

Documentaries of the World

Abbey Jack Neidik's "Unbreakable Minds" (Formerly "Broken Mind"): From the Heart and Soul

It's four years into the 21st century, and a long way from the era when people with psychological disorders were locked up in nightmarish places that eventually inspired horror movies. Nonetheless, the idea that mental conditions are illnesses like any other, and that paranoid schizophrenics should be treated no differently from diabetics, has not entirely sunk in.

WillPower is a Chicago organization that raises funding to buy houses for small groups of supervised psychiatric patients. When Montreal filmmaker Abbey Jack Neidik asked someone on the housing committee how neighbours react when WillPower moves in, he was disturbed by the answer: "Oh, they hate us. They absolutely go crazy. They get lawyers to try to stop us from going in there."

Randy, Brad, and Rob

Neidik, whose doc *The Love Prophet and the Children of God* played the 1998 WFF, immediately saw a film that would de-mystify and humanize mental illness. With the help of WillPower, he found "articulate onscreen subjects that people would identify with." For the next three years, Neidik followed the lives of Randy, Brad, and Rob, thirtysomething men who are clearly aware of their condition, and put up a struggle to live with it. That's not easy when you hear voices or harbour delusions that Guns 'n' Roses wants you to join them in Hollywood. And that's why struggles like Randy's (he has a job, a girl friend, and he sponsors a third world child) are heroic. When Randy succeeds in moving into his own apartment, his father Allan says that his son "has fought for every single bit of happiness."

When I recently asked Neidik about his experience filming these men for his

new documentary, *Unbreakable Minds*, he lit up. "I found them very special. There's a vulnerability to them, almost a nakedness. They don't have a lot of façades and trips. They have had enough of a time just getting through the day."

For Neidik, it's refreshing to hear people tell you exactly what they're feeling rather than spout facile clichés. "You're getting dialogue unfiltered, straight from their heart and their soul. It made me understand what the film is really about: the mind might be crazy, but the soul isn't."

Remembering a Dream

Neidik shares with his wife and filmmaking partner, Irene Angelico, an intimate approach to the kind of documentaries that get personal. "You have to create trust in your subjects," Neidik continued. "It's almost like a love relationship; they have to be vulnerable to you, open up. You're usually going there for the most important story in their life. You're not going there to ask them about their laundry list."

And once the trust has been won, the creative process takes many twists and turns: "I have a rough story at the beginning," Neidik explained, "and I try to feel out where it's heading. However, often there are difficulties" because people are blocking.

Fortunately, as the process develops, "closed doors lead to new directions, and if you are true to them, you realize where the story is. You've got to decode what's going on, and go with the flow. That's exciting, but it's also nerve-wracking."

At the end of the day, "making a documentary is a bit like remembering a dream. You have an initial inspiration, and there's real truth in it. The rest is foggy, you don't really know. As you move through the filmmaking, and even into the editing, you start saying, Yeah, this is it, and that's really the theme. That's what we want."

The magic moment is the realization, "Yeah, that's how the film always was, and you remember it again."

MAURIE ALIOFF

Unbreakable Minds, formerly *Broken Mind*, screens September 2 and 3.