

//

I wanted to find a New Zealander who was working in the field to give viewers a ground level perspective. I knew of only one person—a Red Cross nurse. Trouble was, there were hundreds of possible camps where she might have been working in the Sudan... I knocked on one door of one camp and guess who answered it

Gerard Smyth. Photo: Andrew Clarkson.



Untold stories

An interview with Gerard Smyth

Gerard Smyth—entrepreneur, visionary, researcher, cameraman, interviewer, director, producer, father of two, advocate of social justice issues, filmmaker. Pick one if you will and you have a story about a story man; an interesting tale, an inspiring journey. Yet in fine Kiwi tradition this man has worn many hats and assimilated knowledge and skills through doing—adding to his repertoire as necessity dictates.

He has walked a complicated path, the tracking of which makes complete sense with hindsight, yet it must have looked very confusing at times from his personal vantage point. Faith, dreaming, leaping and making intelligent decisions combined with entrepreneurial skills and a passionate heart have made for an extremely productive and successful career. 'Making a documentary is a bit like heading off for a tramp in the hills, without a map. There is always a choice about which track to take, which aspect of the tale to follow. With a multitude of choices I ask myself, which is the appropriate path? Hearing God's voice doesn't come easy, but I try to.'

Gerard was born somewhat into television, through his locally-famous father Bernard Smyth, radio broadcaster (with 40 years experience as a political commentator and literary reviewer) and presenter of Television New Zealand's (TVNZ) *Town and Around* in the mid 1960s. Raised in the small town of Rangiora, North Canterbury, Gerard was inspired by his father and strongly influenced by both parents, whom he describes proudly as 'left wing Catholic intellectuals with a heart for social justice issues'. Gerard entered a career in television in 1969, training initially as a camera-man in Christchurch for New Zealand Broadcasting. He then worked his way up to being one of the youngest producers in New Zealand, leaving television in 1980. During this time he developed a wide breadth of experience in television having worked within a diverse range of television production, from rock 'n' roll, ballets and operas to science and children's programmes. 'When I left television I was making kids' programmes. I had produced 400 *Romper Rooms*—not finding it that easy—and that was enough.'

//
Whenever I try and
seek the lucrative side
of filmmaking—those
commercial projects
that deliver the ‘dosh’—
I fall flat on my bum

Sonja Talking, (1992), directed by Gerard Smyth.

After a short stint working as a market gardener for a complete change of scene, Gerard found himself in Wellington working as a TVNZ news cameraman. The traumatic scenes of the 1981 Springbok tour personally witnessed, captured for repeated viewing and remembered as one of the darker sides of New Zealand's history, affected Gerard at a core level. This prompted him to seek a simpler life, away from the corporate environment. His choice was Lyttelton.

It was 1985 when pictures of the famine in Ethiopia were shown on the news, virtually as it was happening, via the new technology of video. Operation Hope was mounted with New Zealanders filling a ship with supplies destined for Africa. Gerard describes the atmosphere: 'There was a spirit of giving occurring in New Zealand. Hearing there was an emergency government fund if the boat was not filled, I decided to head up to the North Island with my cousin Patrick. Approaching the Government, airlines, the National Film Unit and television we door-knocked asking for funds, equipment and the like for a small film crew to go to Africa and to film Operation Hope.' The resulting one-hour documentary *One Day for Africa* was shown on prime time television. The film is shocking for the horror of the situation, the starvation, the grief, the sickness, the extreme poverty and the despair of people who could do nothing to help themselves. Yet a feeling of hope pervades. The personal story of a nurse and her humility highlights the humanity expressed through individuals giving to help others in need. The simplicity of this motivation is moving. Gerard describes the making of this film as 'an extraordinary experience ... it was the hottest place on earth at the hottest time of year. What I learnt mostly was if only I stopped staring out the window, I realised I could do things I was passionate about.'

I asked Gerard how faith influenced his work. 'I don't know. But it's an odd thing. Perhaps passion for a tale is God-given. Whenever I try and seek the lucrative side of filmmaking—those commercial projects that deliver the "dosh"—I fall flat on my bum. So it seems I need to have a passion to succeed. Perhaps that is faith influencing my work. And then sometimes, very seldom, the extraordinary has happened. I was in Africa filming what is now known as the "Live Aid" famine... I wanted to find a New Zealander who was working in the field to give viewers a ground level perspective. I knew of only one person—a Red Cross nurse. Trouble was, there were hundreds of possible camps where she might have been working in the Sudan... I knocked on one door of one camp and guess who answered it. I was holding in my hand an 8x10 glossy of her. I held it up and said nothing. As it turned out she was an absolute saint and became the most significant voice in the documentary. Dare I say, that was God's hand and I was thankful.'

One Day for Africa was not only an informative and inspiring documentary, but a confirmation of Gerard's ability to successfully manage large projects. With a renewed confidence, Gerard and a friend opened the Volcano restaurant in Lyttelton. His intuition and

innovation, combined with his friend's cooking skills, made for a hit. He moved on from this business fairly quickly, aware that his skills were in the creative arena, and preferring short-term projects.

On asking Gerard how he is led to particular topics in his documentary-making, and how he chooses between subject matters, he replied: 'I love trying to tell stories. It's always the potential richness of a tale... Stories about people always, and looking back I notice that they are most often tales about those on the outside (of mainstream society) who are knocking on the door to be allowed in. Championing the underdog has always been a bit of a hobby.'

Choosing is the hardest thing; except sometimes I turn over a stone and the story jumps out ... so obviously they are the tales which I find myself passionate about; often it's a sense of outrage, anger. Social justice was always a biggie in my Catholic childhood.'

It also seems that sometimes the subjects choose him, as in *Sonja Talking*. In 1992 Gerard was asked by the Christian Resource Centre International to make a small video about a bright young Christian woman with cancer, Sonja. Shortly after filming commenced, Sonja became terminally ill and died.

Over the next six months Gerard and John Chrisstoffels worked, piecing together the small amount of footage and interviews they had with home videos, stills and sound recordings, creating an intimate and extremely profound film. *Sonja Talking*, made on a mere \$3000 budget, won at the World Christian Film Festival in 1993. Her story is as inspiring today as then and her beauty lives on through this well-known personal documentary.

Gerard's career in filmmaking has not only been of the inspirational genre, but has also been prolific and educational. From 1998 to 2005 he made over 65 films for New Zealand on Air. These films show the story and struggle of minority groups within New Zealand; personal accounts of people with physical or mental disabilities and serious illnesses. His documentary on the residents in Templeton Hospital, *Out of Site*, *Out of Mind* (filmed and researched over one year) was shown in a special sitting of Parliament, and was revealing and informative, giving the residents' perspectives during a changing and controversial time.

Telling the untold story, speaking for those who would not otherwise have a voice, educating, and motivating would have to be the best way to describe the theme of Gerard's career. Happily we can expect more of the same in the future. His current projects include looking at family issues of the lower socio-economic section in society, over a one-year period and the ongoing problem of the diminishing purity of New Zealand's water. Not bad for, in his words, when starting out—'I was a half-baked hippy who liked to try new things'. And now? 'I try to consider God's will in my work. I don't think I subscribe to a fatalist faith. I try to think issues through and I do find myself trying to sense the right thing to do—I think that is drawing on faith.'

Janet Joyce