

"AMERICA'S HEART & SOUL"

PRODUCTION INFORMATION

By Louis Schwartzberg

"America's Heart & Soul" – my first film as a director – came about in a most unusual way. I've been a collector of sorts for years. It started when I was in film school; since I couldn't afford a lot of film, I'd shoot time-lapse photography – shooting only one frame every five-to-twenty seconds. I found that I got the most gorgeous images – storm clouds, flowers opening, and other scenes of nature. These pictures were my passion, and after I graduated, I was able to make a living by making more and more of them. I found that I particularly enjoyed capturing those "magic moments" of landscapes – urban and rural, day and night. It was very fulfilling, but I also felt I was not taking it as far as I could; as I evolved as a person, I wanted to grow as a filmmaker as well.

Everyone dreams of hitting the road, traveling around the country like Steinbeck, meeting new people and seeing parts of the country you never knew existed. I recently had the opportunity to do just that – with a 35mm film camera on my shoulder. What did I find? A nation of individuals, no two alike. I found the most interesting stories in the most unlikely places. I found that though it seems on the surface that we're divided in so many different ways, it turns out that we're connected by a deeper bond than I'd ever imagined.

My trip was my way of taking that next step as a filmmaker. I'd started a different collection a few years ago. I collected stories. As I would read about interesting people in the newspaper or in local TV programs, I would file them away. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with them; all I knew is that they

were real, human dramas. One day, a revelation came to me – I would blend my passion for pictures with my passion for these human stories by adding people to the "magic moments" I'd been capturing on film for so long.

It seemed like a simple idea, but for my first film, I wanted to honor ordinary Americans who were extraordinary in their everyday lives. The media pay tribute to celebrities and sports heroes for doing extraordinary things all the time. That's fine – they're very good at it. But America is more than the famous people you read about in the newspaper or see on television. My collection might not make headlines, but I feel that the people in them make up who we are as Americans. I envisioned a film that would be a series of vignettes – without beginning, middle, or end – that provided a forum for these people to tell their stories.

What started out as a simple idea in my head turned out to be a simple film in many ways, but one that I think gets to the core of something more complex. I think it's some of the most fascinating footage I've ever shot. I didn't shape this material; it shaped me.

I put together a tiny film crew – 8 people. We piled into a van. I served as director, producer, director of photography, camera operator, and grip. It was like being in film school again; we were guerilla filmmakers. Our two best assets were being prepared and being ready, willing, and able to listen.

Of course, our starting point was the anecdotes I had collected over the years. A good example is Patty Wagstaff, the famous flyer. I've thought for a long time that I'd like to make a movie with Patty, and when this film came up, it seemed right. What inspires me about Patty is that she's found her passion, and that's quite literally taken her to extraordinary heights. Like Patty, some people in our film have achieved some fame, and of course, these folks were easy to track down.

But that was only true for about half of our stories; the rest were a result of being ready for magic to happen. Part of the experience in making the film was taking the time to travel across the country, and part of the excitement of traveling is that things never go as you expect they will; there's always a surprise, a place where you turn left instead of right, and find something you had no clue about before. In making this movie, we were light on our feet and ready to move as soon as we heard about a great story.

Case in point: we were gassing up the van in the hills of Appalachia when a woman named Minnie Yancey came up to me and said, "You don't look like you're from these parts. You look a little lost." We had a short conversation, in which I found out she makes rugs, and we made a plan to come back and film her on the way back; now, she's one of my favorite stories in the film. So, did I find Minnie? Or did Minnie find me?

Which stories stood out to me – which "made the cut" into the film? I was definitely intrigued by people whose experience was tied in to their part of the country. I wanted to show how the region influenced the people and the people influenced the region. Everyone in the film is connected to the land – a rug weaver in Appalachia, a jazz musician in New Orleans, a dairy farmer from Vermont.

But I also thought it was important to show that these people aren't stereotypes. Our dairy farmer, for example: you might think that this is a story of a guy trying to raise his kid by going back to the land, living in the country, with nature all around. But then you discover that he's into theater. He plays music. He's an independent filmmaker. He's making his art; he's living life his own way. He breaks the mold.

Another type of vignette that I found especially attractive was the story of a person who has overcome some kind of adversity. I've tried to make sure that "America's Heart &

Soul" is not a Pollyanna film; many stories that people have to tell are not entirely happy ones, but they are stories of people who are trying to make things better, not just for themselves, but for their communities. These people give me a sense of hope; my problems seem very small when I think about what they've had to overcome in life.

But, ultimately, we didn't worry too much about whether a story fit or didn't. We looked for people we found interesting and we rolled film. We listened to Americans tell their stories. I present them to you as they are.

So, back to my original question: what did I find as I traveled across America?

Well, for starters, I found that, like me, people are looking for stories that give us inspiration. We don't need pat answers, but we do need to find that spiritual core. I think people can find that idea very close to home: in ourselves, our cultural diversity.

Since completing the film, many people have told me that they thought it is a perfect film for our times. I think that the timing is perfect for a film that celebrates real people and real values. There's a lot of uncertainty in our country, a lot of divisiveness. I think the answers are in our roots, in the values that our forefathers have passed down to us: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It's my hope that this is a film for everybody, young and old, conservative to liberal, because it isn't political. It just captures people at face value. I think everyone will find something in this film that they can relate to, something that makes them say, "Yep, that's me up there."