



Real

Director of Photography Richard Chisolm seeks out the highs and lows of real life.

The social philosophy of realism and its documentary filmmaking counterpart come together in Richard Chisolm, a Baltimore-based director of photography specializing in documentaries.

Over the years, quite a few heavy-weight documentary directors and producers have turned to Chisolm looking for that combination. During his career, Chisolm has shot documentaries for the American Red Cross in Zimbabwe and El Salvador; handled the camera for a PBS series on Guatemala's homeless children, and earned Emmy nominations for two of the 11 National Geographic documentaries he has shot. One of those nominations, *Don't Say Goodbye: America's Endangered Species*, won the Emmy.

In addition to documentaries, Chisolm has shot corporate pieces and commercials. In recent years, however, he has moved away from the commercial world to focus on documentaries — from highly stylized and formulaic productions to low-budget, freewheeling cinema verite projects.

Whichever kind of documentary he works on, Chisolm is at heart a realist who believes in shooting what's there and not what someone put there. "To me reality can be entertaining, hilarious, tragic and enlightening," he says.

When asked about his favorite scenes, he consistently offers examples where he as the shooter along with the subject and the

audience collided with reality. Two years ago, for example, he shot a six-hour ABC television documentary series called *Hopkins 24/7*, about the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

One of the segments covered 160 medical students as they entered a laboratory room and divided into 40 groups of four. Each group approached a table and uncovered a dead body that would serve for a time as their anatomy teacher. Chisolm shot one group's response to the chilling introduction. "This group was different," he says. "They didn't seem to know each other very well. They had been thrown together and told to uncover a cadaver. The first thing they did, apparently without thinking, was to stop for a kind of spontaneous group prayer or moment of silence."

It was a collision with reality, recorded without comment by Chisolm's camera.

A news trailer edited to introduce the media to the *Hopkins 24/7* series offers quite a bit of commentary by way of camera movements. When asked about his favorite camera techniques, Chisolm hurries to say that he can apply techniques when asked but prefers not to. "I'm the anti-gimmick camera person," he says. "I'm in the school that says no one should notice the camera."

In the National Geographic documentary about endangered species, viewers do notice cameras. Not Chisolm's, but the cameras wielded by two naturalist photographers who served as a vehicle for telling a story about six people who try to save

endangered species. The naturalists, who are real, have embarked on a quest to photograph every endangered species. One of the species they photograph, the Little Kern River Golden Trout, has recently been removed from the endangered list.

In the segment, Chisolm shot the photographers as they worked with Dan Christianson, a Fish and Wildlife employee. Within the filming of the fish story, Chisolm created a profile of Christianson, a soft-spoken, thoughtful man, who makes an unlikely hero. As a boy in the 1940s, Christianson fished the creek for the Golden Trout. Later in life, through his job, he discovered that the fish were endangered. He labored for years by himself to repair problems in the stream. In the end, he single-handedly saved the Golden Trout from extinction.

Chisolm moves easily among uneasy subjects. For a PBS documentary chronicling the lives of homeless children in Guatemala, he literally moved in with the kids, camera and all, for seven days. "It was at times very depressing," he recalls. "The kids were so desperately hungry that they sniffed glue to stave off appetite. They stole car parts and sold them to get food. They slept on the streets. At times during filming, middle class Guatemalans drove past and threw rocks at us for making the film. It made me sad and angry."

One day, it wasn't so bad. "The kids each paid a quarter and went swimming at a public pool," Chisolm says. "For an observer like me it was a huge relief to see them playing in the pool and laughing. I thought, oh my God, these kids will never live to be 20 years old. But at least they have some joy in their lives."

When you see the film, you feel Chisolm's relief. ■