

Diary of my transition from Fine Art Photographer to Documentary Filmmaker
by Alan Feinberg, W'68



In 1957, when my oldest brother began his freshman year at Penn and I was just 11 years old, his prized Rolleiflex camera sat on his desk and I took it. To this day 63 years later he asks me to return it. That began my fascination with photography that has lasted all these years beginning with that camera that represented the height of German camera engineering at that time (alongside the more well-known Leica). I had taught Photography at the Chatauqua Institute, judged photo competitions at camera clubs across Florida and also sold mural-sized prints at art shows such as Art Basel. I considered myself a Fine Art Photographer. Then, one day in 2015 I arrived at a crossroads - the world was not looking for another photograph of the Taj Mahal or Niagara Falls. There were millions of people around the world taking photos with their iPhones. I felt I needed to find something more stimulating and creative.

Fine Art Photography is very difficult to do well. Anyone with a paintbrush can create any scene and depict any story without constraint, while a serious photographer can capture only what is in front of his or her lens. A fine art photographer neither adds nor subtracts from the image. After a lifetime of pursuing the 'ultimate image' and producing only one to two memorable (and salable) finished prints per year, I felt this was not an efficient use of my time and I yearned to tell stories where editing was not proscribed. Of course there are tools in the Photoshop computer application to work magic with your photos but that transitions Fine Art to Graphic Arts which is frowned upon in the world of Fine Art Photography. I wanted to tell stories my way free from the constraints of Fine Art. The answer I was looking for was right in front of me - documentary film production.

Combining my interests in photography, audio production, voice acting, video editing and conducting on-camera interviews (I had established an educational cable TV channel in Boca Raton), producing documentaries did not seem impossible. I still had much to learn before I

could produce useful content and I was even more concerned with the challenge of attracting an audience that would even want to see the result.

I didn't have a 'Hollywood' sized budget with which to work so I planned to do the creative work myself (with help from my wife, Nancy-Jo, who wound up leading the interviews while I operated the camera and kept the veterans in focus). The challenge was finding stories worthy of the time and money required to produce them. I had always heard there was a lot of money in film and I soon learned I could prove it: I put a lot of money in and I haven't been able to get it out!

Then, from out of 'left field' came the idea for the first story. My wife's then 95 year old uncle Donald Katz came to our home for dinner with his daughter. During dinner, he began talking about his service as a nose gunner aboard a B-24 bomber in WWII. It was a very special moment for all of us as even his daughter remarked that she had never heard these stories. Donald, like so many of his fellow soldiers, never spoke about the war when they came home. Military service was just something he did many years ago when he was young, and when the war ended - like others of his generation - he finished school, went to work, married, had children, bought homes and lived their lives. When the men arrived home from overseas at the end of the war GI's rushed off the ships, hung up their uniforms and jumped into bed. The Baby Boom is represented by their children - and none better than by my classmates - the class of '68.

After dinner I asked uncle Donald if he would record a DVD for the benefit of his grandchildren and the generations that would follow. He was willing to do that but insisted I should also interview a buddy of his who was shot down on his 35th and last mission before qualifying to go home. Unfortunately for him, he was captured and became a POW in Germany through the end of the war. Over a period of time, one WWII vet after another came to my home to make a recording for posterity. I has 30 interviews from nonagenarians, members of the 'Greatest Generation' who shared riveting stories of their service to their country. Over a two year period I developed a documentary from this material entitled 'Bagels Over Berlin' which received an audience award as Runner-Up Best Documentary at the prestigious Palm Beach Jewish Film Festival in its very first public screening. Despite inexperience, I had assembled a film that so far has had 100 screenings in 60 cities across the country. It was a dream come true and proved what I tell my children - don't talk about it, just do it. You never know what good things can result.

The 'cherry on top' was 'when the film was accepted for broadcast Memorial Day following the concert on the National Mall. A personal highlight was when our my film was screened at Houston Hall during our 50th reunion.

During my working days as a financial advisor - a client once told me how he was spending his days as a Florida retiree. He said: "I play golf 6 days a week and pray for rain." That comment seemed humorous when he said it but it stuck with me as a warning against an unhealthy life style when I retired. I need not worry because I have now found something that will help me to avoid the tedium of unfulfilling days of leisure and sloth.

You can view the trailer to 'Bagels Over Berlin' by going to www.bagelsoverberlin.com. There is also a link to view the full film, which is behind a pay wall. (to '68 classmates: write me at alanfeinberg1@me.com and I'll send you a link to see the film at no cost). You might instead choose to pay the modest fee - 100% of which is donated to 'Vets Helping Heroes' - a 501(c)3 that provides service dogs to veterans with PTSD. I raise money for this organization - we've raised \$8 million and paid for 400 fully trained dogs presented to needy vets. (note: there are 20 suicides every day among active and retired military - but never has a suicide occurred among our 400 recipients). Regrettably, the VA does not recognize the demonstrable value of service dogs to veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Syndrome Disorder.

Prior to 'Bagels Over Berlin' I produced a 'proof of concept' video on 'Fashion Design' for a friend who was a faculty member at the Parsons School of Design. Using a handheld camcorder on my dining room table I shot a five minute video as she presented a sample lesson. That little piece received 340k 'hits' on YouTube which gave us the confidence to produce a full series of 20 lessons which today is sold online. That was a wake-up call to the possibilities of streaming - the days of DVD sales are obviously numbered.

Finally, I invite you to view a short film that I produced using long-lost footage of my great grandmother in Poland in 1936 when my aunt Eva sailed to Europe for the Berlin Olympics. At the request of my grandfather Abe, Eva and her husband then drove to the Polish village of Kletsk in an effort to bring Abe's mother with them back to the safety of America. The film is 8 minutes in length and was also screened on PBS. The link is: <https://vimeo.com/198493241>. (password: 3579). There is no pay wall.

As long as mind and body allow, I hope and plan to pursue stories that I believe need to be told. BTW, if you have an idea that is meaningful to you, email your thought to me so can jointly review the possibilities.

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