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In Rare Union, Documentary Finds Itself on NBC

By BERNARD WEINRAUB
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LOS ANGELES, July 28 — Early this year a group of struggling documentary filmmakers who had just completed a film about capital punishment borrowed money from family and friends and used frequent flier miles to buy plane tickets to Park City, Utah, to enter the Sundance Film Festival.

Katy Chevigny, the co-director and co-producer of the film, "Deadline," said, "We tried to make the best film we could, but we actually didn't know if anybody would ever see the film outside of Sundance."

Ms. Chevigny and her colleagues don't have to worry.

In a highly unusual move for a broadcast network, NBC has purchased the two-hour documentary for an undisclosed price and will present it on Friday on "Dateline NBC." Although HBO and other cable networks buy documentaries at film festivals like Sundance, it is rare for a broadcast network like NBC to buy a documentary and present it in its entirety, because these networks have news units themselves. The filmmakers said that about 10 minutes of the documentary had been trimmed, mostly to make room for commercials.

What makes the current documentary perhaps even more unusual is that it was purchased at the behest of Robert Wright, now chairman and chief executive of NBC Universal.

According to the filmmakers, after the first screening, on a snowy Friday afternoon, Mr. Wright came up to a producer of the movie, Dallas Brennan, introduced himself and gave her his card. The filmmakers said they did not fully grasp who the speaker was. The next day Mr. Wright came up to them again at a brunch and said he found the documentary so compelling that he wanted to put it on NBC.

The filmmakers said they were floored. "It was absolutely beyond our wildest dreams," said Kirsten Johnson, the co-director and cinematographer of the movie. "Imagine! Six to 10 million people seeing our film in one night. Clearly the public is hungry for independently made films."

The film itself is a straightforward chronicle of the emotional and legal drama surrounding the transformation of Gov. George Ryan of Illinois from a pro-death-penalty Republican to a firm opponent of the death penalty. In 2000 Mr. Ryan imposed a moratorium on the death penalty in Illinois, and three years later, days before leaving office, he commuted the death sentences of 163 men and 4 women to prison terms and freed 4 other men, citing the high number of wrongful convictions in the state. The evidence was initially gathered by undergraduate journalism students at Northwestern University and reporters from The Chicago Tribune. (Mr. Ryan's tenure was shadowed mostly by a corruption scandal.)

Mr. Wright said in a statement: " 'Deadline' is an exceptional, thought-provoking look at one man's struggle with controversial issues surrounding our criminal justice system. It's about life and death and the power of one decision."

David Corvo, the executive director of "Dateline NBC," said he and Neal Shapiro, president of NBC News, agreed that "Dateline" was the best place for the documentary. Mr. Corvo said he could not recall a broadcast network purchasing a documentary and presenting it in its entirety, although there have been cases on "Dateline" where portions of documentaries have been used in news stories.

Mr. Corvo said his staff saw independent documentary filmmakers not as competitors but as different voices for the program.

"My people have plenty of opportunities to tell the stories they want to tell," he explained. "Most people on the staff endorse this idea. They think it's very worthwhile."

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Mr. Corvo said of the documentary: "This is not a journalistic report. It's more personal. It's their style. It speaks with a more personal voice, not a collective voice."

Like the filmmakers, Mr. Corvo said that NBC's interest in "Deadline" was not an isolated event. "This comes in an era where documentaries are blossoming like never before," he said. "There's a real interest in documentaries of all sorts."

That interest is not likely to wane anytime soon. "We'll be back at Sundance next year," Mr. Corvo said.

The filmmakers said they did not know the exact cost of making their film, but estimated it at less than \$500,000, raised partly from foundations and donors. They declined to say how much NBC had paid for it. Their New York-based company, Big Mouth Productions, has focused on social issues and made films on transracial adoption, the criminal justice system and alternative healing.

As is true of many documentary filmmakers in New York, Los Angeles and elsewhere, they seem to operate on a shoestring. Of the NBC deal, Ms. Chevigny said, "I can't quite believe it happened."

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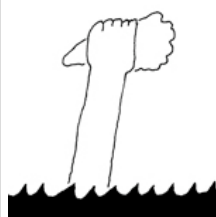
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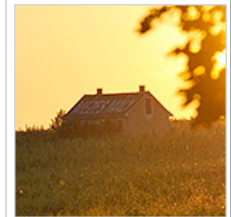
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