

Starweek Magazine
By Jim Bawden

DAYS OF STUDENT LIVES

“This is certainly my most ambitious film project...ever.” Oscar winner John Zaritsky’s voice begins to fade – he’s phoning from his cell, he explains, right on the campus of University of British Columbia. “Yeah, it’s the scene of **College Nights, College Days**, just huge with 42,000 students. In my three-part six-hour series you’re really going to get to know 16 of them.”

After decades of roaming the globe for his award-winning documentaries Zaritsky acknowledges he may be closer to settling down than ever before. Three of his films (*Promises, Born in Africa and Welcome to Sarajevo*) were nominated for Emmys, *Just Another Missing Kid* copped an Oscar in 1982, and, more recently, *Romeo and Juliet in Sarajevo* by Columbia University’s School of Journalism in 1994.

“Oh, no, this is bigger,” Zaritsky protests. For 10 months he had up to 25 cameras whirring away to capture virtually every important moment of the 16 students profiled. As adjunct professor of film at UBC, he posted notices asking for voluntary subjects.

“We got 75 applicants and through interviews winnowed this down to 16. We were looking for a cross-section of first year students (some from other years sneaked in). We did film tests to see how they’d react and chose very carefully – for variety.”

Eight film students were required to keep in touch with the subjects every week and write memos to Zaritsky about events they thought might merit filming. All subjects got their own cameras plus Zaritsky’s crew stepped in to record significant moments.

Zaritsky says the idea came to him when he thought how different campus life was these days compared to his own university experiences (he graduated in 1966). “Tensions are much higher. In my day at University of Toronto we had many job opportunities. But today the market is tight. There’s a real struggle to get in and being a student is pressure packed from the first day of classes. I found students have less time to party.”

In the first two hour segment, titled “It Almost Feels Okay,” Zaritsky had enough production money to rent a local house from a church group and install a bunch of first-year students to see what might transpire. We see the cumbersome process of registration, the shock of being in a college system where nobody cares how you’re doing and those first awful marks.

Zaritsky’s ability to shape and define his material makes CD CN irresistible viewing. Watch it and you’ll realize reality programming is so much more than the sleazy fodder made south of the border. And already Zaritsky is at work on a sort-of sequel, another voluminous study but this one of married couples in crisis.

8 p.m. for the next three nights on the Documentary Channel.