

# Triumph, sadness: The lives of our students make riveting viewing

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Vancouver Sun

*March 5, 2005*

This past week, I took an immersion course in modern university life. Some of you may have done the same, by tuning in to the Documentary Channel on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights for the premiere of a remarkable six-hour series titled *College Days, College Nights*.

From the promo I'd read ("a search for knowledge, love, sex, and a path to the future"), I was expecting a reality-TV version of Tom Wolfe's latest doorstopper, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, replete with sexual depravity and moral corruption and precious little learning on the side.

Silly me. We're talking real life here, not bestselling fiction, and this serialized slice of it, shot over the course of the 2003-04 school year at the University of B.C., put the lie to Wolfe's shock-mongering version. In fact, it made me feel proud to be a parent of the generation now working its way through college -- working being the operative word, as in sweating and stressing and literally beating a path to the future through the competitive thicket created by my egomaniacal generation.

Proud, and sad. Which is how Zaritsky also felt through much of the filming, having had an entirely different college experience himself in the '60s at the University of Toronto. About five years before I got there.

"It was so easy for us, by comparison," Zaritsky told me in an interview this week. The Academy Award winner (for his 1982 film, *Just Another Missing Kid*) moved here from Toronto six years ago and now teaches at the UBC film school. "In the '60s, a BA was still so valuable -- it really was a ticket to a job, a place in the marketplace."

He breezed through college, busying himself less with studying than with partying and rabble-rousing, including politically for causes such as civil rights -- remember those? College students today, he observes, "work far harder at school and are under far more career pressure and as a result have far less time than we had to explore other worlds, to take chances."

They're also much more likely to come from broken homes, bearing scars that get in the way of full-on Wolfean depravity. Straight-ahead kids seeking healthy long-term relationships. As if they won't have plenty of time for that later. Sad, indeed.

Zaritsky doubts they will one day look back fondly and pronounce these the best years of their lives. "Maybe the best years of this generation's lives will be in their 30s and 40s, once they feel they've earned the right to relax and enjoy life."

Making *College Days, College Nights* put him on intimate terms with dozens of students over 10 months of production. Eight of them were from his own film class, employed as interns working alongside a professional crew to capture the day-to-day routine of 16 UBC undergrads who volunteered to be documentary subjects. The 16 subjects were also given cameras to diarize their more personal moments and reflections, adding a potent confessional tone to the mix. Campus confidential, indeed.

Among others, we follow an ironman frat-boy, a women's basketball star, a blind student, a devout Christian on scholarship from Singapore, an irrepressible debater, an intensely

driven commerce student, a couple of lovebird science nerds and a lazy, foul-mouthed party animal. Fortunately, s--- happens to all of them.

"The worst fear for guys like me is you could hold a reality series and nothing happens," says Zaritsky with a laugh. His mood darkens as he describes the ways in which his kids (as he describes the students, having no children of his own) are severely tested over the course of a couple of college terms. And we're not talking about exams -- that's the easy part.

The blind student's beloved guide dog dies -- the final injustice, having gotten through four years of college without having made any friends. The basketball star is sidelined by an injury (but recovers in time to lead her team to national victory). The science nerds break up. The commerce student loses her bid for student council. The kid from Singapore stages a long-delayed adolescent rebellion against his pastor father and finds freedom snowboarding.

Zaritsky developed a soft spot for the Singaporean kid, Gideon Teo. "We all did," he tells me. "Such a sweet human being. And he just grew and grew before our eyes. He's a great example of the tremendous changes that occur during those years. The media quite properly focuses on adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18, sends reporters into high schools, covers problems like drugs and bullying there, but I think we've overlooked our university students who are, after all, the future leaders of the country. I think they deserve more attention."

He also thinks some of them deserve more support from their parents, and a few of his subjects make a strong case for this. One student is clearly overburdened by the needs of her newly separated parents; another (the ironman frat-boy) can only please his traditional Korean parents if he becomes a doctor -- a career path for which he is eminently unsuited. And then there's Tejas, a too-serious young man still traumatized by a childhood divided between divorced parents on two continents. His story touched Zaritsky, and me, most deeply of all.

For the first time in his life, and without even realizing what was happening to him, Tejas fell into a serious depression in his fourth year at UBC. On camera. For those of us familiar with the symptoms -- the lack of affect, social withdrawal, fatigue -- it's painful to watch, and it must have been torture for him to have us watch.

"He was such a neat kid when we interviewed him in the spring," says Zaritsky, "then all fall he was flatlining. Some of my crew were getting really concerned, saying you've got to dump this kid -- he'll just bore an audience to death. I said, let's just hang with him and see. What happens in reality happens, it's how these projects work."

What happened was Tejas dug his way out of the hole and, with a little help from his father and the Dalai Lama, faced down his demons. The camera proved to be therapeutic for him, as it did for others. "They told me they underwent a process of self-examination where they learned more about themselves in the last year than in any previous year," Zaritsky says. "They were far more aware of who they were and where they were going."

He expects the same benefits to accrue to the otherwise unpaid subjects of his next documentary, a reality series on couples which he's casting in the next few months. Contact him at [johnzaritsky@yahoo.com](mailto:johnzaritsky@yahoo.com) if you think you and your marriage can withstand the scrutiny.

A six-hour Documentary Channel encore presentation of College Days, College Nights airs March 27, and the series will be repeated on CBC Newsworld next fall.

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