

RECRUITING AL GORE

For years, he was introduced as the “next President of the United States” -- but in the wake of a personally devastating and controversial defeat in the 2000 election, Al Gore did something entirely unexpected. He hit the road, not in search of exile, but as a traveling showman.

His “show” is a non-partisan, multimedia presentation that reveals, via an original mix of humor, cartoons and convincing scientific evidence, the resonant effects that global warming is wreaking upon our planet. It is also an arresting, inspirational “call to arms,” pointing out the opportunity that stands before the nation to put American ingenuity and spirit to work in attacking this crisis. With little fanfare, Gore has presented his show more than 1,000 times in cramped school auditoriums and hotel conference rooms in cities large and small, hoping to propel audiences to make a difference in what might otherwise turn out to be the biggest catastrophe of human history.

Two people who became entranced by Gore’s show are leading environmental activist Laurie David and movie producer Lawrence Bender. David hosted two of Gore’s sold-out presentations in New York and Los Angeles, where it had a transforming effect on her. “I felt like Al Gore had become the Paul Revere of our times,” says David, “traveling around the country calling out this vital warning that we really can’t ignore.”

She also realized that Gore faced a daunting uphill battle in getting his message out into the zeitgeist. “Having researched this subject for some 40 years, nobody understands the issue better than Al Gore and nobody can explain it more clearly and compellingly to the lay person,” notes David. “But he would have to be on the road 365 days a year to reach even a fraction of the people who need to be reached, and there just isn’t time.”

“As soon as I saw Gore’s presentation, I knew it could make for the basis of an amazing film,” Lawrence Bender says. “We were all convinced that the moving truth of what Gore was demonstrating needed to be experienced on a much larger scale.”

Inspired to act, David and Bender approached a long-time industry friend, Scott Z. Burns, a writer, director and Clio Award-winning veteran of creative advertising. The team also approached Jeff Skoll of Participant Productions – the new company focused on creating exciting motion picture entertainment around core social issues, which in 2005 released such acclaimed and thought-provoking movies as “Good Night and Good Luck” and “Syriana.”

The entire quartet descended upon one of Gore’s shows and each felt equally compelled to kick the production into high gear.

Jeff Skoll says, "I thought I knew a fair amount about this subject, and it's something I've studied and read about for many years – but when I saw Al Gore's presentation, it really changed my mind. I had been looking at it as a long-term issue, a story that was going to be unfolding over the next 20 or 30 years, but what I learned is that it's so much more urgent than that. The facts, as you'll see in Gore's presentation, are that we have maybe five or ten years to address this in a significant way. And here you have Al giving these presentations to 100 people or so at a time, and I knew we had to do more. We had to get this out there as quickly as possible."

Like Gore, the producers saw the impending dangers of global warming as transcending partisan politics. Comments Scott Burns: "I was very moved by the realization that after having held a position of power that afforded him a 360 degree view of all the problems facing the world today, Al Gore had made the decision to commit himself to this one. It wasn't political. Science is, by definition, free of partisan manipulation. Standing there on the stage, Al was not asking for our vote—he was asking for our attention and our will to bring about change."

Adds Skoll: "Al presents the facts in a way that's compelling and unique – it's simultaneously entertaining and frightening. His goal is to clearly take this issue out of the realm of partisan politics by saying here are the facts about what's going on – and the only recourse is for all kinds of people from different backgrounds to get involved because no matter who you are or where you come from, it's going to affect all our lives."

The producers understood that what they were setting out to do would be no ordinary film production. "We were clear that what was at stake," says Laurie David, "was basically the planet itself. All that was left to do was to convince Mr. Gore"

So it was that this group of Hollywood producers found themselves pitching the former Vice President of the United States their movie idea – which Bender acknowledges unleashed a flurry of butterfly nerves. "I'm used to all kinds of pitch meetings but this was the man who might have been President," notes Bender. Luckily, Gore instantly set them at ease. "He was remarkably grounded and charming," Bender continues. "He immediately understood that while he had been getting his message out to thousands of people with his show, a movie could potentially get the message out to millions."

"This deepening global climate crisis requires us to act boldly, quickly, and wisely," says Gore, who saw AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH as one more step towards getting the world to pay attention to the urgent situation at hand.

The filmmakers recruited director Davis Guggenheim to bring to the film a fast-paced, intimate and entertaining cinematic style. A multi-faceted filmmaker, Guggenheim has directed extensively for television and most recently came to the fore as one of the executive producers of the widely acclaimed Western-themed HBO series "Deadwood," which is known for its complex, heavily shaded characters. With AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH, Guggenheim saw a chance to return to his documentary roots while still telling a story full of human depth and surprises.

“Laurie David burst into my office like a Category 5 Hurricane and said ‘I have a movie that might be the most important film you’ll ever make,’” Guggenheim recalls of his introduction to the project. “Still, I was unsure about the idea until we all went to see Gore give the presentation.”

Like his filmmaking partners, Guggenheim left the presentation so shaken and revved up that he could not stop envisioning a movie of what he had just seen and experienced. “I was blown away and I immediately wanted to get this story out to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible,” he says, echoing the sentiments of the producers.

The more he learned about the intensively researched science behind Gore’s ardent warnings about global warming, the more the story intrigued Guggenheim. “The thing you dream about as a filmmaker is finding a subject that hooks you in the gut and says ‘you have to make this movie,’” he explains, “and this movie had that for me. There was the feeling that if I never did anything else with my life except convey this story, that alone would be a pretty big thing.”

As production got under way, the filmmakers admit there were initial concerns about how audiences and the media would approach a movie about two subjects – Gore and global warming -- that have traditionally been fraught with controversy. But those fears were laid to rest as the film made its lauded premiere at the Sundance Film Festival to a highly enthusiastic reception, which included 3 standing ovations.

“The big question was always: will people come into this movie with preconceived notions?” comments Jeff Skoll “What is gratifying is that people from so many different walks of life have embraced this, including people you might think would be opposed to it. Conservatives, Liberals, Red State, Blue State – I think this story has a universal appeal.” Adds Lesley Chilcott, “The raging debate about global warming is over. The only debate left is how quickly we are going to react.”

GAINING GORE’S TRUST

From the beginning, Davis Guggenheim knew the key to turning AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH into compelling entertainment was to gain Al Gore’s trust – to the point that he would be able to get under Gore’s skin. Having been impressed with Gore’s depths of conviction and charisma, Guggenheim hoped to probe beneath them to find his most intimate motivations for taking up the cause of global warming.

At first it was an intimidating proposition. Even after spending considerable time traveling with Gore, it still took Guggenheim weeks to stop formally calling him “Mr. Vice President” and replace it with the more casual “Al.” “You look at this guy and realize that he’s going to be in your grandkid’s history books and that can blow you away,” admits Guggenheim. “But the more time I

spent with him, the more I started to see him as deeply human. He became this funny, thoughtful, fascinating man who also happened to have the most extraordinary knowledge about global warming.”

As Guggenheim dug deeper, he began to find an underlying human story that drives the film from its core. “I began to see Al Gore as a remarkable character who in a traumatic time made a heroic choice to put everything else away and dedicate his life to an issue no one else was willing to talk about,” sums up the director. “I’m the kind of director who loves strong emotions and I felt that when you see Al Gore picking himself up after 2000 and trying to save the world, there was going to be something very powerful in that.”

Over time, Gore opened his life to Guggenheim, revealing the many surprising and sometimes heart-rending ways in which his personal life has intersected with his strong belief in the beauty, sanctity and emotional sustenance of the land. Guggenheim brings to the fore three key events in Gore’s life that helped to forge his steadfast commitment to the environment: the car accident that nearly took the life of his young son; the death of his sister from lung cancer, especially in light of the fact that his family traditionally farmed tobacco; and his historic defeat in the 2000 Presidential campaign race against George W. Bush.

“We had many very long sit-down interviews, some of which were quite emotional, heated and painful,” says Guggenheim of the process that led to these private revelations. “These moments become sort of the inner voice of the film – Al’s unspoken, emotional diary.”

Throughout the shoot, the filmmakers also faced the exhausting prospect of keeping up with Gore’s blistering pace and constant state of motion. Explains Lawrence Bender: “There probably isn’t a busier person on earth than Al Gore. He was constantly zig-zagging around the world, but he made the film a priority so we were always able to get what we needed. Much of the shooting was seat-of-your-pants kind of stuff. Whatever the circumstance, Davis just pulled out the camera and started shooting!”

One of those unforeseen circumstances came as the stark reality of global warming’s potential effects hit home right in the middle of filming AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH. Just as the production team was planning a trip to New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina blasted the Gulf Coast with its devastating force, leading to the worst natural disaster in U.S. history and the unprecedented near-destruction of New Orleans.

It was a heart-stopping moment for everyone in the country and for Davis Guggenheim it provided yet another flashing red light that Gore’s warning must be heeded. “We had plane tickets and crews standing by to go to New Orleans just as Katrina hit,” Guggenheim recalls. “The irony is that we were going there to speak with the insurance industry about the increasing damages due to global warming that threaten their business. Now, it had to be cancelled due to the biggest disaster in US History. That really brought home that this isn’t some abstract concept we’re talking about – it’s something that is happening all around us every single day.”

