ALSO FEATURING
UTFI'S latest film
Matthew McConaughey
RTF Scholarships
AND MORE

tattooed UNDER FIRE
RTF filmmaker Nancy Schiesari looks at today's soldiers and their tattoos
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Greetings from the Radio-TV-Film department and Happy 2009! We've had a busy fall, offering an innovative digital media master class (under Geoff Marslett's thoughtful guidance), adding fresh classes examining the Internet and politics, and organizing some new initiatives. For example, we're doing a joint screening of student work (UT and Rice Universities) at the Rice Media Center in Houston (Feb. 13) and we're hosting a student-curated screening in New York (Feb 18) as part of the Anthology Film Archive "NEWFILMMAKERS" series. David Mamet is coming to spend some time with some lucky students, and Evan Shapiro of the Independent Film Channel and the Sundance Channel will be here to give a Mavericks Lecture, sponsored by the Cable Center.

We've also created a new endowment to offer a scholarship in the memory of former professor Nick Cominos, who passed away last year. This scholarship will support students who want to produce documentaries on social issues, topics dear to Nick's heart. In this issue you will see an article on Nick and the new endowment, as well as an article on the Drago Spirit of Life endowment, another scholarship that has been instrumental in helping students undertake their creative work. We have Entertainment Partners to thank for still another scholarship that joins a small but much needed group of scholarship opportunities. In an accompanying article several students thoughtfully contributed their stories on how important scholarship support has been to their studies here. In an era of increasingly tight budgets, we're so pleased to see how many people are contributing to both our undergraduate and graduate programs. (If you're interested in donating to this scholarship, or any other of our scholarships, please see our department web page: http://rtf.utexas.edu)

You also can catch up on Paul Steklar's and Nancy Schiesari's latest projects and send your best wishes on to Program Administrator par excellence Susan Dirks and Distinguished Senior Lecturer Robert Foshko, both of whom retired in January 2009. We will miss them dearly but know they'll be following the department's progress from not too far away.

As always, stay in touch and let us know what you are up to.
THAT'S A WRAP
UTFI PRODUCES FIRST ALL-STUDENT FEATURE FILM

BY WUNMI BAKARE

The University of Texas Film Institute (UTFI) began filming its first all-student feature film, Dance with the One, during the summer of 2008 with the help of more than 60 students from six schools across campus. This was the first film produced through UTFI’s Feature Film Lab, a two-year, five-semester non-profit program designed to train UT Austin students in all phases of professional feature filmmaking.

UTFI is reinventing the film school model by incorporating the production of feature films into the curriculum and training students in six areas of specialization: producing, directing, editing, cinematography, production design and sound.

“Dance with the One is about a 20-year-old boy who lost his childhood coming from a dysfunctional family,” says the film’s executive producer Alex Smith, a Michener Center for Writers graduate (M.F.A. ’96). “He makes bad choices but is able to save his little brother from the sins of his father by becoming strong and showing brotherly love. The film shows potential for a family that gets healed. The strength of the writing is engaging, funny, hard-hitting, and emotional at its core.”

Joshua Smith Henderson, of the Michener Center (M.F.A. ’06), wrote Dance with the One with Jon Marc Smith. The film is directed by Mike Dolin, a Michener Center graduate (M.F.A. ’07) who has been a writer and director in the UTFI Feature Film Lab.

“Jon Marc Smith and I were inspired by a few kinds of Austin, Texas,” Henderson says. “The psychedelic cowboy, the successful Mexican-American businessman, the washouts and drug casualties, and finally the children of such people.”

RTF professor Tom Schatz, executive director of UTFI, Alex Smith, and Bryan Sebok oversaw production.

“The script began as one of eight selected for a Fall 2007 screenwriting lab, which culminated in a fully cast, public reading,” Schatz says. “It was one of four scripts selected to move on to the spring production lab where teams of student directors, producers, actors, cinematographers, and production designers cast and shot key scenes from the scripts to better explore the films’ characters, tone, look, and market viability.”

RTF graduate student Marcel Rodriguez was the director of photography. RTF senior Sam Avila was the art director and College of Fine Arts graduate Yvonne Boudreaux was the production designer.

“This film took the lead because of the performance aspect,” Boudreaux says. “Mike Dolin and I had a really good foundation during pre-production, especially when we were on location scouts. Everyday, I had to stay on top of the three aspects of production design: the present, which is on set; the past, which is wrapping out the location that was seen before; and the future, which is what will be seen tomorrow.”

As production designer, Boudreaux, along with cinematographer Marcel Rodriguez, created a canvas for the actors based on the director’s needs for the space.

“We save a lot of time by having good communication among the director, the cinematographer, and the production team,” Boudreaux says.

The production process spanned both summer sessions, with full-scale pre-production taking place in the first session and five weeks of principal photography during the second session. The crew included over 60 graduate and undergraduate students from RTF, College of Fine Arts (Theater and Dance), School of Architecture, McCombs School of Business, School of Law, and the Michener Center.

Professionals from the local filmmaking community mentored students in each production department. These included producer Elizabeth Avellán (Desperado and Once Upon A Time in Mexico), casting director Beth Sepko (Office Space and Miss Congeniality) and actress Dana Wheeler-Nicholson (Tomatstone and Friday Night Lights).

Post-production continued into the fall semester under the supervision of the RTF’s Keefe Boerner, formerly of Troublemaker Studios, who was visual effects coordinator on many Robert Rodriguez films. During the Spring 2009 semester post-production is continuing as part of a post-production course, taught by Bryan Sebok, which features professional sound mentors from the Austin community.

“When success on the film festival circuit or even at the box office would be welcome,” says Alex Smith. “The ultimate goal was to give students an experience they couldn’t get at any other university creating their very own professionally made feature film with industry guidance and mentorship.”

UTFI film institute
utm.utexas.edu
PHOTOGRAPHS

OPPOSITE PAGE (in order from left to right): RTF alumnus and B-Camera First Assistant Travis Krumm, RTF student and 2nd AC Mike Farber, and RTF alumnus and First Assistant Camera Brian Nelligan prepare to shoot a scene with actors Gabriel Luna and MFA acting student Xochilt Romero.

Photograph: Tom Schatz

TOP: B-Camera Operator and RTF student Drew Daniels contemplates the next shot.

Photograph: Charles Ramirez Berg

ABOVE LEFT: Director Mike Dolan frames a scene.

Photograph: Charles Ramirez Berg

ABOVE RIGHT: Executive Producers Tom Schatz and Alex Smith and Producer Bryan Sebok discuss an important step in the film’s production.

Photograph: Charles Ramirez Berg

MIDDLE LEFT: RTF alumnus and Camera Operator Rick Diaz strikes a pensive look.

Photograph: Charles Ramirez Berg

MIDDLE RIGHT: Cinematographer Marcel Rodriguez casts a watchful eye during a scene break.

Photograph: Charles Ramirez Berg

Actor Gabriel Luna shows affection for Michener Center Graduate and Director Mike Dolan’s directorial style.

Photograph: Tom Schatz
Alum Discusses Latest Independent Film with RTF Students

BY CHRIS MARGRAVE

When RTF alumnus Matthew McConaughey chose to premier his latest film, "Surfer, Dude," in Austin in September 2008, he did so with a select number of RTF students in mind. Earlier in the summer, the actor, avid UT football fan, and now with "Surfer, Dude," first-time producer, personally arranged a workshop with around forty RTF advanced production students to discuss the ins and outs of making an independent film.

Hosted by RTF professor Tom Schatz, who taught McConaughey during his time in the Department (89-93), the intensive master class offered the students a rare glimpse into the evolution of a film from its inception to its national release. In advance of his campus visit the week of the premier, McConaughey provided the students several versions of the film's script, a copy of the film's budget, and other pre- and postproduction materials related to the creation of the film. As the last step before the master class, the students were allowed to view "Surfer, Dude" before its worldwide premier at the Paramount Theater.

To assure that the experience for the students would be optimal, McConaughey requested that the workshop, which took place in Studio 4D, be a press-free zone to reduce potential distractions. The event also included the film's director S.R. Bindler ("Hands on a Hard Body") and co-producers and brothers Mark and Gus Gustawes. In all, they spent nearly three hours chatting with professor Tom Schatz and answering students' questions about the making of "Surfer, Dude."

For the fifteen years following his graduation from UT, McConaughey made a name for himself acting in big budget Hollywood movies, from his breakout performance in "Time to Kill" to his surefire roles as leading men in romantic comedies.

Speaking of the latter, McConaughey joked to the gentlemen in Studio 4D that though the standard attire in the romantic comedy is often a baby blue v-neck sweater, he's lobbying hard for the more manly navy blue.

Deciding on a character's wardrobe or hairstyle—McConaughey mentioned the displeasure the studio executives expressed to him when he shaved his head for his role as a dragon slayer in "Reign of Fire"—are small decisions that are parts of the greater whole of a film's production. Though McConaughey has enjoyed his acting career, he's longed to get his "hands back into the clay" and have "full creative control."

The summer before his senior year at UT, McConaughey acted in Richard Linklater's "Dazed and Confused." Working on Linklater's iconic film, and playing the iconic role of Wooderson, not only launched McConaughey's acting career, it introduced him to the challenges and triumphs involved in producing an independent film.

Backed financially by the money he's earned as an actor and pooling from his years of experience working in films, particularly while at UT, McConaughey started a production company called "J. Living (Just Keep Living)" that he hopes
will enable him to work with the clay again as he did during his time in the Department.

Tom Schatz asked his former student if making *Surfer, Dude*, the first film fully produced by JK Living Productions, was worth the trade-off of only being responsible for one’s acting performance.

“Absolutely,” remarked McConaughey, who in addition to lead actor and co-producer served as the film’s music director. “But it’s hard to produce a film. There’s a definite buzz but it’s hard. It’s the most customized creative adventure I’ve ever been involved with.”

McConaughey added that he experienced more creative growth doing *Surfer, Dude* than in ten other films he acted in back to back.

Though his acting career has transformed him into an international celebrity, McConaughey was eager to share his experiences about the making of *Surfer, Dude* and the reason for initiating the RTF workshop.

“We didn’t come here to say, This is how you make an independent film,” McConaughey said, concluding in the same candid, laid back tone that permeated the evening. “We came to simply share how we did it… Regardless of whether you liked the film or not.” McConaughey said, “we just want to share our experience and hope it can help all you in your filmmaking careers.”

R

TF alumnus Bryan Bertino is refreshingly unsparing with regard to his meteoric rise to success. Based on the box market triumph of *The Strangers*, Bertino’s writing and directorial début that with regard to its budget grossed the most profit of any film during 2008, the former student writer in RTF Equipment Checkout has earned a multi-million deal to write two more films for Rogue Pictures. For Bertino, however, the road to Rogue was paved with years of late night writing sessions and a steady resolve to stick out his dream.

Speaking to RTF associate professor Richard Lewis’ Introduction to Screenwriting class in September, Bertino matter-of-factly recapped the sequence of events that led from his days as a director of photography as a student in the Department, to winning a script competition in Los Angeles and having it bought by Universal Pictures, to the years of waiting while the script lingered in the limbo of Hollywood pre-production.

Universal eventually shuffled Bertino’s story, a thriller about a couple fighting for their lives in a home invasion, to Rogue Pictures, a genre company under Focus Features that’s produced films such as *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*. When Rogue was unable to find a suitable director for the film—“They looked at plenty of directors with much bigger names and more experience than me,” said Bertino—they called in the writer to get a better feel for the vision of the film. Following that meeting, Rogue promptly offered Bertino the director’s chair—without even a student film reel to his credit, much less any experience directing a Hollywood feature picture.

“Right then I went out and bought a book on directing by Sydney Lumet,” Bertino deadpanned to the class.

Was it not strange to go from relative anonymity and having no experience to directing an established actress like Liv Tyler, one of *The Strangers’* co-stars? Bertino admits it was odd to suddenly be calling the shots, but as the writer, he added in his remarks to the class, no one knew the film better than he.

This “insider’s” knowledge also played a valuable role during Bertino’s visit to Richard Lewis’ Intro to Screenwriting course. In the class, burgeoning storytellers learn the basic structure of a screenplay. Examining well-known scripts and viewing the products of those scripts (*Star Wars* and *Robocop*), the students discuss the inner workings of a screenplay. They explore a script’s beats, midway points, moments of exciting action, as well as its three-act structure, the foundational blueprint of most successful Hollywood movies.

In Lewis’ class, the students proffer their opinions about the significant structure points in the script. Then Lewis, usually the last word, posits his expert opinion. With both the writer and director present in the flesh, Bertino represented the authoritative judge to the students’ educated guesses, at times referring to clips of the film that were shown on the large screen of the room.

Good guess, but this is the midway point. Right here is the end of the first act. This is why the story takes a turn here.

Bertino’s visit thus gave the students a unique opportunity to break down the components of a script and hear how those elemental aspects of storytelling evolved into the final Hollywood product.

With the class drawing to a close, someone asked the former RTF student if the story for *The Strangers*, what Bertino refers to as a “horror drama” that attempts to revive the importance of characters in thriller films, was really based on true events, as it’s been marketed in the media. Bertino chuckled and smiled widely.

“Well, someone did knock on my door one night, when my little sister and I were home alone.” But overall, Bertino concluded, displaying a spirit of humility and expediency that should serve him well as he continues on his filmmaking career, “once the movie is made, the director/writer loses control over how the movie is marketed.”

Though the “based on true events” promotional appendage was not his idea, Bertino emphasized to the class that as a writer his central task is to “make sure people fall into the world the film creates.” Gauging from the achievements of *The Strangers*, Bertino is poised to create compelling cinematic worlds for moviegoers to fall into for years to come. He’ll let the studios decide whether or not they’re based on true events.
Conversation with Paul Stekler

FILMMAKER

Q&A

RTF professor Paul Stekler talks about contributing as co-writer on PBS Frontline documentary during a momentous election year

Communique: When did you begin co-writing The Choice 2008 and why did you sign on for the project?

Paul Stekler: I began talking with Frontline in the summer of 2007. They thought that their Choice films, done every 4 years, had gotten a little stale and they were looking to make them more relevant to the actual presidential choice, more than just standard born-in-a-log-cabin bio. I knew that this election was going to be an historic one, with Obama and Clinton looking like they'd be the Democratic nominees and McCain the frontrunner for the GOP. I argued for doing political bio for the candidates, how the two candidates had actually won their nominations, and what choice they offered the voters. After months of planning, that's what Frontline decided to do and they formally offered to have me on the project.

Communique: Describe your experience crafting a cinematic narrative (the unfolding '08 election and its attendant complexities) that was still in motion and had not yet concluded?

Paul Stekler: Well, it was interesting. We didn't know for sure if Obama or Clinton would win, so we did prelim work on both of them. None of the campaigns would permit us until it was clear they'd won, so we couldn't film any Democratic insiders until the summer of 2008. The McCain campaign was also undergoing an internal shakeup, so we never did get some of the insiders. That said, because this film is about the candidates — who they were and how they climbed to the respective top of their parties — we didn't have to worry about the ups and downs of the fall campaign. In any case, I usually take a year to edit my films and with this project we filmed through the summer and then edited the two hour film in less than 10 weeks. Now that was crazy!

Communique: How does The Choice 2008 differ from some of your own films?

Paul Stekler: The Choice was much more a journalistic format than my own films, which are more story oriented. The experience of telling stories of course informs both ways of tackling politics on films. But in all of our discussions for a year plus, the idea was to put these candidates and the campaign into a story form. That's the way to get and keep a large audience. It's also the way that most people understand elections and the race between candidates. Mike Kirk, Frontline's top director, did a great job visually piecing together a compelling story.

Communique: To what extent do you think The Choice 2008 made an impact on the actual outcome of the election?

Paul Stekler: I think this whole election ended up being about Barack Obama. If he was deemed acceptable, given President Bush's unpopularity and the state of the country, he'd win. If not, he'd lose. I think our film did a good job of presenting him as the calm, cautious, and politically savvy politician that he is. As such, with such a large national audience, I suspect the film probably helped him. That said, many many people told me how sympathetic a character John McCain was in our film. His problem, as the film pointed out, was being caught between the independent that so many people admired and being tied to an unpopular administration. I think The Choice did a great job of really illustrating both men and the race.

Communique: What will you remember most from your time working on this film?

Paul Stekler: This was an amazing election and I'm really happy to have had the chance to help make a film about it while it was happening. We interviewed insiders from both sides of the aisle and some of the best political writers of this generation — many people I've admired for years. For a political junkie, what could be better than that!
FALL 2008 GUESTS

DON HERTZFELDT
is an Academy-Award nominated animator. Before the age of thirty, his films were already the subject of several career retrospectives. The popularity of his work is unprecedented in the history of independent animation and his films are frequently quoted and referenced in pop culture.

BRAD FRIEDMAN
is an animator who has worked on such films as Iron Man and Incredible Hulk.

BOB SABISTON
is the innovator of the distinctive animation technique used in such films as Road Hood, Snack and Drink, Waking Life, and A Scanner Darkly.

RANDY BALSMEYER
is a visual effects artist whose credits include thirteen of Spike Lee’s features and six of the Coen Brothers’ films, as well as films by Robert Altman, Bernardo Bertolucci, David Cronenberg, Hal Hartley, Mike Nichols, Martin Scorsese, and Wayne Wang.

THE OCTOPUS PROJECT
is an acclaimed Austin musical group known for its imaginative use of animation during live shows and in its videos.

LANCE MEYERS
is an animator who has worked on such films as Space Jam, Anastasia, Quest for Camelot, Prince of Egypt, and A Scanner Darkly.

ADDE WAGENKNECHT
is an artist exploring generative art, architecture, industrial design, sustainable design, new media and open source software and hardware.

CARLOS GUÍDES
is an interactive music composer who was born in Portugal in 1968. He has composed music for film, dance and theater, traditional instrumental and electronic music, and interactive installations.

LISA OSBOURNE
is the supervising producer of the Digital Content Lab at the American Film Institute, an incubator for next-generation digital entertainment products.

DAN JOHNSON
is a writer, director, and animator of many acclaimed animated projects.
Sitting in the chairs at River City Tattoo, under needles abuzz with ink, the soldiers openly profess their patriotism, share their secrets, and confess their fears. Each soldier’s story is an evocative, poignant and highly personal look at the human and cultural cost of war. With an official military dress code that celebrates the uniformity of appearance, soldiers look to their bodies as their own personal landscape to express their identity. Though they are faithful members of unified battalions, the soldiers in Tattooed Under Fire reveal a multitude of stories bristling under the surface, a riot of self-expression going on right underneath the uniform.

One trend that presented itself during the making of the film was the contrast in tattoos before a soldier deployed and after he or she returned from combat.

"Before the soldiers left," Schiesari notes, "the young men and women were getting tattoos that helped them cope with their anticipation of what they would encounter in combat. They chose symbols to live up to, images of what they wanted to embody to help them face their fear and protect them against danger."

Some soldiers chose fierce tigers to evoke bravery. Other soldiers were inked with religious symbols to inspire them to try to maintain long-held values that they knew might be tested, even obscured, as they were swept up in the urgency of combat, the ambiguity of a foreign land and an unfamiliar culture.

One soldier, Josh, enlisted one of the River City artists to help design a tattoo for his back that consisted of two ravens intertwined inside a historically based image of a Norse warrior’s shield. The shield embodied Josh’s military/ancestral connection while the ravens represented thought and memory, which Josh says distinguish human beings from animals.

When the soldiers returned from Iraq, Schiesari says, they would often get a commemoration tattoo on their body as a reference to one of their buddies who died. A few soldiers inked themselves with images illustrating their deep cynicism toward their role in the war.

The film relates the story of one soldier who before being deployed is filmed enthusiastically receiving a tattoo on his bicep of a fetus in a blender. While at a hospital in Iraq the soldier held a young Iraqi toddler in his arms and was stunned by the irony of his tattoo, to which he said the little girl was oblivious.

"Before I went to Iraq," the soldier shares after returning from his tour of duty, "I was getting the most offensive..."
tattoo over. I wanted to shock people. Now I don't feel that way anymore. But I'm not going to try and hide it. It's my past and this [my skin] is my storyboard."

Army medical doctor John Perelli, a consultant on the project, says the film is about something deeper than tattoos. Tattooed Under Fire powerfully illustrates, he says, how outsiders have a veiled view of those who experience war first hand.

"The depth of the feeling of getting such a permanent, shocking painting on your body is implicit in being tattooed like this," Perelli says. "If you ask the soldier to 'tell me about the war,' you might not get words. You might just get something like abstract art, some deep symbolism that gets in your face."

"It's my past and this is my storyboard."

In Tattooed Under Fire, Schesari reveals an intimate glimpse of American soldiers before and after serving in Iraq. These young men and women who volunteered to serve in the military often return from war changed in ways only their fellow soldiers can grasp. Through the creative and sometimes subversive act of tattooing, the soldiers construct a narrow bridge to the "outside" world. This is who I am. This is what I went through.

By showing how the soldiers employ their skin to assert their individuality and identity and by providing these young men and woman a chance to articulate their place in a world in which war is an unavoidable fact, Tattooed Under Fire ably serves as the other half of the bridge, meeting the soldiers where they are and presenting them faithfully to the world.

PRODUCTION CREDITS
Editor: Christina Kim (RTF alum)
Executive Producer: Alison Repper
Co-producer: Laura Sobel
Associate producer: Carol Geiger

Cinematographers: (all RTF alums):
Nancy Schisian, Librado Lozano, Iskra Vatseva, Nati Ganen, Marco Stumic, Hans Liebing, Kendra Doherty, David Blue Garcia, Billy McCartney, Christina Kim, Bennet Garrison

Sound: Martin Peterson, Ben Lazard
Sound mixer, engineer: Marty Lester

An ITVS/KIRU UCNS co-production with executive producer Bill Stotesbury and co-producer Meredith Holsey.

Website (designed by Cecy Cornea (RTF alum)): http://tattooedunderfire.com
My wife Hanna and I created the Drago Spirit of Life Award to commemorate the life of our son Gregory, who we lost to cancer a few years ago when he was 33-years old. We were looking for a way to fulfill a promise I made to Greg on the day his doctor told him he was terminal – I promised we would never let him be forgotten. The scholarship has helped me fulfill that promise.

Greg was a nice guy, in the prime of his life, someone you couldn't help but love. From the time he was a small child, he was very engaging and could easily talk with adults about a number of subjects. In spite of possessing an excellent mind, Greg did terrible in school. He never went to college and ended up in a number of blue-collar jobs before finding himself working for a company that ran and operated nightclubs and a small radio station. He took a position with this company on the island of St. Croix in the Virgin Islands and within a short time became a popular on-air radio personality with his own afternoon “drive-time” show. When he returned to the mainland, Greg worked as a nightclub emcee and entertainer for the same company.

As he matured and especially when his illness grew worse, Greg expressed regret about not attending college and said that if he had and because of his love for radio, he would have wanted to attend UT and study in the RTF department. After Greg passed away, I searched for an appropriate way to commemorate his life and to give meaning to it.

For us, the choice was easy. Though I graduated from the UT School of Architecture, this scholarship was about Greg, not me. As part of a university that would always exist, the Radio-Television-Film department seemed a fitting place to celebrate our son’s memory.

Each year, my wife and I host a simple lunch to meet the scholarship recipients. We ask the students what they want to do with their lives. Some have very specific plans for their futures and others have yet to arrive at that point. We tell them a little about Greg and ask them to think of him when they feel down and tired of studying or when they want to drop out of school all together. We encourage them to finish their degree, because to Hanna and I, they represent a living part of our son.

Meeting the students has helped in our grieving process and has given us the opportunity to meet some really great young people from all walks of life. Some of the students even stay in contact with us for quite a while after they finish at UT. For Hanna and I, every time we hear from one of the students, it makes us think of our son and understand that through these young students, he lives. We enjoy the knowledge that something we and our son, did has helped a number of young people achieve their dream.

One story particularly embodies Greg’s enthusiasm for life that as well as inspiring the name of the scholarship inspires us to this day.

Our final months with Greg showed us what a strong person he was. On the day he was pronounced terminal after over a year of treatment, we all embraced in a flow of tears at the hospital. None of us had faced this type of tragedy before, so none knew what to do or what to say. We drove home very quietly with no conversation. When we arrived at our house, I pulled the car into the driveway and turned off the engine. Finally, Greg’s voice came from the back seat of the car.

“Well, I guess you know what this means, don’t you?”
“No,” I responded sadly, “what does it mean?”
“From here on in,” he said, “I get the remote.”

Naturally we all laughed because no one expected this level of humor at the time. Later, I realized Greg did that for my wife and me. Humor was his tool and he used it to ease the unbelievable pain we were feeling. Even while staring down death he embodied a generous spirit of life.

Through this scholarship, we’re able to see students accomplish their dreams and catch that same spirit of life that Greg demonstrated even up to his final days. For us, helping the students helps our son live on.
RTF Scholarship Recipients Report In

CAITLIN WITTLEF
JLF Fly Endowed Presidential Scholarship in Communication

This past semester, my scholarship has helped me pay for my tuition. I am enrolled in classes that have advanced me along my track as an RTF and journalism double major and that have enriched my life. My media studies course on the effects of globalization around the world has really opened my eyes to both the problems and positive aspects of this modern phenomenon, and I feel much more informed about globalization’s effects on media. My journalism course about publishing for the web has given me new vital skills; I can now use Twitter, Google feeds, YouTube, and Wordpress for journalistic purposes, essential skills I’ll use after I graduate. My honors symposiums have promoted interesting and insightful discussion, and reporting on the courts and the election this year for my intermediate reporting course were two of my favorite experiences. I am excited to continue learning in the beautiful city of Austin for two more semesters. I can’t wait to see what else I will learn!

NOLIC TAN
The Entertainment Partner’s Scholar for Production Excellence

Throughout my college career I have had the opportunity to work on a variety of projects. From graduate thesis films to interning on a feature film, I’ve gained experience in many different areas of filmmaking—working in craft services and the art department, casting extras, operating cameras, toiling as grip and production assistant, and last but not least working in post-production. It was through these experiences that I discovered my passion for filmmaking and most of all my love of film editing. While I love being in the midst of the chaos of production—I have fond memories of working on set—there is nothing like being confined in a low-lit, windowless room piecing together a story; it’s just you, the footage, and a cup of coffee. It is this fascination with piecing together a story that has led me to pursue my last semester at UT enrolled in the UTSC program. I feel that the experiences I have gained as a student in the RTF program have prepared me for the film industry, no matter what area of filmmaking I end up pursuing and it is thanks to the Entertainment Partner’s Scholarship that I now have the opportunity to go out to L.A. and begin my career as an editor.

SOHAM MEHTA
Warren Saakeen Endowed Presidential Fellowship

The support I received from the Warren Saakeen Endowed Presidential Fellowship will be fully applied towards my graduate thesis film. Even when using film equipment from school and with all of the crew and actors volunteering their time, a narrative film shot on 16mm film can easily cost well above $10,000. I’ve spent the fall semester writing the script. I will enter pre-production this spring and hope to shoot in May 2009. What began as a story set entirely in Austin has turned into a road trip film to New Mexico. A recently arrived Indian-American family wants to celebrate Diwali as it would be celebrated in India—with fireworks. Trouble is, fireworks cannot be purchased in Texas in November. I will still try to shoot the bulk of the film in Austin. Pretty much all of the interiors can be shot locally. However at some point, I will have to take the cast and a stripped-down crew on the road. The Fellowship funds alleviate some of the financial burden so that I can let the story dictate where it needs to go as I’m writing rather than constantly limiting it because of financial considerations. At least a little bit. But any amount is greatly appreciated.

Fund Created in Honor of Nicholas Cominos

This past year the Department lost a great friend and colleague with the passing of former Department of Radio-Television-Film senior lecturer Nicholas Cominos. The decorated WWII veteran and passionate teacher retired in 1998 after 17 years of service to the Department and died peacefully last March in his California home at the age of eighty.

To honor his contribution and commitment to the Department and its students, a scholarship has been established in his name. The fund will assist students in the Department of Radio-Television-Film in a way that honors Nick’s commitment to educating and caring for people. This new scholarship will provide valuable support to students engaged in documentary projects that have as their subject a humanitarian focus.

The initial creation of the scholarship fund was made possible by the generous contributions of Nick’s wife Joan Cominos, Nick’s immediate and extended family, the Kithenian Society of California, and other close friends and colleagues of Nick’s, including former student Robert Rodriguez, whose comic strip (below) aptly captures Nick’s lively eyebrow. The Department is thankful for their deep show of support and hopes to build on their generosity by raising additional funds so that the fund can be converted into a permanent endowment. By raising further support, the Department will be able to honor its great friend and colleague and make a lasting impact on RTF students.

If you would like to join those who’ve already demonstrated their support and make a contribution to the Cominos Endowment, you may donate online (http://rtf.utexas.edu/cominos_fund.html) or send your tax-deductible donations to:

Director of Development
College of Communication
The University of Texas at Austin
1 University Station, A0000
Austin, TX 78712

Please make your check payable to the University of Texas and note that it is for the Nicholas Cominos Endowment.
It's an expected right of passage for graduate students: a road of long hours and little pay, grading papers and crunching numbers for faculty research projects—all on the way to an advanced degree. Graduate students in the RTF department, however, have discovered one more project—one that gives them recognition and satisfaction.

In October of 2004, graduate students Avi Santo and Chris Lucas, busy with coursework and assisting faculty, noticed the landscape of television and new media changing at a faster rate than scholarship in the field. They realized by the time articles on television and new media appeared in dust-covered volumes lining the shelves of faculty offices around the world, they were already outdated.

Santos and Lucas plus a cadre of fellow graduate students, decided to create a journal that would respond to these rapid shifts and developments in television and new media—bypassing the conventions that slow the production of a traditional journal. The end result was Flow—a journal of television and media studies published entirely online, and edited exclusively by volunteer RTF graduate students.

Flow does away both with the printing process that can delay the arrival of new scholarship and the extensive peer-review process typical of academic print journals. In living up to its name, Flow was able to publish in weeks what might have taken years to publish in traditional print journals.

Produced twice monthly throughout the academic year, and monthly during the summer, Flow publishes 1,000-word essays from leading scholars in a range of media studies disciplines. It also accepts open submissions for longer-form feature articles. Since its founding, seven volumes and over 550 articles have been published. Although founders Santo and Lucas are now gone, two graduate students continue to serve each semester as coordinating editors, along with an additional 20-30 other graduate student editors, who work with the journal's marketing, contributors, and Web design.

Jacqueline Vickery, a graduate student and coordinating editor, says working for Flow is a unique opportunity: "It enables students to have one-on-one communication with the top scholars in their field through working with them as contributors."

"Flow has become the dominant electronic journal in media studies," says faculty advisor Michael Kackman, an RTF assistant professor. "Its reach and influence rivals that of the top print journals."

The brief format and conversational nature of the articles help it find a large audience. Kackman estimates each issue of Flow is viewed by a minimum of 5,000 readers, and the website now averages 30,000 visits per month, from every state in the U.S. and over 60 countries.

"Because of the unique nature of Flow's short essays, it has been especially effective in undergraduate classrooms," Kackman says. "Articles have been included in dozens of college media studies syllabi. Flow has never been a narrowly academic site—it's not just for scholars talking to one another. It's used by secondary school teachers, fans, and other members of the public interested in our contemporary media culture."

Kackman feels by bringing together industry professionals, TV critics, fans, activists and scholars, Flow can help facilitate better relationships among the various groups. Most issues feature articles on a diverse array of topics in media studies, including reviews of TV shows such as "Mad Men" and commentary on video game censorship issues, or analysis of policy decisions and lawsuits against YouTube.

In addition, several former graduate coordinating editors, and faculty advisor Kackman, edited an anthology of original essays, entitled FlowTV: Essays on a Convergent Medium, by former Flow columnists that was published in 2008 by Routledge/Taylor & Francis.
**FUTURE PLACES FESTIVAL**

Digital Media & Local Cultures in Portugal

In October 2008, RTF Department faculty and staff took part in Future Places, a digital media festival in Porto, Portugal, produced by the UT Austin/Portugal CoLab program. With the theme of "Digital Media and Local Cultures," the festival promoted Portugal as a presence on the international digital media scene, showcased examples of digital media from around the world, and hosted a series of specialized workshops, lectures, events, and performances.

Artists, advanced media production students, and technology and design professionals submitted work to the festival’s competition in July 2008, proposing live performances, experimental digital videos, prototypes of new social interactive performances, experimental digital videos, prototypes of new social networking platforms and media distribution software and artistic installations. Sixty-three complete entries were received and were vetted over the summer by an international review panel which included RTF faculty member Kathleen Tyner and Hugh Forrest, a principal coordinator of the South by Southwest Interactive media festival.

The top three prize-winning entries included a project featuring an artificial organism that speaks to environmental stimuli, an installation evoking a time machine, and an audio-visual performance piece.

Future Places also hosted three workshops, free of charge to participants, addressing different topics in digital media theory, design, and production. The sessions ranged from one to three days. In one workshop, participants were able to work with Arduino, a physical computing platform popular with artists and designers. Another series focused on interface design for mobile devices, as participants spent three days collaborating to create new tools for mobile platforms.

Finally, a third workshop examined the dynamic nature of digital media, and the promises and challenges of creating media in an interactive environment.

The Festival also featured a series of talks by scholars, professionals, and artists, where they addressed issues of preserving local culture, creating repositories of personal and collective social memory, and working as an artist, all through the lens of digital media. Speakers included Caroline Frick, founder of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image and assistant professor with the RTF department, as well as several other notable innovators in the field of digital media studies and performance.

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**DIGITIZING THE PAST**

Texas Archive of the Moving Image Announces New Initiatives

Founded by RTF professor and UT alumna Caroline Frick, the Texas Archive of the Moving Image (TAMI) supports the discovery, preservation, digitization, and dissemination of seldom-seen images of Texas such as home movies, educational films, training videos, and locally produced film and television. A new partnership with the Office of the Governor’s Texas Film Commission has allowed TAMI to embark upon several new initiatives to better preserve and celebrate Texas’ unique media legacy.

As part of the partnership with the state, TAMI is offering free digitization services to individuals and organizations with Texas-related film and video that can be shared via TAMI’s online library. The library, which offers streaming videos of Texas-related moving images, already has over 300 videos ranging from newsreels of the 1900 Galveston Hurricane to a local 1966 television interview with the cast of Batman: The Movie to Spit Farther, a short documentary on Luling, Texas by RTF Professor Paul Stakler. Using Web 2.0 technology, a video tagging system allows viewers to contribute to the descriptions of these videos, involving them directly in the creation and maintenance of the library.

In the spring of 2009, TAMI will launch the Texas Film Round-Up, a traveling media education and preservation program. In addition to hosting educational programs on moving image preservation and Texas film history, the Round-Up will also provide on-site digitization of film and video for those interested in participating in the library. The Texas Film Round-Up’s first stop is in Austin. It then travels to the Lower Rio Grande Valley in May and to Lubbock in July.

To stimulate the use of Texas-related media in the classroom, TAMI is also creating an educational resource kit assisting K-12 teachers in the use of TAMI’s online library to supplement social studies and media literacy. The kit will be released in summer 2009.

If you have any Texas-related video footage that may deepen and broaden the critical understanding of the lives and history of the people of Texas, visit the TAMI website to learn about submitting your media.

http://www.texasarchive.org

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**IMAGES**

ABOVE LEFT: BELLE FAMILY
Young Walter Bell in a scene from his family’s home movie collection depicting daily life in 1950s Gatesville, Texas.

ABOVE MIDDLE: CATWOMAN
Austin television personality Joan Boren interviews actress Lee Meriwether (Catwoman) before the Austin premiere of the 1960 film Batman: The Movie.

ABOVE: LJBJ and JFK
Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy urge Texans to "put their confidence in the Democratic party" in this 1960 campaign footage shot by Austin cinematographer Gordon Willison.

All images courtesy of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image
RTF Alumini is Robert Rodriguez To Be Speaker at the 126th Spring Commencement

Rodriguez, who wrote the script for his first feature film, El Mariachi, while in the RTF department in the early 1990s, will deliver the 126th Spring Commencement on May 23, 2009. The success of that 1993 film, produced when he was only 23 years old, began a career that has earned him awards, honors and critical acclaim for his creative and innovative skills in the direction and production of films. El Mariachi, which Rodriguez wrote, directed, shot, edited, and sound-recorded for only $7,000, won him the coveted Audience Award for best dramatic film at the Sundance Film Festival, as well as the hearts of audiences in Munich, Edinburgh, Deauville and Yubari (Japan) festivals. Although he had deferred completion of his graduation requirements to work on film projects, Rodriguez returned to his studies and received his bachelor's degree in science in Radio-Television-Film from the University of Texas at Austin in summer 2008.

“We learn many things from one another at a great university,” said William Powers Jr., president of the University of Texas at Austin. “From one of our former students, Robert Rodriguez, we have learned the importance of pursuing our dreams and staying true to our convictions. Robert’s talent, creativity, resourcefulness and tenacity have propelled him to the top of the highly competitive motion picture industry. We are honored that he will be our speaker for the 126th Spring Commencement.”

As the third of 10 children born to Cecilia and Rebecca Rodriguez of San Antonio, Rodriguez learned to be resourceful at an early age. “When I was five years old,” he said, “I was a child to serve as cast and crew in home movies he filmed with the family video camera. He honed his skills for film production classes in the RTF department, and produced a series of home movies, including Bedhead (1991), a short film featuring his three youngest siblings. The film was honored at many national and international festivals.

While studying in the RTF department, Rodriguez reflected on life with his brothers and sisters as the basis for a graphic novel comic strip, Los Hooligans, which he created and featured in The Daily Texan student newspaper. He also was a student in 1991 when he wrote the script for El Mariachi while stationed at a drug research facility as a paid subject in a clinical experiment. The research money helped finance the $7,000 cost of filming the movie, which he produced in Spanish with hopes of selling it to the Mexican home video market. Instead, Rodriguez signed with a powerful agent at ICM. Columbia Pictures then bought the rights and signed Rodriguez to a two-year writing and directing deal. From that point, his career skyrocketed. Rodriguez wrote about his career experiences in Rebel Without a Crew, a book published by Dutton Press.

Rodriguez went on to write, produce, direct and edit, Desperado (1995), a sequel to El Mariachi, for Columbia. The film introduced American audiences to Antonio Banderas as a leading man, opposite Salma Hayek. Rodriguez also wrote, directed and edited, The Masons, which, Rodriguez he, was to be a part of the Cancina! Film Festival program and screened in and around Austin in 2007.

Most recently, Rodriguez has been in post-production on the film comedy adventure, Shorts, which he wrote, directed, produced, shot, edited and for which he also composed the music. Starring Jon Cryer, William H. Macy, James Spader, and Leslie Mann, Shorts will be released by Warner Bros. in summer 2009.

In 2000, Rodriguez and Elizabeth Avellan founded Troublemaker Studios, their Austin, Texas-based production company for which he is co-owner and president. The studio includes a world-renowned visual effects studio, music and publishing arms. It has played a primary role in making Austin a filmmaking hub.

Rodriguez later created the Spy Kids family adventure series and has been involved in several other film productions, including the acclaimed Sin City. Rodriguez also wrote and directed Planet Terror, which was paired with Quentin Tarantino’s Death Proof as part of the Grindhouse features filmed in and around Austin in 2007.

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Information on the May 2009 commencement ceremony can be found online at:
http://www.utexas.edu/commencement/
2009/graduationschedule.html

RTF ALUMNI
WHAT ARE YOU UP TO?
rtf.utexas.edu/alumni

RTF SPRING EVENTS
David Hammet: 2/5
UT RICE Showcase 2/13
Saddle Up NYC Showcase 2/18
SXSW Film Festival: 3/1-3/21
Master Class with John Pierson Jan-May
Rodriguez at Commencement: 5/23
details at
rtf.utexas.edu
Faculty Profiles

Shanti Kumar

**FIELD OF RESEARCH**
Shanti Kumar's research focuses on Global Media Studies, Cultural Studies, and Indian Cinema and Television.

**RECENT/FORTHCOMING WORK**


**BOOK/FILM RECOMMENDATIONS**

**FAVORITE AUSTIN RESTAURANT**
Clay Pit

Jennifer Brundidge

**FIELD OF RESEARCH**
Jennifer Brundidge’s research and teaching interests lie mainly at the intersection of democratic theory and the empirical study of the contemporary media environment.

**RECENT/FORTHCOMING WORK**
“Political engagement online: do the information rich get richer and the like-minded more similar?” Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics. Eds. A. Chadwick & P. N. Howard. 144-156. With R.E. Rice.


**BOOK/FILM RECOMMENDATIONS**
*Women in Love* (D.H. Lawrence), *Ham on Rye* (Charles Bukowski), and *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy)

*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *A Street Car Named Desire*, *Annie Hall*, *Trainspotting*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, and *Super Bad*

**FAVORITE AUSTIN RESTAURANT**
Uchi & Torchy’s Tacos
Retiring into The Sunset

The Department Bids Farewell to Robert Foshko and Susan Dirks

Robert Foshko, a dedicated and talented member of the faculty who since 1979 has taught both screenwriting and studio production and supervised countless students on many independent projects, retired from teaching in January 2009. In his long tenure in RTF, Bob provided students with the opportunity to train under the guidance of a true professional. Formerly Head of Production for MCA and Head Script Editor for MCA/Revue Productions New York, Bob was for over twenty years a professional writer, script editor, director, and producer for theatrical motion pictures and television.

His production staff and screen credits in New York, Hollywood, and London include work for MCA-Universal, British Lion/Columbia, MGM-TV, and Columbia Pictures/Screen Gems. In addition, he produced or directed over a hundred national television dramatic and documentary episodes in series and specials for CBS, NBC, ABC, and PBS, where he was Executive Producer for Cultural Programming.

His television and film work has received numerous honors from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, multiple CINE Golden Eagle awards, The Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, and the International Festivals of New York and Chicago, among others. He also wrote and edited fiction for Ziff-Davis Publishing, Hillman Periodicals, and King Features Syndicate.

Bob began his second career with RTF almost by accident. While on an extended vacation, he dropped by campus and met the Department Chair, Bob Davis, who took one look at Bob's fabulous credentials and convinced him to “give teaching a try” during the upcoming summer session. Bob must have enjoyed the experience – since he devoted the next sixty semesters to teaching!

Throughout his teaching career, Bob's students have celebrated his classes as among the best they've taken at the University. He is especially renowned for the short videos he and his students have made for numerous sponsors both on and off campus. These range from training videos for corporations such as Dell and IBM, to proceedings of international conferences sponsored by Centers across campus.
A Send Off for Susan

Susan Dirks, the chief operations officer for one of the best Radio-TV-Film programs in the country, retired from the Department in January 2009. At the Vietnam War, a high-achieving young woman from Richardson, Texas decided to attend UT Austin—in part because of Austin's progressive atmosphere, as evidenced by the on-campus anti-war demonstrations shown on television, and also because the university’s size might possibly be able to handle her voracious appetite for learning. Susan’s bibliography, with a weakness for Dickens and an interest in politics was enrolled in the Plan II Honors program. But little did she know at the time that her appreciation for academia would pull her back to the 40 Acres again and again. And while she spent some time managing a local book store, working for a healthcare consulting firm, and traveling the Southeast for CBS News, she inevitably found her way back to campus. We’re all lucky that she did.

For the past 15 years, Susan managed the budget, handled personnel, and oversaw endless departmental projects. Her job required attention to detail, an understanding of people, and an ability to juggle political issues with deftness. Susan did all of this with a smile. Most of the time she meant it.

People tend to resort to metaphor when describing Susan: she is “a calm harbor in the storm” and a “mother hen.” Such praise speaks to Susan’s singular capacity to harmonize her tasks as administrator with her multiple moods of colleague, friend, and occasionally in the role of the Peanuts’ Lucy, wise counselor. Though she will be missed, all who worked or studied in the Department, during Susan’s tenure received an immutable gift in simply having gotten the chance to work along side her.

Susan’s Colleagues Sound in
Sharon Stine
She is the most prepared, organized, planning-oriented person I have ever met. No one else carries around in their head the classrooms one particular faculty member prefers, the childcare schedule of another, the screening schedule of a third, and the parking needs for a guest visitor appearing in yet another class. Susan is the person who knows everyone on campus and who to call in order to get an answer to nearly any esoteric question—and there are a surprising number of esoteric or just plain tough questions: everything from how to persuade a disturbed student to seek help to where childcare is located on campus to how a tenure file should be assembled.

She always has the best Halloween costumes in the office (I seem to remember a pretty convincing bee costume on one occasion, with wings and antennae), and she even extended her costume flair to the Fourth of July when she showed up at a party with a blinding amount of red, white, and blue bunting. She is so good, so diplomatic, so knowledgeable, so efficient, and so thorough, that we do believe the earth will open up and swallow the department when she leaves.

A Former Student Shares

Dear Mr. Foshko,

I was a member of your very first class at UT and ran across you a few years ago in Beverly Hills at "The Grill." I have been in New York for the past 5 years working as the executive producer of "All My Children" for ABC.

I don't often have time to stop and think of my past, but when I do I am reminded of how very inspirational and encouraging you were to me. The hands-on skills and firsthand insight given to me in your classes gave me the tools and confidence I needed to make my first marks in Los Angeles. After freelancing in live variety and award shows almost 27 years ago, I have had the good fortune to have made a great career in daytime drama since 1984.

So, I am sending you a long overdue "Thank you" and extending an invitation next time you might be in New York to say thank you in person.

All the best,
Julie Hanan Carruthers
All My Children | executive producer

SEND A MESSAGE TO
BOB AND/OR SUSAN:
rft.utexas.edu/dirksmissive.html
rft.utexas.edu/foshkissive.html

P.S.

Bert Hendigstad
I have had the pleasure of working with Susan Dirks for over 12 years. Early on, I asked her why she put in the considerable hours that she does and the considerable effort she makes during those hours. The response was, paraphrasing: “Bert, if I didn’t, it would probably end up hurting the students and/or faculty.” What else is there to say?

She also asked, several years ago, that she not be considered for anymore staff awards. This gave the rest of us staff a chance at an award that we otherwise would probably not have had!

Karen Wilkins
I have so much respect and fondness for Susan. She is the foundation of the department. She has a keen sense of the complexities of the personalities involved, and is able to handle multiple political issues with deftness and sensitivity. I cannot imagine the place without her, and am worried the pillars will crumble with her departure.

Richard Lewis and Stuart Kelban
It is a little known fact that when, in 1555, Nostradamus prophesied the end of the world, he was actually referring to Susan Dirks’ retirement from RTF. Susan makes birds and budgets sing, children and chairs smile, dogs and faculty wag their tails. Possessing the smile of Julia Roberts, the brains of Jodie Foster, and the hair of Rita Hayworth, Susan is the leading lady of RTF.

When it comes to the demands of her job, she’s able to demonstrate the killer instinct of a Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction, yet with students and faculty, she’s Julie Andrews from The Sound of Music: the gentle, patient, loving nanny we all wish we’d had as children but still need today. Susan handles every task with grace and elegance, never missing a step, and when we watch her choreograph the never-ending demands of faculty, students, chairs and deans, we’re reminded of Ginger Rogers, who had to do everything Fred Astaire did, but in high-heels and dancing backwards. Susan’s a classic, a star—and in true Hollywood fashion, there will be a sequel in the months ahead, but it will never be better than the original.
John Wayne, in costume as Davy Crockett, on the Brackettville, TX set of his 1960 film The Alamo.