

## FROM HD EXPO® / October 2007

### FILMSCHOOL Q & A: (FILM SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL)

In 2004, Chris Palmer joined American University to establish the Center for Environmental Filmmaking in AU's School of Communication. CEF was founded on the belief that environmental and wildlife films are vitally important educational and political tools. The center trains filmmakers to produce films and new media that are highly entertaining, ethically sound, educationally powerful and effective at producing social change. Along with Montana State University, CEF is one of a small handful of programs geared specifically to training conservation and wildlife filmmakers in the US.



Palmer heads up CEF as its director and is also a Distinguished Film Producer in Residence at AU. An environmental and wildlife film producer, Palmer has produced over 300 hours of original, primetime and large-format programming during his 25 years producing career. His work includes "Whales," "Wolves," "Dolphins," "India: Kingdom of the tiger," and "Coral Reef Adventure." He and his colleagues have produced Emmy winning and an Oscar nominated films, he has been honored with the Frank G. Wells Award from the Environmental Media Association and serves as President of the MacGillivray Freeman Films Educational Foundation.

**HDE:** *Chris, you've enjoyed such an accomplished and varied career. You have three degrees, you've been a Naval Officer, an energy consultant to a US Senator, an engineer, and a filmmaker. What motivated you to launch a university-based program?*

**Palmer:** I love teaching and American University is a great place to teach. The students are committed to learning and the faculty is committed to the students. It's inspiring to work with young and enthusiastic people. Also, as a member of the full-time faculty, it is still possible to produce films, write books, give speeches, perform stand-up comedy, and do all the other things I find fulfilling and rewarding. The environmental issues that the world faces today are incredibly important and CEF addresses that need.

**HDE:** *Who are your students? Are they filmmakers, journalists, conservationists? Combinations of all of the above?*

**Palmer:** My students are all those and more: filmmakers, journalists, conservationists, scientists, political scientists, broadcasters...all looking to find new and innovative ways to produce films and new media that changes the world.

**HDE:** *Is "changing the world" a key motivator among your students?*

**Palmer:** Yes. They want to make a difference. My students want to lead meaningful lives and produce films that help society.

**HDE:** *Are there notable or promising graduates you'd like to highlight?*

**Palmer:** Absolutely, it's a talented group and I'm mentioning just a few. Andrea Bloom is producing films for the National Park Service, Leslie Gant is pioneering a new environmental web program, Joe Grimme has recently co-produced a film on the Chesapeake Bay and Michelle Williams is making a film on mangroves.

**HDE:** *Traditionally, the conservation - wildlife filmmaking community embraces cutting edge technologies fearlessly. Is that true of your students? What tools do your students use, and what fascinates them?*

**Palmer:** Some are fascinated by new technologies; editing, cameras, and new media. Others are fascinated by policy issues. Others are fascinated by the question of what is the most effective way of reaching people and influencing them.

**HDE:** *Do you see an increase or interest in the creation of mobile, viral and web-based environmental messages?*

**Palmer:** Absolutely. My colleague Larry Engel and I have just returned from the film festival that was buzzing with conversations on this issue.

**HDE:** *How did you launch the Center for Environmental Filmmaking in 2005?*

**Palmer:** Dean Larry Kirkman and I were both profoundly concerned with what was happening in the country environmentally. We wanted to do something tangible and long-lasting to address the problems the global community faced. We raised money, developed programs, persuaded all the Deans of the various AU schools to support the idea, and forged ahead.

**HDE:** *No matter how far from Hollywood a filmmaker lives, are their career steps the same? Create the idea, pitch it, raise the money for it, make it, distribute it, hope for the next one?*

**Palmer:** Yes and no. In a sense, there are no short cuts. You have to pay your dues. There is no getting around the need for hard work, diligence, creativity, networking, learning new technical skills, learning how to work with other people, etc. On the other hand, the training we give them, like the training given in other excellent similar schools like Montana State University, give students opportunities to learn skills (and make contacts) that can propel their careers forward faster than would otherwise be the case. So, I believe that quality training accelerates the process.

**HDE:** *You are President of the MacGillivray Freeman Films Educational Foundation. What's an overview of the work the Foundation is involved in?*

**Palmer:** The mission of The MacGillivray Freeman Films Educational Foundation is to educate and inspire people of all ages and backgrounds to explore, discover and appreciate anew their connection to the natural world, to the cultural histories that shape our communities and to the world society at large. Our cornerstone belief is that lifelong learning is a critical element of the well being of individuals and of society. The Foundation has produced "Hurricane on the Bayou," a giant screen film on the loss of wetlands and the impact of Katrina on New Orleans; we help thousands of underserved students to come to science centers, see giant screen films and to learn about the world. The Foundation also creates companion educational materials.

**HDE:** *What do you hope for CEF?*

**Palmer:** To produce a new generation of filmmakers who are dedicated to conservation and to producing shows which are ethical, meaningful, passionate and entertaining.

**HDE:** *You seem to have a lot going on, but are there other projects you're working on you'd like to mention?*

**Palmer:** I am writing a book on wildlife filmmaking for Sierra Club Books which will be published in 2009. I am also working on three other books on fathering daughters, on humor, and on aphorisms.

[www.environmentalfilm.org](http://www.environmentalfilm.org)

*Written by Christine Purse, October 2007*

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