

A SECOND LOOK - A STANFORD PROFESSOR REVISITS THE ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY LIVES OF DWARFS 20 YEARS AFTER AN EYE- OPENING AND EMMY-NOMINATED FILM

June 27, 2005 | Mercury News, The (San Jose, CA)
Author/Byline: KIM VO , Mercury News | Page: 3A

Little people piqued Jan Krawitz's interest, then changed her life.

In the early 1980s, she labored to make a documentary exploring the hopes and daily hardships faced by people of short stature. At a time when most people saw dwarfs only in circuses and comedies, the eye- opening film got an Emmy nomination.

More than two decades later, the Stanford University professor has revisited the people from that first film in a thought-provoking documentary called "Big Enough," which airs Tuesday night on PBS stations.

Combining then-and-now footage, Krawitz introduces viewers to the dwarfs she originally interviewed and shows how the past two decades have shaped their lives.

The Palo Alto resident calls her work with the dwarf community "the most significant experience of my filmmaking career." Those are big words considering her 30-year career has included a personal memoir on how a sexual assault in a Texas motel forced her to re-examine her middle-America beliefs about safety and control.

While the attack was personally significant, she said the films "Little People" and "Big Enough" provided even richer cinematic themes: dating and discrimination, genetic testing and child rearing, personal attitudes and societal ones.

"As a body of work, it packs a punch," said Krawitz, who said the experience has made her more empathetic to a community she once rarely thought about. Little People of America, a national support group, estimates that 1 in 20,000 people is born with some form of dwarfism, which has medical and genetic causes.

Krawitz was first intrigued by their stories in 1979, when she read a newspaper article about a dwarf support group in Florida called "The Mini Gators."

Library research yielded only one article. So she attended a dwarf symposium at Johns Hopkins Hospital to learn more.

"By the end of that weekend, I thought: I'll do anything to make this film," she said.

She was struck by the insidious discrimination experienced by a community that included a host of ethnicities, backgrounds and political beliefs. They were people living in an environment tailored for somebody else, she said.

Making "Little People" was tough. No one was interested. Of all the groups facing discrimination, she heard after a few pitches, why should they fund a project on dwarfs. Then she and "Little People" co-director Thomas Ott won a film competition. The prize was \$2,500 and a Datsun. They immediately sold the Datsun, loaded up their Toyota Corolla and started filming.

The film was released in 1982 and later shown on PBS, providing a candid look at the lives of several dwarfs as they navigated stares from strangers, complained about toilets that were too tall and discussed the isolation of being different.

"It was regarded as very excellent exposure of the lives of little people," said Dan Okenfuss, vice president of public relations for Little People of America, which has 8,000 members.

"It was one of the first movies that put little people in average life situations. Before this there was the occasional newspaper article or a reunion of 'The Wizard of Oz.' " After the film, Krawitz lost touch with most of her subjects over the years. About five years ago, though, she began wondering what happened to them.

She got reacquainted with the subjects from "Little People." Mark Trombino, then an upbeat 11-year-old, was working and married, with a child. Len Sawisch, who once had "Dwarf Power" embroidered on his denim jacket and was an intense advocate for equal rights, decided to spend more time fishing.

Then there's Karla Lizzo, whose eyes betray the physical and emotional hurts she's endured in the past 20 years. "Most people don't let me forget that I'm little," Lizzo says in the film. "Their attitudes sometimes are so wrong, it digs deep."

The observations are as revealing as the interviews. Krawitz is a subtle filmmaker who lets the everyday images do the work. There's Mark Trombino and his wife, Anu, trying to reach the credit card slot to buy gas or splayed across the washing machine to reach the knobs.

And then there's Brandon Sawisch, an average-size teen washing the dishes in his family's diminutive kitchen, which has been scaled down for his mother, father and sister, who are all dwarfs.

Without saying anything, Krawitz prompts the viewer to question what is normal.

"This is a really sensitive portrayal of a life we never see on mainstream TV," said Cara Mertes, executive producer of PBS' POV non-fiction series. "It really broadens your world view."

"Big Enough" premieres at 10 p.m. Tuesday on KQED.