

MIND OVER MATTER: 'Unbreakable Minds' Screens in the Chicago Area

By Dixon Galvez-Searle

Northbrook, IL-based WilPower, Inc. is hosting the Chicago premier week of "Unbreakable Minds," a documentary that chronicles the lives of three men with serious mental illness. The film, which was shot in the Chicago area over the course of three years, also sheds light on the efforts of WilPower, a community-based organization dedicated to meeting the needs of adults with mental illness.



Brad, from the documentary "Unbreakable Minds"

According to director Abbey Jack Neidik, the idea for "Unbreakable Minds" came from his mother-in-law, WilPower director Lydia Lilienheim. She asked Neidik and his wife, Irene Lilienheim Angelico, to make a film about the organization. That led the couple, which has directed and produced acclaimed documentaries through their company, DLI Productions (Montreal) to go looking for ways to tell the story.

Neidik says he wanted to tackle the subject by investigating the lives of mentally ill individuals as well as their family and friends. In an effort to find interview subjects, the filmmakers met with WilPower's Bret Badgen and came away with roughly ten names, half of whom were women, but most of whom declined to appear in the film. "A lot of these people suffer from schizophrenia and being in front of the camera can be quite intimidating," says Neidik.

Eventually, the filmmakers found three individuals to focus on: Brad, a college student who suffers from schizophrenia; Randy, whose schizophrenia worsens after his doctor prescribes a new medication; and Rob, a former radio DJ with obsessive-compulsive disorder. In addition to the main subjects, the film spends time with family members, friends and WilPower staff members.

Neidik says most of the participants were generous with their time because of a desire to share their stories with the public. He says a lack of public understanding can turn to fear and even hatred, making it difficult for organizations like WilPower to provide basic services like housing. Neidik hopes "Unbreakable Minds" will ease some of that tension. "One of the goals of the film was to break the stigma that surrounds people with mental illness," he says.

The three main characters come across as likeable and articulate, despite their struggles. Neidik says he was surprised and moved by the richness of their everyday lives. "One of the great things about documentaries is you get into people's lives that you'd never get into in that intense [of a] way," he says. While it doesn't skirt the seriousness of mental illness, the film has plenty of positive news to offer. Randy, for example, moves into his own apartment and WilPower overcomes initial opposition to open a new group home.

The film was shot on a Sony PD150 and edited on Avid. Neidik and Angelico collected close to 90 hours of footage, which was pared down to 52 minutes. "Unbreakable Minds" has already shown on Canadian television and at festivals. It has an educational distributor in Filmmakers Library (New York) and a worldwide distributor in the National Film Board of Canada. The participants have also seen it and, according to Neidik, offered an enthusiastic response.

"Unbreakable Minds" will screen October 25, 26 and 27 at the Highland Park Theatre in Highland Park, IL and October 28 at Northwestern University's Block Cinema in Evanston, IL. A panel of film participants and mental health experts will answer audience questions after each screening. The filmmakers will make an appearance at the October 25 screening.