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ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## Racing to Capture Vanishing Languages



Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages

Jeremy Newberger records a Bolivian man with Gregory D. S. Anderson, a linguist.

By JENNIFER V. HUGHES  
Published: January 13, 2008

JEREMY NEWBERGER, a documentary filmmaker, was camped on the banks of Lake Titicaca in Bolivia with two scientists studying the world's vanishing languages. They were trying to meet a medicine man who is one of about 100 people who still speak Kallawayaya, when one of the scientists, Gregory D. S. Anderson, became ill.

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"I was in my tent thinking 'Oh, this is so perfect!,'" Mr. Newberger said, laughing. "We're looking for the medicine man and here this guy is sick? This is so great."

Mr. Newberger was traveling with his fellow filmmakers, Daniel A. Miller and Seth Kramer — a trio who make up the Garrison-based company, Ironbound Films, along with Victor Gallo, the company's supervising editor.

The medicine man was found, Dr. Anderson was filmed drinking a cup of herbal tea and his stomach ailment had subsided by that evening.

By the fall of 2007 — three years and 200 hours of digital tape later — "The Linguists"

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was completed. It tells the story of Dr. Anderson, the director of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, and K. David Harrison, a linguist at Swarthmore College, and their quest to document ancestral languages like Chulym in Siberia and Sora in India.

The producers are confident that their film will find a home on the air, especially after its premiere this week at the [Sundance Film Festival](#) in the noncompetitive “Spectrum: Documentary Spotlight” category.

While all three filmmakers have worked on projects with other companies, this is their first effort with their own. The company is named after the Ironbound section of Newark because Mr. Miller and Mr. Kramer grew up in New Jersey and have made several films with construction themes. Mr. Miller now lives in Cold Spring, Mr. Kramer in Red Hook in Dutchess County, and Mr. Newberger in Yorktown Heights.

“We realized the films we were making were all over the planet,” Mr. Newberger said. “So as far as where we lived — we all grew up in the suburbs, so when we had families, we all moved up for our kids.”

In fact, Mr. Kramer was in Lithuania when the idea for “The Linguists” came to him. He was working on “Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans,” a film that was nominated for an Emmy after it was shown on [PBS](#) in 2002. While standing in a courtyard in the capital city, Vilnius, he said, he realized the path under his feet was made from Jewish tombstones inscribed with Yiddish, a language he did not know despite his Jewish heritage.

“The image that really got me was that people were literally trampling on the language,” he said, adding, “I knew there were hundreds of languages like this, each with their own story to tell.”

Despite wary network executives who said the subject matter was too staid, the filmmakers secured \$520,000 from the [National Science Foundation](#) and spent an additional \$40,000 of their own money.

The trips were far from cushy. Mr. Newberger said the extreme cold in Bolivia was bad for the steady hands needed to hold cameras. There they also coped with altitude sickness, which they medicated partly with coca leaf tea.

“It’s made from the leaves you make cocaine with, and by the third day we were drinking, like, 10 cups a day,” he said.

Mr. Miller said the filming was stressful for both the filmmakers and the linguists, each aware of how time was chipping away at their grant money and allowing their quarry to slip away. The film notes that when the project began there were seven estimated speakers of the Siberian language Chulym. By 2007, two had died.

“We’re trying to capture a story in a limited amount of time, and the linguists are trying to recover a language before it dies, which might even happen while we are there,” Mr. Miller said. “Everyone was on edge.”

Dr. Anderson and Dr. Harrison worked on a report issued in September indicating that out of the world’s 7,000 languages, one is lost every few weeks. It is a human rights issue, Dr. Anderson said, as many native languages are silenced because of colonialism. Dying languages could also hold the key to finding native treatments for disease.

And then there are the less tangible reasons. “Language is essentially a historical library of information about a people and a culture,” Dr. Anderson said. “There are a lot of

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people who intrinsically value the search for knowledge.”

That would certainly include Mr. Miller and Mr. Kramer, who met at the New York City-based Great Projects Film Company, where they produced and wrote the 2002 PBS documentary “America Rebuilds: A Year at Ground Zero.”

“One of the things that makes their movies so successful is that Dan and Seth really do have nuance and precision — there are not a lot of broad strokes,” said Daniel B. Polin, president of Great Projects. “They really try to understand their subject material and bring it to life.”

Mr. Miller and Mr. Kramer’s films have appeared on PBS, the Discovery Channel and the A&E Network, including a 1997 PBS film, “The Trial of Adolph Eichmann,” which earned Mr. Miller an Emmy nomination.

The two filmmakers formed Ironbound in 2003. Mr. Newberger, whose production credits include MSNBC’s “Imus in the Morning,” joined them in 2004, but he has known Mr. Miller from childhood, when they spent summers at Camp Young Judaea Sprout Lake, near Poughkeepsie.

The filmmakers give an eclectic list of influences: Mr. Newberger said he grew up reading comic books, which sparked the desire to tell a story, frame by frame. Mr. Miller said he was drawn to documentaries by the renowned filmmaker [Frederick Wiseman](#) and his observational style.

Mr. Miller said he also finds simple inspiration in the quiet woodsy home along the Hudson River that he chose for his company’s base, instead of the bustling film epicenters of New York City or Los Angeles.

“You’re able to think about your project and not how you fit into the world of film,” he said. “It really helps the creative process, even if my FedEx closes a little early and I have to drive 30 minutes for a lunch meeting.”

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