

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH
FILMMAKER BRIAN KNAPPENBERGER
AND GUEST ADAM STEED

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Host: Bryan Smith

Bryan Smith (00:00):

Brian Knappenberger, Adam Steed, welcome to the podcast.

Brian Knappenberger (00:03):

Thanks a lot for having us.

Bryan Smith (00:04):

Yeah. So, what brings you to Sundance?

Brian Knappenberger (00:08):

This is my fourth time, I think, in Park City here with a film. This film is called, Church and the Fourth Estate, the short film and the doc-short category.

Bryan Smith (00:17):

It's Church and the Fourth Estate?

Brian Knappenberger (00:19):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:20):

Okay. And tell us the subject matter of the film and the narrative of the film. I saw it by the way.

Brian Knappenberger (00:26):

Yeah, yeah. Okay good. Well, it started for me- I was really interested in tracking down a kind of press story. You know, I was doing research about billionaires attacking the press; thin-skinned billionaires who couldn't stand a word of criticism, and attacking the press, and filing lawsuits, and trying to silence stories that they didn't like. And I came across a bunch of stories from my last film. And as part of that research, I sort of learned about these series of stories that came out in Southern Idaho and the Idaho falls post register, written by the reporter Peter Zuckerman. And he, along with his editor Dean Miller, were looking into a boy scout camp there called "Camp Little Limb High."

Brian Knappenberger (01:12):

And I was just really fascinated with their work, and in particular the backlash that they experienced with the community. Some people within the community loved the stories, thought that they were really doing a public good in exposing what was going on at this boy scout camp, which was child abuse, child sex abuse. Others thought this was a subject that didn't need to be

aired in public, or that they were being unfair and they pushed back on the story. So, I was really kind of curious about that. So, I was both inter- and, by the way, the richest person in Idaho, a man named Frank Vandersloot, who owns a company called Melaleuca. He was one of the critics, staunch critics of these series, and he went so far as to take out full page ads in the local paper, in the Idaho Falls Post Register.

Bryan Smith (01:59):
Against the journalists?

Brian Knappenberger (02:00):
Against the journalists; really questioning, going after the veracity of the stories, really questioning the veracity. And so that was interesting to me too. So-

Adam Steed (02:10):
Can I just interrupt really-?

Bryan Smith (02:11):
Absolutely, Adam.

Adam Steed (02:12):
When I tell the sexual abuse story that happened to me, and the journalist writes exactly what I told him, and Frank attacks the story and says, it's propaganda. How do you think that makes me feel?

Bryan Smith (02:23):
Right. Yeah. Well, it's- What it is, in my opinion, it is an attack on the truth. And that's what I've seen. I mean, that's what we're seeing culturally right now is that we're in a post-truth era where we're kind of, we're unmoored a little bit from what is, now that the media has been attacked so effectively by the right wing media and in the right wing politicians. So you, what would happen with you Adam, in my opinion, not to take over the discussion here. But I did really enjoy the documentary and I have a point of view on this, but what happened with you is you were talking to a real journalist, someone who was checking their sources and was reporting facts. What is being reported to him. He's put it in the newspaper. And as a result, when the newspaper is attacked, you're attacked, the truth teller is attacked.

Adam Steed (03:22):
Yeah. Well, and don't you think, when victims of sexual abuse are told that they're crazy that's kind of a line. People don't even say that, but that's kind of a thing that perpetrators do to victims of sexual abuse. It's to stop them from talking, you know what I mean? It's a real sensitive area and there's a lot, we joke around, we call it the craziness that we feel that's on us. It's a way- It's like something we carry around until our truth has been told.

Bryan Smith (03:49):

Well, and I refer to it as gaslighting, too. And that's not a term that I even really knew about until the 2016 election.

Brian Knappenberger (03:57):
People are using it everywhere, huh?

Bryan Smith (03:59):
Yeah.

Adam Steed (04:00):
It's- I was trying to think is it 'cause you've got a little lighter...?

Bryan Smith (04:01):
No-

Brian Knappenberger (04:01):
Gaslighting is from a Hitchcock movie in which he's drive- The main character is driving his wife slowly crazy by turning down the lights every once- When she keeps saying, "Well, the lights are... The light's changing in here." And he keeps saying, "No it's not," but he's secretly turning- So he's trying to, attempting to drive her insane and help-

Adam Steed (04:23):
So interesting.

Brian Knappenberger (04:23):
-Make her question her own... What she sees.

Bryan Smith (04:28):
Right. And that's, I think what Vandersloot was starting to do with.... And he's taken a page out of the right wing playbook, which is attack truth tellers, if the truth hurts your cause. And here it was hurting the Boy Scouts and the Mormon church.

Brian Knappenberger (04:44):
I think that's true. This is, you know, this goes down, this series of stories goes down before fake news becomes a big thing.

Bryan Smith (04:51):
Right.

Brian Knappenberger (04:52):
But I think there is the origins of this right- I mean, I think some of the origins of this go back to the eighties or even sooner, probably even sooner. But yeah. I mean, look, he's questioning this- He's making a choice here and he's protecting the institutions that failed here as opposed

to the vulnerable people, the vulnerable kids that were a part of this organization. But he's doing it in all the ways that kind of rings true for, in 2016 and on in our modern moment. I mean, he's saying, is this propaganda or is this journalism?

Bryan Smith (05:32):

Right.

Brian Knappenberger (05:32):

And he's questioning, he's just- He believes that they were coming from a certain position that was being unfair to the people in the positions of power.

Bryan Smith (05:43):

And this kind of ties into your documentary on the Gawker lawsuit as well, which is the attack on free speech if that's- If it's speech that doesn't fit within your personal narrative, you attack it and you use money to do it. And here Adam was the victim of that, on the receiving end of that type of tactic. But before, maybe before we get too far into this discussion, if we could back up a little bit and Adam, if you could introduce yourself to my listeners and explain what your role in the film is.

Adam Steed (06:20):

Oh, okay. I don't know who your listeners are, but hello. I'm Adam. So, obviously it's very uncomfortable to tell a graphic detailed explanation of sexual abuse that happened to you.

Bryan Smith (06:37):

And we're not asking you to do that.

Adam Steed (06:39):

I know. And so watch the film cause I'm not gonna tell it here, but I tell- Yeah, I told my story, and I met Brian. Part of my story I just couldn't tell, because I couldn't work out the problem of my church that I loved was largely responsible for repressing and hiding the sexual abuse. So if I told a true story, I criticized the church and I wasn't allowed to do that. And actually it's funny, 'cause kind of a prominent member in the church who stands up for victims of sexual abuse was Elizabeth Smart. And she was irate about victim shaming and I guess this gaslighting and stuff, and you could sit in her eyes when she talked and the topic came up. And she sat across the table from me, she even put her hand on mine and looked me in the eyes when I told her I was a victim of sexual abuse.

Adam Steed (07:25):

She said, "No guys ever come forward. You're the only one that I know and you need to tell your story." I don't know if she understands the entirety of what my story was, but she gave me such an encouragement and so I started to feel like, okay, I'm going to tell my story, tell the truth, and let the consequences follow. In fact, that's the word, that's the words out of one of our songs in church is, "Tell, do what is right and let the consequence follow." You know, I stuck to that and I

told my story. I kind of started to warm up to talk about it a little bit, and I made a few posts. And Dean Miller, who reads my posts, saw that maybe now's the time for Adam to tell the story that's been- He knows a lot about my life and he could see some of the struggles of not being able to tell.

Adam Steed (08:07):

And see the thing is, and I always say this, when a victim doesn't see justice there's a certain amount of craziness created from sexual abuse crime, and it stays on the head of the victim until the perpetrator gets punished and then it goes. It's like a teeter totter. It leaves the victim and the perpetrator gets punished and suddenly the victim feels normal again.

Bryan Smith (08:28):

Yeah.

Adam Steed (08:29):

And I think there was some element of that in this area, and this craziness, and with the church and stuff. And I think that just the timing lined up where I was starting to feel like, for the first time that I need to do this, 'cause I'm always going to feel a little bit crazy in the problem until this is talked about. And then I go-

Brian Knappenberger (08:45):

Well, I was making a film about the press, a short film about the press and about the attack on these, this short- The series called "The Scouts Honor Series," that the paper was publishing. And it was good, it was interesting. But I wanted to sort of dig deeper and that's actually where I reached out to Adam. As soon as I sort of heard his story, I just thought that he's center stage on this film and I wanted to tell his experience and use that as a sort of basis for the film.

Bryan Smith (09:15):

Yeah. And that relationship started when, what year?

Brian Knappenberger (09:21):

When I reached out to Adam?

Bryan Smith (09:22):

Yeah.

Brian Knappenberger (09:23):

About a year ago, I reached out to Adam, but I had been making this sort of short film even before that. And so when I finally found out, I mean, I remember we talked a little bit and then he came by, and we sat down and did an interview. And I knew just a couple minutes into the interview that I- This was a very different film than I was making before, and that I wanted to tell his story and his- I mean, just the courage with which he came forward and the kind of candor

that he had with these very difficult experiences that he went through. It was just so moving that I thought that this is what I want to make the film about.

Bryan Smith (10:01):

Yeah. Well Adam, did you feel a sense of validation as you talk to more people who were actually on your side?

Adam Steed (10:12):

Yeah, so leading up to him inviting me, I did not want to do it. I was like, okay, I'm just going to do this really quick and get it over with. 'Cause there's a wall against exposing yourself in this way, to talk about this kind of stuff. There's- It's really difficult to do. But on the other side of that wall I'll never forget the moment where we were, a certain point of that interview, and I looked at the clock, or the time, and I just thought, we're still here, still talking about this. These people aren't running away. They're not scared of me.

Bryan Smith (10:43):

Right.

Adam Steed (10:44):

And I feel really good. And, what I'm talking about, I feel really good. And I'm just telling the truth and I feel really good. And yeah, I mean that moment for my self-esteem, and for me, and for validation. Yeah, it is priceless.

Bryan Smith (11:00):

Yeah. Okay, so a year ago you meet Adam and you're working on this short on journalism, was Vandersloot on your radar at that point, Brian?

Brian Knappenberger (11:09):

Yes, absolutely. I was trying- Because what happened was Vandersloot not only had attacked these, this series of stories in this very dramatic way, taking out full page ads, numerous full page ads, questioning the truth of the stories. Later, Mother Jones magazine had reported on Mr. Vandersloot, because he had become a campaign, like a finance manager of the Mitt Romney campaign. So, they looked into donations from Melaleuca to Mitt Romney and were reporting on that kind of campaign finance stories, which is part of what they do really, really well. And they mentioned this series of stories that had happened in Idaho Falls. So they mentioned the Scouts Honor series, and they did it in a way that caused Mr. Vandersloot to then go after Mother Jones magazine and try to sue them for defamation.

Bryan Smith (11:59):

And that was talked about in your film, as well.

Brian Knappenberger (12:01):

And that's talked about in the film as well. So, and that was very dramatic for Mother Jones magazine. I believe it cost them an upwards of \$2 million to fight those lawsuits.

Bryan Smith (12:10):

This is not a multibillion dollar corporation.

Brian Knappenberger (12:13):

No, it's not, no. So, and ultimately they won. But sometimes that doesn't necessarily matter when it costs you that much money. And maybe that's not even the intent, maybe the intent is to really kind of harass the publication and to stop people from talking critically about you in the future.

Bryan Smith (12:30):

Right. So when you meet Adam and this film narrative, does it start to gel at that point right when you meet him, in terms of where it's going?

Brian Knappenberger (12:40):

Well, it's the human face of this. And I understood that that's, that was going to be center. And you learn a lot from talking to Adam, and the way he's dealt with this and gone through this. And to see all of this through his eyes was, was pretty powerful. And by the way, we learned a lot in the last year that, that Adam and Peter and Dean Miller just didn't know at the time. And that is the extent of the abuse and the Boy Scouts. They were arguing whether or not this was happening. And a lot of this debate was whether or not this was happening at this one camp, "Camp Little Limb High," in this one part of the world, Southern Idaho. And whether or not that was happening or not was part of this whole debate. Well, as it turns out, we've, as a result of lawsuits, there's been the release of all of these, what the boy Scouts called the ineligible volunteer files.

Bryan Smith (13:31):

The perversion files.

Brian Knappenberger (13:32):

Or otherwise known, yeah.

Bryan Smith (13:34):

But they referred to them as the perversion files, right?

Brian Knappenberger (13:36):

Within the boy Scouts organization, they called them the perversion files.

Bryan Smith (13:40):

It's craz- It's stranger than fiction.

Brian Knappenberger (13:42):
Yeah.

Bryan Smith (13:43):
This stuff in- I'm looking at this film and it's a very succinct, concise narrative. And I'm struck, because my background is, I'm a trial lawyer and I represent sexual abuse survivors. But my-

Brian Knappenberger (13:56):
Wow.

Bryan Smith (13:56):
Yeah. And I've been doing that for the past decade and I-

Brian Knappenberger (14:00):
You kind of buried the lead here.

Bryan Smith (14:01):
Well-

Brian Knappenberger (14:01):
Like, wow.

Bryan Smith (14:03):
I mentioned that to the publicist, but I wasn't sure what was going to make it to you, but-

Brian Knappenberger (14:07):
No, it's our honor.

Bryan Smith (14:08):
Yeah, so-

Brian Knappenberger (14:09):
I totally respect what you do.

Bryan Smith (14:10):
Well, thank you. And I have immense respect for every abuse survivor that comes forward and tells their story. Because I know, I am 100% confident, that it is a fraction- The people that come forward are a fraction of the true victim pool out there, that just, they can't do it. They can't come forward.

Brian Knappenberger (14:32):
And this is why I think Adam's story resonated so much with me. I mean, the phrase that comes to mind is courage is contagious. And the courage that he had to go against the, basically the

power structure of Southern Idaho, and then to come forward and talk to me about it on camera. It's just, it's really inspiring, and not a lot of people have that strength.

Bryan Smith (14:55):

Yeah. And another thing that really jumped out at me in the film is the fact that Adam, you did what most abuse survivors do not do is, you told somebody and they didn't do anything about it. Most of my clients, the first person they've told about their abuse is me or maybe their spouse right before they called me. And that- And I've represented hundreds across the nation, hundreds of abuse survivors. So you are a unique- your story is unique, and you are unique because you had the courage way back when it happened to know that this wasn't right and not only wasn't it right, but it needed to be reported. And then that's when the betrayal occurred. And it occurred at the Boy Scout level and the Mormon church level, unfortunately. So, I noticed that there was no litigation discussed, were you part of any litigation...?

Adam Steed (15:54):

Yeah, so originally I was offered a chance to sue Scouting for what had happened and I turned it down. And that was, at the time that Brad was apprehended and I was like 15, 16, 17. And actually, I turned it down 'cause you know, I didn't want to attack my church. I didn't want to attack Scouting. But when I came back from my mission and my dad called me and he said, "There's this reporter Peter Zuckerman, who wanted to talk to you, and I told him to go- That you'd been through enough trauma, go talk to the other 24 victims on the list that-" Brad Stoltz had admitted to sexually abusing 24 victims and others whose names he couldn't remember that that list. That reporter went to look for that list in the courthouse.

Brian Knappenberger (16:38):

Yeah, he said, "What list?"

Adam Steed (16:39):

"What list?" Yeah.

Brian Knappenberger (16:40):

"What other 24?" There's- He had no- There was no documentation of this.

Adam Steed (16:42):

And it was a missing file. And then eventually that blew up. And we found out that one of the kids on the list was the son of a Bishop in Blackfoot Idaho, had just committed suicide. That he was, that he left a note that he was sexually abused and that nobody believed him, and that suddenly I realized a lot of these other kids on that list who I knew, who I went to school with, that I thought that I'd helped them by turning us in and they had gotten help, and none of them were helped. None of them were contacted. It was all hid. And then I realized I'm an adult now, I'm not going to get abused again. I'm going to stand up for these kids. And I did everything- The church community teaches you not to sue, and I looked at it, I said, "I'm going to sue Boy Scouts

of America, because I want those people's jobs. I want them gone and I want the truth to come out."

Adam Steed (17:29):

And so I was just barely starting a semester in BYU, I was a returned missionary, I was dating, I was gonna get married in the temple with this girl and that all fell apart. Her family heard about Scouting. She didn't want anything to do with me. I was off on my own at that point. But I knew behind all that fog, I knew there were children out there, adults, kids, whoever; they were out there and they were suffering. And when kids go- when they get sexually abused, they go into closure, and if they don't get help and they feel crazy. And I was like, no, this isn't going to happen. So I'm gonna sue Boy Scouts of American, and out of the blue I sued them and I barely caught the statute of limitations by like three days or something.

Bryan Smith (18:06):

Idaho has a tough one.

Adam Steed (18:07):

There was a five year statute put together by Scouting people and the church people protecting it, saying-

Bryan Smith (18:13):

Lobbying the legislature.

Adam Steed (18:14):

-We don't want to hurt. And I ended up lobbying the legislature and got it removed.

Bryan Smith (18:18):

Well done. Well done. That's a whole nother story in and of itself, probably.

Brian Knappenberger (18:21):

It is, I know it is, it's amazing.

Bryan Smith (18:21):

There's a lot of layers to this thing.

Brian Knappenberger (18:24):

Adam and his dad had that had that law removed, were instrumental in that.

Bryan Smith (18:28):

So, how's Peter doing now? The journalist.

Brian Knappenberger (18:32):

Yeah, I mean he left. I think it's safe to say under duress. I mean, he didn't- He was no longer comfortable in Idaho Falls and he's, I think he splits his time between DC and Portland, Oregon. And he's a writer.

Bryan Smith (18:45):

Yeah. Peter, just for listeners who haven't seen the film yet, Peter was a, kind of a hero figure in the story-

Brian Knappenberger (18:52):

Definitely.

Bryan Smith (18:52):

-Because he reported on the truth and was harassed and attacked by a billionaire.

Brian Knappenberger (18:58):

Yeah. It's worth noting he, ultimately, a year later/something, won the Langston Award for journalism for those stories. Which is, I think, one of the most prominent of all media journalism awards.

Adam Steed (19:09):

The Script's Award and the Livingston Award.

Brian Knappenberger (19:11):

So, he was-

Adam Steed (19:12):

I didn't know what they were, but I looked it up.

Bryan Smith (19:13):

Yeah.

Brian Knappenberger (19:14):

And that was a big deal. And they, and you know, so ultimately he got some recognition for this work.

Bryan Smith (19:19):

So Brian, tell us about your- How you found documentary filmmaking as your chosen form of storytelling.

Brian Knappenberger (19:29):

That's interesting. I've always been on the kind of dual path between journalism and photography. You know, I got... As a still photographer for a long time, I was a commercial still photographer for awhile and I basically just started getting into filmmaking, crafting stories with

images and music and people's stories. And as I was kind of working as a photographer, I would just- Or, a cinematographer, director of photography, I just started interviewing people and going down that path. And it just became... It's hard to say. My film was I think in 98, 99. And it was about technology entering the human body and changing who we are as a species, and robots becoming more sentient.

Bryan Smith (20:14):
Pretty ambitious project.

Brian Knappenberger (20:15):
It's pretty, pretty precious still, even 20 years later. But a lot of my work has had to do with technology and how it's changing and shifting. I feel like that's a really big thing... How it brushes up against civil liberties and human rights and freedom of speech and that sort of thing.

Bryan Smith (20:34):
And is that how you got involved in *The Internet's Own Boy, the Story of Adam Swartz*?

Brian Knappenberger (20:40):
Aaron Swartz, yeah.

Bryan Smith (20:42):
Or- Aaron Swartz, yeah.

Brian Knappenberger (20:43):
So, I've done a number of films about technology and sort of the fringe groups performing in technology and communities online. And so, at my previous film, before that one *We Are Legion, the Story of the Hacktivists* was in a period of hacktivism, or digital activism online. One of the most pressing, you know, biggest periods of protests we've seen recently. There's, the occupy movement was around that time. That year is unprecedented period of hacking activity.

Bryan Smith (21:15):
But hacking for good.

Brian Knappenberger (21:16):
Some for good.

Bryan Smith (21:16):
Allegedly.

Brian Knappenberger (21:17):
Some for not. Yeah, a little gray area sometimes, but mostly using computer systems in ways that were meant to protest or to organize a protest, that sort of thing. And Aaron Swartz was a luminary figure in that world. He really still remains one of the few figures that, I think, was really

both understood the technology and understood the internet really well, and understood how to craft and create. He understood the infrastructure he helped build RSS and things like that. And he also had very strong and developed sense of civic duty. So, he had both. He's one of the few people that I knew who had both of those things. Right? He really understood the technology and understood the basic sense of information being public information, being free to the public, and just a basic sense of public good and civic decency. And it's a rare combination there. So, it was a tragic loss.

Bryan Smith (22:24):

Was that your first documentary that made it into the mainstream? The...

Brian Knappenberger (22:28):

Yes, I think so. I mean, *We Are Legion, the Story of the Hactivists* was- It was picked up and people saw it, but it was also hacked early on and has been pirated. It was one of most pirated films of the year, that year.

Bryan Smith (22:40):

Well, isn't that ironic.

Brian Knappenberger (22:41):

Yeah. I don't know how that happened exactly. You'd never would've guessed.

Bryan Smith (22:46):

Yeah.

Brian Knappenberger (22:47):

But no, *We Are Legion* is, I mean, I still have... I mean, just... That film is still seen by lots of people around the world, but from, in a mainstream sense, yes, *Internet's Own Boy*.

Bryan Smith (23:00):

And what are the logistics involved for someone who wants to make a documentary in terms of finding funding to help you shoot it, but also to get the word out and to promote it? What is the sequence of events in terms of, you have an idea, you've got some equipment, you have the technological skill? Okay. So, let's start with that, but then what happens next?

Brian Knappenberger (23:26):

Well, that's a good question. The- And I guess the short answer is it's never happens the same way twice. I, for me, I think one of the places that I start with is that, and coming from a kind of photographic background or a cinematography background, I've always had cameras around me. I've always liked to have cameras. I've always been able to pick up a camera almost at the drop of a hat. But usually it starts with just getting pissed off about something, or just being really angry about something, or just really being moved about something, and picking up a camera and starting to talk to people. From there, I've always been a fan, and different people

do this different ways. I mean, I've been a fan of starting to cut something together, starting to kind of put together something even before you have funding. Just to get your own sense of what the film's about, just to understand. And I think you... I'm a fan of heavy research process. I'm a fan of doing a lot of work on paper before you go into editing.

Bryan Smith (24:25):

That's the journalist in you.

Brian Knappenberger (24:27):

Yeah, it's the journalist in me. But I think it also saves a lot of time and editing and costs later. And also just focuses you a little bit on what the story is that you're telling. So, I'll jump right in and start shooting stuff, start getting interviews with people that I find fascinating or compelling, and start cutting stuff. And, I've found that when- If you do it that way, as opposed to trying to presale it or trying to raise money first or something, there's just a sense of... You just know the story better. You know how to talk about the story, you know what you want from the story and there's a sense of momentum that starts to build. And so I guess that's my answer to you quest- There's never really a logical step-by-step pro- I mean there's elements there, but you're maneuvering in order to position yourself for them.

Bryan Smith (25:13):

And it sounds like, once you have the idea and you just want to start shooting, that sounds like a very organic process to me. And if you were to have funding too early, then it almost seems like that would complicate things, because then you've got, if people are saying, "Hey, here's some money," there's always some type of condition tied to that money. Right?

Brian Knappenberger (25:33):

Exactly. Which brings you to the, really the most critical part of it, and that is to fight for your own free expression and free- And for your own freedom of your own voice. That's it. That's more important than the money. Maintaining that early on throughout is so key because, and ultimately that gets you funded by- Ultimately the money comes if you go that path too.

Bryan Smith (25:57):

Right.

Brian Knappenberger (25:57):

So, no, I really think, I mean... Tell the story that you want to tell, and understand the story that- Understand what that story is and fight for it and go for it. And if people understand that, see that vision, then they'll get onboard with it. But I'm a much bigger fan of doing it that way than earning lots of money, or getting lots of early funding. And then you want the ability to shift gears a little bit too. I mean that happened in this story. You know, you're thinking of it as a press story and then you're kind of this sense of the, all these lawsuits come out about the Boy Scouts, this release of all these ineligible and volunteer files. And you want some freedom to kind of move within a little bit.

Bryan Smith (26:40):

Well, I think those are always the best documentaries where they start thinking that it's one thing and then it's not, and it takes a crazy turn.

Brian Knappenberger (26:48):

That happens a lot.

Bryan Smith (26:49):

Yeah, and that kind of leads me to my next question, which is, what do you think about the state of documentaries right now? Because I- When I look at my neck Netflix queue, I would say about a third of them, at least, are documentaries.

Brian Knappenberger (27:04):

It's a wonderful time. The joke I usually say is that if, you know... I've been doing this 20 years or more and what I do now is called, 'premium content.' What it used to be called is, 'I'm broke.' I mean, there used to be no money for this. That's not to say there wasn't a thriving place for documentaries. I worked for PBS for awhile, which was great, PBS frontline. There were other outlets, but it wasn't... The last few years we've seen, the streaming services mostly, really take documentary seriously. As a result audiences have responded to that. There's never been a doubt in my mind that there was an interested audience. That's been clear for 20 years to me. But to see a commercial- Or people starting to understand that in a commercial sense, it took a long time, but it's great.

Bryan Smith (27:56):

So, when you put a project together, like Church and the Fourth Estate, and you make your way to Sundance. When you arrived at Sundance, I assume that you don't have a deal, or typically you would not have a deal in place for distribution at that point?

Brian Knappenberger (28:12):

That's true. That, well, that's true with this film and true with my last film as well. It's not necessarily true with a lot of- A lot of films are, that are Sundance, are already purchased. So, that's not... Definitely not true across the board.

Bryan Smith (28:27):

I think with Netflix and Amazon that's starting to...

Brian Knappenberger (28:29):

They're jockeying before you get here, so it's not quite the same. There's a handful of films here that weren't, didn't have distribution, or that the filmmakers decided not to have distribution until they got to Sundance.

Bryan Smith (28:41):

Yeah.

Brian Knappenberger (28:42):

I kind of prefer that a little bit. I liked the kind of, the independent aspect of it. You know, keep that going as much as possible.

Bryan Smith (28:50):

Yeah. Well, I think it adds to the mystique too when you're in the audience, and you're at Sundance, and you're like, is this going to be picked up? Is anybody else gonna see this?

Brian Knappenberger (28:59):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (29:00):

And it's possible that it will not be seen by anybody else.

Brian Knappenberger (29:03):

That's true.

Bryan Smith (29:03):

Or it'd be very difficult to see. Of course, if you go to the Eccles and Anne Hathaway shows up... Meh.

Brian Knappenberger (29:10):

That's going to appear somewhere.

Bryan Smith (29:12):

It's a pretty sure thing, at that point.

Brian Knappenberger (29:15):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (29:16):

So, do you find yourself, in terms of what you're looking forward to in 2020 in 2021, the projects that you're working on, is it still documentary filmmaking for you?

Brian Knappenberger (29:27):

Oh, that's a good question. I'm finishing up a six part series we did for Netflix, one story over six episodes. That's gonna come out in a month. And then we're starting a new series that is a very... It's kind of on the, it's an anthology series, doc series, but where we're jumping into things that I get... You would be closer to a kind of narrative approach. I'd say recreation although that word's not perfect, but it's going into scenes and stuff based on, it's based on- I can't say much

about it, but it's a... It's based on disinformation online and deception. And so we're actually playing it out in ways that are a little more like a narrative film would be illustrated.

Bryan Smith (30:08):
Yeah.

Brian Knappenberger (30:09):
I guess.

Bryan Smith (30:10):
And and you can't talk about the six part series either?

Brian Knappenberger (30:14):
The new one, man...

Bryan Smith (30:15):
he Netflix one?

Brian Knappenberger (30:16):
So, I've been keeping it to myself for like two years. And I wish I could, and it's so close. I mean, it's about a crime, pretty horrific crime, that happened in... I'm not supposed to- But a crime that happened in Los Angeles, North of Los Angeles.

Bryan Smith (30:31):
Okay.

Brian Knappenberger (30:32):
And we are in the courtroom with the perpetrators, but there was some pretty serious kind of failures of the power structure in Los Angeles, and some of the people in County government and other things have- Other places are also been charged criminally, so that we're following those trials as well.

Bryan Smith (30:49):
Yeah. Let's go back to Church and the Fourth Estate. What kind of response, Adam, have you received from people who have seen the film, or have heard about the film in your community?

Adam Steed (31:04):
So... Well, my community isn't always the Park City, Sundance community.

Bryan Smith (31:09):
{ laughs } Understood.

Adam Steed (31:11):

And we just saw the premiere two days ago, but- And I can't really relate to, from a professional, what you usually see. But I had a standing ovation and I was... Got to stand in front of these people and they were crying, and I got hugged by so many people. And it was... So like, for me, right fresh in my mind is how absolutely terrified I was to be there doing that. And then how extremely beautiful it was to see these people.

Bryan Smith (31:43):

And in terms of your, in the story, in terms of your family and friends I caught a little bit of a sense of that from the film.

Adam Steed (31:53):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (31:54):

But what has been the response from your family and friends in terms of your involvement in this project?

Adam Steed (31:59):

You know, I kind of was quiet about it. I think I would have been more, "Hey guys, look what I'm doing." But it's sexual abuse, and it's kinda hard to be like... I don't, I'd rather just let them know after, so I put up a Facebook posts. But I did this film about some pain in my life. People that- I know hundreds of people... I've had support from all members of the church and not members alike that unanimously feel that what I'm doing is incredibly important.

Bryan Smith (32:29):

And if I remember correctly from the film you stayed in the church, is that right? Because there are aspects of the church that you still found helpful and an important part of your faith?

Adam Steed (32:43):

As you could assume, because of what's happened to me, that I have a difficult time in a church setting, and so I don't really know where I am. But I do feel closer to God and my life, and closer to everybody, and closer to truth than I've ever felt. I do feel a lot more solid than I've felt, and a lot's happened just since the first interview with Brian last... That was just this last year that's, I think, has been helping solidify me as a person and really ground me, and help me find my own sense of self. You know, I've told this horrible elephant in the room story and now I'm starting to feel like... This year was the first year in nine years, since I had a divorce, that I got a girlfriend and the... You know, we spent six months together. She was tragically hit by a car and she died. And it was a tragedy that happened while this film was going on.

Bryan Smith (33:41):

Oh my goodness...

Adam Steed (33:42):

Yeah. But, so it's been a really mixed year for me. But I had all this confidence and things are going really good. And then I had this, 'cause life had- Life has tragedy sometimes we don't expect. But... Yeah, so, I do feel more comfortable in my own skin than I felt. And I know that she really wanted this for me too. She was there coming to the filmings and stuff, and she knew it was traumatic for me, and spend time with me afterwards and encouraging me and everything. So...

Bryan Smith (34:13):

Well... Not to shift around too much, but I'd like to bounce back to your beginnings as a creative and ask you, if you were standing in front of a group of high school kids and they had an interest in this type of storytelling, what advice would you give them in terms of what type of education to get, what interests to pursue, and how to get on that path that you took.

Brian Knappenberger (34:42):

Aspiring filmmakers?

Bryan Smith (34:44):

Yeah.

Brian Knappenberger (34:45):

Yeah. I mean, I think that the one, well... That's interesting, the education. I mean I learned a lot, I learned a lot about photography and filmmaking, but it wasn't- I didn't get any really formal education, more of- Mine is more, well, the sum was in photography, but journalism too. But I don't... I think the thing, the best way to start to create films and to be a filmmaker is to, is just to dive in. I guess it goes back to what we were just saying a little while ago that, just to start understanding what it is, why you- What do you want to say? You know, what is it, what kinds of stories do you want to tell? What do you find most relevant in the world? What parts of the insane world that we live in right now do you want to document? Do you want to understand? Do you want to sort of step back and say, "Why is this the way it is?" And to pick up a camera, and start cutting stuff together, and then critically show people, right?

Bryan Smith (35:51):

Hmmm, scary.

Brian Knappenberger (35:52):

And it's scary, but let it wash over you. Let it, I mean, nobody's gonna- Not everybody's gonna love it. You know, a friend of mine, a guy, a graphics guy, I met early onset. Well, you show, show people what you work on and then you say, "Well, is it good or is it bad?" And it's like, well, okay, if it's good, why is it good? You know, why, what is it that you're responding to? If it's bad, why is it bad? Is it bad, because it's technically bad? If that's the truth, if that's the case, then just do anything it takes to get better at those elements. Right? You can figure that out. But is it bad because it's weird or different? Well, maybe you're the judge of that, as a filmmaker; maybe you as the artist are the judge of that. So, I think, again also back to the question about

money and financing, I do think that the choice between doing a film with a lower budget that is uniquely your vision, as opposed to a higher budget film that's not, there's really no choice there. There really isn't. One is a short term gain, but then it's pretty much over, you've made, you've decided your path. But if you stay strong, true to a vision and it's the authentic process of trying to figure something out about the world. It's just gonna lead to something else. You know?

Bryan Smith (37:16):

It sounds like, too, that you really need a community or at least a few other people who are like-minded to kind of help shape you in those years where you're trying to figure out what's good and what's bad, because I don't know that that can happen in a vacuum.

Brian Knappenberger (37:32):

Yeah, that's true, that's true. You meet people. But I think, I would also say to younger people, seek out those people that you're most sort of inspired by, I guess. And I think people are more accessible than you generally, people give them credit for. And I think if you're approaching the craft honestly I think people, other people, recognize that. But yeah, I think the showing of people is very, very critical and I mean, it's so important. And to get it out, I mean, a lot of people are scared of that and then never show anybody their work, or they keep playing with their play. But I mean, I just don't think you, I don't think the cycle of improvement works unless you go the whole distance, and go back and make another film.

Bryan Smith (38:21):

Right.

Brian Knappenberger (38:21):

And then show it, craft it, create it, make new mistakes, and then show people and keep doing it again.

Bryan Smith (38:29):

If I was going to summarize your advice to the high school students, it would be: do it.

Brian Knappenberger (38:33):

Do it, yeah { laughs }.

Bryan Smith (38:34):

Just, get out there and start shooting.

Brian Knappenberger (38:36):

It's hard to make it more complicated than that. I mean, and don't second guess yourself. Don't think you need an agent, or a deal, or something. I mean, all that stuff is reacting to your vision. Your vision, and the purpose of what you're doing, has to come first.

Bryan Smith (38:50):

Yeah. And do you think that the issues of figuring out how the camera works and lighting are things that you can learn just on the job; getting a job as an assistant on a crew or something like that, as opposed to going to film school and vocationally- Some type of vocational school or actual film school like USC. Is that something on the job that you can learn?

Brian Knappenberger (39:19):

Yes, I think so. I think it is, I mean, it's good to have a little bit of preparation and I think there's an instinct for that. If that's something that you love to do, then you're hungrier and you're... It's easier now, I think, you can learn technology pretty, fairly easily with YouTube and other things. I mean, there's a personal element to it. I mean, my dad, I remember one birthday when I was, I think it was nine years old, my dad gave me my first Pentax screw mount camera. And so it was a proper SLR camera, and it was my birthday and they hid different lenses around the room, and I had to go find- It was a scavenger hunt. I had to go find the camera body and the different lenses. And we were about to go on a trip, right? We did these long kind of road trips and we had a Ford Econoline van and we just like did these loops around the country. We didn't- That was a lot of the States, America.

Bryan Smith (40:12):

Good memories.

Brian Knappenberger (40:13):

It was, and we were about to launch on one of these trips when I- It was my birthday and I got this new camera. So we're in this black Ford Econoline van, and I was learning all of the lenses and how it worked, and what a wide angle lens was, and what that did for an image as opposed to a long lens, and the kind of places where you'd want to use each different kind of tool. And I remember my dad saying that, an F-stop, right? I mean, he said, "Look." He held his hand up like this with the little kind of, you could see through the little, wrapped his fingers around and look in a pinhole camera, right? Everything's in focus. So, the smaller that hole, that f-stop is, the more focus there is. And the wider it is, the less depth of field. He's taught me depth of field in the back of a Ford Econoline van.

Bryan Smith (41:04):

That's a tough concept.

Brian Knappenberger (41:05):

When I was about eight, nine, ten years old. But if you think about it a pinhole camera, which I'd already made a bunch of, makes sense, I get it. And that stuck with me, and I think even even what I've just said gave me a leg up on the assistance in Hollywood.

Bryan Smith (41:19):

Yeah.

Brian Knappenberger (41:20):

It's hard to explain. I mean, I understood lenses as well as they did-

Bryan Smith (41:25):

Yeah. Because of-

Brian Knappenberger (41:26):

-At my first job.

Bryan Smith (41:28):

-Your dad's instructions when you're in the van.

Brian Knappenberger (41:30):

Yeah. And what's weird is, when does this- That entered my brain when my brain was ready for it, at some tender age, and my dad just happened to be into photography. He's not a photographer, but he was super into it at that moment. So, there was some convergence there that imprinted itself on me after he moved on.

Bryan Smith (41:51):

Yeah. I would imagine that another skillset that you need, as a documentary filmmaker as opposed to a feature film narrative type of movie, would be a real knack for communication, empathy, listening, so that you can develop a rapport with, for instance, Adam.

Adam Steed (42:14):

I was going to mention that when, because you guys work with people in film all the time, and you might get more used to that. In my place, as a common person, when you hear someone who wants to make a movie or something's going to talk to you, your brain goes right into, "Oh, I need to say my most important stuff. I need to say everything perfect." It's pressure because you're not used to that.

Bryan Smith (42:37):

Right.

Adam Steed (42:38):

And it really, I think, helped. Brian's approach to me really helped me, because he really low-profiled it, just acted really kind. He didn't wait for a long time for me to rethink and second guessed myself. So, it was really like some of our most successful interviews were, "Oh, you're in town. Hey, you want to come over really quick? Hey, let's talk really quick." And that was the- Because especially with issues of trauma, when you revisit those over in your head before you go, then your interview is not very, that good. What's good is right at that moment where you ask those questions, and if somebody brings it up and talks about it in their memory, and at that moment it's not- You can get a traumatized version of trauma, or you can hear kind of the story in the beginning. And so I appreciate the fact, as a person in this process that- And it's no fun as

like a victim, or you know, someone that's been through trauma of some sort. So, to give a report of the traumatized version of yourself.

Bryan Smith (43:40):
Right.

Adam Steed (43:40):
That's not what, that's not- That makes you feel like a basket case, and you don't know if the same result's going to happen with the reporter that happened in your life when you told that to somebody. And so...

Bryan Smith (43:49):
Yeah.

Adam Steed (43:51):
The way that he caught that with real low profile, didn't wait a long time, heard your story, lot of validation, a lot of support that you're doing a great job. I'm very, when the trauma stuff comes on, very not controlled, like an agenda that he needs to fulfill with his stuff.

Bryan Smith (44:10):
I was going to say that, that's what I picked up on when I was watching the film, is that there didn't seem to be a real strong point of view driving the narrative or an agenda, as you said, Adam. Which is really refreshing, because I think there are some documentaries out there that... They're just out to accomplish something, you know it. You know, the fire festival was, those were really entertaining documentaries, but I don't know that there were that journalistic or I think there were just kind of looking for this... I mean, I'm not trying to diminish the work that they did. I enjoyed both of the fire festivals, I watched him with my kids, I thought they were hilarious. But I noticed with this film a lot of the voice, your voice, was just the listening and the empathy and letting Vandersloot. I mean... Let Vandersloot hang himself just by, with his own words. I mean, this is, you don't have to have an agenda when you have a story like this. It just kind of gels and really is impactful. And and so, I think, the standing ovation was very well deserved, Adam, at the premiere.

Adam Steed (45:27):
That belongs to every victim of sexual abuse in this world. To... It was like becoming Harry Potter instead of the guy under the closet.

Bryan Smith (45:36):
Right. Yeah. Well I, and I wanted to thank you as well on behalf of all of my clients, and all of the folks who probably will never come forward, because hearing this type of story in a mainstream format like this is validating to thousands and thousands of abuse survivors.

Adam Steed (46:00):

Do you think it can change the world?

Bryan Smith (46:02):

Absolutely. I think it has changed the world, already. What you did with the litigation that you filed, what you did with the interviews with Brian sitting here today, showing up at the theater, watching the movie with a bunch of strangers, not knowing what the reaction's going to be. You have changed the world. Brian has changed the world. And I think everybody that listens, and watches that film with an open mind, is changing the world, because they're changing when they see it.

Adam Steed (46:37):

People don't believe us and people don't want to hear about scary topics.

Bryan Smith (46:42):

They don't, it's very uncomfortable. We don't want to believe the worst in people, unless the person who is speaking the truth is going against our own best interest. And then we believe the worst in that person who is speaking that truth. But it's... I think we're culturally ready for a shift, and to start believing abuse survivors as our default position as opposed to questioning them and their motives as the default position. And that's what I'm hopeful for.

Brian Knappenberger (47:22):

That's a good step forward.

New Speaker (47:25):

Yeah. Brian, thank you so much for being on the podcast.

Brian Knappenberger (47:28):

Thanks a lot, thanks for having me.

Bryan Smith (47:29):

And making time for me. I know you're busy here at Park City and the Sundance Film Festival. Adam, thank you for sitting down with us. It was a nice surprise to see you here and get to know you in person.

Adam Steed (47:40):

Thank you for having me on your show.