



"So many of my films have been about what happens when someone reaches out to someone else and what that response looks like."

— Brian Lindstrom

PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

Brian Lindstrom

The Portland filmmaker goes behind bars to document the families living on both sides of the fence of Oregon's only women's prison

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Watch Brian Lindstrom's recent films and it's clear the importance the filmmaker places on compassion. "Finding Normal" is about recovering addicts who reach out to help others through recovery. "Alien Boy" explores issues of police accountability in the case of James Chasse, a man with schizophrenia who was brutally killed by members of the Portland Police Department and a Multnomah County deputy after a confrontation on Sept. 17, 2006. The film was applauded by critics and the public alike when it premiered at the Portland International Film Festival in February 2013.

Lindstrom is currently working on a film about the Family Preservation Project, a program that is contracted through Peninsula Community College at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, Oregon's only women's prison. The working title is "Mothering Inside," and the anticipated completion date is Jan. 15.

Lindstrom and his wife, Cheryl Strayed ("Wild," "Dear Sugar"), are raising a family here in Portland, his native town. The film version of Strayed's popular autobiographical novel, "Wild," is now in theaters.

Lindstrom was raised in Portland by a

single, working mother and a pair of divorced grandparents. He was the first in his family to go to college, attending the University of Oregon, Rutgers and Lewis & Clark College before heading to Columbia for his masters. I asked him about this experience and how it contributed to his worldview.

Brian Lindstrom: My mom was a bartender and my dad was a produce person at Fred Meyer. They divorced when I was 7 years old. No one else in my family had gone to college. It was kind of understood that I would go, although we never really talked about what that would look like or how that would be paid for.

I put myself through college. I worked in a salmon cannery in Cordova, Alaska, for nine summers.

S.Z.: Working in the fishing industry can be very demanding. *Nine summers*. That says a lot about your character.

B.L.: The freedom of putting myself through school also meant that I didn't have to answer to anyone about what I wanted to study or what I wanted to be. Sometimes I'm sure I felt a little jealous about my classmates whose college educations were paid for. But I certainly didn't envy them

having to explain why they didn't want to be an accountant.

S.Z.: What drew you to film making?

B.L.: The chance to tell stories in various forms. I think of the camera as a sort of passport. I was really excited about the idea that I could use the camera to hang out with people who I thought were interesting. Especially cinéma vérité filmmaking, which I've done a lot of and I really enjoy. It allows me to insert myself into people's lives in hopefully not too obtrusive of a way and kind of reveals the kind of everyday struggles and beauty and transcendence that is out there. If you look for it, you can find it.

S.Z.: Cinéma vérité?

B.L.: It's a French term that means "film truth". The idea is that if you spend enough time with someone and you're filming them, if you just get out of the way and let life unfold, there will be revealing moments that give you special insight into that person's character and the challenges they face and their special way in the world.

I don't know how someone like myself, if they were coming up now, could put themselves through college. I don't know if the work in the salmon cannery or elsewhere would be available. I don't know if the Pell Grant would be available. I really worry that the gap between the haves and the have nots is growing ever wider. I worry about what kind of society that creates.

S.Z.: You've said: "My films attempt to answer the question, how does a person grow?" In your experience, how can a person grow and why is that important?

B.L.: (Long pause) I think a person grows from realizing an obligation they might have to other people. That can take many different forms.

So many of my films have been about what happens when someone reaches out to someone else and what that response looks like.

Like in "Finding Normal," recovering mentors who have been through the hell of addiction and have a hard-won knowledge about what it takes to stay clean. They reach out to people newly into recovery and, by sharing their own stories, give that person hope.

I think different versions of that kind of happen every day in these little exchanges. We never really know what is at stake or what some simple statement or inquiry like, "How are you today?" can mean to someone.

I'll never forget, when I transferred into Lewis & Clark College as a junior, I felt completely like a fish out of water because I was putting myself through school. I was with kids who were talking about prep school and trust funds and I was like, "Where am I? I don't belong here."

I was really thinking maybe I needed to make a change, and my film professor, Stuart Kaplan, just sat down and had lunch with me. Suddenly I felt that I did belong there. This professor was showing an interest in me. It was one of those pivotal moments in my life and it was simply him taking the time to sit down and ask me how I was doing. I think sometimes we forget how those small gestures can have profound impact.

I'm reminded of Dr. Russell Sacco in "Alien Boy." He went to the same church as Jim. I'm always so touched by his story. He just decided that he was not going to let Jim's mental illness be a barrier to them talking. As he put it: "I'm just a person, Jim's just a person. We're here in church, I should just talk to him." And so Russell did that, every Sunday he would talk to Jim and at the beginning, Jim wouldn't really respond. He wouldn't say anything. And very slowly Jim started to say "Hi" back to him. And they gradually built a relationship. I'm sure that relationship made a big difference in Jim's life because not many

Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, the setting for Brian Lindstrom's latest film, opened in 2001. It was built to accommodate the rise in inmates as a result of the state's new mandatory minimum sentencing laws. It is Oregon's only women's prison. With more than 1,600 beds, it far surpassed the previous 200-bed Women's Correctional Center in Salem.

See LINDSTROM, page 9