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Student Films Earn Kudos

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Special Olympian, Charbel El-Khoury, (left) thanks Special Olympics supporters, alongside his sister, Nin El-Khoury, on campus Aug. 7.

Photo: Christine Baker

"I had never experienced anything like this – being around the most awesome group of people I have ever been around."

Nikki Willson, director of Let Me Be Brave.

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Choosing a topic is the first challenge that students face in Documentary Filmmaking. It can't be too broad, but there has to be a human story there. It has to be real.

"Our goal with making the documentary that we made was just to kind of give a different look at the Special Olympics," explained Shawn Whitman, the student producer of *Let Me Be Brave*, a film that follows the experience of 17-year-old swimmer and medalist, Charbel El-Khoury. "It's kind of one of those organization that everybody knows about but nobody knows about."



Whitman gravitated toward the topic, having worked as a camp counselor with the Special Olympics for the past seven years in South Carolina.

At the film's screening on campus Aug. 7, representatives of Florida's Special Olympics chapter acknowledged that not many people realize that the **Special Olympics** is a year-round organization that serves more than 2 million

Click on the images below to watch the films, *Let Me Be Brave* and *71*

Students taking Documentary Filmmaking have the chance to explore their real-world curiosities through the medium of film, using real settings and real characters. Sometimes class projects end up getting professional recognition – like the student group whose film, *71*, was bought by Current TV.

Sometimes their work helps real organizations like the Special Olympics, whose representatives visited campus August 7 for a screening of the student film, *Let Me Be Brave*.

"A lot of other directors have started out making documentaries and [gone] on to do fiction," said Documentary Film Course Director Jim Martin.

"It just gives you a real feel for reality and people and for dealing with all kinds of issues that you have to force, in a way, when you're dealing with actors. Real people just do it."

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intellectually-disabled youth and adults worldwide. Florida's chapter is one of the state's largest volunteer organizations.

"On any given day, there are 84 Special Olympics events going on," said Matt Levy, vice president of resource development for the non-profit group. The organization plans to use the film to recruit volunteers. "It's a storytelling vehicle to reach people," said Levy. "It's an invaluable tool."

Coach and public relations manager Kevin Lajeunesse said he thought the benefit of the experience went both ways. "One by one, pretty much every person in the crew came up to me and thanked me for letting them be a part of it," said Lajeunesse. "I could tell that [this experience] touched them in a way that they hadn't expected."

The student group who created the film, *71*, was similarly inspired by the subject of their film – 71-year-old weightlifter and former Olympic champion Jose Postigo. The filmmakers found Postigo at the Sunshine State Games, a series of multi-event competitions for athletes of all ages.

"We were actually going to originally follow the games," said Timothy Dalisay, student director for *71*. Then they met Postigo.

"Even for his age, he was lifting some pretty heavy weights," said Dalisay. "It was really inspiring. I was really scared for him – he looked fragile, I guess, only because I knew he was 71-years-old."

After talking to Postigo, the crew realized that he had something to teach them and to anyone who might watch their documentary. "He looks his age but he's doing things that I didn't think 71-year-olds could do," said Dalisay. "He really had a great message and it was [that] sports is for all ages. No matter how old you are, you can play a sport."

The film was also inspiring to the producers of **Current TV**. Shortly after uploading the documentary to Current.com, the student filmmakers heard back from Current's producers, who offered the group an \$800 contract to run *71* on Current TV for three months.

"I feel really excited about it because this is our first project that's actually going somewhere," said Dalisay. "It's a real television credit that we can use on our resume."

According to Martin, one reason these two films were successful is that the crews searched for a good story and then listened to their subjects. The benefits of that spill over to fiction filmmaking.

"I think that's the key to doing documentaries – listening," said Martin. "Especially for young filmmakers, dealing with actors and trying to get them to do emotions that you've never experienced yourself or have no idea when you're 18 or 19 is kind of tough. With documentary, though, you can ask the right questions and you can really listen to people."

He added, "Once you learn to listen, really listen to what people are saying, then you can deal with actors and start to see what they're saying by listening to them and getting them to listen to each other!"

- *Christine Baker, Online Editor/Writer*

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