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A Mission at 311

By

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My thesis project is a linear documentary film. It focuses on 70-year-old Charles Birnbaum, a piano tuner based in Atlantic City, who is fighting against eminent domain to save his family house. Charles Birnbaum's deep emotional connection to his family's house is at the core of my film. This house contains the story behind his families' complicated life.

I have always been interested in classical music and history. Being able to study piano with Charles Birnbaum, for three years was a significant step for me to experience after my initial arrival in this country in 2008. Charles helped me overcome my homesickness for my country by using the magical power of classical music. Taking private lessons with him was the most exciting activity I have had during my four-year bachelor's study in New Jersey. I will always cherish the profound bond Charles and I have together.

Like most parents, mine expected me to be an exceptional one. The first step of achieving this goal was to study an instrument. Even though they didn't consider me as a musical talent at all, I was forced to study piano for five years before I went to middle school. Honestly, I was resentful of my parents' one-sided decision. I never ever expected their decision could have a profound impact in my life. Nowadays, I have to admit I am grateful.

It is actually hard for me to explain the reason of why I suddenly fell in love with playing piano again after I came to the U.S. Maybe my loneliness and nostalgia for China enlightened me to play piano as a joyful method to help myself to adapt in a new country. It indeed worked. I began to enjoy my American life as my enormous hunger for learning more advanced pieces grew larger. My uncle and aunt then realized the necessity of needing a piano teacher for my advanced study.

Eileen Birnbaum, Charles' daughter, taught my little cousin piano. After Eileen learned that I wanted to further my study of the piano, she enthusiastically recommended his father to us.

Nevertheless, I began my piano lessons with Cindy Birnbaum, Charles' wife until she approved that I was ready to study with Charles.

My profound bond with Charles began.

Charles is a genuinely kind man whose affection and openness made me much more comfortable to live in a new country. I clearly remember my first impression of Charles; with his giant aged hands and strong grip he shook my hand; a genuine and benign smile wore on his face and his unforgettable hoarse voice were full of energy. From that moment, I felt a sense of mystery and attraction from him.

Charles is an exceptional piano teacher. Although I only played for my pure joy, he treated me no differently than other students who majored in piano performance. The way he taught me was so different than any other teachers I had previously studied with. For instance, besides strengthening my fundamental techniques, being able to interpret and understand the musicianship out of each composer's piece was at the core of his teaching. He frequently told me the sounds that I produced must be musical and meaningful. Otherwise, it would be a waste of time. In addition, as a piano tuner, the stunning sounds that he tuned out of each piano always had an indescribable power to touch me.

My curiosity towards Charles' personal life grew stronger when an old faded picture of him performing with an orchestra caught my eyes. When I asked him about it, I remember how proud he was as he shared his precious experience of performing with the Philadelphia orchestra at the age of 16 with me. I was extremely curious of why he ended up being a piano tuner in Atlantic City as opposed to a concert pianist. It urged me to start my journey to really get to know his personal life.

Not long after, I read an article *A Life in Tune: Charles Birnbaum* in a book called *Great Americans: Stories of Resilience and joy in Everyday Life* by Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Vitez who used to write for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. “Usually in the afternoon, in the stale stillness of his mother's living room, Charles Birnbaum sits at the grand piano and plays Brahms” in a three-story weary old house on 311 Oriental Avenue in Atlantic City (Vitez). This is the house where Charles spent his youth. More importantly, this house is a huge achievement of his parents in the U.S. after they survived the terror of the holocaust in Poland during World War II.

However, the aftermath of the Holocaust remained a constant shadow on Charles’ family. As one of the children of holocaust survivors, Charles not only inherited the musical talent from his parents, but he also inevitably inherited the aftermath of war from his mother and suffered a life-changing experience during his youth.

I was shocked when I learned the story of Charles’ personal life. I couldn't believe what had happened to him and his family. As a film student in New Jersey, I was passionate and had a deep urge to make a documentary film out of Charles’ personal life. However, as a modest person, Charles kindly refused my initial proposal, but his story had always been in my mind in the past few years.

I guess back then he didn’t see a reason to make a film out of his personal life. Since 2014, Charles has been fighting in the court to save this very house from being destroyed through eminent domain. New Jersey’s Casino Reinvestment Development Authority wants to seize Charles’ property in order to create a tourist district to enhance the fortunes of the Revel casino, which went into bankruptcy two years ago.

Charles sued the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority based on the fact that they had no right to take private property to create a tourist district without specifically identifying what would eventually be built.

This time, I asked Charles again, and he agreed to be the subject of my film.

Initially, I did not think the house would be a central character in my film. In fact I wasn't confident in telling Charles' story until he personally explained his background and how trauma could be passed on to the next generation. Charles's parents were the Holocaust survivors who both lost their first spouses to the Nazis. They escaped to the forests in Poland and hid there for over a year. His mother became pregnant towards the end of the war. In 1944, three years before Charles' birth, Dora, Charles' mother, gave a birth to Sam in the forests, Charles' brother.

After the liberation, Dora inevitably developed post-traumatic stress disorder and battled it throughout her life.

There are studies of the lasting impact of trauma of World War II has on "so-called second-generation Holocaust survivors" (Kluger). It is now understood that post-traumatic stress disorder "also lives on in people who were not even born when the events of World War II occurred. These are the children or even grandchildren of the era's survivors, and the events still resonate in their lives, creating a deep cloud that can last a lifetime" (Taylor).

One of the studies comes to a scientific conclusion and explanation known as "epigenetic inheritance. It's the idea that traumatic experiences affect DNA in ways that are passed on to children and grandchildren, kind of like molecular scars" (Yasmin).

When I learned the complexity behind the story of Charles, I realized my film would not be merely about saving a three-story weary house. Outwardly, Charles is indeed saving his family house, but deep inside of him his action has a more profound meaning--protecting his family's monument.

During the filming, I learned that Charles and his brother Sam had suicidal tendencies when they encountered the pressures in their lives. No surprise, the pressures were directly from their parents who yearned their children to be successful towards their careers in order to deal their own "untold emotional demons" (Kluger).

In comparison to their parents, as children of holocaust survivors, Charles and Sam "had an intense need to act as redeemers for their parents" (Kaplan) whose minds was embedded with the experience of a destroyed world. They wanted to make their parents proud in a new world--U.S. However, "grow up with parents afflicted with the mood swings, irritability, jumpiness and hyper-vigilance typical of PTSD" and their children are "likely to wind up stressed and high-strung themselves" (Kluger).

In 1968, Charles attempted suicide at the age of 21, but he somehow survived. Unfortunately, his brother Sam did not. Despite the fact that he "fled" to Australia to distance from his parents' pressures, Sam committed suicide in 1980s triggered by a job loss.

From the moment I learned the story of Charles, I realized the necessity and importance of telling a past story in an attractive visual way to accompany with the interviews. Therefore, my main approach to create the visual contents of the film is to manipulate the old photos to add some effects by using the software of Adobe After Effects and Adobe Photoshop. The inspiration of attempting this method derives from viewing the Academy Awarded documentary-

short film *Lady in Number 6*, which tells the story of the oldest Holocaust survivor in the world.

Being able to manipulate photos was never in my repertoire of artistic creation. I found myself attracted to this new style even though I only possess basic skills and techniques. I decided to use this esthetic look throughout my film to give life to the still photos of Charles' family.

I am satisfied with the outcome and though it is definitely not perfect, I am glad I tried something new and know that this will reflect in my future artistic path.

As an artist, I need to keep evolving and developing to use new approaches and forms to create artistic pieces. In another word, the change of artists reflects the change of our world. It is like a chain reaction, which inevitably exists in our universe. I need to look ahead and explore new technology as I have grown as an artist.

As a documentary filmmaker, finding an approach to let your interviewees confide to you is very critical and challenging. Your film will not be able to express its core essences without gaining a trust and full access from your subject. Luckily, because of my bond with Charles I sought an approach of informal interviewing.

Honestly, shooting Charles' interviews in an informal approach was not my initial plan, but the outcome of it has an obvious impact on my film. It not only created a sense of closeness and authenticity towards the viewers, but it also put Charles into a comfortable atmosphere in which he could completely confide in me without feeling any restraints. Actually, I didn't like this approach at the first, but then I realized how relaxed and spontaneous and emotional he was. I realized this was the best genre to tell this story. In addition, constantly having close ups on Charles is another approach of mine to create a sense of closeness. It will help the viewers to engage with the story and the main character without feeling any distraction from the framing.

This technique also implies that there is also a closeness existed between the subject (Charles) and the filmmaker (myself). I would say the outcome of my film would have not been as impactful as it is now if I used the conventional style throughout my film.

From my point of view, a documentary film should always possess its essential authenticity and objectivity even though manipulation is inevitable through the editing process. Hence, my approach of using cinema verite as a style is to reinforce the idea of authenticity and objective.

As far as my editing style, I intended to create a smooth, slow and serene feeling and environment to accompany with my story. It allows the viewers to have enough time to process and absorb the intention of each image. For instance, the opening scene of my film intends to create a subtext of a city (Atlantic City) that has been exploited, abandoned and decayed. Given the current dire situation in Atlantic City, I am visually asking the question – what is the economic purpose in taking Charles’ property for creating a tourist district.

The process of making this film really educated me not to take everything I have for granted. Given the similar background of what my country suffered during the Anti-Japanese War from 1931-1945, I feel deeply sympathetic for the people who suffered in World War II, especially the Jewish people. I would say this is probably the main reason and motivation of why I was so drawn to Charles’ story at the very beginning.

As an international student from China, being able to tell an American story that is completely out of my Chinese experience has been my greatest accomplishment.

Before I began working on this documentary I watched other Chinese students’ thesis films outside of Hunter College. The subjects of their works were various and interesting. I was impressed. However, I have sensed that some of their works intended to sacrifice the image of

China in order to get the attention from American audiences to hear their unique “voices” as filmmakers. Some of their voices were truly heard, but some complicated issues they were exploring were not persuasive.

However, my approach is different than theirs. Instead of focusing on obvious sensitive topics, mine is to focus on quiet human stories and find the drama in them. In fact, their stories are more deafening than we thought. They inevitably relates to the change and reflection of different historical times and backgrounds. By looking at these quiet stories, we can have a more objective and emotional view to understand how a historical time and background affect different group of people. Therefore, the significance of these quiet stories are as profound and deafening as those obvious sensitive topics. I always thought that people overlook some unremarkable details in our lives. If we can give a second thought at them, you never know what kind of impact and meaning they can have in our lives.

I am always blessed that I kept asking myself the question of why Charles didn't have a concert career as a pianist while I was studying with him. What I have found out in the subsequent years has proved my point of giving a second thought at some unremarkable details which eventually helped me to start my thesis film. For that, I consider the process of making my film truly unique one.

As a non-native speaker, using English to conduct all the interviews was definitely the biggest challenge. There were times when I got confused during the interviews or I misunderstood the answers from the interviewees. I was extremely embarrassed, but I am glad that I overcame this language barrier and eventually was successful. As I screen the interviews I realize what I have accomplished.

For me, the process of making this English language film has been a precious learning experience, which I will never ever forget. It encouraged me to improve my English and move to a higher level. However, perhaps more importantly, this experience strengthens my social skills to interact with different people who have different occupations and backgrounds. No matter where I will end up working after my graduation, I will always cherish this learning experience and be proud of how I have grown as a person and an artist.

If there was one thing I would like to change in my film, it would have been to add my own narration into the film to accompany with Charles' own narrative. I think it would effectively diminish the acoustic fatigue of Charles constantly narrating as the main character in the film.

Even though making documentary films have become easier in recent years, having a couple of professional members to partner with you is always an ideal option.

Unfortunately I did not find any professionals to work with me during the production. This is my biggest regret. I believe my film might have higher production values if I were working with a professional crew. However, I am not certain whether Charles would completely confide in me with the presence of other professionals whom had not known. As a documentary filmmaker, it really makes me to think of how to find an adequate approach to adapt different circumstances in order to achieve the artistic outcome.

For my post production, I have hired professional members to do the color correction and sound mixing. I have to say the result of the final product is stunning and valuable.

My distribution plans are still developing. I will submit this film to festivals throughout

the world, as I believe its message is universal and critical. People have told me that their families continue to suffer (as Charles' family has suffered) which made me realize the aftermath of the Holocaust still lingers despite it had happened 72 years ago. Therefore, I believe my film will promote public awareness and provoke discussion about the lasting trauma of war, all wars.

Given the growth of Neo-Nazism in some region of the USA and the world, I hope A Mission at 311 can educate people to remember history and suppress this sinister root.

A Mission at 311 is a highlight of my eight-year studying in the United States. This is my biggest accomplishment during my schooldays. Most importantly, I not only see it as a reward for my upcoming commencement, but I also consider this film, this story as a gift I am returning to the United State.

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