

The AFI DOCS Interview: Juliane Dressner, Director of Opening Night World Premiere PERSONAL STATEMENT

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Karoline, Enoch and Christine are Brooklyn high school seniors who just want to go to college, but like so many public school students throughout the country, their schools donâ??t have enough college guidance support. Refusing to give up, they decide to work as college counselors in their schools, becoming the very resource they donâ??t have themselves. Inspirational and moving, heartwarming and heartbreaking, PERSONAL STATEMENT is a testament to the power of knowledge and the ability to lead with a dream.

PERSONAL STATEMENT opens AFI DOCS on Wednesday, June 13 at the Newseum. Get tickets here.

AFI spoke with filmmaker Juliane Dressner, in an interview below.

AFI:What led you to pursue documentary filmmaking?

JD: Before my film career, I worked as a consultant in the nonprofit sector, documenting best practices in social programs, including youth organizing. I was so inspired by the young people who were addressing problems in their communities that I decided to become a filmmaker so that others could see the power of their work.

AFI: What inspired you to tell this story?

JD: College access is one of the dominant civil rights issues of our time. People from low-income backgrounds are increasingly excluded from higher education. One reason why this disparity exists is because many low-income students donâ??t have access to enough college guidance support.

When I learned that young people were taking it upon themselves to close the college guidance gap in their schools, I realized this was an extraordinary opportunity to both understand the obstacles they face, and to draw attention to their inspirational determination to surmount them.

AFI: How did you find the subjects in your film?

JD: I reached out to the staff at CARA (College Access: Research & Action), the organization that trains students to work as college counselors in their schools, and they were open to collaborating on a film. They knew that seeing these young people bringing about change in their communities is the best way to understand just how effective they can be.

CARA invited me to the peer counselor training, and that is where I met Karoline, Christine and Enoch. They were three of the 70 inspirational young people I met that day who had decided to step up and fill the guidance gap in their schools by working as peer college counselors.

AFI: What was a particular obstacle you faced while making the film?

JD: When I showed up on the first day of the peer college counselor training with a camera crew, I had raised enough money to make a short video.

After meeting Karoline, Christine and Enoch, and understanding the enormous responsibility they were taking on, we realized that the best to way tell their stories was to follow them through their senior year and into college. This would mean shooting at their schools and homes at least weekly â?? and sometimes even more often. But I did not have the funds to pay for a crew to do that much filming. I considered delaying to raise money in order to film the next cohort of peer college counselors. But after meeting Karoline, Enoch and Christine, who were all interested in collaborating on a film, I felt compelled to continue. So I used what little money we had to purchase a camera.

I ended up doing much of the filming on my own. In some cases, and especially when capturing sound would be challenging with a one-person crew, Eddie Martinez and I would work as a two-person crew, with Eddie shooting. Even as I was filming, I was raising funds for the film. It was hard, but I think that the film benefited from having a small crew. Karoline, Christine and Enoch, as well as their families, classmates and teachers, became accustomed to us. As a result, we were able to capture pivotal and intimate moments.

AFI: What do you want audiences to walk away with after screening your film?

JD: Low-income teenagers want all that higher education promises: the possibility of prospering and moving beyond survival mode. They know that a college degree is their best bet. But many of them canâ??t get there, and as a result, income inequality persists.

One of the main barriers keeping low-income students out of college is the lack of college guidance in public schools. Many people donâ??t realize that most public schools donâ??t employ college counselors. Instead, guidance counselors are expected to provide help with the college process. But nationwide, the guidance counselor to student ratio is one to 490. And guidance counselors report that they can spend only 22% of their time on college guidance. The lack of college guidance support is especially troubling for students who donâ??t have someone at home who can help them with the college process.

I hope that audiences walk away from the film with a better awareness of the college guidance gap. The film sheds light on both the systemic barriers that keep so many young people from attaining a college degree, and the power that already exists within their communities to address problems of inequality. In

the film we see that the very people who are affected by a problem are in fact the ones who are best situated to solve it.

AFI: Why is Washington, DC, a valuable location to screen your film?

JD: There is no better place for PERSONAL STATEMENT to premiere than Washington because the issues addressed in the film are national ones. We hope that the film will build support for systemic change throughout the U.S.

AFI: Why are documentary films important today?

JD: Documentary films are a powerful vehicle for transporting viewers to worlds they have never experienced. Watching PERSONAL STATEMENT, the audience comes to understand what it is like to navigate the daunting college process on a terribly uneven playing field. We see how challenging it can be for low-income students to become the first in their families to go to college. We hope the film will build support for the reforms that are needed to enable all young people to fulfill their potential.



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