CONVERSATION WITH
GIRL RISING DIRECTOR
RICHARD E. ROBBINS

Please tell us a little bit about your background as a filmmaker.

My background is in journalism. In a way, ABC News was my training for documentary filmmaking. It was a great experience. My most recent documentary, prior to Girl Rising, is Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience.

How did you get involved with the issues in the film?

Initially, I really didn’t know very much about development issues. My understanding was generally in the larger context of geopolitical issues — such as war or famine. I tended to view these issues from a journalist’s perspective (e.g. reactive), rather than as an NGO looking forward for solutions. However, in the course of research for other work, I happened upon a study of girls’ education. I realized there was a gap in my knowledge and understanding about the issues, so I did additional research on the subject. I realized there was an opportunity for a film — there was a need to bridge the gap of knowledge about these issues. In a way, I found it similar to where the concept of global warming was 20 years ago. There was a small group of people who were paying attention and who understood the basic facts, but it hadn’t penetrated to the broader world.

Ultimately, I did quite a bit of research. Data on girls’ education in the developing world is fairly new information. Traditionally, people in the international development and aid community — which has really only been around since post World War II — has focused on what one tends to focus on when there are places with people in desperate situations — the most urgent needs, such as getting people fed, getting good healthcare, getting good agricultural support, etc. It wasn’t until the 70s and 80s when people began to look at the long-term effects of education. And of course it takes a while to get results from long-term studies. So, it wasn’t until the 90s that we saw the widespread impact of girls’ education.

Why was it important to you personally to be a part of Girl Rising?

One reason was parenthood. There’s something to becoming a parent. When I traveled in the developing world for ABC News, I encountered so many children, but it’s different when you have a 5 year old of your own. So when I was back in the developing world as a parent, it was a whole new connection for me to see children who didn’t have food and didn’t have shoes and couldn’t go to school.

I wish there was a better story about how I got involved with this subject, but really it began when I started reading about these issues. I just got hooked. I’m a bit of a research nerd! Once I read a study, I wanted to read another one, and then another. It is not that I dove head in to these issues. I felt like I was dragged in by the work. Ultimately, this is why I wanted to make the film. The issues just grabbed me and wouldn’t let go.

How long was the process of making the film?

I started research even before Operation Homecoming. There was a great deal of research involved. We also spent a lot of years raising money. In addition, we spent a fair amount of time figuring out how to make the film. There were significant challenges. Truthfully, it required us to be willing to break some of the traditional documentary rules, and required us to be even more ambitious than traditional documentary filmmakers.

Can you tell us about the stylistic choices you made in
the film?

My thinking of how to make the film was very much informed by the making of Operation Homecoming. The subject of Operation Homecoming was really the memory of war, not the war itself. As a filmmaker, you have to ask the question what does the document of memory look like? You can’t point a camera at a memory. You can record someone having it and try to bring it back to life, but ultimately it is sort of illusive. For me, the subject of girls’ education was something similar. I came to believe that what we really needed to document in the film was the spirit and the drive of these girls – what was inside of them.

When we first went to Kenya and I came back to Los Angeles, and I viewed my footage, I realized I was making something that was sad and depressing and overwhelming. But this wasn’t the experience that I had had out in the world. People who travel the developing world often experience this dichotomy. You can be in a circumstance you find incredibly bleak and dim, and at the same time encounter a person in those circumstances who is incredibly inspiring and makes you believe anything is possible. I wanted to capture this essence.

What about the varying imagery in the film?

When you make footage of something and show it to people, the first thing people tend to notice is what is not familiar. The familiar passes unnoticed. It’s what different that strikes them. The first picture of what we see in Cambodia are the things that are different – it’s dirty, the children don’t have shoes, etc. All of the things that make the girls seem like the other. But I wanted to make a film that showed how the girls are like all the girls that we know. We wanted to focus on girls as people, as human beings, with similar aspirations and dreams to the girls at home. So for that I had to throw out the documentary rulebook. I am a sort of traditionalist as a filmmaker, and I did seek out cinematic justifications for what I did, but it took me a while to let these stories unfold in a more lyrical way.

The different chapters in the film offer different post-production effects. Can you speak to that?

We get used to certain kinds of images as general image consumers. I think we have a hard time receiving new information from images that seem familiar. Viewers might say “Oh I’ve heard this one before. I’ve seen so many of these war images. I already know about it…” So as a filmmaker I have to ask, ‘How am I going to tell you something new that you think you already know about? How can I give you a different set of images so that I can put you in a different headspace?’

The individual choices are much more intuitive. I have my own process. For example, once I had a piece of writing for a given chapter, I asked someone in my office to read it aloud and record it. I would listen to it over and over and then the images would just form. Part of this process is just letting the images form and not chasing them away.

The most obvious version of this in Girl Rising is the Sierra Leone chapter. I loved how light and youthful the voice in that story was. It actually reminded me of Juno. The people who did title sequence for Juno, Smith&Lee, directed and did all of the visual effects for the Sierra Leone chapter. Luckily they were into it! Jenny Lee has a great Making-of Video for the Sierra Leone chapter.

Another example is the Peru chapter about Senna, shot in black and white. I wanted to communicate how cold and bleak it was. It was very sunny, but it was more a mean, cold sun. Black and white captured this better than color.

We hope to inspire students and young adults to create a 10th story. What advice do you have for students interested in creating their own documentary?

By nature I’m analytical. I do lots and lots of research. I mulled this project over in my head a million times. Ultimately, I realized that these girls don’t have political or economic capital; they barely have a voice in the world. They do, however, have emotional capital. For all of us. It is hard to see them and not be moved. So my advice is make an emotional connection with your audience. The fact and circumstances will take care of themselves. Your job as a filmmaker is to make the viewer care. More than how much you understand the exact circumstances, it is really important to get the viewer to care enough so that they actually do something. Finding this connection is harder than it seems. Sometimes it’s pulling back on the intensity of the emotions, because too much intensity can make people turn away. I learned a lot about finding that spot. I find, for example, that when people cry they stop paying attention. I want everyone to get to the point where they think they’re going to cry but they keep paying attention!
Any final thoughts?

The most important and positive thing about girls’ education is that we actually know what the solution is. There are lots of different ways to educate girls around the world. When people ask me what they can do, I say there are so many organizations that are doing incredible work. You can find them easily, or you can create something on your own. Follow the chain of your own interests. For example, if you are interested in bicycles, there are some great bicycle interventions that help girls get to school. Spend a little bit of time connecting what you care about to what is happening out there in the world. It is incredibly gratifying and exciting when you do.