

Filmmaking for the Blind

The Making of “Our Little Secret”

By

Chip Curry

Director, Chrysalis Films, San Jose, CA

chipcurry@earthlink.net

www.ChrysalisFilms.com

408 356-2486

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Abstract

A teacher, a therapist and a filmmaker assisted a group of nine visually impaired and blind students in making a ten minute video “murder mystery.”

These California School for the Blind students were ages 12-14. The project involved ten weekly two-hour sessions.

Clips from the film can be viewed on the Chrysalis Films website, www.chrysalisfilms.com on main page under “Working with Kids.”

Introduction

I have been making video documentaries, commercial productions and short narrative films for twenty five years. One of my most memorable projects began in January, 1999 when June Waugh, a therapist at the California School for the Blind asked me to bring in my video camera to a class meeting and see what might happen.

I had no idea what to expect. My first thought was that I would get some ideas for a documentary about the kids. June thought it would be good to videotape personal interviews with each student. We also thought of asking them to sing or recite poetry, and perhaps share some of their favorite recorded music.

Ten weeks later, to our amazement, we completed planning, discussing, scripting, acting, and premiering a ten minute narrative movie. The project gave students the thrill of putting a show together, and it proved to be a rich learning experience for the students as well as the teachers.

All of us, teachers and students, developed this project as we went along. This was a first time for all of us. What follows is an outline of what happened each week.

Week 1: What shall we do?

Sitting together with no camera present, we went around the room telling our personal stories. We encouraged honesty and all of us, including adults, took our turn telling a little about our lives, challenges, and some of the history that put us in the room at this moment.

The students felt that recording their personal stories would be interesting, but this was not an idea that had them highly motivated. Then one young fellow, Juan, totally blind, said "let's do a murder mystery!" With this suggestion the atmosphere changed to one of high motivation. All the students started offering suggestions. Another student suggested that Tom (who was often late to class) would be late for class in the movie and the goal would be to find him. All agreed to the premise and we were off and running.

We decided they would come up with the story, I would handle the camera and June and Dave Renslow (their classroom teacher) would use the project to teach self expression and script writing.

To me, the most amazing thing was that visually impaired and blind students were quite thrilled to be playing with a medium that I assumed was reserved for the sighted. Juan "saw" himself as a detective solving a case, he wrote his lines, acted his part and processed all feedback on his work.

Week 2: Videotaping Personal Statements

We started videotaping personal statements. We encouraged the physical involvement by asking students to handle the lavaliere mike placement on shirt of interviewee. Every student was asked to take a turn as interviewer and interviewee. We requested the following questions be answered.

1. What is you name, age, and visual impairment?
2. What do you see, what kinds of things can you do and not do?
3. Where do you see yourself in 10 years, what are your goals?
4. What obstacles do you foresee and how will you handle them?
5. If you could give someone with your condition some advice, what would it be?

Week 3: Script Discussion

Dave Renslow remarked that the kids were very motivated that was a great opportunity to develop creative writing skills during classtime.

I have had some experience making up stories as a storyteller and filmmaker. All that is necessary is to have a problem and characters trying to solve it as more obstacles arise. The story needs to make some kind of sense, but it can be campy, and funny.

It can be as simple or complex as one wants to make it. The goal is to produce something, and have fun in the process. In very simple terms, we think of story structure:

1. Beginning: introduce the characters and the problem that must be solved
2. Middle: characters start solving problem, more obstacles arise.
3. End: everything seems to work itself out.

Week 4: Finding Consensus

This session presented the biggest challenge for me and an amazing observation.

The previous week's assignment had been to complete a first pass at a final script. Upon reading it at this session, several parts did not make sense. My concern was how much should be their idea and how much should I interject. As we allowed each student to express their ideas, the class started to lose interest—joking and daydreaming. Even I was a little confused and could not concentrate—we were loosing it. I regained control by simplifying the discussion, and restarting at the beginning of the script.

“Ok, who committed the crime?” Everyone agreed on the answer.

“What were they feeling?” They could answer this.

“What does each character want?” This was also a good question to get the class focused and giving simple valid answers.

Then we eased into the first problem area, someone offered a solution, I stopped them from rambling, and when I understood their idea, I paraphrased it and offered it up for an informal vote. It proved difficult for the whole class to follow each proposed scenario.

We were not achieving a consensus. I realized that this was a lesson that must be taught and I was not fully prepared to teach it. So I decided to end the class with at least an agreement of what part of the script worked, and what part was not working.

I asked three of the most interested students to stay late, thinking it might be easier to work with a smaller group. It was indeed easier, but we still had to:

1. Speak in turn.
2. Listen carefully.
3. Think about how the proposed story element would affect all the characters and the plot.
4. Evaluate whether this was what we liked.
5. Write it down so we could read it back to test the full concept.

It finally worked. We developed a working story line. As an instructor, my job was to be able to filter ideas and rephrase them to the group so they could

understand the plot ramifications of each new idea. I also had to make the final judgment as to whether an idea would connect up with the rest of the plot. This was a very intellectual undertaking—almost like thinking through an algebra problem—maybe harder.

Another positive element that day was the delight I felt in hearing these kids speaking in visual terms, it was beautiful to hear partially and totally blind students visualizing the story.

One of the boys said: “Then one of the girls drops the key and no one sees—but the camera notices it and Tom moving it toward him with his foot.” I saw these kids closing their weak eyes and just letting the mind take over. Their mental vision was 20-20.

The Story

The movie opens with several girls arguing over mirror space and deciding they need an additional dorm room. They decide to capture the boys one by one, lock them away and take their room. Before he is captured, one boy notifies some detectives that strange things are going on.

The boys get the key to the closet and escape, putting skeletons in their place. The girls come the next day to bring food to the boys in the closet but the door is locked and they realize they have lost the key. They leave.

The detectives get wind that the closet might be a place to check and discover skeletons! Then they go to inform the students who are rehearsing a music video. “We have found the boys and they are dead!” The girls shriek.

Later that night the girls are enjoying their new room, but feeling guilty reading a story in the paper that three boys have been kidnapped. The lights go out, and the boys appear from the darkness and scare them.

Week 5: On a Roll

The kids fine tuned and completed the final script in class during the week, and almost any idea fit because the main thread held.

At the final reading everyone burst into spontaneous applause. Everyone knew which character they would play, and what they do in the movie. We discussed props, and planned to shoot the following week. I allowed two hours, and planned to direct. I needed to make sure we had sensible cuts and transitions, and that the story—far fetched as it may be—was clearly told. If we did this again, we might encourage partially sighted kids to assume some directing roles requiring vision, and the totally blind kids to get involved with directing performance content and emotion.

We all felt we were venturing into uncharted territory and everyone was quite pleased with the challenge.

Week 6-7: The Shoot

I arrived at 1:00 PM and we planned to shoot the 11 page (30 point type) script in 2-3 hours. We were dreaming of course. We started setting up the shots, with minimal lights. We were having fun, the kids were improvising in the scenes. We used the microphone on camera—the sound would not be perfect, but given the time constraints—we chose to shoot for fun, and leave a few production values on hold.

We were all loving it. I had a concept of how to shoot, and the kids were movie stars. There was Debbie the “Starlet,” The two blind students who were playing sighted detectives. They couldn’t walk without canes, so we shot with them already placed—they enjoyed pretending they were reading in one scene. We let them do some improvisation as to what they would say. Juan seemed to have a good idea of his character as a detective. And David his partner listened to him adding a few lines here and there. With improvisation, we shot several takes, and had no trouble getting footage that could be pieced together nicely in edit.

At the end of three hours, we were worn out, I said let’s keep shooting, thinking how nice it would be to complete. But after a moment of thought, I realized: This project is not about finishing the shoot, it’s about the process, the fun of partially sighted kids being part of a visual world. It’s about imagination, it’s about discovery, it’s about looking at challenges and having fun solving them, it’s about an adventure. It’s not about learning to finish on time. So we said “Let’s call it a day. We had a blast, let’s finish next week.”

During the shoot, I was a bit loose with the kids, and they seemed a little rowdy, joking around with ideas. Well, yes, the atmosphere was a little bubbly, but I did not want to sacrifice the creativity for control. And I knew when the command was “Quiet on the set” that there was total cooperation. They were not rebelling against anything, they were just happy and I, as a filmmaker, was listening to their jokes, seeing if anything was good enough to use.

Several students played music and sang. I recorded them and used their music throughout the ten minute film. We did use commercially released music for one scene in which the characters were engaged in production of a music video.

After the Shoot

After the wrap, I edited the film in about 10 hours, showed a rough cut to the class. Then we interviewed everyone to get their reaction. They loved it. We ask them to each take a turn with an on-camera introduction which would be used as a video intro to the film. We videotaped a lot of enthusiasm and pride.

However one fellow was joking, trying, in my estimation to sabotage the process. The project was a success, but I went home angry at this disruption. I thought about it and realized the unexpressed sadness he must have—partially sighted and going totally blind—a sharp kid, with great aspirations, of being a video game programmer. I concluded that a class is like a family. You have to take each for who they are, regardless.

We decided to do a premiere showing at the school, I added complete audio narration to the video: "Our Little Secret" so the totally blind will follow. We also added outtakes into the credits for some great laughs.

The Premiere

About six weeks after completion of the project, several classes were invited to attend the premiere showing. A projector and good sound system made the showing an entertaining event. Many of the partially blind students could make out something by sitting up close to the 70" screen. The totally blind kids were very much a part of the fun. Some had starred in and developed the story, and they had no problem loving the moment. Since the film had complete audio narration, anyone could follow the story.

Cake and sodas were served. Each participating student was given a copy of the video. It was a fantastic experience for all involved.

Conclusion and Thanks

My thanks and respect go to June Waugh, David Renslow and the staff at CSB for the incredible work they do and the value they bring to visually impaired students. And my respect goes to the students for their courage, perseverance, and success.

This project lives on as one of the most exciting, fun projects of my career.