

HENRY'S INDEPENDENT SPIRIT AWARD STATEMENT

I grew up in a middle-class suburb of Richmond, Virginia, during the 1960's and '70s, during one of the most turbulent periods in American history. I was too young to perceive the radical changes going on right outside my family's door, as the civil rights movement came to the South. Our paved suburb was literally built around poor black rural neighborhoods with dirt roads, a metaphorical geography that I only dimly perceived. I remember the "coloreds only" drinking fountains, and I recall that my Vermont Yankee mom (A Doris Day look-a-like) organized a Saturday morning racially "mixed" doubles match at the segregated Byrd Park tennis courts. Traffic backed up as gawkers took in the scene, though the significance of the event would not dawn on me until years later.

Puzzling images of Vietnam and assassinations reached me via TV. From the backseat of our car, I glimpsed demonstrations and near riots. But if none of this global turmoil pierced my veil of childhood security, I couldn't escape the fallout of my parents' ugly divorce. For my activist mother, who fought so loudly against discrimination, it was a cruel irony to find her self banished from her country club and social network. She encouraged her three sons (she had no daughters) to become artists because, as she put it, "artists can move freely among people." Those words propelled me to New York City.

Three decades later, after an art school education and a long apprenticeship with the Maysles Brothers, I am an established nonfiction filmmaker with my own production company and dozens of notable films to my name. Although New York is still my home, I find that the images of childhood, so puzzling at the time, now inform much of my work. With *The Disappearance of McKinley Nolan*, I met the Nolan family in the "black belt" of Texas and everything that had been so peripheral to me as a kid now helped me recognize a classic story of America in the late 20th Century.

The work that preceded the McKinley Nolan film has been difficult to classify. Although my films have shown around the world and received much critical praise, reviewers and festival programmers have often found them difficult to place in the context of established genres. If they share a common theme, it is in my intention to explore the possibilities of documentary as a subjective and personal art form. Rather than consider myself a dispassionate observer, I have looked for ways to foreground the connection between my subjects and myself and create a relationship that grows more complex and nuanced as the film unfolds. In exchange for letting me into their lives, I demonstrate that my presence affects their stories. I am not above the fray. We—the filmmaker, the subjects, and by extension, the audience—are in it together.

Umbrellas was my directing debut, a trial by fire where I stepped out of the Maysles' shadow and fought for the film I needed to make. It is a film that shows the deep passions of the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude on a world stage and the inherently dramatic and at times painful consequences of their work. With *George*, made with and about my autistic son, I tried to find a unique cinematic language that dramatized our relationship. Adding another narrative level, I also showed how HBO executives, after viewing rushes of the film, confronted their own preconceived notion of that relationship and of autism in general. For *Jack*, I took a 3000-mile road trip with an alcoholic. When I made the film, I had recently made the decision to become sober, but my goal was not to condemn an addict's self-destructive behavior, but rather to paint a sober (in both senses) picture of Jack that was both loving and vicarious.

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