

Interview with Maria Finitzo

Maria Finitzo's documentary *Five Girls*, which has been the buzz of social documentary circles for months and will debut on public TV nationally through the hallmark documentary series P.O.V. in the fall, isn't your usual portrayal of teens at risk. Rather, it's the story of five Chicago-area girls, who are different from each other in every way but one: they all confront the challenges of their young lives with impressive skill, and they are succeeding. Corrie must cope with her Christian dad's deep disapproval of her bisexuality, and the rejection of her classmates. Amber makes the honor roll, but her family in turmoil leaves her homeless mid year, and she turns to a local felon on house arrest for affection. Haibinh struggles for perfection in studies and at home; she longs to go home to Vietnam, but can't. Aisha's divorced dad sternly lectures her about boys and clothes, but attends every one of her basketball games. Toby's doctor parents never stop demanding the best, but that's nothing compared to the demands Toby puts on herself. These are some of the hidden story of American girls, and their stories tell us much about how adolescent girls survive and thrive.

Finitzo is a veteran documentarian, who had worked for Bill Kurtis on his New Explorer series, and produced work for the Today show, the Learning Channel, for Audubon and the educational market before making *Five Girls*.

She spoke with Center Director Pat Aufderheide about how she honed the concept of *Five Girls*, how she sold the idea to public TV, how production house Kartemquin Films helped to shape the film, and how it is reaching grassroots audiences.

Why did you decide to make a film on this subject?

I suppose the simplest answer is—I had a baby. When my daughter started to get older, at 4 or 5, and we went to look for movies, she would say, Where are the movies about girls? And I couldn't find what I wanted. So initially I thought I would do a series called *Getting Real*, a weekly documentary series about girls. I tried desperately to get it funded. I couldn't—I think it was a little ahead of its time. It ended up in the hand of Mary Seifford at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. We talked, and she finally said, I've had this proposal in my briefcase for six months and I can't get it funded, but would you be interested in doing a documentary about girls? I had also been turned on by Carol Gilligan and Lyn Brown's book *Meeting at the Crossroads*, about adolescent girls. I worked on a proposal for four or five months for CPB. We got enough money to get us going, and into a lot of trouble.

How did the idea for the film evolve?

Originally we had the focus on why girls lose their self-esteem in adolescence. We turned it to a more positive approach, following recent research into the psychology of girls in adolescence. The American Psychological Association had convened a task force on adolescent girls, to look at the strength and resilience of adolescent girls. And that was the inspiration. Yes, they have trouble, but many of them come out ok. Where do all those strong women come from, after all? And then the question was could we find five girls who would fit our hypothesis.

Did the premise pan out?

Oh, yes. When I was at the Taos Talking Pictures festival, people commented on how I was lucky to have picked extraordinary girls. And what I think now is that all girls are extraordinary,

and all I had done was to give them an opportunity to show how they are. If you give them an opportunity, and a place to feel safe, and an active listener, they can tell you; it works extraordinarily well.

How did you find those five girls?

I went from small private to large public schools, from inner city to the suburbs. If I had a contact at a school, I would ask someone to pre-select about 50 girls. I wasn't looking for the smartest or most troubled kids. I would have a meeting with the girls and their parents and give them a questionnaire. And if they filled it out I promised to interview them again. I picked schools that would give me different kinds of girls. I ended up interviewing about 55 or 60 girls. Then I had missing pieces. Haibinh was missing. I called up the Vietnamese Association, and asked them for suggestions. They recommended girls who were all members of a dance troupe.

Did everyone you started with end up in the film?

All of the people we chose worked out. There originally was a sixth girl, though, a Latina at a Catholic school. When the school found out that [production house] Kartemquin films was involved, they refused to cooperate. They felt Hoop Dreams had been unfair to St. Joseph's High School, even though it hadn't been, and they didn't want to be involved. All the other schools were very cooperative and very willing to help out.

Did you have trouble getting people used to the camera?

Actually, I didn't anticipate how quickly the girls and their families were able to forget we were there. Usually we put wireless mikes on both people, and sometimes a wireless and a boom. We didn't interfere, I didn't tell people where to go. For instance when Amber is sitting on the front porch, I would say, well, talk about boys. And off they'd go; I would be irrelevant. People needed a focus and then they'd take off. One of the first things we filmed was the scene with Amber and her mother at her homecoming. They had quite a scene, and it was as if I wasn't even there.

Amber's mother is a kind of mystery in the film.

Right after we started filming, Amber's mother started going through very difficult times, and she still is. Rather than throw her life and its trouble up on screen, I chose to give her some privacy. She falls out of Amber's life. We just left it ambiguous.

It posed real problems in terms of whether we were going to stay with her story. First, we had some questions about whether she needed us in her life at that point. And also, to what end—would we just be fostering stereotypes? And finally, Amber has vulnerabilities—I didn't want to exploit her.

I didn't know what to do. Then Gordon Quinn reminded us that in when a player got injured, he was shocked that the filmmakers didn't abandon him. So we didn't walk away. And we found that our presence was important, more and more so, until we were almost like surrogate parents. We always stayed in touch. She travels a tremendous arc, and we couldn't capture all of it but we wanted the main gist. Her mentor also is a wonderful person; she was instrumental in Amber getting to college, and gave her what Amber needed. Amber finished her freshman year with good grades, is working in the mailroom of a law firm, and is looking forward to going back to school.

Amber's story was the easiest to lay out—it had so many events and the ending was great. But I fell in love with each story at different times. The nice thing was that each story brought a different element. Corrie's story was very powerful. We've all been at odds with our parents at times.

Were any of the stories difficult for you to follow?

Toby had a story that it took me a long time to get my arms around. For a long time I thought it was about leaving home in Portland and trying to make her home in Chicago. But when we began cutting, it became about a kid who has a lot of privilege but a lot of pressure. It's about trying to find out who you are, when everyone around you is telling you who you should be. Her story really resonates with people because there are many powerful issues—living up to expectations, being who you are and struggling constantly to excel, living with constant pressure.

How did you edit all the material?

We shot on Betacam—95 percent of it was handheld—and we edited on an Avid. We inputted most of the footage into an Avid. We had 150 hours of video. We cut the film in bricks. Each girl had a brick. Then we cut 5 different 25-minute films. The biggest challenge was then interweaving them and making one strong film. That took the longest. What are the points of connection, how will you remember who they are, how do you leave a character without resentment. Some great scenes fell out because they didn't fit into the tapestry. With other scenes, what followed strengthened the part before. If I were to do it again, though, I wouldn't pick more than three people.

What was the role of Kartemquin in the production process?

Working with Kartemquin is the best thing that has ever happened to me—this is a great place for documentary film. They were in this from the beginning. Their stature was instrumental in my getting initial funding. Filmmakers like Gordon Quinn and Jerry Blumenthal, who've been making films for 35 years, are a tremendous resource. Yet no one ever told me I had to do anything. This is also a place where really talented people gravitate. When it came time for an editor, they knew David Simpson, who had worked with them on several projects. And he came in as editor and co-producer. Throughout the editing process, Gordon Quinn would come in and provide a really good critique and guide; he was very generous with his knowledge. And when we ran out of money, he didn't kick me out; we deferred costs. We've recouped some of the costs, but not all of it, by a long shot. So Kartemquin makes it possible for something like this to happen. I made a better film with them than I ever would have made without them.

Did you learn any secrets of funding?

Yes, I've learned that when I've had success, it's because I hooked up with a person who became engaged in the project. People need to care about it. Cold proposals—if there's not an angel attached to them, they just get turned down. Contacts are very important. I stumbled upon it with Mary Seifford. Without her championing, I wouldn't have gotten far. At PBS, Sandy Heberer really went to bat for us. You have to have that.

How are you reaching audiences with the film?

It's a wonderful tool to make things happen. The Chicago premiere will be at the Steppenwolf

Theater on August 13, and it will be a fundraiser for the Young Women's Leadership Charter School, which opened last fall. It caters to inner city girls who are getting lost in the public school system.

It'll be on P.O.V. on October 2. P.O.V. has created teachers' guides and is working with the American Library Association to prepare a library guide. WGBH is doing a local resource guide, the American Psychological Association is creating a parent's guide. And we'll have an 800 number to call for questions. The film will have a website thanks to POV, oriented to parents.

We're also working with the Television Race Initiative in San Francisco to create a civic engagement campaign. They've created a use for the film as a coalition-building film. The Girls' Coalition of Greater Boston—it's a clearinghouse that brings together all the organizations in Boston involved in research or programming around girls—will use clips from it for an organizing event on September 26. We're working in San Francisco, Atlanta, Boston, and Chicago, to create different events around the broadcast. People are working to build local girl coalitions, and perhaps the Boston coalition will launch a national organization.

P.O.V. has a license for three years. Oxygen Media loved the film, and they've talked to P.O.V. about some kind of cross-promotion, but they're still talking. I'm looking for more festivals now. We have a couple of offers for a national distributor, and we need to think about international distributors.

What's your next project?

Kartemquin has a film we've been interested in for some years, on de-alerting—taking nuclear weapons off alert so they won't be so easy to launch. So I want to work on that as my time gets freed up.

And how old is your daughter now?

My daughter is now 11, and I'm on my way to facing her adolescence. At least now I know what I'm in for.