

A Meeting with Professor Dinesh Sabu

I've been searching for a sense of direction in the second act of my life. I had previously spent 10 years working as a theatre director, actor, and writer, yet I became disenchanted with the medium and its limitations. During the last years of that period, I would frequently wonder: Am I reaching the people I want to reach? Am I telling the stories I want to tell? Is raising awareness enough? Can I go beyond that? These questions drove me to pursue a master's degree in Public Service at Marquette, where I could better understand the intricacy of the systems I was hoping to change through my art. My experience in graduate school and at my nonprofit placement has since reaffirmed the importance of storytelling in the social sector. I've found that creative storytelling is lacking in the nonprofit field; yet such storytelling is vital to communicating with the public, donors, volunteers, government officials, and constituents. Stories matter. I've been eager to explore documentary filmmaking partially because I loved the documentary theatre process I was formerly engaged in but also because film can reach more people, isn't ephemeral, can be created without much, and contains many artistic tools. I'm grateful for this assignment because it impelled me to reflect on my interest in documentary filmmaking and led me to connect with Dinesh Sabu.

Dinesh Sabu is a documentary filmmaker and an Assistant Professor in the department of Digital Media and Performing Arts at Marquette University. After briefly masquerading as a math & science student at the University of Chicago, Dinesh became entrenched in the university's film studies program. During our meeting, he expressed that he felt "bifurcated" by his artistic side and his politically active side while pursuing his undergraduate degree. Documentary filmmaking emerged as a means for him to experience wholeness, think through social issues, and ask engaging questions

that could generate difficult conversations. Through an internship at Kartempquin Films, a journey of independent filmmaking, and a master's program in documentary filmmaking at Stanford University, Dinesh now finds himself in a place where he creates films that range from the purely experimental, where one would have to search for a political message, to films that are overtly political and social justice oriented. It's inspiring to have learned that he doesn't limit himself to a particular genre or process and that strict specialization isn't necessary in his profession.

Some of the key takeaways from meeting Dinesh were how to mentally approach making art, how to engage in non-exploitative storytelling, and how to get people comfortable in front of a camera. Dinesh and I spoke about the questions of accessibility and impact that had driven me to pursue my master's degree; his advice: "Think through the art." Instead of doggedly trying to answer such questions prior to making art, I can use the process of making art to think through issues and social questions, including queries found in the medium, such as how to make storytelling non-exploitative.

Dinesh spoke with me about "participatory documentary filmmaking," which is "less about showing up with a camera and extracting something" and more about co-creating a film by putting in the time to build trust and report with a community. In this process, you can provide community members with a camera, "show [them] how to use it, and then work with [them] over the course of a decent amount of time to use that material to tell something" meaningful. And, even if the subjects of a documentary aren't co-creators in the filming process, they can still be empowered by "showing them what you're making and giving them the right, the ability to respond." This creates the conditions for dialogue, which involves "listening to [others] in a wholehearted way" while working towards mutual understanding.

With regards to getting people comfortable in front of the camera, Dinesh expressed, “the mistake I see a lot of people make is showing up with a camera, pointing it and gathering stuff” without first spending time with people sans equipment. It’s first important to “[talk] with people about the project [and get] them comfortable with the idea about the project.” As the camera holds power, I’m committed to being mindful of power dynamics and subverting such dynamics through time, intuitive listening, and collaboration.

While I embark on my journey as an aspiring documentary filmmaker, Dinesh advised that because I already possess creative storytelling skills, it’s now a matter of acquiring the requisite technical skills and learning by doing. With a myriad of online resources (one being LinkedIn Learning), I should be able to teach myself how to use editing software like Adobe Premiere, which costs \$20 a month at a student-rate. Dinesh suggested that I could borrow film equipment from Marquette (a Canon 60D) and practice making videos. Additionally, he graciously offered to let me sit in on “Intro to Digital Media Production” - one of his Tuesday morning lecture classes in the Fall semester that helps students learn the fundamentals of filmmaking. Before that, I plan to watch Dinesh’s personal narrative – *Unbroken Glass* – as well as two documentaries that he recommended: *Hale County: This Morning, This Evening* and *Inaatte/Se*. Thank you, Dinesh for meeting with me, and thank you, Marci, for this assignment.