

College Days, College Nights

UBC students were in front of and behind the cameras for this view into student life

By Brenda Austin

The title of this documentary alone should draw you in.

Over the course of the 2003-04 academic year, eight UBC film department students followed the joys and disappointments of 16 UBC undergraduates.

The entire 6-hour film aired in three parts March 1, 2 and 3, on the Documentary Channel. Now, CBC plans a shortened version to air in the fall.

The documentary revealed emotional discord between student and immigrant parents; the party scene; the stress of exams; romance; relationships with faculty; student achievements, and the struggle and defeat of those far from home.

The lynch pin of the whole project was John Zaritsky, a well-known journalist and film producer whose documentaries have aired on PBS, CBC and BBC. He became film production adjunct professor in the UBC Department of Theatre, Film and Creative Writing for this project.

Zaritsky broached the idea for this documentary at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival with Corus Entertainment, editors for the Documentary Channel, carried in Vancouver on Shaw's digital cable service. He wanted to know what it was like to be a college student in the new millennium.

His company, Point Grey Pictures, did the preliminary cast interviews for College Days, College Nights of about 70 volunteers from the UBC undergraduate student body who responded to campus advertisements.

"About half were eliminated in the first interview. The other half went on camera with a professional crew so we could gauge their reactions. We wanted a balance of gender, cultural background, university year and study course."

The crew members were fourth-year film production students and they interned with Point Grey Pictures for six UBC credits.

"They were fairly green to begin with, but knowledgeable in camera technology, easy to train and quick to learn, and were shooting up to professional standards at the end of the semester," Zaritsky said.

Mike Rae, one of Zaritsky's interns, lived in a house rented by Point Grey Pictures for four of the volunteer cast. This meant he could be part of their lives for parties, exams, family issues and so on.

"The experience changed my life," said Rae as he followed Leila, a first-year nursing student, Spencer, a political science student, who ran for Alma Mater Society Vice-President, and Jamie, a fluently bilingual French and English international relations student.

Another cast member, Melody Chan, was assigned to the fourth member of the house. She followed the roller coaster life of Sheila, the captain of the UBC women's basketball team, attending championship games with her and learning how to get a genuine story by working hard at keeping a good relationship.

"Crew members were expected to observe closely the lives of their subjects, stay involved and bring ideas to weekly film department sessions," Chan said. The knowledge, expertise and connections she made led to subsequent contract work on 10 feature films.

Zaritsky's not surprised. "Melody, yes, she was a great shooter," he said. "And Mike is now my teaching assistant in a new course this year with a documentary called Couples."

"I have respect for all these students. They're more serious and hard working and more competent than I was as a student, although they are less politically committed and motivated than my generation."

Cast members each kept a video diary they could use at any time. This was often the truest record of their emotions. Zaritsky remembered a vignette of compelling honesty that touched on the universal experience of rejection. A student recorded his thoughts and feelings at 3 o'clock in the morning on the loss of his girl friend.

There were other tense incidents in the film and in the lives of the cast. But, overall, most felt they were doing the right thing at the right time at university, according to Alyson Drysdale, a film department faculty member responsible for organizing the internship documentary production course, which she co-taught with Zaritsky.

"And for the student crew," she added, "this was a unique experience. Until now it was unheard of for students to leave university with six hours of on-screen professional credits to their name. This was a big accomplishment."