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Filmmaker Reviews

Pro-Social Filmmaking

Work in Progress

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*The Workers*, directed by Heather Courtney

Article: *The Workers*, Directed by Heather Courtney

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Director Heather Courtney talks about her documentary *The Workers* and community based distribution.

*The Workers*, directed by Heather Courtney

Before attending the Masters film program at the University of Texas, director Heather Courtney spent eight years working for various refugee and immigrant rights organizations, as well as human aid organizations including an African Refugee Camp in Tanzania. Heather used her graduate thesis film to further her work for the immigrant community. Her documentary, *Workers*, explores the complexities of immigration and labor issues during a time of incredible growth for Austin. The film focuses on two men, Ramon and Juan, and the day labor site where they report each morning looking for work from local contractors. The obstacles these two men face is set against a controversy that erupted when the city moved the day labor site from a downtown location to a residential neighborhood. The neighbors' reaction of anger and fear, projected on immigrants they had never met, was part of what inspired Heather to make the film.

Since its completion, Heather has held various community-based screenings in order to humanize the immigrant's story, with the hopes of dispelling the misconceptions that surround their plight in Austin and cities across the country. Among the film's many accolades is the audience award for Documentary First Film at last year's South by Southwest Film Festival. In his review of the film, Michael King of the Austin Chronicle wrote, "Everyone should see this film, the human underside of our relentless growth. Every filmmaker should see it as a testament to letting the story come to you."

IFCTV.com recently spoke with Heather about her approach to the film, the issues it covers, and her advice for other filmmakers who want their message heard.

IFCTV.com: What filmmakers or films have influenced you the most?

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HC: I lean more towards the cinema verite approach - letting things happen in front of the camera [like] the Maysles Brothers and Pennebaker. Also, more recently, I saw *Dark Days* [Mark Singer's doc about squatters living underground in New York City's Amtrak tunnels] and I found it to be really inspirational. I had lots of filmmakers who were instructors at UT who influenced me as well.

**IFCTV.com: The film opens with a disturbing shot of truck drivers driving up to the day labor site and giving a precise description of what kind of worker they want, describing them more like products than people. How did you manage to diminish the effect of the camera enough to capture this kind of unabashed honesty?**

HC: For those scenes I just stood back with the camera and used a radio mike for the person who worked at the day labor site to get the sound. I tried to stay pretty far back and I tried not to shoot so that they would be easily identifiable. I was trying to get the mood of it, not identify individual people. Most of them were aware that I was shooting, but that's how it normally happens. They were just doing what they usually do.

**IFCTV.com: You mention the Maysles brothers, and one of the things Albert Maysles emphasizes is the importance of putting your subjects at ease in order to capture honesty. Do you have certain methods for accomplishing that?**

HC: For me it was just a matter of getting to know them, and trying to explain to them what I was trying to do with the film. I think that in the case of Juan and Ramon, I was pretty lucky in that they were pretty comfortable with the camera. That is one of the reasons I focused on them. Some people think you have to separate yourself and be objective and not get close to your subjects, but you have to spend time with them to develop the comfort level and rapport you need.

**IFCTV.com: Did you intend to focus on these two men from the beginning or did that evolve as you started shooting?**

HC: Well, obviously I didn't know what would happen with their stories. I focused on Ramon initially because he was such a great speaker, and he had a lot of opinions that he wanted to share. He also had a very typical story in that he was a husband and a father whose family was in Mexico, and he sent money back to them. That's why I initially chose to focus on him, but I didn't know how his story would go. I decided to focus on Juan later because I wanted to balance out with Ramon. He was younger, and wasn't here to support his family. He didn't have a wife and kid, and he was more into the dream and adventure of it. I wanted to show that side as well and both were very open, so once I started talking to them, I realized they would be the ones to focus on. I still didn't know that Juan was in deportation screenings and nobody knew that Ramon was sick.

**IFCTV.com: Did you have a particular goal in mind when**

### **you started out?**

HC: It was pretty broad in the beginning. I was going to the day labor site to meet with people and then the controversy erupted about moving the day labor site from downtown to a residential neighborhood. Originally, it was going to be some immigrant stories but then I followed that controversy the whole summer, which really provided a chronological thread. And then a lot of themes emerged as well. When I started seeing the opposition the neighbors had to these people they didn't even know and that it was based on a lot of misconceptions, it became a real motivator to fight these misconceptions. There's a large group of immigrants who are doing all the hard work in the city and no one really knew them as people, so the motivation was to try to humanize the issue.

### **IFCTV.com: Given that goal, was there a danger of your own point of view getting into the film?**

HC: Initially, I was going to try to include a lot more of the neighbors in it as well and try to humanize their stories. But in the end, there really wasn't room for that and I really wanted it to be an immigrant story. Obviously, I have an opinion and every filmmaker does, so it's hard to believe in objectivity. I tried not to demonize anyone, to be as fair as possible. I had footage of the neighbors that was much worse than what I used. I could have done a longer, more complex piece, including the neighbors not having much power against the city's decision to move the day labor site there, but the story of Juan and Ramon became much more compelling than the argument over the day labor site.

### **IFCTV.com: Since you finished filming have there been any incidents that would justify the neighbors protest against moving the day labor site? It seems like in the film the transition was very successful.**

HC: I think it was a very successful transition. In terms of its effect on the neighborhood it hasn't had much affect at all. There was one incident where one of the workers was sleeping in a guy's shed, but that was one out of two hundred guys who go there everyday for the past two years.

### **IFCTV.com: The film has obviously had a lot of success in festivals but for documentaries that doesn't necessarily translate to success in distribution. How do you get it seen outside of festivals?**

HC: I received two grants, one from the city of Austin and then one from the Texas Council of the Humanities to set up community based screenings in Austin and the rest of Texas. I've actually screened it about 40 times, 30 times in Austin and the rest in other parts of Texas, at community based settings. I work with an immigrant rights group and we'll set something up at a community center to talk about issues affecting immigrants. I show it at schools and neighborhood associations, including the one in the film, to talk about neighborhood issues, and to sort of open some

people's eyes to the issue. So a lot of people have seen it.

It also showed on some local PBS stations and on the Dallas PBS station, and it's schedule to show in Houston in a few months. Locally, I've had lots of people interested. I've also had some offers from education distributors to get it out. That's one main thing for documentaries, is to get it to universities and colleges.

**IFCTV.com: Do you feel that national distribution is secondary to having it seen in these venues where you can discuss the film and its issues afterwards?**

HC: No, I don't think one is better than the other. Community based screenings allow for a discussion afterwards where it's not just a passive experience. People talk about the issues and it's a pretty complex subject matter. Immigration has lots of gray areas, so it starts discussion and, in that respect, community-based screenings are a really good thing and they might be better than a theatrical release. But with a theatrical release more people will see it, which is a good thing too. I think documentaries shouldn't be seen only as educational but as legitimate films for a movie theater like any other film. I also think television can reach a wider audience. I know several documentary filmmakers have gone with HBO's documentary series or Showtime, and more people see it that way. I don't think that documentaries should be pigeonholed as educational only, or only intended for community screenings.

**IFCTV.com: With your film just under fifty-four minutes, has length been an issue in getting distribution?**

HC: Yes. It's been an issue for festivals too. It's a little too long for a short and too short for a feature length film. So I've had some problems because it's hard to program.

**IFCTV.com: Why did you choose that length?**

HC: I didn't really choose that length that's just how it ended up. Actually, I tried to make it 56:40, which is the PBS length, but I couldn't even do that. I wanted it to be more organic, and it just kept coming up at that length.

**IFCTV.com: As far as the budget goes, how was the film funded?**

HC: Student loans mostly. (laughs)

**IFCTV.com: What advice do you have for documentarians who have picked their subject and now need to prepare for shooting?**

HC: It's so hard. It's really different according to what kind of documentary you want to do. I think you should just research your topic as much as possible before you start shooting. Also, try to get to know the people before you start shooting. I don't think you can plan out your film, but I think you can be prepared by knowing the topic really well. Also trying to shop the idea around is a good idea. I'm not

good at that, but its important to find funding. It's good to look into funding as early as possible because funding cycles take a long time. Even if it's just an idea, you can still apply for funding.

**If you would like to set up a screening for your community, school, neighborhood, organization, or university please contact Heather Courtney at [hcourtney85@hotmail.com](mailto:hcourtney85@hotmail.com).**

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