



Community

Published Online: Tuesday, August 1, 2006

Published in Print: Wednesday, August 2, 2006

Local woman documents work of disabled wildlife photographer

By CARYL DIERKSEN

The Independent

Allison Smith nearly tossed aside the piece of paper that would change the direction of her life forever. Smith, Woodstock, an Algonquin newspaper reporter, quickly scanned a notice about a photo exhibit at the public library. She was actually laying the paper aside when a single phrase in the press release caught her eye and her imagination.

"Disabled wildlife photographer. I wanted to meet him," Smith said.

So she attended the show, admired the striking wildlife photos David Farber had taken from his wheelchair and watched him interact with another visitor. Soon she was fighting back tears.

"David is a powerful force. He has a special spirit," Smith said. "I couldn't do justice to his story in a short article."

In 1981, an active young man in his 20s who held a black belt in the martial arts and enjoyed mountain climbing and kayaking, Farber was involved in a horrible motorcycle accident that cost him the use of both his legs and his left arm. His movements are limited to the use of an electric wheelchair.

But Farber wouldn't accept those limitations, Smith said.

Despite the physical challenges, an undaunted Farber pursued his dream of becoming a wildlife photographer and was the first to access the remote Alaskan wilderness to photograph grizzly bears from an electric wheelchair, Smith said.

The reporter and the photographer remained in touch, and a year later Farber was able to facilitate one of Smith's dreams.

"I've always wanted to make a documentary," Smith said. "I've never been to film school, but I've studied the heck out of documentaries. I watch the editing, the shots, the story structure, the lenses, the music."

Smith said she even pays attention to the commentary from the director. It was this intense interest in documentary films that led to an epiphany of sorts for Smith.

One summer evening last year, Smith and a friend, Chicago photographer and journalist Stephanie Book, were watching a documentary together when inspiration struck them simultaneously.

"Allison and I were inspired to try to make our own documentary about David. It took just a few seconds to make the decision," Book said.

They had no trouble convincing Farber to agree to the project.

"He was so interested and so excited about the idea that he and his story could inspire other people, whether they are impaired or not," Book said. "He is one of the most unselfish people I've ever met."

The two would-be documentarians first approached the project with humble aspirations.

"Our goal was to make a 15-minute short film we could show to our friends and David and not cry from embarrassment," Smith said. The first thing they thought they needed was some professional advice.

Not knowing where to begin, Smith e-mailed Alison Rostankowski, a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor whose media class Smith had taken. Smith described her concept for the documentary and asked for a recommendation of a book she could use to begin.

"(Rostankowski) wrote back and said, 'I want to produce that film,'" Smith said.

Rostankowski, who has produced several television programs, came on board as executive producer and brought with her Tess Gallum, an Emmy-winning cinematographer and editor.

Book took the title of co-cinematographer, and Smith wears hats as producer, writer and director. Smith also started her own production company, Red Couch Productions.

The project soon morphed from a short film into a full-length documentary geared toward film festivals and television.

"Getting it picked up will be the trick," Smith said of the challenge of getting the film before a paying audience.

The film's title, "Lion in the Street," refers to a proverb that she promises will be explained in the film. The documentary will show the challenges Farber encounters as he returns to Alaska to photograph grizzlies and later attempts to become the first man in an electric wheelchair to photograph Arctic polar bears in the wild. There will also be footage of Farber at home in Carpentersville.

"The film will not simply be about his work but also the risks he takes in his personal life," Smith said.

Smith directs the film with a technique called cinema vérité — no script or narration, just the reality of the images. This technique lends drama to the film, Smith said.



Courtesy photo

As for the cinematography, Book said one camera will focus on Farber, while a small lipstick camera will be attached to his wheelchair so the viewer shares his perspective.

The production team has completed a documentary treatment and a short trailer of preliminary footage. The next step is to secure funding to complete the project.

In July, the team received a \$5,000 Quality of Life grant from the Christopher Reeve Foundation. Reeve, who played Superman on film among other characters, became a quadriplegic after an equestrian accident. The foundation named for the late actor is dedicated to curing spinal cord injury by funding innovative research, and improving the quality of life for people living with paralysis through grants, information and advocacy. CRF Quality of Life Grants are awarded to programs or projects that improve the well-being of people living with paralysis, particularly spinal cord injuries.

Smith said the credibility that the grant brings to the project should help their efforts. The group needs to raise an additional \$3,500 by Aug. 7 in order to accompany Farber on his next trip to Alaska. The trip to Canada in mid-October will require an additional \$30,000.

After contacting businesses in Woodstock and Carpentersville for help, Smith said she received only two responses. One local business owner told her to come back when she had \$30,000, and another offered warm encouragement but was unable to make a monetary contribution.

"We can't come this far and not be able to finish. When I think about my obstacles, I think that David has been facing obstacles for 25 years. He has been my motivation to follow in his example," Smith said.

For more information, visit www.lioninthestreet.com.