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Woman Behind the Lens: Ky Dickens

We flip the camera on the passionate filmmaker

By Jourdan Fairchild



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In the male-dominated world of commercial television production, **strong female voices are few and far between**. One that's loud and clear is that of 35-year-old director Ky Dickens, whose trailblazing documentaries spark serious conversations. Her latest film, *Sole Survivor*, took top honors at the Midwest Independent Film Festival and premieres on CNN tomorrow night at 8 p.m. CST. Here, Dickens shares what the last decade has taught her and why cinema is at the forefront of social change.

Q&A

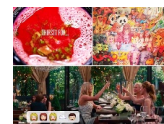
You started your career as a camera operator in 2000. What was the industry like for women back then? Has it changed?

I was shocked to find out how little representation there was, especially in creative roles like directing. It was a total boys' club. Even today, I'm often the only woman with 30 men on a TV commercial set. So when I started my own documentary film company, it was a priority for me to create opportunities for women. I only hire female editors and producers. And in the past three to five years, there have been a ton of female documentary directors popping up at festivals. You need compassion and keen observation when directing people, especially in documentaries. So based on the skill set that most women share, I think the role is often better suited to them.

Why do you think film is such a powerful tool for activism?

We live in a very media-based society. People form their ideas, perceptions, even what makes them feel comfortable, from the characters they see on the screen. No one can deny the fact that LGBT characters on television in the past ten years have completely changed America's comfort with gay people — and that's also true with minority groups. By pulling together and presenting information in a creative, responsible way, documentaries can help people better understand crucial social issues.

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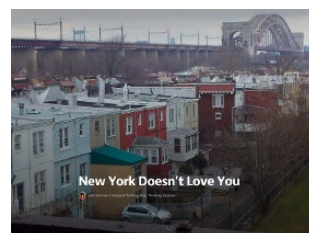
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Describe one of your favorite moments captured on film.

When I was 16, one of my really good friends died in a car crash. And when we were getting ready for the funeral, a bunch of us gathered to watch past footage I'd taken of him. There was one section where he was dancing and his feet were just spinning around. It was just the most joyful moment any of us could've watched. At that moment, I realized that shooting real life is so important because it has the power to heal, to remember, to preserve. It's all so easy: Just keep a camera rolling.

***Fish Out of Water*, about the relationship between homosexuality and the Bible, was your first documentary. What impact did that film have on you and others?**

As long as I live, I will never make another film that's as fulfilling as that one. When you create a movie, you don't know if it's going to have legs. But it's still screening at churches all over America. It's just been translated into Haitian Creole and Spanish; it's even been shown on a van touring around Russia for the past two years. It's a constant reminder that even though society has taken huge steps toward marriage equality, it's still really hard to come out and to understand your sexuality in the context of faith and family.

***Sole Survivor* deals with some heavy stuff, too. Why was this an important story for you to share?**

I'm always trying to find original subjects, and I had a personal interest in survivor's guilt because of my friend's death. I didn't tell anyone that we'd switched places in the car just before the crash. I do remember feeling like a fraud that I had lived. Then in my late 20s, I realized that I felt this deep need to make a huge difference in the world. I couldn't even take a nap because I felt like I was wasting precious time I could be spending on something impactful. So I started reading and discovered stories of survivors of plane crashes. These deaths were so public and dramatic and acute and widespread. And there had never been a film on the topic.



In telling true stories, do you feel pressure to get things right?

For a long time, *Sole Survivor* didn't get picked up. Most of the survivors had never spoken publicly, so stepping up showed real bravery. There were nights I felt so ashamed and would cry because I felt like I had let these people down. But then Michael Moore got his hands on it somehow and loved it so much that he premiered it at his Traverse City Film Festival. A week later, CNN wanted to acquire it. From an outsider's perspective, it looks like the film has been successful, and it has; but the only thing that's important to me is that the survivors feel like their stories are being heard.

on the best possible platform.

Someone makes a film about your life. What's the title?

Wonderment. What drives my relationships with the stories I tell is the wonderment and curiosity of the world. Despite violence and hatred and confusion, there's always beauty to be found. You just have to keep looking for it.

You live in North Park — with your partner (Kaisa Dille), one dog, two cats, and three chickens. But what's your favorite Chicago neighborhood?

I love Andersonville because it feels like a quirky, old town. I'm Swedish, so I appreciate the heritage there with the museum and the bakery. Plus, it's close to the beach.

What's next for you?

I have two films on the burner. One is about the scientists who are trying to bring animals back from extinction by remapping their genomes. The other is about child prodigies. How does someone become one? What happens to child prodigies when they grow up? It's all so fascinating to me.

Photo: Amanda Clifford/Courtesy of Ry Dickens

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