

Pittsfield filmmaker Rick Derby's odyssey reaches fruition with release of documentary

By Richard Houdek  
Special to The Eagle

LENOX -- Some filmmakers grind out movies like the proverbial sausages. Others, such as the late Stanley Kubrick, could require years for an idea to go through the developmental and filming periods before it reached audiences. Add Rick Derby to the latter category. His film "Rocks With Wings," documenting a girls' basketball team on a Navajo reservation and the African-American who coached the squad, required 13 years to complete and only now is arriving on the screen. It will receive its premiere Saturday afternoon at 4 at the Crandell Theatre in Chatham, N.Y. as part of the Chatham Film Club's second annual Film Columbia festival.

### **'Gradual process'**

Derby's entrance into the world of filmmaking also was what he describes as "a gradual process." While still a lad growing up in the Berkshires he was interested in communications, but he liked sports and dreamed of being a sportscaster.

"I wanted to be the voice of the Red Sox," Derby confided in a phone conversation Sunday from his home in New York. His guidance counselor at Wahconah High School managed to secure an internship with a sports announcer at WWLP-TV, Channel 22, in Springfield. "But what he was doing suddenly seemed boring," the Pittsfield native, now 43, recalled.

A television class at Westfield State College impressed Derby with the possibilities of visual media, but the real turning point arrived when he began watching films at the old Toad Hall theater at Music Inn in Lenox.

"I used to go see all the art films -- there was no cable then -- and I spent all my money on movies. The first time I saw [Federico] Fellini's '8 1/2' I thought it was just brilliant," Derby said.

He also began to take advantage of all the things that always had been around him here in the Berkshires, including the Williamstown and Berkshire Theatre Festivals.

"I was like on the outside looking inside -- everyone else seemed to be from somewhere else -- but that's how I got into storytelling," he said.

Earlier, Derby said, much of the world had been opened up to him by Mary Flynn of Stockbridge, who was his humanities instructor at Wahconah.

"She exposed us to nearly everything: opera, sculpture, painting, music -- oddly enough not film -- but all of this was almost like a foreign country to me; I grew up coon hunting," he said with a laugh.

Derby eventually studied film at Boston University, receiving a degree in 1980, but

recalling those days, he said he spent more time working on off-campus movie jobs than going to class, and, in the process, learned more about his art.

"The school then was a school of public communications," he said. "They were teaching us how to communicate, or the means -- technology -- but they didn't address the idea that you had to have something to say.

"I would be the last person to tell someone to go to film school. Look at the movies being made now, and that's the result of film schools."

When he was going to film school, Derby said, students were making three kinds of films: "those about homeless persons, something about an artist or a painter, or an homage to [Jean Luc] Goddard. And now they are making action films; their only research is the movies they are derivative of. And that's why I am cynical about film schools."

### **Encounter at Telluride**

The idea for "Rocks With Wings " came to Derby when he followed a film on which he had worked to the Telluride Film Festival. The film was "The Voices of Sarafina," a documentary about the 1987 Broadway musical. Some physicians for the Indian Health Services clinic in Shiprock, N.M. attending the festival for diversion, saw "Sarafina" and sought out the filmmakers for a copy.

"By the way," Derby recalled their remarking, "you might be interested in this story: the girls basketball team at the reservation just won their first state championship, and their coach is an African-American."

"My heart didn't beat one beat before I knew I had to make a film of this," said Derby. With some funds inherited from his father, a former General Electric employee, and investments by others, Derby first visited Shiprock in 1988 and began filming the following year.

### **Community transformation**

The film, he said, recounts the veritable transformation of Shiprock, an impoverished community of people resigned to a dismal fate that was galvanized by a basketball team of talented women who discovered they could win.

The focal point is Jerry Richardson, a recent college graduate whose only job offer was a teaching job at the reservation. Following a near-fatal automobile accident three months later, he was offered, and accepted, the job of coaching the team.

Along the way, the traumas of Richardson, raised in Texarkana, Texas, during the period of school integration, and the Lady Chieftains' precipitous ascendancy to the state tournament and eventual victory over nearby rival, Kirkland Central, a primarily white Mormon community, is recounted in the film, which Derby said is only the first installment of the tale.

### **Four more chapters**

Subsequent chapters -- four of them -- will deal with more state championships, eventual losses, de-emphasis of basketball when it is believed by some to overwhelm the community, the departure of Richardson to a college assignment, his successor, the later lives of the players and details about Richardson's eventual fate.

After FilmColumbia, "Rocks With Wings: The Path With Heart" will be shown next month at the Hawaii Film Festival, in San Francisco at the annual American Indian Film festival, and in summer, 2002, on Public Television as part of a series celebrating diversity.

Derby said he has 99 percent of the remaining films shot, two have been rough cut and in one he has edited scenes.

"I'm hoping that the success of the first film will persuade people to want to know more about the Lady Chieftains." he said. "It's hard to sell a series, to PBS or other documentary outlets, that isn't painted in broad brush strokes. I would have stopped shooting, but this story didn't stop."