

BREAKING INTO PRISON WITH CAMERAS: DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS TESTIFY

Writ-Writer:

One Man's Journey for Justice

Susanne Mason

There is no shortage of prison stories to be told: the themes of redemption and revenge, of unexpected kindness and justice denied make life behind prison walls a treasure trove of drama. But too many of the stories will never be told – the walls work both ways. Filmmakers trying to get access to prison have abandoned many proposed projects because of the formidable roadblocks and byzantine bureaucratic hurdles erected by prison officials. One result is that the public has little idea how existing prison practices and policies affect the millions of incarcerated Americans, and how their plight is central to larger, more critical criminal justice issues.

No other segment of American society erects such formidable barriers to inspection. It is left to the dedicated journalist or documentary filmmakers to bang at prison walls and tell the necessary stories. But they will be stalled and frustrated, and may spend weeks, months, and sometimes years trying to produce the reports and documentation needed to communicate to the free world what is going on in prison or what has already happened behind the walls.

My experience making two documentaries that required filming inside the Texas prison system taught me one thing very quickly: time is on the prison administration's side, unless you are a network anchor or famous television news reporter.

If you're not famous; if you're an unknown documentary filmmaker, the emotional toll of gaining access becomes a huge part of the work itself. I once worked for more than six months to get permission for a five-day prison shoot. On the third day of the shoot I was notified that we would have to wrap up by lunchtime the next day. A TV network anchor and his crew needed to cover an upcoming execution. If I had insisted, I *may* have been granted permission for a second shoot, but I didn't have the funds to produce it.

In 1990, I began preparations for a documentary about domestic violence. The issue would be shown through the stories of several women incarcerated for murdering men who, by their accounts, had abused and threatened to kill

them. The only logistical challenge was obtaining permission to videotape and interview the women prisoners in the Riverside Unit in Gatesville. The warden, a woman, was sympathetic to the issue at the heart of the women's stories – the possibility that they had killed in self-defense. After writing a request letter and talking to her on the phone, she granted me access, provided that I get additional approval from Huntsville.

I knew enough about the Texas prison system to know that this would be a big hurdle. The warden didn't know whom the proper clearance should come from, only that I must have it. I made a lot of phone calls and left a lot of messages that weren't returned and made more phone calls, and eventually got somebody to call back. I pushed for and was granted a meeting in Huntsville.

The official said I could videotape the women for my documentary, but that prior to distribution, I needed their approving sign-off. I wasn't willing to drop the film project over this. I had spent months researching the issue and corresponding with the women whom I planned to interview. When prison officials sent me the written agreement, I crossed out the language about final approval, initialed and signed it, and mailed it back. I notified the warden that I had official permission, recruited my crew, and we set shooting dates.

Warden Cranford then denied me permission to videotape the women in their prison dormitories or at their job posts. I would only be allowed to interview them in an empty classroom in a separate building. I thought, how can I make a documentary film if all the audience sees is talking heads? Wouldn't I simply be editing a series of interviews together? Was this limitation designed to dissuade me from making the film?

I wrote her a long letter explaining how critical it was that the film show the women in their everyday prison lives. She wouldn't budge, except to allow me to take still photographs of each of the women in posed positions following the interviews. In the end, I used those stills, video exteriors of the prison, and family photos of the women and made the movie the best I could. Titled *Stories from the Riverside*, the film was one of the first to look at the self-defense angle of domestic homicide by women. Fortunately, it was picked up by a reputable educational distributor and used widely by organizations working to educate the public about family violence.

My next film was a prison story I knew would never be told on film, except by a filmmaker like me – green, passionate about the subject, and

eager to sink my teeth into a serious production. Had I known the level of difficulty the film presented I don't think I would have taken it on. Thankfully, eagerness trumped good sense, because the film was ultimately broadcast nationally on PBS and honored by national organizations.

Before it was finished it had at least three working titles – but *Writ Writer* stuck. It is a historical documentary about the civil rights era prison reform litigation in Texas prisons and tells the history primarily from the prisoners' perspective. It offers a powerful view of the transformation of one state prison system during the 1960s, as prisoners nationwide began to enjoy greater access to federal courts as a result of several Supreme Court rulings.

The central figure in the history is a prisoner named Fred Arispe Cruz, who waged a legal battle on several fronts against the Texas Department of Corrections in the 1960s. In a larger sense, Cruz fought to sever the roots of plantation slavery that had shaped the Texas prison system since its founding. His determination earned him long bouts of solitary confinement and other retaliatory punishments.

To portray the atmosphere of Texas prisons in the fifties and sixties I would use both archival film footage and modern-day film footage shot by me and my crew. To do that, I needed permission from the prison system to film inside the walls and fences. This time, I went straight to the top and met with the executive director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to request permission to film. He granted it and instructed me to work out the particulars with the Institutional Division director and the Public Information office. By the time I had my first meeting with my assigned PI officer, I had spent months waiting for access, and it would still take another three months to get shooting dates set.

This time, I was able to interview two prisoners who knew Cruz while incarcerated in the sixties and film general prison activity inside the Ellis Unit, in the cotton fields, inside the gin and in the gym. The footage would cut interchangeably with archival film of the fifties, sixties and seventies. It would enhance the visual and artistic quality of the film, making it more attractive to national distributors. In turn, millions of people might eventually see *Writ Writer* and learn of Cruz's efforts.

The most frustrating experience in making *Writ Writer* was obtaining mug shots of prisoners featured in the film. These are public records, and the TDCJ had released paper copies of them to me. When I asked for the actual photos, and agreed to pay for the cost of providing them, two officials, one

who said no and the other who said yes, spent a year bouncing me back and forth. It was an enormous waste of my time and money, and an example of how prison administrators dissuade film producers because they can. In desperation I contacted an advisor who happened to know the chief counsel at TDCJ and offered to call him. He graciously heard my grievance and instructed the records officials to let me have the photos. Game over.

Needless to say, these two officials were not happy with me and dragged their heels when I called to make arrangements to photograph the microfilmed mugs, on site in Huntsville, three hours drive-time away. When I arrived, neither of the two records officials were available. A state employee showed me the cubicle where the microfilms were waiting. I checked to see if everything had been pulled and discovered that several mug shots were missing. I think this was their revenge. One of the missing mugs was of a famous and notoriously violent building tender – a prisoner recruited by the warden to act as a guard over other prisoners. This prisoner “knew where the bodies were buried”. Even 25 years after his death, the “good old boys” of the prison system still guarded his image, part of the sordid history of the TDCJ. No matter how long it might take and what obstacles I had to overcome, the story I was telling was part of that history and needed to be told.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susanne Mason's new documentary *Writ Writer* was broadcast nationally on the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* in Summer 2008 and received the prestigious 2009 Silver Gavel Award from the American Bar Association. She has served as associate producer of a variety of PBS documentaries, including *Are the Kids Alright?*, *Struggle in the Fields*, *Songs of the Homeland*, and *Go Back to Mexico!* Mason received a Silver Apple from the National Educational Film & Video Festival and a Director's Choice Award from the Black Maria Film & Video Festival, among other honors, for her film, *Stories from the Riverside* (1993), a 28-minute documentary about domestic homicide from the perspective of three women incarcerated for murdering their abusive husbands.

For more information, please visit:
www.writwritermovie.com
www.newday.com/films/writwriter.html