

# Oscar-Nominated Director Weighs-In on His Heartwarming Documentary

**B**orn on September 7, 1979, Thomas McKay Martin, Jr. was raised in Seattle and graduated from Western Washington University with a degree in American Cultural Studies. In 2002, T.J. made an auspicious directorial debut with *A Day in the Hype of America*, which won the Best Documentary award at the Rhode Island International Film Festival.

He next shot a short entitled *Loves Martha* before making *On the Rocks*, a docudrama about drug and alcohol addiction. T.J. collaborated with Dan Lindsay on his latest movie, *Undefeated*, an inspirational documentary chronicling the selfless efforts made by Memphis' Manassas High School football coach Bill Courtney on behalf of underprivileged members of his team.

The film has been nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Documentary category. And here, T.J. talks about the possibility of becoming the first African-American director to win an Oscar.



**CELEBRITY INTERVIEW**

by Kam Williams



T.J. Martin and his co-director Dan Lindsay

**Kam Williams:** Hi, T.J., thanks for the time, and congratulations on the Oscar nomination.

**T.J. Martin:** Thank you very much for the kind words. It's been an amazing experience.

**KW:** What interested you in making *Undefeated*?

**TJM:** I was really drawn to two things. First, my directing partner, Dan Lindsay and I are interested in making documentaries where the action unfolds in front of

the camera versus a talking head piece. We saw this as an opportunity to make a coming-of-age film that was much more experiential and less anecdotal. Second, I feel that often times the stories that come out of neighborhoods like North Memphis are sensationalized pieces exploiting the pitfalls of the community. I saw this film as an opportunity to show both the good and the bad, and to really celebrate the community and

all of the possibilities that lay before it.

**KW:** How did you come to hear about Coach Bill Courtney?

**TJM:** Our producer, Rich Middlemas, graduated from the University of Tennessee. He follows their recruiting every year. In 2009, he came upon a recruit named O.C. Brown. He had never heard of him and decided to do a little research. He Googled his name and the first thing that appeared was an article from the *Commercial Appeal*, a local Memphis paper, about his living part-time with his grandmother in North Memphis and part-time with his offensive line coach in East Memphis. He had never worked in the documentary world, so he sent the article to Dan and me. We thought that it was an interesting enough story to see if there was potential for a feature-length documentary. While trying to track down O.C. Brown we met Coach Bill, and from there everything changed!

**KW:** Why do you think he was so successful in turning Manassas High School's football program around?

**TJM:** I think he was successful for a few reasons. First of all, he understands that the sport of football cannot be the foundation for building and grooming young men. As he states in the film, "Football doesn't build character, it reveals it." Secondly, he stayed committed to his student/athletes. One of the biggest issues we found in that community was a lack of consistency in the kids' lives. Bill not only said that he would turn the program around but he also showed up everyday and proved to them and the community that he was committed to the cause. Lastly, I was always impressed at how Bill treated the students with respect and spoke to them like young adults and not like they were little kids. He didn't assume they would respect him simply because he's an adult. He put in the time and effort and earned that trust and respect from the students as well as the community.

**KW:** Do you think he's had an effect on his players as a role model that will last long past their playing days?

**TJM:** Absolutely! Good coaches often become surrogate parental figures and can be very influential, especially during the adolescent years. One thing that stood out to us and that is not seen in the film much is how often Bill would hug his players and tell them that he loved them. This would happen every day to just about every single player on the team. There's no doubt that when Bill takes the time to share that level

of intimacy and respect with his players, it has a positive, long-lasting effect.

**KW:** What message do you hope people will take away from the movie?

**TJM:** We set out to make an intimate, coming-of-age film that is, more than anything, a human interest piece. With that said, we never shy away from

the race and class dynamics that are very prevalent in the film. I would hope that after being emotionally drawn into the human aspect of the story, the film can inspire a greater dialogue about the serious divide between the haves and have-nots in this country, as well as looking at the ties between race and class and how they affect each other.

**KW:** How do you feel about the possibility of becoming the first black director to win an Academy Award?

**TJM:** First and foremost I'm extremely honored for such recognition. At the same time, I would have a hard time claiming such an achievement since I'm half black. My experience navigating the world is night and day different than that of someone whose parents are both Black. I personally, identify much more with being mixed race. It would be hard for me to accept such an achievement without also acknowledging my Native American, Scandinavian, Chinese and Jewish roots as well! I definitely think it warrants a greater conversation. I wonder if there's some kind of designation for being the first mixed race director to win for best documentary? Probably not.

**KW:** Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

**TJM:** Do you identify as being Black?

**KW:** The Tasha Smith question: Are you ever afraid?

**TJM:** Yes, all of the time. Every time I reach a new stage in my career or in my life, I'm completely terrified!

**KW:** The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

**TJM:** Good question. I'm not sure I can quantify happiness.

**KW:** The Teri Emerson question: When was the last time you had a good laugh?

**TJM:** When I saw that I was nominated for an Academy Award.

**KW:** What is your guiltiest pleasure?

**TJM:** Not sure I can put it in print.

**KW:** The bookworm Troy Johnson ques-

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