

Letters out of Africa

BY ERIC VOLMERS, CALGARY HERALD APRIL 24, 2009



Letters From Litein

The problem with telling true-life tales in documentaries is that the stories inevitably continue to unfold long after the cameras stop rolling.

In the postscript to Calgary filmmakers Matt Palmer and Petros Danabassis' documentary Letters from Litein, which follows a group of Calgary elementary students to an orphanage in Kenya, we are told that one of the orphans vanished not long after the filming stopped.

When Palmer returned in 2007 to show an early version of the film to the Kenyans involved at the home, he spent two weeks looking for Winnie. "We went to her grandmother's house which was way off in the middle of nowhere and nobody seemed to know where she was," says Palmer, who directed the film. "It was a few months after that we found out she had a baby."

In the few scenes she appears, Winnie comes across as a smart but troubled young woman who is bursting with potential and ambition.

So it was discouraging for the filmmakers to learn her fate. At 17, she is now married and living in a small shack near a tea plantation with her husband and daughter, who is reportedly suffering from malaria.

In the big and often bleak picture of Africa, her story is not particularly tragic. But her outcome seems

to prove one of the darker points hinted at throughout the film.

“It reinforces the whole thing where girls do get left out of the education system there,” says Danabassis, 39, who co-produced the film with Palmer and Kaari M. Autry.

“It was heartbreaking,” adds Palmer. “I just felt right from the very first visit when I met her that she was a real leader in the home and really dynamic individual and really smart girl. Unfortunately, she was branded as being a troublemaker, because she spoke out.”

Winnie’s “speaking out” is not all that earth-shaking, nor is it particularly damaging to the African Inland Church’s Children’s Home where most of the film takes place. *Letters from Litein* is not an expose. In fact, it’s based predominantly on the sunny premise of Calgary children from the now-closed Fred Seymour Elementary public school visiting the Kenyan orphanage that they had raised money for as a school project. But Palmer’s camera doesn’t flinch from some uncomfortable moments.

Winnie talks of feeling like a second-class citizen in the home. The idea that the girls do not get the same academic push as the boys is repeated numerous times during the film, often suggesting the orphanage is locked in a patriarchal Christianity that seems at least 50 years out of date. The Calgary kids, meanwhile, are reluctant at first to bond with the orphans and occasionally come across as bossy when playing with them. One scene shows the entire entourage as wide-eyed and ill-prepared when confronted by a group of desperate, glue-sniffing street kids who lack the cheery demeanour of the orphans back at the home.

“Part of the intent of the film was to just be completely truthful and honest to what the experience was,” says Palmer. “Everybody experiences it differently. And those conflicts are hopefully what makes you grow and are natural. Not everybody experiences things in the same way. It would have been a disservice to make a feel-good film that glossed over those sorts of things.”

This is not to say the film is a downer. Quite the opposite. It’s hard to imagine any audience coming away from the film without feeling good about how the Calgary kids give of themselves. The orphans, meanwhile, are an endearingly happy group of children for the most part, despite their hardships. The film shows how all kids — regardless of culture — respond to the universal idea of long-term friendship.

But Palmer’s cinema-verite style, in which he shot without interviews or narration and whittled down 300 hours of footage, makes the action seem honest and unfiltered.

Plot wise, *Letters from Litein* follows students and staff of Fred Seymour as they forge connections with the orphans, a project that began in 2005 as part of the school’s global citizenship curriculum. The school, which closed in 2006, raised \$50,000 for the orphanage. In August of 2006, Palmer, Danabassis and crew tagged along as a Calgary group made the long trip to Litein. The group

includes Fred Seymour's principal, Brenda Zugman, assistant principal Kathy Laycock, teacher Sarah Kesler, seven children — aged seven to 12 — and their parents.

But in many ways, it's the aftermath that's most important when it comes to this story. The film's tag line — "Whose life will you change?" — points to the idea that engaging in this sort of service demands more than simply writing letters and sending money.

Since the film was shot, almost all of the Calgary children who went on the 2006 journey have returned to Kenya. Some have helped build massive playgrounds in and around Litein. The Calgary educators, meanwhile, continue to network with the African teachers that they first met in Litein. Palmer himself is sponsoring two girls at the home so they can attend a private school. Any profits made by the film will go back into the Litein community.

"That's one of the great things about the project is that the group is still connected," says Palmer. "They've been back and they are all planning to go again. I think that is really important for the community to see that this is a sustainable connection. There is some responsibility that has been taken to maintain that friendship and that connection."

Throughout the film, the children at the home are shown receiving numerous gifts from the Canadians. But when Palmer returned to the children's home in November of 2006 to record them reading letters back to Canada, their fondest memories had little to do with material goods.

"Every night they were given stuff," says Palmer. "Not one of them talked about that. Everyone said it was playing with kids from Canada, that was the best part. It's not the money. It's that connection that is most special and empowering for them."

Spotlight

Letters from Litein opens tonight at the Globe Cinema. Filmmakers Matt Palmer, Petros Danabassis and Kaari M. Autry will be in attendance for a Q&A tonight after both evening screenings. Film follows friendships from Calgary to Kenya

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