

Filmmaker Uses Art to ‘De-Mystify’ Ecological Hot Topics; SPH Education Informs Environmental Documentaries

TERRY YOUNG SUSPECTS THAT IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD HER, at age 16, that she would eventually pursue a master’s degree in a scientific field, she would have had a simple response: “You’ve got to be kidding.”

At that time she was part of a dance company performing at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. She would go on to explore other artistic passions, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in photography and ceramics from Mount St. Mary’s College before attending the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., to study photography and film, with a special concentration in documentary filmmaking. For more than a decade she worked with her grandfather, a photographer who owned a documentary film company. “I really like the medium,” Young says. “I think as an education tool it’s very powerful.”

That thinking, combined with a concern about environmental issues, has driven Young as she went through an undergraduate program in biological sciences at Wright State University and then enrolled in the UCLA School of Public Health’s M.S. program, where she is completing her second year in the Department of Environmental Health Sciences.

With her M.S. education, Young intends to produce documentary films as a way to de-mystify difficult biological concepts and ecological hot topics for the general public. “The problem is that not all of the information is on the table,” she says. “I find that the Environmental Protection Agency has one perspective, the Army Corps of Engineers has another, scientists have another, environmental groups still another, and the general population, which outnumbers all of them, has an entirely different perspective. It would be nice to clarify the issues and get everyone on the same page.”

Her film credits include “The Crisis at the Salton Sea,” an educational video short that Young produced, photographed and edited for the Pacific Wildlife Project, an environmental rescue organization. For the video, she ventured into the Salton Sea in a kayak during a period of heavy fish and bird die-off. She also edited an updated version of Sheila Laffey’s award-winning documentary “The Last Stand,” detailing efforts to preserve the Ballona wetlands.

While pursuing her M.S., Young has engrossed herself in her current film project, “Ya Don’t Miss the Water,” a video documentary on the problems of water in Los Angeles in which she uses the San Gabriel River basin as a model for water-strapped communities with high-population pressures. Young, who has shot more than 40 hours of interviews and footage, says the point of view emerged during the filmmaking process. She prefers it that way – keeping her own biases to herself. “If you shoot enough and you open it up to as many people as are willing to talk to you, issues start sticking out like sore thumbs,” she explains.

For a right-brained person, the scientific aspect of the M.S. program has been “very hard,” Young concedes, laughing. But she is convinced it will help her make a more powerful impact through her art. “There are so many people who have trouble understanding the world around them with all of the technology and science that seems to be coming at them at a very fast pace,” she says. “A powerful medium like film can contribute to bridging that gap.”

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