring 2017, the students familiarized themselves with the equipment and learned about the intersection of mental illness and homelessness.

"We had camera [and] sound workshops to help guide us through the equipment. Then we had a disability activist talk to us about the language we should use to address the barriers people face," says Scheuber.

The educators and several students took a two-day scouting trip to St. Louis in May to meet the clients and staff of Depaul USA and explore the locations where they would shoot.

"It was great that we ... didn't have the pressure of filming, to just get to know the subjects of the stories," says Suffredin. "Some of the students hadn't interacted before with somebody who is actively schizophrenic. The students really got a sense of empathy, and they brought it with them when we went back down [to film] in June."



"I am constantly surrounded by men in the cinematography program, so it was really nice to be surrounded by women," says student Melissa Pratt (center).

Junior Melissa Pratt did have prior experience, both with people experiencing homelessness and with documentaries. She'd taken a service immersion trip to work with people facing homelessness in East St. Louis, Ill., and had made her own documentary about a woman who previously had been homeless. She knew to expect the unexpected.

"In the pre-production class, we tried to formulate our story—the scenes we would want to get, shots we'd want to get, the topics we'd want to talk about. We'd planned out a general script for the documentary.

"And as a documentary always goes, it never really quite goes to plan."

PRODUCTION

Rana divided the students into three crews of four students each. "Each student had a very specific role to play. They were either the producer, director, cinematographer or sound producer," she explains. She, Kupper and Suffredin each followed a team as advisors.

"I hadn't done sound before, and I wasn't confident in my abilities whatsoever," Scheuber says. "But we always had a professor there to guide and challenge us."

Kupper's expertise helped students achieve complex shots that they might not have tried otherwise, like filming Joe, a client, going for an early morning run, says Zielinski. "She helped the students set up a shot out of the side of a moving van and do it safely."

As executive producer, Zielinski's role was to make sure crew members had everything they needed, from equipment to hotel reservations. For example, when the crews arrived at their hotel in June, they realized there wasn't enough space in their rooms for the equipment. Zielinski quickly booked a meeting room that became their production office, affectionately dubbed the "war room."

"JoAnne really set everybody up to win," says Kupper. "All the students had to do was just pick up the gear and go."

Well, not exactly.

"Of course, the first day we get there, our plans kind of shattered," Pratt says. "Everything was always changing, so we just shot what we could." They grabbed unexpected opportunities, abandoned unproductive lines of questioning and improvised on the fly. Every night, they'd compare notes in the war room and map out a new plan for the following day. "It's only once you're shooting that you realize how your story is going to play out," she says.

That's the crucial difference between a scripted feature film and a documentary, says Rana: "The idea is not to tell stories about other people but to allow people to tell their own story."

As a film crew, you also behave differently, says Kupper, who has more than 30 years of experience in features, documentaries, corporate films and advertising.

"In the feature world, you put on this persona of a professional. The more you can play that role, the more successful



Susanne Suffredin

Suffredin has more than 30 years of experience as an editor and filmmaker in non-fiction, narrative and commercial genres, especially long-form documentaries. She is best known as the post-production supervisor on “Hoop Dreams,” which won the Audience Award for Best Documentary at the 1994 Sundance Film Festival and was an Academy Award nominee for Best Editing. Her films include “The Calling,” “5 Girls,” “The Last Pullman Car” and “@Home.” She recently completed work as an editor on “Other People’s Children,” a web series by CDM faculty members Anna Hozian and Brad Riddell, both assistant professors of screenwriting. She is currently working on a documentary about the life of former National Basketball Association player Chris Webber.



JoAnne Zielinski

Zielinski produced the feature-length biopic “Vincent de Paul: Charity’s Saint,” which aired on Catholic TV, was dubbed in Spanish and French, and won a Certificate of Merit at the Chicago International Film Festival. She served as a casting director on Chris Parrish’s film “Thrill Ride,” which was released in theatres in December 2017 and is being distributed by Gravitas Ventures (video on demand and Blu-ray). She has produced, directed and served as casting director on narrative features and short films that have garnered over 70 film festival awards regionally, nationally and internationally. Currently she is the program administrator for CDM’s summer programs with the Chicago Housing Authority (see page 33).



To read about another award-winning CDM filmmaker, visit depaulmagazine.com.

you are,” she explains. “It’s the opposite in documentaries. You’re trying to break down the barrier between you and your subject ... It’s not fair to ask your subjects to drop their mask if you’re not willing to drop yours.”

The hardest thing for the faculty was stepping back. “They made all the mistakes I made when I was starting,” says Kupper. “Watching them miss stuff, or struggle with equipment, or make the wrong choices ... I did all that, and watching them do it was like feeling that pain all over again.”

Yet it was also exhilarating, says Suffredin. “It was great letting them step up and gain that confidence,” she says. “My favorite moment was when I stopped thinking of them as students and started thinking of them as people I was working with on a project.”

POST-PRODUCTION

“I always say, production is the dream, when all story lines seem viable. Post-production is the reality, when you have to find the pathway to the story that works,” says Suffredin. As the film editor, “you become that person who takes all those great things that were captured in production and knits them together to make that one story.”

“IT WAS LIKE DOCUMENTARY BOOT CAMP.”

—Dana Kupper, CDM faculty

Depending on deadlines, funding and the length of the film, it can take from a few months to years to create a finished product. With a fall deadline for the Depaul USA videos, the team hired **Kathleen (KeKe) Mullins (CDM MS ’13)** to edit the film. The students worked closely with Mullins throughout the summer, reviewing rough cuts and giving feedback. Students had to learn to make painful choices.

“As the editor, you’re the person who has to convince people to let go of things that they love because they don’t work for the film,” Suffredin says. “You have to edit with momentum and use the parts that are going to take you to that next level.”

DISTRIBUTION

While the films for Depaul USA had a clear destination, distribution is usually the most complicated and time-consuming part of any documentary, Rana says. Film festivals and art houses each require separate applications and deny far more entries than they accept.

Rana frequently arranges to show documentaries to groups that are connected to the individual film’s subject matter. She has spread the word about her disability-related documentaries in academic and health care circles. Her

Photo by the Chicago Housing Authority



CHA DOCUMENTARY PROGRAM EMPOWERS FUTURE FILMMAKERS

By Chaz Ebert (JD '77)

Few programs inspire me more than those committed to empowering the voices of future filmmakers, especially female filmmakers. That is the goal of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) Program in Documentary Filmmaking. Held during the summer at DePaul's School of Cinematic Arts, this five-week program kicked off in 2016 and is designed for female high school students living in CHA housing on Chicago's South and West sides. I love how it prepares these young women to become future documentarians by instructing them on everything from aesthetics to technical skills. Professional filmmakers are among the students' mentors as they shoot and edit their movies.

These lessons enable the students to express their views on social issues that personally concern them. Four documentaries are created each summer. Two of the films produced in 2016 were selected for local film festivals, including the Global Girls Film Festival. The wonderful documentary "Rise Up" premiered

at the 2017 Windy City International Film Festival and won the Rising Voices award.

I am pleased that this program is being sponsored by DePaul because that institution remains so very important to me. I not only received my law degree from there, but established a small grant for law students to help with incidental expenses. The CHA documentary program is but one example of DePaul's commitment to our city and its various communities.

"The underlying motivation for the CHA documentary filmmaking program is our belief that young women can be cycle breakers in their community," says Liliame Calfee, adjunct faculty member and director of DePaul's program. "Film can be a powerful vehicle for social change . . . Mentored by film students and award-winning filmmakers, the girls dive deep into social topics affecting their communities. Last year, they chose teen pregnancy, bullying, gun violence and single-versus dual-parent homes. Not only do they learn professional filmmaking skills, but perhaps more importantly, they realize the power of their voice."

I went to speak to the future filmmakers. I wanted them to know that I, too, became interested in film while I was living in CHA housing. It is important to me that they look to the future to see how what they bring to the program can help change the direction of their lives. Calfee told me that she constantly reinforces that idea.

"They are our future and change can only occur if they take an active role in bringing awareness to the challenges they face. Through their films, they are able to foster positive dialogue . . . As we put the focus on young women, we introduce a new voice—a largely unheard perspective—that inherently helps to humanize what have become very polarized narratives in the media," she says.

I say amen to that.

Originally published as a blog post on July 17, 2017, this article was edited and reprinted with permission. See the original at bit.ly/EbertCHA. See all the videos at bit.ly/CHAMovies.



Katie Scheuber (CDM '17) has a passion for making films that create more awareness of marginalized communities.

works in progress—one about language and identity among a new generation of Indians and another about dogsled mushing in the upper Midwest—will be shown in community screenings, film festivals and international venues.

Some films do win awards that can lead to broader distribution through theatres, but most documentarians don't make films for the glory, she says.

"My very first short documentary, 'Ring Laila,' was about female boxers in India," she says. "A nonprofit took the film and put it on the back of a truck and traveled from village to village around northern India to show it ... I think that is my most rewarding experience."

For Scheuber, finding her confidence was its own reward. "Before, I was scared to take on production," she says. "There aren't a lot of women out there being boom operators or sound recordists, and now that may be something I'll pursue."

As for Pratt, she expects the lessons she learned to last a lifetime: "Next time when I'm filming, I'll have a little Anu in my head and Dana on my shoulder."

See the DePaul USA documentaries at bit.ly/DePaulUSA.

FEMALE FILMMAKERS GIVE VOICE TO THE UNHEARD

Only about one in four people in the film industry in the United States is female. Yet, in the School of Cinematic Arts (SCA) in the College of Computing and Digital Media (CDM), 80 percent of the documentary courses are taught by women, and the MFA program is headed by a woman.

"Documentaries give women and people of color more of a voice," says Anuradha (Anu) Rana, assistant professor of cinema production, directing and screenwriting, who created the graduate documentary program. Because documentaries generally cost less to make, Rana says, "You don't have to wait for a big Hollywood producer to support you."

The documentary field is certainly more balanced than the world of feature films, which is where Dana Kupper entered the business as a union camera technician. Now a professional lecturer in SCA, she was the rare woman in a technical position 30 years ago.

"It's a totally testosterone-driven world, features," she says. "It was chaos, and people

were mean. You had to fight for stuff. They were always testing you."

Her experience filming documentaries for DePaul USA was the complete opposite. "At one point, I did realize that it was four women running it, and I wondered if that's why it went so smoothly."

Stars such as Meryl Streep and Oprah Winfrey are trying to diversify the industry. They are the primary donors behind The Writers Lab, a screenwriting retreat designed to increase both the number of women in the field and the number of multifaceted roles for female actors.

Anna Hozian, assistant professor of screenwriting in SCA, was one of 12 writers selected for the first lab in 2015. Industry award winners helped her refine her script, "Anchor Baby," which she hopes will begin production soon.

"The Writers Lab was a launching moment for many of us," says Hozian. "The film industry is really about personal connections."

She thinks that's partly why there are so few women in Hollywood. "We all like to

surround ourselves with people we identify with, right? The men in power positions will anoint people they identify with and it becomes perpetual."

Hozian is committed to disrupting that cycle. "I love all my students, male and female," she says. "But, there are times when I see very talented female students, and I want to help cultivate those voices."

Bringing unheard voices to the fore is why JoAnne Zielinski, associate dean of CDM, Liliane Calfee, adjunct faculty, **John Psathas (CDM MFA '11)**, assistant professor of directing, cinema production and cinematography, and **James Choi (CDM MFA '16)**, instructor, partnered with the Chicago Housing Authority to create a documentary program for teenage residents (see page 33).

"We gave them a chance to define themselves instead of being defined by the media," Calfee says. "If we give them skills, if we give them a voice, we're giving them an opportunity to really make a large ripple effect in their communities."