

How We Captured John - Living With Mental Illness



Film producer Joseph Piner first met John when he just finished up a feature Length documentary titled Electronic Crack Film. I was looking for my next film project. While I was visiting my mother on High Street in Elkton, Maryland a man was walking towards me and looked like he was from some supper hero movie the way he was dressed.

Screen shot from the film



I stopped him and talked to him and right away I knew that there was something about this man that had a story. John told me about his life and the mental illness that he lives with. I asked him if we could meet the next day and talk more. He agreed and we got together in a nearby park the following day. After listening to John's story, I knew that this was the next film to produce. I don't see many documentary films about mental illness and I thought that I would give it a shot.

It was one week or maybe a little more before we started filming John. We looked at some of the very few documentary films about mental illness so we could get a feel or see if there are any influences. From there we drafted a more in detailed outline of what we would hope to film and help tell the story.

What We Found

We found out that the best way to film someone like John living with mental illness was to capture as much footage of John as we could. That would require us to film John in the morning as soon as he got up and around. We follow John through his daily visits to many retail shops in and around Elkton, Maryland. This was a bit of a challenge, because you have to be ready for John, he is always on the move. In fact you will see lots of footage of John on the move in the film.

Picking the right gear to capture John

Because John was always on the move walking the streets of Elkton we needed the right gear to be able to keep up with John. We already had several cameras in our studio. For the run and gun stuff we knew the camera would have to be small enough to keep up with John and at the same time provide good clean and stable footage. I didn't want a DSLR although you can get some really nice looking footage out of these cameras, they do have their own limitations. I took my Canon XC 15 out and started filming John. I wasn't completely sure that this would be the right camera, but to my surprise the Canon XC 15 produced some really nice images with its Canon C-log pro file. The camera was not able to get the DOF/ background out of focus as much as we would have liked, but we were still able to get a lot of the scenes with blurry background.



I installed a cinema cage on the Canon XC 15 this allowed us to attached handles for gripping. We also attached a matte box to use 4X4 ND filters. Even though the Canon XC 15 has built in ND filters, we found that it should have went up to two stops more.

Canon XC 15



Filming Our Interviews

With the subject being mental illness I knew this was going to be a film, where we would have to rely heavily on interviews intercut with lots of B Roll shots, archival footage, and John interacting with the public. We picked up our Blackmagic Ursa Mini to film all the interviews. We filmed in the Ursa Mini's log profile to give more dynamic range. There was no problem at all with this camera achieving a blurred out background. Not all the scenes in the film called for the background to have less DOF/ Blurred background, but as most filmmakers know this is the type of image that has dominated the film world. Some interviews were filmed on the Z Camera E2

Blackmagic Ursa Mini



Z Camera E2 C



While capturing audio we had the Rode NTG 2 Shotgun attached to the Canon XC 15 to capture sound for the run and gun shots, but when we had time to capture sound externally. We started out using the Tascam DR-701D, but quickly moved to the Zoon F-4 Field Recorder. We used the Sennheiser MK -66 Shotgun mic for the field recorder and we were very pleased with the sound we produced.

Sennheiser MK -66 Shotgun Mic



FILMING DURING COVID – 19



We had just gotten back from filming in Nashville, Tennessee when it was announced that the United States had a serious problem with an outbreak of the Coronavirus/ Covid – 19. We were supposed to rap our documentary film up with two more interviews on some of the new bills that were introduced to legislation on mental illness. The government shut down and we were out of the interviews. The Covid – 19 pandemic abruptly forced our hand. If we even got to film something we would have to follow new guidelines to keep ourselves and everyone around us safe from the virus.



Post Production

Most of the footage we shot had to be converted to a different format before we could start to edit. We shot in 4K 24p for this film. The Canon uses MXF files which won't even import into our Avid Media Composer system. Blackmagic Ursa Mini files are fine and can be edited right away, since we are downscaling the 4K footage to 1080p we converted the 4K footage to Avid DNXHD files, which handles much better in the Avid Media Composer system.



“Now that our film is very near to completion, which we would like to film the last two interviews, we have to figure out the best and most reliable way to launch our film. Our options are not so hard it just depends on how long this Covid – 19 Pandemic last.