From Boston to Burma: Documentaries go the distance

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Photo Courtesy/Jovian Lee

More than 8,000 miles from home in a country whose language they didn't understand, Greg Mills and Dan Christopher found themselves somewhere they'd never imagined going: the entrance to a brothel.

"Do you want a Thai lady?" asked the man at the door.

Usually at brothels in Thailand, men choose from "menus" featuring photographs of prostitutes. However, at this parlor, girls stood in a line for customers to hand-pick.

Christopher, a senior political science and psychology major at Rutgers, chose a girl and brought her to a small room in the back. But once they sat down, their business was not sexual.

"We made it known that we did not want to sleep with her, we just wanted to talk to her," said Mills, a junior cinema studies major.

Mills was in Thailand as part of Global PACT, a program that sends students abroad to work on problems in troubled communities by creating projects that address specific issues.

"When traffickers come to rural communities and just pay money, they'll offer $2,000 for a child," Mills said. "These people basically just assume that their children are going to go work in a sweatshop or something, but nothing like being a sex slave. They don't even think that's a possibility."

With that in mind, Mills and Christopher's group, Ta To - which means "wide eyes" in Thai - focused on Thailand's human trafficking crisis, which includes child labor and prostitution, and agreed on their weapon of choice: documentary film.

At the brothel, with only a small video recorder and a series of questions scribbled phonetically in Thai, Mills and Christopher questioned the girl after she agreed to answer questions for a fee of 500 baht - about $15 in the United States.

"Dan started interviewing her while I was over by the door holding it closed," Mills said. "We brought back-up [support] that came in later in case things went down. If they saw us with a camera they would probably hurt us pretty bad."

Upon returning to the United States, the pair sculpted 13 hours of film into a 20-minute documentary called "Wide Eyes" that recently premiered at Rutgers and Northeastern. They said they hope to expand the movie and return to Thailand to make a full-length film in the future.

A powerful tool

Mills and Christopher are not alone in their use of documentary filmmaking. More Northeastern students are using documentaries in attempts to convey a powerful message.

"Nowadays, you need more than a book or more than a photo," said Jovian Lee, a senior cinema studies and communication studies major who filmed documentary footage in South Africa. "I think you need the closest thing to living it without actually doing it, and that's film or television."
Gerald Herman, a professor of history and education who teaches History in Media, a course where students film a documentary, said he agreed.

"The power of documentaries," he said, "is that they allow you to look at aspects of the real world with a focus and attention, and to give you a sense that you’re in that real world, whereas the power of a dramatic film, you always know that you’re one step away from that, and it’s been filtered through screenwriters and actors who act the parts."

He said advancements in technology have spurred an increase in the number of documentaries made, including those by students.

"When I started we were still cutting film with scissors," he said. "Now all you have to do is go to YouTube."

For his documentary, Lee went to Grahamstown on a different Global PACT trip, but filmed out of his own motivation. He focused on the Eluxolweni Shelter, where needy and abandoned children can find shelter, clothes and support.

"It was just a really amazing, amazing program. To see the massive class differences - you have this beautifully rich town that’s got Rhodes University, and then surrounding it you’ve just got miles and miles of shacks and dirtiness and poverty and it was really sad to see," he said. "And then just to see a shelter like Eluxolweni, which allows kids to come in and start up a life."

He is still editing footage but hopes to make a 20-minute film to show people the problems in South Africa and the ways shelters like Eluxolweni are alleviating them.

"Even right now, talking about it, it can’t do it justice at all," he said. "It just works out better because you get to ... see these kids that if I just told you about them, you’d just be like 'oh that’s really sad,' but seeing them in film, you see them as real people who are really in need."

Mills, Christopher and Lee all used native people to film much of the footage. Lee had South African children interview each other, while Mills and Christopher used the help of three Thai women, also members of their Ta To group, who took the camera into different towns to conduct interviews. The results were more real, honest answers than they might have been had the students conducted interviews themselves, and footage that all three say is emotionally moving.

"People can read about different things, and be like 'that’s terrible,' which is exactly like in Thailand," Mills said. "If you see something visually and it gets ingrained in your memory that has a bigger effect. It sticks with you."

Hitting close to home

While middler journalism major Kristin Bush said documentaries on problems in other parts of the world are important, she also said there’s a need for documentaries that focus on more local or all-encompassing issues.

"I definitely don’t think you need to travel across the world [to shoot a meaningful documentary]," she said. "There are things happening in our backyard and stories that need to be told."

For her co-op last spring, Bush worked as an intern for CNN on Anderson Cooper 360, and worked with Cooper on a piece called "Planet in Peril." The four-hour documentary aired in October, but took almost a year to film. Cooper traveled across the country and the world, examining chemical dangers in the environment.
That included testing Cooper's blood and a young family's blood for potentially harmful chemicals like those found in plastics and home products.

"When we got the results back, the levels were surprising, both to us and the family that had their kids tested," Bush said. "It's obvious that we are exposed to these chemicals. I definitely didn't expect the levels to be this high."

Senior journalism major Jenel Ronn and middler journalism and Spanish major Stefanie Bair, both members of NUTV, also covered a "backyard" topic in the station's first-ever documentary: Northeastern's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). While their piece, "Student Soldiers," was more informative than investigative, they said it served a similar purpose to "Planet in Peril."

"Our hope was just that people would watch this and get a better sense of what it's like to be in ROTC. We weren't trying to change anybody's opinions, we just wanted people to understand what it was," Ronn said. "You just want to project what that life is in the most accurate and fair way that you can."

Ronn and Bair spent two nights in Devens with the ROTC, experiencing the training.

"We didn't just go around Northeastern and talk to cadets," Ronn said. "We went to their training and spent a weekend in the woods in the middle of nowhere with no running water, we woke up at 4:30 in the morning with everybody. We went through the training with them."

Some documentaries can be purely educational. During their spring co-op at Boston Neighborhood Network (BNN), Samantha Lavine, a junior journalism and cinema studies major, and Andrew Cabasso, a junior entrepreneurship major, spent more than 40 hours on a five-minute documentary about Boston's bridges to be shown in between BNN programs.

Cabasso put his bones on the line for the job, using a skateboard to get a tracking shot of a series of bridges.

"I wouldn't suggest holding a piece of equipment worth several thousands of dollars while you're rolling on this four-wheel death trap," he said.

Still, he and Lavine said documentaries can be a perpetual tool.

"Documentaries are a quick fix, an easy source of information that you usually wouldn't get," Cabasso said. "They just feed you this information that's very easy and very interactive. I'm not trying to knock books or anything like that, but who reads as opposed to watching TV's these days?"