

Power Player

Empowerment Project Puts Power Of the Media in the People's Hands

BY TRAFTON DREW, Staff Writer • PHOTOS BY CHRISTINE NGUYEN

You don't have to go to Hollywood to see an Oscar. In fact, you don't even have to leave this town.

Since 1993, Chapel Hill has been home to the Empowerment Project, which received an Academy Award that year for its documentary film "The Panama Deception." Since Barbara Trent and David Kasper created the organization in 1984, it has grown to be one of the most well respected independent documentary producers in the country.

But the Empowerment Project is about more than simply producing documentary films. "Our purpose is to democratize access to the media and to provide resources to put the power of the media in the hands of those working to further social justice, to explore artistic expression and to advance important human purposes," Trent said.

The Oscar winner sees video activism as a form of empowerment — hence the name — and one of the organization's main focuses is to aid and encourage fellow independent filmmakers. As a result, the group provides low-cost editing facilities to aspiring filmmakers and has published a manual titled "Taking It to the Theaters." The manual provides independent filmmakers with a guide on how to effectively distribute a documentary film to independent theaters.

While it might seem unusual that a nationally respected organization with an Academy Award to its credit is headquartered in two small homes (one house, one yurt — a Middle Eastern tent) on the outskirts of Chapel Hill, one gets the impression that Trent and Kasper wouldn't have it any other way.

While Hollywood often produces films of questionable taste and still makes money, even the best independent documentaries have a hard time getting national distribution and even more difficulty making a profit.

The nature of the situation might seem unjust, but few feel as strongly about it as Trent.

"Some countries have government censorship ... (but) in this country the government doesn't need to have a red-felt pen to cross out sections," she said. "The things that they don't want in the paper never get near the paper."

"There's a history of writers who lost their job for having a different political view than their editors," she added.

This results in what she refers to as

This situation has made it even more difficult for independent media such as the Empowerment Project to cover current events. While the major news networks have huge budgets and are able to immediately send correspondents all over the globe, Trent and Kasper must first go through a lengthy fund-raising process.

Despite mobilizing the day they heard about the December 1989 invasion of Panama, "The Panama Deception" was released two years later — and this was after constantly cutting corners due to time and monetary restraints. In Trent's eyes, that means that the public had to wait two years before the real story of the Panama invasion was told.

The Empowerment Project maintains that the national media did a horrible job covering the invasion, never asking why it was necessary to deploy thousands of army troops to arrest one man.

"If the public had the kind of media it got in the '60s, it would be much less complacent because it would know exactly what was going on and it would have a better idea of who was to blame and where to focus one's protest and anger," Trent said.

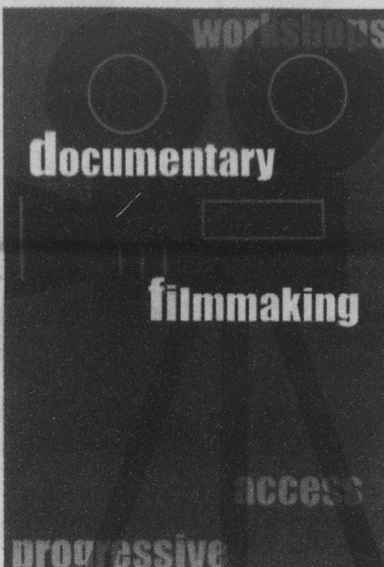
This is not to say that Trent feels that today's students are more apathetic.

I don't buy that," she said. "I can't help but wonder if that's a nasty rumor spread so that students will believe it about themselves. That's a great way to disempower people."

Through their support of artistic expression and democratized media, Trent and the Empowerment Project have been doing the opposite.

The group is currently working on a number of projects, including documentaries on the effects of American economic sanctions on Iraq, the cultural challenges facing Macedonian emigrés and the quality of life at the end of life.

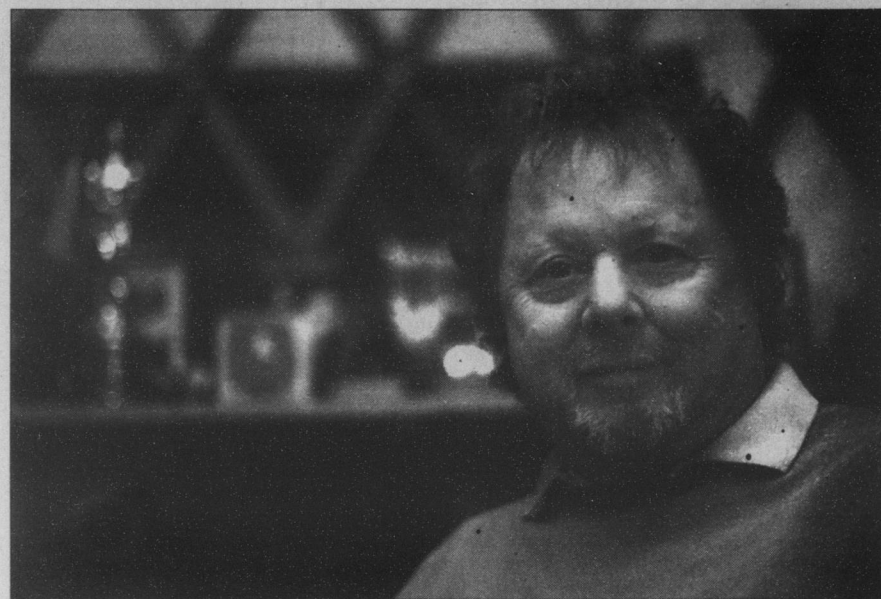
Trent remains focused on demonstrating, and maintains that individuals can make a difference if they set their



self-censorship. Trent also believes that the political views of media editors are dictated by the large corporations that own the nation's major media distributors.

"Two of the major networks are owned by two of the largest arms builders in the world," she said. Therefore, she says we see the news "which benefits their corporate interests around the world."

"At least if you're in a country that openly censors the media, you know that you're not getting the truth. Whereas in this country, people listen to the media and think they are getting the truth. That's the insidious part of economic censorship."



minds to it.

"I wish everyone would take personal responsibility and realize that their single actions affect people all over the world," she said. "On the other hand, how do you walk out the door without doing something wrong?"

"The question is, are we doing acts that are going to make the world a better place for us to live in?"

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Empower Yourself

The Empowerment Project offers:

- video workshops
- digital and VHS video editing facilities
- a film music library
- transfer of slides or prints to video
- rentable projection equipment and video recorders
- speaking appearances

For more information, see www.empowermentproject.org.



David Kasper, top, is a co-founder of the Empowerment Project, which provides training, equipment and encouragement to progressive video activists. Co-founder Barbara Trent, bottom, sits with the Oscar she won as director of the 1992 documentary "The Panama Deception."

Behind the Scenes of the Panama Invasion

The photos below are from the Empowerment Project's Oscar-winning 1992 documentary "The Panama Deception."



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE EMPOWERMENT PROJECT/JULIO CESAR GUERRA D.

The Empowerment Project's Panamanian film crew with director Barbara Trent at a demonstration, June 20, 1990.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE EMPOWERMENT PROJECT/JULIO CESAR GUERRA D.

The neighborhood of El Chorrillo after the invasion of Panama in December 1989.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE EMPOWERMENT PROJECT/SENOR BARRIOS

U.S. MP searching a refugee at the Balboa Refugee Camp while other Panamanian refugees wait in line, December 1989.