

October 7, 2007

TELEVISION

A Newsman's Legacy: Filmmaking

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Kayce Freed Jennings and Tom Yellin of the Documentary Group. "Steep," the film company's documentary about extreme skiing, will have a limited release in December.

THE dedication, set in white type against a black background, is easy to miss. "To our friend, colleague and ski buddy," it reads, "Peter Charles Jennings."

Those words — and yes, they refer to [Peter Jennings](#), the ABC News anchor who died in August 2005 — come at the end of "Steep," a 90-minute documentary about the perils and personalities of extreme skiing that was first shown this year at the TriBeCa Film Festival. The film will open wider in December, when Sony Pictures Classics gives it a limited release in New York, Los Angeles and nearly two dozen other cities, including Telluride, Colo., and Park City, Utah.

None of which explains the film's connection to Mr. Jennings. As it turns out, the project was one that the anchor had helped to conceive. He did so through an offshoot of PJ Productions, a small, independent documentary film company that began in the late 1980s as a unit under his direction (and at his disposal, for the purpose of making prime-time specials) within ABC News. After Mr. Jennings's death from lung cancer, the team that survived him — including his wife, Kayce Freed Jennings, and Tom Yellin, Mr. Jennings's longtime producer — finished the film along with the director, Mark Obenhaus.

But in seeking to carry on Mr. Jennings's legacy as a journalist who moonlighted as a documentary filmmaker (and who dreamed of doing such work full time in his retirement), Ms. Freed Jennings and Mr. Yellin have set their sights far beyond the craggy peaks of Jackson Hole, Wyo., and Chamonix, France, where the spine-tingling ski scenes of "Steep" are set. Now known as the Documentary Group, the production company — whose principals include five other longtime colleagues of Mr. Jennings — has secured commitments for more than a half dozen other projects across a range of platforms.

Two are prime-time specials for ABC News that are scheduled to be shown next year. One, about China, is being reported by Bob Woodruff, and the other, on infant mortality, is by Elizabeth Vargas. The Documentary Group has also received initial financing from [PBS](#) and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to develop a series for PBS on the history of television, with at least four one-hour segments planned.

Another of the group's films, "Operation Homecoming," based on writings from soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan and their families, was shown on PBS earlier this year as part of the series "America at a Crossroads"; an expanded version of the film was recently selected to open the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam in November.

While the Documentary Group benefits from its financial relationship with ABC and its access to the network's audience, the bulk of its costs are not covered by the network. It therefore has to beg and scrounge for financing just like anyone else who tries to make a documentary, except in the case of the Documentary Group, the ambitions are perhaps greater. Mr. Yellin, Ms. Freed Jennings and their colleagues dream of luring documentarians, a notoriously isolated bunch, to work under one roof — theirs — in space provided to them by ABC in an office building on the far West Side of Manhattan.

"We think we're in a position to be a home for documentary filmmakers, who at the moment often work out of their garages and struggle to make ends meet," said Mr. Yellin, whose career at ABC News spanned nearly two decades before he and Mr. Jennings took their documentary unit independent, in 2002. "If we can become a place that is creatively and financially a sort of safe haven, they're going to be able to do their best work."

As an example of what the Documentary Group might someday become, Mr. Yellin cited its recent partnership with the filmmaker Oren Jacoby to make a documentary about the involvement of the Marquis de Lafayette in the American and French Revolutions. Mr. Yellin believes that such a film could resonate in the United States as it wrestles with the meaning of liberty and internationalism. He says the film is nearly fully financed, though he declined to say for how much.

But in an indication of the uncertainties facing the Documentary Group, it has yet to figure out how it will distribute the film. "We have no idea, ultimately, how it's going to get to its audience," Mr. Yellin said. Still, he said he takes comfort in knowing that the distribution system for documentary films has perhaps never been so democratic, with the Internet serving as a means not only to promote a film but also, in some cases, to get it directly to viewers through streaming downloads, DVD sales and other technology.

As it has made the transition from a company bearing Mr. Jennings's initials, the biggest challenge faced by the group may be that its guiding force is gone. Up until just a few days before he died, Mr. Jennings, confined to his home on the Upper West Side, worked on plans for "Steep" and for two ABC documentaries. One was about the toll of AIDS on black people, and the other was about the deep political divide in the country.

"I'd bring the producing team in, and he'd grill them," Mr. Yellin recalled. "He did that to the very end."

Mr. Jennings's values "continue to permeate this place," said Ms. Freed Jennings, who had worked as an ABC producer for more than a decade before she married Mr. Jennings in 1997. "He would also be very pleased that we're moving on and taking this idea and running with it."

After deciding that they wanted to carry on — at no small financial risk, especially to those at the producer level — the principals tackled the question of whether to retain Mr. Jennings's name or to shed it in order to look forward.

"We decided not to use the name," said Richard Robbins, another longtime ABC producer who directed "Operation Homecoming." "To have used it would have felt a little exploitative, and also a little shortsighted. I think we felt comfortable talking privately about carrying on Peter's legacy. I don't think we wanted that to be our public reason for being."

A major vote of confidence came from David Westin, the president of ABC News. He assured Mr. Yellin that ABC would continue to, in effect, subcontract some prime-time documentaries to the group.

"In the press of doing our day-to-day business, sometimes it's hard to focus on documentaries," said Mr. Westin, who turned to the group last year to produce "To Iraq and Back," Mr. Woodruff's account of his recovery from head injuries sustained in the war. "To have them here, devoted to doing that — and to coming in, proposing ideas, and as we agree, to produce — is a great advantage."

While neither ABC nor the Documentary Group would quantify the network's annual financial contribution to the effort, Mr. Yellin acknowledged, "The programs we do for them are not, in business terms, what we'd call a profit center for us."

To that end, on "Steep," the filmmakers enlisted as an investor an educational publisher, Stuart Horsfall of Colorado. Mr. Horsfall had never invested money in a film before. But he said that, based partly on the involvement of Mr. Jennings, he made an initial commitment of \$500,000 to the film.

After the anchor's death, Mr. Horsfall said, he wound up financing nearly the entire film himself because he believed those whom Mr. Jennings left behind were committed to making a memorable film. Asked if he felt that, through his contribution, he was helping sustain the legacy of Mr. Jennings, whom he never met, Mr. Horsfall said, "Yes, I guess I did."

He added, "I just respected his work."

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