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Chris Schueler

The filmmaker calls for action with his rousing documentaries calling for social change.

Documentary filmmaker Chris Schueler is more than just a storyteller. The former actor, stuntman, and high school teacher has become an advocate for social change.

As president of Christopher Productions, Schueler has created more than 100 television programs that have aired locally, nationally, and around the globe. Along the way, he's racked up 45 nominations and 19 Emmy® Awards, among other honors. The posters, plaques, and certificates on his walls are reminders of the lives he's touched, but they also speak to the director's passion for identifying problems and leave no doubt about the positive impact he's had on many young lives.

For the past 20 years, Schueler has focused his camera lens on serious topics such as teenage drinking, texting and car crash dangers, dating violence, HIV/AIDS, youth suicide and even climate change. His most recent documentary is *No Exceptions*, which chronicles pain pill addiction.

ATM: Once a topic catches your attention, what does it take to get a project started?

Schueler: We research for a long time. Sometimes it's a year or more before we ever take the camera out of the box. We pull together a number of people and get them involved in every aspect of a project. With the latest documentary, we talked to addicts, parents, psychologists, doctors, and pharmacists. Really, we put together a group of all the people who had an interest in making a change.

ATM: What did they teach you about addiction?

Schueler: That anyone can be impacted—even the girl next door. For instance, Erika, one of the amazing young women in the film, was into high school sports when she got hooked after taking a pill for a backache. She's doing great in recovery and sharing her story with hundreds of students. Now, she'll share her life and her warnings with thousands of people who see the film.

ATM: Tell us about your work abroad.

Schueler: In Nicaragua, we helped dispel many of the myths surrounding HIV/AIDS. No one was talking about it there, and people didn't understand what was really going on. If you left your village to go to Managua you became an outcast, because other villagers knew you were going to the capitol to get

AIDS. Even the country's doctors were afraid to treat infected people.

ATM: How were you able to dispel those myths?

Schueler: We knew that we could do it through television, so I talked to the general manager at the country's biggest station. He told me his group needed someone to train some rural stringers. We agreed to do it if the reporters would make HIV/AIDS their first story. It was a huge breakthrough. I think it changed their country. Once the stringers were trained, and started listening to the doctors we'd brought with us to talk about the reality of HIV/AIDS, it had a huge impact. "Good Morning Nicaragua" ran stories for a week. To me, that's what television is all about. It showed us how useful media can be.

ATM: Had you trained reporters before?

Schueler: I was a high school teacher in California, and toured with Up With People, so I was used to working with students. When I moved to New Mexico, I landed a job hosting "Stopwatch" on the old KGGM-TV 13. While I was there we started "News 101" as a student broadcast training program.

ATM: Did that start you down this career path?

Schueler: Yes. At first, we worked with high schools. The news director told me if students produced stories that were workable he'd put them

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on the air. When the station aired their stories on Sunday evenings, the ratings went up. After the first year, 40 other schools across the state wanted to participate. Eventually, it was syndicated around the country.

ATM: Did you use that program to branch into other kinds of shows?

Schueler: We started "Adventure Rio," an animal show for kids. We also produced "Fences," a

show based on youth issues for the New Mexico Department of Health. It was "Oprah Winfrey" meets "Saturday Night Live." It won the Grand Award at the New York Film Festival, beating out Disney and some PBS programs. That's when I knew we could use media to affect social change.

ATM: You've also worked on biographies, haven't you?

Schueler: Last year, we produced a program about U.S. Senator Pete Domenici and used Sam Donaldson to narrate it. Sam called me the night before we recorded the script. I think he sensed I was nervous working with him and so he told me the only thing that would irritate him was if I didn't really direct him. The next day, the session went really well. I was listening remotely, because I couldn't fly to D.C. for the taping. I'd just tell Sam what visuals we'd be using, or the music I was planning to play, and he'd nail it.

ATM: Have you ever had to skip a project due to a lack of funding?

Schueler: I've never made my decisions on how much money. I know it's a little crazy, but I make my decisions based on what I want to do.

ATM: That sounds like you are comfortable taking leaps of faith.

Schueler: Sometimes I just spend my own money. A few years ago, I read about a 13-year-old who had gone to a slumber party and died after drinking a bottle of vodka. I knew we had to take a closer look at teenage drinking. We applied for a grant, but when the letter came back we didn't get any money.

ATM: What did you do then?

Schueler: I still remember telling everyone who was involved, "It's over." But the television station managers told me to do it anyway. Everyone volunteered to get the show done. A week before it aired, people started lining up to give us money. We didn't take it and aired the show clean, except for one sponsor who had been a supporter from the beginning. That's when I learned you just have to do it. You have to go after something you believe in.

ATM: Have you ever had an underwriter who didn't like your final edited film?

Schueler: I don't really care if they like it or not. A film may or may not do well in award shows, but if the audience we are targeting is changed by it, and accepts the message we are delivering, then that's the critical element of success for us.

ATM: Is there one project you put on a back shelf that you wish you had done?

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Schueler: Not really. There have been stories where I thought I just don't have the money to do this, but the story kept gnawing at me and at some point I say we just have to do it. We have so many projects in development. I'm lucky I still wake up every morning raring to go.

ATM: Like when you jumped off a helicopter into a fireball?

Schueler: That's a long story. I was studying drama at the University of Pacific in Stockton, Calif. I originally wanted to be an actor, but my parents insisted I also get teaching credentials. To pay for my last semester, I agreed to work as a stuntman on Nick Nolte's movie *Who'll Stop the Rain*. I had no idea what I was doing when the stunt coordinator, Bobby Bass, asked me if I'd ever jumped out of a helicopter. I told him that in Ohio they called me Chris "Helicopter" Schueler.

ATM: You were lying, right?

Schueler: Absolutely. But you always say "yes" when they ask you. He figured it out as soon as we started hovering up in an old Huey and he saw my eyes bugging out. I jumped with all the safety gear and just covered my face with my hands to keep from getting burnt. I got paid, and never did another stunt.

—PETER ST. CYR



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