

STAFF SOUND BYTE

SUE ARBUTHNOT

School of Film faculty member Sue Arbuthnot talks about making regional documentaries, working with Northwest Native tribes and busting stereotypes.

You have a B.F.A. in sculpture from the PNCA. What prompted you to do film?

The Northwest Film Center was a sister institution with PNCA so I would go there to see films. I discovered there were certain things film had the potential to do that the plastic arts weren't achieving for me. I liked the idea of story and movement very much. At the same time, filmmaking is a very physical process, especially film editing. It was like sculpture to me, and still is.

How has being an Oregon filmmaker influenced your work?

After going to graduate school at Columbia, I realized that I wanted to tell stories closer to me. I think our memories, including where we are from, accumulate over the years, and strengthen our voice creatively. There's a lot of fantasy to that, looking for the truth in something, whether it's fiction or non-fiction film.

What do you find unique about the Oregon independent film community?

It's not a given here that people will gravitate towards a commercial/industry type of film career. We tend to be really resourceful and draw on people's expertise in the community. Filmmakers and artists from other places ask, "What is it about Portland?" People from L.A. say, "Oh, that's cute that you're from Oregon." But you wouldn't say that to Ken Kesey, would you?

How do you know when you've found a good story to tell?

It goes back to ideas or values that are important to you. I like the idea of busting stereotypes open, especially when it comes to low-income people or racial diversity. Filmmakers bring their own perspective to a story. As I get older, my perspective is changing, and so are the stories I can tell.

Do you see documentary film changing with new technologies?

The doors are open so much wider now because of digital technology. It has changed how we learn, and made storytelling through film more accessible for people with different economic resources, cultural backgrounds and languages.

Your company, Hare in the Gate Productions, produces both personal and commissioned documentaries. Is there a difference in how you approach one or the other?

Mostly there are similarities. The commissioned work and the personal work that I do are both story based and character based. When a client needs to get across some information, they often think of charts and graphs. My response is to try and communicate information by using the film medium's strength, which is to communicate through story or people.

You've worked extensively with Native American tribes and communities throughout the Northwest. How do you see your role in advancing these communities?

Strong native communities are a big part of our regional identity and there is great interest in hearing their stories, especially around natural and cultural resources and their protection. Obviously, it's better for people to tell their own stories, but those stories can be strengthened through collaboration. I've had the opportunity to teach native people to learn filmmaking—one way you can empower people to help them to tell their own stories. That's a big part of why I'm here—it's just something that's important to me.

You're an instructor at the Northwest Film Center, teaching documentary and videography, among other things. As a teacher, what are the most important things that you try to impart?

Beginning students can be easily intimidated by technology. I tell them to not get bogged down in the tool part of it. Learn your storytelling craft. Take a moment and look again at the idea you are developing, and then ask for help if you need to. Be confident that an idea is worth pursuing. Work at finding the best way to tell your story.

Tell us about your new documentary "Imagining Home."

It's a feature documentary about the redevelopment of New Columbia. It was originally a shipyard worker community, but became so blighted over the years that the Housing Authority of Portland decided to tear it down and rebuild it in 2003. We wanted to find out what happens to people when they're forced to leave their homes, and what happens when they come back to a "new" community. We talk a lot today about creating sustainable places to live as a way to try to deal with the root causes of poverty and prejudice, but we've not really done much about it in practice.

Another new project also has to do with community preservation. It's very different. It deals with a small wheat-farming town in eastern Washington, with a population of about 400. Nationally, less than 2% of the population is still involved in farming, most of them with big corporate farms, as we learned in "King Corn." This farm community has tried to find a way to bolster its survival by having an annual combine demolition derby. It's been really successful for 20 years. We've filmed six of them, getting to know intergenerational families and how they're trying to keep their values and lifestyle going. It's kind of funny and kooky and yet very real. It's been amazing.

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