

A Collaborative Experience with Bitter Jester Studios by Margaret Mei

Bitter Jester Studios (BJS) is the multi Emmy-winning production company that was hired by the Sisters of the Living Word (SLW) to write, direct and produce a modern and cutting edge video to share with their friends, benefactors and the world-at-large. They hoped for a video that would tell the story of the Sisters' bold past, interwoven with their timeless mission of bringing new life to people who are poor and oppressed along with their core values. It turns out that Nic DeGrazia and Dan Kullman, the creative team and owners of BJS, "hit it out of the park" with a heroically humble and harmonious homage to the legacy of the Sisters of the Living Word. The experience became quite fascinating and very educational for all involved.

Watch the video on the website at www.slw.org or on YouTube.

Following is an interview with Dan and Nic who said they have been doing this work long enough (18 years) to know when they have a good project. They agree that the Sisters of the Living Word have been one their best clients ever. So let's find out how this project evolved.

Nic, would you please tell us how the concept of the video came to be?

Nic: The Sisters came to us with a general concept of moving in a new direction which was both creative and abstract. We were able to flesh that out as a group and then Dan and I thoughtfully executed the ideas and concepts.

Because Dan and I were not familiar with the SLW before being hired, I asked the six Sisters involved and one Associate (Josette Buehlman) to write their answers to some questions I gave them about the Community. Their answers allowed me to write the script. We knew we were straddling a fine line of showing how the SLW are forward thinking while embracing their great history. I felt very empowered as a creative person because the Sisters let us take the reins.

Dan: We wanted to film in a regal, historic, non-dated environment – some place that spoke of ancient majesty - so I approached the Jason Smith of Lake Forest who provided us with their home to use for most of the video. Then we had the challenge of scheduling as much filming in one day as possible!

Nic: The video succeeds in a building that in 100 years will still have the same “museum quality” look.

The Sisters who were asked to be a part of this video – Sisters Chioma Ahanihu, Mary Nicholas Eiden, Sharon Glumb, Carrie Miller, Georgene Schumacher and Kris Vorenkamp - weren’t enamored with the idea of performing yet you and your crew put the Sisters at ease. How did this happen?

Dan: Nic and I took the Sisters out to dinner before the filming began to get to know them and allow them to get to know us and feel comfortable with us. That meeting also informed the selection of the crew. The meeting gave us a good sense of how we wanted to interact and set the tone.

Nic: Being on a set is intimidating so breaking bread is important. Dan and I become the stable part of the film making process for the talent.

Nic: Once on set, I explained that the SLW gave me the words with which I wrote the script so there was nothing new for them to learn – just be themselves. On the writing side, I was a bit nervous and insecure about tackling the material, not nervous about my ability, but this was not a topic I had written about or filmed. The material from the SLW and Josette was rich and insightful.

Once the script is written and we’re on set, I am the one interviewing the talent in front of the camera. The charism of the Sisters is not threatening and they were so easy to work with because they live that charism. There were many, many takes yet the SLW were open to the guidance and encouragement they received.

In describing the SLW charism, the foundress Annamarie Cook drew an analogy to the effort exerted in trying to grab hold of a butterfly. She wrote, “When one attempts to catch a butterfly and pin it down one invariably causes the death of the butterfly. So, it seems to me, it is with charism. One feels it, one can at times touch it, but one can never completely identify it in all its manifestations.”
(Reprinted from Seasoned by the Word by Mary Ann Zrust, SLW)

BJS did a great job capturing the SLW charism. How did you feel about the project as it was taking place?

Nic: Everyone was so humble and respectful. The actual filming was a real collaboration of BJS and the SLW. Dan and I were also aware that this video was going to be different from others in that we hoped it would become a visual, lyrical poem, and I think that was accomplished.

Do you think you'll submit the Sisters' video for an Emmy?

Nic: We are definitely submitting this to the Emmy's! We have a good shot at a nomination. It's an engaging, comfortable, perfect piece that showcases the charisma of the SLW and the creative work of BJS.

In your 18 years in business do you have a favorite production?

Nic: In 2006 we created an under-age binge-drinking video for an organization called LEAD (Linking Efforts Against Drugs) that the schools of Lake Forest and Lake Bluff used with great success creating dialogue between students and their parents. You're working with people who have to open up and expose themselves about a difficult subject and it can be awkward for the talent. Dan is behind the camera with tears running down his face but I have to hold myself together. But we have a good time on the set and everyone relaxes. It turned out that this video was so well received that it became mandatory for all teachers and students to watch.

Dan: Oh, there are so many to choose from but the travel projects have been special – Angola in 2009, Cuba twice for a dance company documentary, recently Denver and Pittsburgh for a real estate development company. My favorite way to experience something is through the camera. The camera lets you into other people's experiences.

Speaking of cameras, do you each have your areas of expertise or do you overlap?

Nic: We can both do everything but Dan focuses on the equipment/gear and the technical side while I do the banking and client relationships. It's a good mix. On set we separate – I direct and interview talent in front of the camera and Dan is the cinematographer and works with the crew and all the technical aspects of

filming behind the camera. We're both good at editing while filming. My job is to get the best out of the people in front of the camera.

Dan: I synthesize the material to create a style/visual look within the boundaries of time and budget. I put the crew together. Nic and I always try to make it a pleasant experience for all involved. We enjoy the DOING. And hopefully we have a positive impact on the people with whom we are working. The whole process of filming is very complicated – we have to see behind the scenes – time, technical, story, personalities all have to come together.

Nic: Dan and I are both very capable editors and it's enjoyable work. We poured a lot of passion and creativity into this video because we knew we were on to something special. And as artists we always think things can be better so we're always tweaking our projects!

What inspires you?

Dan: Generally any people or projects that are compassionate, respectful of one's dignity and show humanity. I love history and relating the past to present – other people's lives inspire me.

Nic: I am energized and inspired when I feel I have control of the functional film set. I relish the opportunity to fix the problems. I like doing work that resonates with people. And a good sense of humor inspires me! Dan is an excellent comedic writer.

I'm sure people will be wondering how you came up with the name Bitter Jester. Would you explain?

Nic: While I was in college I had a sketch comedy background with my good friend, Dr. Charles Turck. Purple Shirts is an off-shoot of The Comic Thread (see BitterJesterFoundation.org) where Charles played a bitter jester (1998) wearing an ill-fitting jester costume who would get laughed at and then he would get angry-we love that irony and juxtaposition.

In our senior year, in 2001, we incorporated our production company but we needed a company name. We came up with a list of 120 company names which

included Bitter Jester and as we whittled the list down Bitter Jester remained constant. So we became Bitter Jester Entertainment, then Bitter Jester Creative, then Bitter Jester Creative Development, and now the production end of what we do is called Bitter Jester Studios. BJS (writing and production) works in tandem with Bitter Jester Creative Development (concept creation and script writing). Charles still performs with our comedy troupe but after a few years with Bitter Jester Creative he left to become a Board Certified Pharmacotherapy Specialist, and my good friend, Dan Kullman became my new business partner.

My experience was one of awe. Long hours, retakes galore, so much equipment to set up and take down (lighting and cameras), two days of shooting b roll film for special effects and during it all you were all so patient, professional, enthusiastic and encouraging that I have to say it was a privilege working with you. You went above and beyond. Thank you!