DISCOVERING GLORIA

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With Discovering Gloria, I aimed to produce a multidimensional portrait of inner-city teacher Gloria Jean Merriex (Gainesville, Fla.), capturing the late Duval Elementary teacher’s transformation into a trailblazing innovator and a national model. I felt compelled politically and aesthetically to craft a work that would render and embody Gloria’s transformation and methods. I sought to employ well-tested filmmaking techniques along with innovations to build the blocks of documentary portraiture until seeing the emergence of a complete, lucid work. In other words, I never intended to create a tribute or a historical footnote but instead to mime a transformational process to form an intervention that stimulates thoughts and discussions among audience members and views and raises questions about the present and future states of our educational system and societal values.

For these reasons, I also spent a great deal of time planning and producing the first public exhibition. I formed a committee of some of the key supporting characters in the film to formulate and execute the most effective
event. I MC’d the 90-minute program at Lincoln Middle School in Gainesville, introducing Alachua County Public Schools Superintendent Dan Boyd, who delivered the opening remarks and spoke about Gloria, whom he knew well. Next, two of Gloria’s former students – Charlie Brown, a University of Florida premed junior, and Jasmine Patterson, a Santa Fe College nursing freshman – performed a quick skit about Gloria and introduced the film. The post-screening panel featured supporting characters from the film who worked closely with Gloria. They included UF Lastinger Center Director Don Pemberton; Prof. Thomasenia Adams, associate dean for research at the UF College of Education; Prof. Elizabeth Bondy, director of the UF College of Education’s School of Teaching and Learning; Alachua County School Board Member Leanetta McNealy; Alachua County Public Schools Fine Arts instructor Angela Terrell; and University of Texas Assistant Prof. Emily Bonner, who flew in to participate in this event.

The public exhibition concluded with 15 of Gloria’s former students performing some of her musical innovations, including the “Math Rap.” They received a standing ovation from the audience of more than 450, which included her family members and friends.
The objective of this Documentary Project in Lieu of Thesis is to produce a tangible multidimensional portrait of a subject (a deceased inner-city teacher, Gloria Jean Merriex) through an innovative methodology that combines research, film, black-and-white photography, color photography, graphics and video footage based on inductive reasoning, storytelling and other techniques.

Crafting a multidimensional portrait of a subject that the artist has never met poses challenges. Drama, which dictates the utilization of conventions that manipulate the audience to feel and think in prescribed ways, often clashes with the creation of realistic portraiture. In other words, capturing reality within this artistic endeavor can prove a futile pursuit. Ancient thinkers recognized this ingrained dichotomy, as illustrated by Aristotle (*Poetics*) and Joseph Campbell (*The Hero With A Thousand Faces*). This is the case even when the storyteller has had the opportunity to spend time observing, documenting and interacting with the subject.

Object representation theory has taught me to avoid confusing the map for the territory. I therefore never seek to tell the so-called “absolute truth.” That would be a maddening pursuit for me and an insult to the audience. I do, however, always strive to create fleshed-out, multilayered characters based on my subjective interpretation of reality.

The challenge of accomplishing this feat with a main character one has never filmed expands vastly within the framework of micro-budget documentary filmmaking. Unlike writing or feature filmmaking, documentary filmmaking demands the concrete realization of visual and auditory authenticity.
Gloria taught fifth-grade math and third-grade reading at Duval Elementary in East Gainesville, Fla.

That is why reenactments, in which documentary directors hire actors to simulate factual scenes, often fall flat. The medium of documentary filmmaking exposes many reenactments for what they tend to be: pale, awkward attempts at presenting the so-called “truth.”

Mainly for the abovementioned reasons, when I started working on *Discovering Gloria*, I set out to make a different film – an observational documentary about an inner-city school striving to sustain its academic excellence after losing its star teacher. I spent the 2008-09 school year at Duval Elementary filming the teachers and administrators endeavoring to maintain their success after losing Gloria, who played a pivotal role in turning this into an unlikely A school. I shot 120 hours of footage of educators and students doing their best and feeling confident about earning a school grade of an A or at least
Jasmine Webb is one of Gloria's former students who is featured in the documentary.

a B on the high-stakes FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test). Most of the Duval Elementary teachers and administrators I interviewed viewed filling the void left by Gloria's loss as a formidable undertaking but insisted they were up to the task. The lowest grade they anticipated was a B.

My journalistic background prompted me to press harder on this topic. I asked if a C may be a more realistic goal. My interview subjects made it clear that they and the community would consider such an FCAT score a failure.

The 2008-09 FCAT results, which came in as the school year wound down in June, shocked everyone, including me. Duval Elementary received an F. This led me and many others to recognize how crucial Gloria’s methods and innovations were to the school’s success. Just as the 2002 F grade caused a major shift in Gloria, sending her on journey of reinvention, the 2009 F grade
altered my trajectory. I felt compelled politically and aesthetically to craft a work
that would render and embody Gloria’s transformation and methods. This is how
I ended up setting out to produce a documentary portrait of a subject I had never
met, filmed or interviewed.

I aimed to employ well-tested filmmaking techniques along with
innovations to build the blocks of documentary portraiture until seeing the
emergence of a complete, lucid work. I sought to create an entity that would exist
in its own right, here and now. In other words, I never intended to create a tribute
or a historical footnote but instead to mime a transformational process to form an
intervention that stimulates thoughts and discussions among viewers and raises
questions about the present and the future states of our educational system and
societal values.
With *Discovering Gloria*, I aspired to trigger the same kind of cultural shift generated by her classroom innovations. Anything short of that, I thought, would waste a rare opportunity. My first step called for conducting numerous new interviews and shooting new footage, this time focusing on Gloria’s journey, challenges and contributions.

During the 2008-09 school year, I interviewed professors and researchers who studied her methods. I also interviewed many of her family members, colleagues and former students. Equally important, I collected several hours of home-video-like footage of Gloria teaching in her classroom and an interview she gave a University of Florida College of Education doctoral student. For my purposes, this interview was weak – the interviewer mostly asked technical mathematical questions – but it was so much better than nothing that it felt like a true godsend.

One of my interview subjects was Anthony Guice, right, a parent volunteer in Gloria’s class.
Gloria poses with her Duval students.

Although shot by amateurs pointing consumer-grade cameras from the back of Gloria’s classroom, the classroom footage, in particular, proved invaluable to my goal of crafting a documentary portrait. I extrapolated examples of her techniques from the classroom footage and paired them with descriptions provided by my interview subjects. Wielding a surgical knife, so to speak, I zeroed in on exact moments in the footage. On this front, I certainly invented nothing new, following in the footsteps of many documentary filmmakers such as Errol Morris’, who juxtaposes Vietnam War footage with pointed bites from an interview of former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in Fog of War; and Spike Lee, who weaves in historical footage to devastating effects in his
One of Gloria’s innovations was the “Geometry Dance,” which the students loved performing.


However, I knew that no matter how much I succeeded marrying precise slices of classroom visuals to insightful interview bites, I needed to go several steps further.

To accomplish my goal of creating a highly effective documentary portrait, I developed a multipronged plan that included building on longstanding documentary filmmaking traditions and best practices but also blazing new trails. I quickly realized that to properly tell Gloria’s story, I had to channel her innovations through the film’s aesthetics, themes and pacing.

Aiming to mimic her artistic approach, I sought to push the boundaries of documentary portraiture in order to stimulate discussions and effect change by the use of the following:
• Extensive primary research. With the new interviews I filmed (after Duval Elementary failed the FCAT in 2009), I intended to do much more than collect material with which to edit the documentary. This became a key part of my primary research. Each of the professors, doctoral students, teachers, students, family members I interviewed provided a singular perspective. Collectively, they painted a complete picture. Although only a small percentage of that footage ended up in the film, it proved vital to my understanding of Gloria as a person, teacher, mother and community member and my consideration of the most appropriate forms to render the depth of her teaching breakthroughs and to examine them from an eclectic yet streamlined variety of perceptive angles. Here, for instance, is a quote that did not make it into the film but influenced my storytelling.
It’s by Prof. Thomasenia Adams, the UF College of Education’s associate dean for research: “I was mesmerized by how much she put herself into the teaching. When I walked into the classroom it wasn’t just a teacher that I was looking at, but it was drum major, and it was a musician, and it was an actress, and an improviser, and a comedian all wrapped up into one person that then became this teacher.”

• Fleshing out the talking heads. Documentaries are often accused of relying too heavily on “talking heads.” In Discovering Gloria, I aimed to present the interviews as three-dimensional characters. Thus, I lingered on certain expressions and zeroed in on fresh perspectives. One example of this that made it into the film is Prof. Elizabeth Bondy, director of the UF College of Education’s School of Teaching and
Learning, saying about Gloria: “She didn't move to using music because she studied Howard Gardner’s work about multiple intelligences. She moved to using music and movement and the other strategies that she used because she studied her students.”

• Targeted secondary research. I conducted extensive research relating to Gloria’s teaching techniques and innovations, including books, journal articles and dissertations. For instance, in her doctoral dissertation about Gloria, “Unearthing Culturally Responsive Mathematics Teaching,” Emily Bonner wrote, “In many ways, the feel of [Gloria’s] classroom mimicked that of a community church. There was not an overly religious tone, but the style was similar. Students were taught as a group and were expected to participate fully. If Gloria felt the energy in the room decline, she would demand attention.”
• Synthesizing Gloria’s techniques and creating a powerful slide deck. This called for verbal, visual and auditory innovation. I was influenced by the documentary *Waltz with Bashir*, in which Director Ari Folman crafts a portrait of himself and his fellow soldiers during Israel’s 1982 Lebanon War using animation. First, I boiled down Gloria’s methods into eight major pedagogical points. Second, I conveyed them in short, active sentences that are deceivingly simple. Third, I paired them with photographs. Fourth, I set them to an original musical track composed for this purpose. This allowed me to innovate within the canon of documentary portraiture, meshing words, images, graphics and sound into a cohesive storytelling mosaic. This also lent a long-term element to the documentary portrait, helping to turn it into a teaching tool that can be used to inspire and prompt discussions anywhere, anytime.

• Bringing these slides to visual life. Working with a graphic artist (Sherri Blasé), we used a variety of Photoshop filters to turn color and black-and-white photographs into cartoon-like slides enriched with colors. The playful nature of Gloria’s classroom methods, including her utilization of movement, inspired this creation. Animation also has a long tradition in the field of education. Setting these animated slides to precise music infused this part of the film with sequential, purposeful movement. The result proved larger than the sum of its parts, as it provided an academic lesson in just a couple of entertaining minutes.
Here the original photo I used for one of the slides:

And here is the slide I created together with the graphic artist:
Creating an edgy atmosphere with black-and-white photos. I utilized black-and-white photographs in key moments to force the viewers to place themselves in this environment. Black-and-white photos conjure up the news. Thus, they help drive a sense of danger. They also help create a raw aura. To intensify this experience for the viewers, I applied After Effects 3D-like treatments to these photos to create a sense of intimacy with the viewers. I reasoned that viewers are familiar with 3D movies that bring the action to the tips of their noses – sometimes right up to their eyelashes. So, for instance, when I illustrated the rough nature of Duval Elementary’s neighborhood by showing black-and-white photos of a kid being beat up on the street, I utilized the 3D effect to force the audience to take a close examination as opposed to just passing by. I aimed to keep the audience members engaged even when they felt uncomfortable:
• Rhythmic editing. Having built a solid foundation based on research, reasoning and storytelling, I entered the editing suite with a new confidence in my ability to deliver a multisensory experience to the viewers. Having done my homework, so to speak, I turned to the right side of my brain – feeling my way through the material. I guess you could say I used rhythm to craft this film – inspired by Gloria’s own use of rhythm in her teaching.

Gloria started out as an ordinary teacher. During her first 25 years at Duval, she followed the Florida Department of Education’s prescribed curriculum, implemented Alachua County Public Schools’ Pacing Guides and got her students through elementary school – a celebrated feat in Gainesville’s impoverished, crime-ridden Eastside. Something snapped in her, however, when her school flunked the FCAT in 2002. Seeing her students held back, she shelved the textbooks and status quo and set out to reinvent herself.

“I’ve discovered,” she said, “that learning requires active involvement.”

Seeing an opportunity to turn around her school, Duval Principal Lee McNealy asked Gloria to teach math to all fifth-graders and reading to all third-graders and to coach her colleagues. Gloria invited them to observe how to bring out the best in students through creativity and humanity.

She led by example, said Don Pemberton, director of the UF Lastinger Center for Learning, an education innovation incubator. “Gloria worked across all grade levels and infused a can-do mentality of ‘we’re going to work overtime, long hours and get it done.’ ”
Gloria invented ways to engage every one of her students.

Gloria created a nurturing culture at Duval, said Pemberton, who became her champion. “What we see in high-achieving schools is really well-developed cultures and high expectations of students.”

Gloria reserved the highest expectations for herself. She worked day and night developing hip-hop and dance routines, fine-tuning her other techniques, crafting targeted lesson plans, holding after-school sessions for struggling students, guiding her colleagues, cooking classroom meals and buying or sewing Duval uniforms for those who needed them.

Her transformation was all encompassing. That is why I started *Discovering Gloria* with Pemberton saying she started out an average teacher. I had him speaking in voiceover and show students performing her “Math Rap.”
Duval Elementary students practice Gloria’s “Geometry Dance.”

This, I believe, quickly achieves three essential goals – hooking the audience, setting the scene and mood and establishing a baseline for protagonist’s development.

I then pinpointed Gloria’s moment of change. It happens at the end of McNealy’s description of Duval failing the FCAT. She recalls how Gloria put her arm around McNealy and said, “It’s going to be all right.” That’s it. That’s when something snapped in Gloria. That’s when she decided – subconsciously, possibly – that she was going to change. Change radically.

I spend the next several minutes of the film describing that change. I purposely mixed in family members’ recollections. I wanted to illustrate that this change was profound and clear to everyone around her and that it went beyond the classroom. Gloria became a new woman.
Once I delivered that part of the story to the viewers, I spent a great deal of time illustrating her innovations, including the eight pedagogical panels:

1. To boost her students’ grasp of the material, she flips the curriculum, kicking off the year with the hardest concepts.

2. To keep up with her students’ short attention spans, she designs energetic, multi-topic lessons.

3. To demystify math and reading, she employs everyday examples and props.

4. To engage her students, she infuses cultural nomenclature and experiences.

5. Seeing kids easily memorize intricate lyrics, she writes the “Math Rap” and “Reading Rap.”
6. Noticing Double Dutch jumpers' laser focus, she choreographs the “Geometry Dance.”

7. At church, she picks up choir-like chanting as a teaching tool.

8. To instill willpower in her students, she sets high expectations and practices tough love.

I made similar decisions throughout the film, culminating with the one observational moment of Gloria that I dug out: As her students leave, she hugs one of them, praising him for turning in his homework and saying, “You’re about to make me cry.”

I felt the same way when I came across it. I saved it for the end of the film and it worked.
Discovering Gloria works as a documentary portrait. I feel confident in saying that the methods I employed – whether stemming from a long tradition in filmmaking or experimental in nature – place Discovering Gloria within the canons of documentary portraiture.

After I screened Discovering Gloria to a crowd of 450 in Gloria’s community, her family members, friends, neighbors and former students told me that they felt the film brought her to life. Her mother, Cenia Merriex, pulled me aside to say: “I felt she was here. She was just running late and would join us at any moment.”

This comment signified a great deal to me. It showed me that I accomplished the goal of creating a multidimensional documentary portrait. It also showed me how far I’ve come as an filmmaker.

I came into the UF Creative Photography MFA program three years ago seeing myself as a just a storyteller – no more, no less. But through the rigorous intellectual challenges posed by my faculty, particularly my thesis committee members, and the work itself, I’ve become a documentary filmmaker who takes a strong a social stance and displays an artistic aptitude.

With my work, I no longer just strive to tell stories – I aim to effect change.
Sources:


Bonner, Emily, Unearthing Culturally Responsive Mathematics Teaching, University of Florida dissertation, 2001


Films:

Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir*

Errol Morris’ *Fog of War*

Spike Lee’s *4 Little Girls*
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Boaz Dvir is an award-winning filmmaker. He is the writer, director and Co-producer of *Jessie’s Dad*, which tells the story of Mark Lunsford’s crusade to protect children against pedophiles; and the writer, director and producer of *Discovering Gloria*, which paints the portrait of Gloria Jean Merriex, a highly innovative inner-city teacher.

Dvir is currently in post-production on his latest documentary, “A Wing and a Prayer,” which tells the virtually unknown story of World War II aviators who launched a secret operation to prevent a second Holocaust in 1948.

Dvir has taught storytelling and documentary filmmaking at the University of Florida. He’s led groups of UF journalism and telecommunication students to Guatemala and Nicaragua.

Dvir has written for the *Jerusalem Post*, New York’s *Newsday*, the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel*, the *St. Petersburg Times*, Scripps Howard’s Treasure Coast Newspapers, the *Times of Israel* and *Explore* magazine. He served as editor of the *Jacksonville Business Journal* and managing editor of the *South Florida Business Journal*, which are part of the Newhouse-owned American City Business Journals. He appeared on “Week in Review” and wrote commentaries for WJCT, Jacksonville’s NPR/PBS station.

Dvir has won six Florida Magazine Association awards, including first place for his *communigator* column. He also won numerous awards from the Florida Press Association, including first place for his *Business Journal* column.