

CHERYL: Wait. No, no, no. I have to stop you 'cause I'm Co-director.

SAM: Co-director, OK.

CHERYL: Yes. So, and it's *Who Am I To Stop It*.

SAM: That's it, yeah. *Who Am I To Stop It*.

[bouncy music]

I'm Sam Gaty, and you're listening to part of a conversation that I had with Cheryl Green who's the Director of *Who Am I To Stop It*. It's a film about loneliness and art, and it was Cheryl's first documentary film. She co-directed it with Cynthia Lopez.

We recorded this conversation at NW Documentary in Portland just as Cheryl was finishing reworking her film into three shorter documentaries that each focused on just one of the characters. And in this interview we focus on just one of these stories, the story of Brandon. Because his story had been expanded, and I was interested in the story of her film project and why they decided to revisit Brandon's story. We started by talking about Cheryl and how she got started with this project in the first place.

[music fades out]

CHERYL: So, I started—as you mentioned, I'm Co-director of this film—so, I paired up with Cynthia Lopez who was already a seasoned filmmaker to work on *Who Am I To Stop It*. And at some point, she had work, other work stuff that was taking her time and her energy. And so, there was this need to shift me into a little more of the duties of co-directing and co-producing. And so, I took the DIY classes after I started making *Who Am I To Stop It*.

SAM: Oh, OK.

BOTH: [chuckle]

CHERYL: Which was amazing because then, I actually had the knowledge and the power to be able to say, no, Cynthia, I can handle this shoot on my own! You can take this shoot off.

SAM: Yeah.

Cheryl came to this project not only as a fairly new filmmaker but also as someone who was new to the community of those with brain injuries. And the film's exploration of how artistic practice helps to support people as they rebuild their world after brain injury was a personal exploration for Cheryl.

CHERYL: I went in with a question that I knew the answer to because I'm somewhat in the community. I've never been institutionalized. I've never lived in a facility like that like Brandon did. But I lost most of my friends. And to be fair, it's not like they all showed up and said, "Ew, you're gross 'cause you have a brain injury. Good-bye." Some of them did. Some of them were scared and creeped out and didn't, were just too uncomfortable with my communication impairments. And some of them, I, as part of my impairments back then, I pushed them away because I was impatient and mean and aggressive and misunderstanding their intentions and hating them. So, there was some mutual we're outta here. But I lost most of my friends.

So, I had to leave work, so I lost my work identity. I wasn't exactly sure if or when I'd get better. So, you...you can have some real injury to your sense of, your personal sense of self and to your social sense of self. And so, you get isolated.

SAM: Yeah.

CHERYL: And then I start, then I became—I didn't become a filmmaker—then I started, I wrote and starred in a film. Well, I'll just write a film about terrible and hard my life is! And it ended up being this comedy. It's very funny.

SAM: I met Cheryl for the first time at Oregon Doc Camp several years ago, just after she had finished her film *Cooking With Brain Injury*. What I remember is that she introduced herself to me as comedian with a brain injury, and at the time I didn't really know what that meant.

CHERYL: The big thing about brain injury is that nobody believes you. So, if you say, "Oh, I struggle with this because of my brain injury," you'll often get either, "No, you don't," or "Oh yeah, I struggle with that too." When they watched *Cooking With Brain Injury*, "Oh, that's what you're going through."

"I've been telling you!!!"

But they can't. It's so hard to hear, for non-disabled people. Disabled people don't care. Like, "Oh, that's what you're going through? Mm. What do you need?" But non-disabled people, especially family members, are so upset that you acquired a disability 'cause we think it's the worst thing in the world that they won't, they won't or can't hear you when you describe it. You put it up on screen in a comedy, and it's much more approachable.

SAM: The work of making the film gave her a new community. And this experience of a real artistic practice helping to overcome the loneliness of life with brain injury was part of the inspiration for the documentary.

CHERYL: Brandon's a really good example I wanna bring up based on what you just said. Because Brandon is surrounded by humans all the time, and so I wanna sorta dig in to why that doesn't cure loneliness. So, in the film, he is living in a supported living facility for people with brain injury. So, that means, I don't know, there's like a dozen or something. He didn't choose any of his roommates or housemates. They are all people with pretty significant impairments from brain injury, so they can't live independently. And there are no other kinds of people who live there. The other part is that there's always a schedule to it. You gotta sign in, you gotta sign out, times in this log book. Like, I can't just—I had to call him and the front office to schedule. I was like, oh man. I gotta call the front office to schedule to see my friend? Gimme a break.

SAM: Yeah.

CHERYL: And you know that those things are there to, ostensibly, to support him, right?

SAM: Right.

CHERYL: But he is completely aware that I don't have that crap in my life. And so, he can see me here just on the other side of this glass wall. I can come and go as I please, and he can't. And he's an adult. Everybody in this facility is an adult, and yes, they need support because of the level of their impairments. But no, they don't want that!

SAM: Yeah.

CHERYL: And so, it does create this isolation and this other-ness. And he was kinda languishing in that facility artistically. He went some places, but he just wanted so much more. And I thought, you know what? Let's do this. Let's partner. Why don't you be in my film?

SAM: In the film there are three stories about three people: Kris, Brandon, and Dani. Kris and Dani both have more complete stories in the film. And it's just one of the hard parts of documentary filmmaking is that life doesn't always provide a timeline of events that's convenient with a production schedule. And so, now that Cheryl is reworking the structure of the feature, and it's created this chance for her to revisit Brandon's story.

CHERYL: You know, it always, when Brandon's final scene in the feature comes up, I always hang my head like, "I'm sorry that's your final scene, Brandon. But you weren't doing anything else, and we had to wrap!" And it's just life. And then, two years after we wrapped—two years, something like that—boom. It's like, have you heard of, I think it's from theater, if you...take a gun out of the drawer in the first act, somebody better shoot it by the second act?

SAM: Yeah.

CHERYL: I wish I had a better analogy than shooting a gun.

SAM: [chuckles]

CHERYL: But anyway! I feel like, like you said, Kris and Dani both say, "You know what I really want?" And then they do it. And it's not like it solves all their problems or radically changes their lives. But they did set out to do something, and they did it. And we don't see that in Brandon's story. And then after we wrapped, he did it. Everything that he talked about in the feature, he did. And more. So, yeah, I just felt so compelled to film a new ending because I didn't think that a short just from the existing footage would be as dynamic. And it wouldn't be fair. 'Cause Brandon does struggle. He comes to every screening, and he watches himself up there. He's like, "Tsk tsk. That guy. Ugh." And he knows—'cause he's told me—he's sitting there. He knows who he is. He knows what he's up to now. And he watches this guy onscreen. He's like, "Come on, old Brandon! What are you talking about?" So, it's been stressful for him to watch his old self onscreen.

SAM: I shared an early edit of this interview with Cheryl, and she suggested that as an ending I might talk about.... Well, I'll just quote her 'cause I think she put it pretty well in the note to me. She said, "You might talk about the idea of how a documentary freezes your life in time, but your life continues. A lot of people who aren't familiar with brain injury think that we don't progress or change. This is another reason people get isolated: your friends get scared of how you are right after the wreck and don't realize that you might change."

And for me, one of the most interesting things about this idea of Cheryl's documentary freezing time is that memory is one of the most common things to slip away after a brain injury, and it's something that both Cheryl and Brandon struggle with. And it occurs to me now that I don't actually know what it's like to watch the film with memory loss. You know, I wonder, do the events unfold as a surprise every time you watch it? Can you even anticipate what's gonna happen, or are just along for the ride with the audience? And can you connect the events in the film to the person you are and the kinda current trajectory of your life? If not, it must be strange to watch yourself as a stranger onscreen, doing things you don't remember. But anyways, that line of thinking is beyond the scope of this interview.

[bouncy music]

If you're curious to see the film the best place to start is to look for it at New Day Films, and Cheryl has also continued to make films, which can be found online. And then of course, if you have your own story to tell, you should drop by NW Documentary. The door is always open. It's a pretty friendly place.

And if you wanna support other people telling their stories, please consider a donation. Thank you for listening.