Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

White House Student Film Festival: Interview with Director Mitch Buangsuwon

Charity Hume · Wednesday, April 2nd, 2014

As a high school dean, I work with about a hundred juniors at Polytechnic School in Pasadena. One of my jobs is to sign a pink form that tells me a student is going to be absent at a future date.

I often joke with kids when they hand me the form. When Mitch Buangsuwon approached me a few weeks ago, pink slip in hand, I asked him, “You going to Vegas?”

“No,” he answered. “I’m going to the White House.”

At first I thought he was kidding.

“THE White House?”

And that’s when I learned that Mitch’s film would soon be honored at the White House Student Film Festival, one of only sixteen films chosen from over 2500 entries.

In the fall, The White House asked students all across the country to create films explaining how technology could be used in educational settings. Mitch’s winning entry is titled simply ***alex.***, a short and powerful profile of his younger brother’s challenges with dysgraphia and dyslexia. Mitch had witnessed the kind of issues that faced his brother as he struggled in school, until he experienced a breakthrough by attending a program that offered him the use of a writing tablet.

Within months of using the new technology, Alex overcame a lag in reading and writing proficiency that had held him back for years. The film itself is a compelling invitation to all who see it to shed the bias and judgment that has shadowed students with learning differences, and see the creative brilliance at work in the minds of all who can access their imaginative power when they have access to the appropriate technological tools.

alex.

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After Mitch returned from Washington, he had been interviewed on television by NBC and ABC, but in this interview, I wanted to explore the film’s message in more depth.

“Why did you choose to make the film about your brother?” I asked him.

“It’s an issue I really care about. I don’t see my brother as different from anyone else, but to the public eye, he reads differently. It does affect him in a negative way, and I don’t want him to feel that way. To go to a school like Poly I feel really blessed. But even here, the school didn’t fit with the way he learned. The school he goes to now, Westmark, specializes in teaching kids with learning disabilities. But I don’t think it should be called a disability. If you look at dyslexia, Steve Jobs, Walt Disney, they both had dyslexia. They have much more creativity. Maybe it’s something that should be nurtured. Celebrated.”

“Do you think you think creativity is a disadvantage in a traditional school setting?” I asked.

“It can be. Testing. Regulation that has to take place, can hold back the potential of a lot of creative thinkers. Even in the arts department, the way art is taught can be very standardized and give little room for expression. When you have dyslexia and you fall behind, that can damage self-esteem. Now, people understand it better. But for a lot of kids out there it’s a huge problem. They have been bullied and have become depressed by other students, and occasionally their teachers. On the surface it looks like they can’t read or write. I just wanted to show that Alex is no different than anyone else. As he grows up he has the same potential to achieve as anyone else. I don’t think people should be looked down on because of dyslexia. Chances are they will be more successful than the kids that bullied them.”

Photo by Kayla Valencia

There were many beautiful symbols in the movie, and I asked Mitch if all of them were intentional.

“The most important aspect was that the whole thing was shot outside. I knew everyone would do indoors. I wanted to make something that would catch the eye. I work better outside; I’m not an indoors person. Since the focus was about my brother, he’s also very outdoorsy and I wanted to express that. His classroom setting would have felt wrong; he’s not as comfortable there. He really does like nature and bugs. It made sense.”

I asked about the use of stones on the stream: “Were you thinking of stepping stones leading to progress?”

“While I was shooting it, it wasn’t the idea. I just wanted him to take a hike through nature. As I started to edit, that did start to occur to me to show that his learning has evolved, and the whole movie could be seen as a journey. The day was shot at the beginning of the day and ends with a sunset, to show his educational experience so far. That was also reflected in the music as it picks up toward the end.”

I asked Mitch, “Did you ever feel your own creativity had not been recognized in school?”

Mitch said, “I definitely feel like I’m not always ‘the smartest one in the class’ as far as grades go, but that’s just who I am and how my brain functions. The way I see it, that’s not where my potential is supposed to be. Making a video is a better representation of my skills than taking a test. Coming back from it, I am seen by people a little bit differently. The whole situation is kind of surreal. I’ve put more work into papers I haven’t done well on. It’s weird how things can work out like that. I’m definitely seen differently by my peers and my teachers. I’m not super outspoken. To them I’m just another student. Recently, I can feel a difference: Mitch is the kid who won the contest and went to the White House. I’m definitely getting a different vibe.”

Mitch's concluding thoughts focused on the combined impact that had been made by the student directors of the winning films.

"One big thing keeps getting overlooked," he said. "Through this film festival, different companies have donated money to fund technology in public school classroom settings. I didn't know about that until the President gave his speech. That was pretty crazy. The whole contest showcased how technology was being used or how it should be used in the future. So the companies supported that by donating their products and their money to fund more tech in schools."

[embedvideo id="-BGPzJFd3Ko" website="youtube"]

Obama's remarks at the White House Film Festival reminded viewers of the importance of closing American education's technology gap: Obama said, "When less than 30 percent of our students have access to true high-speed Internet in their classroom, while in South Korea students have 100 percent, that's like waving the white flag when it comes to our global competition. But here's what I think: In a country where we expect free Wi-Fi at our coffee shops, then we should demand it in our schools and in our libraries."

Obama announced that in the past month, corporate funding for his initiative, ConnectED, has increased dramatically. After thanking some of the corporations, Prezi, Adobe, National Geographic, and others, for their contributions, Obama said, "If you're quick at math, which I know you are, then you'll see that this means we've delivered over $1 billion in technology commitments to our schools, which isn't too shabby for one month."

One billion dollars. I thought of the sixteen student filmmakers who had been recognized as the winners of the first White House Student Film Festival. Together, their work is a testament of the power of our creative thinkers to advance social change. Each film envisions a way to include and empower more of our students, not only those who have learning differences, but students who are faced with illness, or who live in disadvantaged settings, by increasing their access to an education. The student film directors have clearly shown us that educational technology can help us create a more inclusive community that harnesses the imaginative potential in all of us to create a better world.

White House Student Film Festival Selections

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