

Their Side: A hybrid documentary project.

The Critical Discussion and Reflection.

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Originally titled *Voice of God*, this hybrid documentary project began as a critical exploration in the psychology and cultural influences of decision making. Using symbolism of a deer and a hunter to make a social critique on the pressure and importance of making “the right” decision, and interviews from experts in their respective fields of study of the human conscience, *Voice of God* would take a unique approach to show how the decision making process works. The deer represents the spirit animal of a good decision maker and the hunter acts as the protagonist, deciding whether or not to shoot. Through the interviews and intertwined narrative story, the audience will recognize how, where and why people find certainty when making the most difficult of decisions. However, true to the nature of a documentary, plans changed. While conducting the last of the interviews, the interview subjects revealed interesting details about the most significant moments of their young lives. These interview subjects were my siblings and what they said forced me to question my memory of the events that happened in our childhood. *Their Side* became the new title of this project where I conducted an exploration on what really happened during the custody battle between my parents. The film explores the consequences of the decision making process that effectively broke a family. In it, my siblings share their experiences of the events and fill in the holes of details that were hidden from me for my entire life. The purpose of this project was not to merely tell the story of the Parker family, but also to start a conversation on the consequences that our decisions have on other people, and how those affected find their own ways to cope and move on.

Their Side tells the story of the Parker family and how their parents’ decisions affect the lives of their children. Dan and Kathy Parker, the father and stepmother respectively, provide details that have long remained hidden from the eyes and ears of the Parker children. Juli Gumina, the Guardian Ad Litem, recounts her memory of the events from the perspective of the

court. Olivia Parker, the oldest sibling, provides the most complete version of the story from the perspective of the children. Stephen Parker, the oldest brother, recounts his unique dilemmas with personal relationships within the broken family. Dylan Parker, the youngest brother, shows how the traumatic process of a custody battle can have lasting effects on the mental health of children involved. Danielle Parker, the youngest of the Parker children, acts as the narrator and mediator of the interviews.

The details of the custody battle were sealed by the courts, but since the youngest of the Parker children was now 21, details can be shared. The beginning of the documentary introduces the narrative character; a mysterious figure in a dark room with a voiceover that introduces me, Danielle Parker, and my intentions for making this project. Then, the Parker family is introduced and they each provide some details of the early years of the family. Conflicting stories of who had the power to actually make the decision of who would be granted custody riddle the second act. Every opinion and perspective is shared until a full picture is created. At the climax of the film, it is revealed that the one who made the ultimate decision was Robin Parker, when she decided to end the fighting and give up her right to her kids. Through the course of coming to this realization, the narrative story of the character in the dark room plays in parallel. It is quickly revealed that the character is not in an empty room and is not alone. A rifle lies on a bright red table and two other figures join her there. Soon the identities of each of the figures are revealed as different versions of the same “self”. Each self takes the opportunity to choose whether or not to hold the gun, and then what to do with it. In this version of the project, the gun itself represents the decision. Three characters, one representing the good, another the bad, and the last one something in between, demonstrates their intentions of what to do with the weapon. In the end, none of the selves wield the gun because it was never in their control to make the decision.

Moreso, *Their Side* is not about how to make the decision of whether or not to shoot, but it was about the consequences of whatever the decision was, regardless of if the gun was fired, or not.

While there are a lot of characters and moving parts within this story, the arc follows the perspective and emotions of the Parker children. The resolution is that the Parker children decided to take control in the only way they knew how; it was their decision to stick together no matter what. They also express their unique approaches to coping with the consequences of a decision they did not even make, and had no control over. Each of them had a piece of each other and only part of the story, which separately, were incomplete and insignificant, but together they are whole and thought-provoking.

Their Side presents a unique approach to the hybrid documentary exploration project. By following the natural direction of the project, I found answers I never thought would matter to me and discovered my own strengths and weaknesses. The first draft of their side was incoherent and convoluted, it was not until the project received constructive feedback that the story was discovered. Per peer review, questions were asked and important details were picked out of the rough which led to the construction of a much more comprehensive piece. The style is unique to not only my personality as a filmmaker, but also the time in which it was made. During the Coronavirus Pandemic, filmmakers were forced to take extra caution to prevent further spread of germs. This led to the use of Zoom to conduct interviews and the duplication editing technique in the narrative scenes to ensure fewer personnel on set while filming. Additionally, the editing techniques and sound design helped showcase my character as the filmmaker.

Their Side proved to be effective in evoking an emotional response from its audience through character development, editing, and figurative expression. The interview subjects in the film quickly become recognizable as characters in a story because of their consistent behaviors,

use of diction, and attitudes throughout the film. They all present a unique arc of emotions as they recount their memories of the custody battle. This makes them more personable to the audience and encourages them to connect deeper with the characters and their story. The editing of the film helps share with the audience more about who the characters are that words alone cannot simply convey. The pacing of *Their Side* follows an easily identifiable pattern, starting quick and witty with its cuts and topics of conversation, slowing down just enough in the middle to understand important plot points, and ramping up again at the climax and reveal of Robin Parker's decision just before the resolution. Accompanying the pacing of the film is the musical score which helps the audience follow the flow and emotional intentions of certain parts of the film. Emotional moments are accompanied by quiet, somber music, while informational moments have exciting and more joyful music playing underneath. In this sense, the editing also proves to craft and help shape the story. With many elements, it can be easy to get lost in all of the information, but with lower third titles and frequent intervention of the narrative storyline to help recap the important details, the story is clearly understood. While the symbolism of the gun may prove to have been less effective than initially intended, it still received positive feedback in its inclusion in the final project. One classmate remarked how personally he connected with the story and that he understood the meaning of the gun. The story of the Parker family alone is enough to elicit sadness and grief from anyone watching because it allows them to see all the parts in between that are organic and personal. This is the real family, and these are their real emotions, some still just as raw as the day they happened.

Upon reflection of this project, the outcomes that were anticipated before filming began were much different than those that followed after finishing the final edit. This mostly has to do with how the entire project itself was reworked within the last two months of the thesis class. As

the filmmaker, I did not gain any more certainty than what I had before starting this project. In fact, during the project I felt more uncertain than I ever had. Making the decision to change my project so late in the year caused a lot of anxiety and if it were not for the guidance and confidence instilled by my mentor and professor, Justin Reifert, I would likely not have explored the new avenue. The thing that I wanted most from this project was concrete answers on how to become a more certain person. Perhaps there is no concrete answer for that, and maybe, my indecision can be a useful thing. When I am able to make a decision, I follow through every time until the end, but I provide myself with a safeguard, a way out, just in case. I keep the idea of backing out or reverting back to a place of familiarity and consistency, but somehow knowing that I have something to fall back on makes me even more certain that whatever I do will work out.

In terms of technique and skill, I was able to receive feedback and praise from my peers and found that, although few, some initial outcomes this project came to fruition. *Their Side* exhibits my talent as a filmmaker to edit a coherent story with unique figurative devices and, however controversial, sparks a conversation among the audience members. *Their Side* won the award for Best Storytelling at the annual GrizzDance film festival at Oakland University, an honor I found truly humbling. By creating a piece on something that I knew and cared so deeply about, the audience resonated with me and found beauty in what I created. They also were not afraid to discuss some of the artistic choices I made with the film. The use of the gun was a topic I was nervous to talk about especially considering the events that happened this year. I was able to explain the original intention with reference to the deer hunting scene where the deer is actually known as the spirit animal of a good decision maker. Some audience members

commended my choice to keep the symbolism because it clearly articulates the unprecedented pressure that can come when faced with making a difficult decision.

Although some outcomes were much different than expected, that does not mean they are not incredibly valuable. *Their Side* tells a story from the perspective of the individuals who felt they did not have a voice while all the events they discussed were taking place. The interviews gave them the opportunity to reexamine and unpack their emotions towards the course of action. Olivia and Dylan Parker remarked that filming this documentary allowed them to find closure just like I mentioned in the resolution of the film. It also allowed them to share their perspective with our parents in a form that required them to simply listen. *Their Side* presents the opportunity for discussion, but while watching they are forced to engage with the characters without being able to retort on everything they mention. This film acted as a platform for my and my siblings' voices, which is something we all went without for a long time in our lives.

Their Side was perhaps the most difficult, emotionally and mentally straining project of my career, but it was also easily the most rewarding. This film taught me things about my family, myself and reinforced my confidence as a filmmaker. It helped me to discover my strengths and showcase what I have learned.