

THE TEENAGE VIDEOMAKERS & THEIR STORIES

*"If you look at the street names in the project, you come up with so many ideas.
Desire (that's a street) is like a wish to do something or a desire to go far.
You want to have benefits and you want pleasure. You just want to feel
good about yourself – the biggest thing you can do."*

Cassandra Swaing, Teenage Videomaker

DESIRE begins in a large, run-down public housing development named Desire, which sits at the end of the former streetcar line made famous by Tennessee Williams. The camera pans over the rooftops of the sprawling development to reveal a courtyard where independent filmmaker, Julie Gustafson, and her video crew are teaching an excited group of African-American girls how to use camcorders to film their lives. Across the river in Belle Chasse, a working-class suburb, a white teenage mother sets up a camera to film her move into yet another trailer home. In an affluent New Orleans neighborhood, two teens – one Asian-American and one white – are making videos about life in elegant suburban homes. As the film progresses, we meet and follow these teenagers as they film the stories of their own dramatic and changing lives. Throughout the unprecedented five-year collaboration, Gustafson and her crew document this process and pose challenging questions to each of the girls about their desires and choices – their opportunities and obstacles.

CASSANDRA SWAING, 15, a vibrant African-American honor student from the Desire Public Housing Development, has ambitions to serve in the military, attend college, and become an engineer. But pressures from her peers and her environment pull on her. She creates a powerful video poem for the documentary, called *Boredom*, in which we learn she had unprotected sex with her boyfriend and is pregnant. She decides to have the baby. About having unprotected sex, she says, "I made a choice, but it was a bad choice." We learn that generations of women in her family have been poor, single, teenage mothers.

TIFFANIE JOHNSON, 17, is a teenage mother and wife from Belle Chasse, a New Orleans suburb across the Mississippi river where hidden pockets of poverty create high incidences of teenage pregnancy among white teenagers. In her video *My Side, Your Side and The Truth*, she points her camera at her young husband, Lee, who felt pressured by Tiffanie's family to marry her. A year later the marriage ends in divorce. Between taking care of her child, part-time jobs, and college classes, she insists she will make something of her own life. She wants to be more than a mother and a wife.

PEGGY WANG, 16, is a first generation Asian-American student attending one of New Orleans' finest private high schools. In sharp contrast to her parents' assertion that the Chinese are conservative and "don't really talk about sex," the "Americanized" Peggy said that if she did have sex and got pregnant, she'd "have an abortion just like that." In *Advantage 24*, she spoofs her curiosity about birth control and sex. For Peggy, college and career opportunities are her most effective form of birth control.

TRACY MORTON, 16, is a white student attending the same prestigious high school as Peggy. The daughter of a homemaker mother and lawyer father, Tracy is expected to be a superwoman who combines both parents' achievements. She struggles with alcohol, smoking, self-esteem and her parents' high expectations. In her video piece *Still Life*, she reflects on her mother's financial and emotional dependence on her husband and children, as well as her father's stressful and time consuming career.

KIMECA ROGERS, 18, is an African-American mother of two who also lives in the Desire Housing Project. In her video piece, *Just Another Half Day In My Life*, we see her battle to finish high school and raise two sons, one of whom has special medical needs. In a poignant video piece called *Paw-Paw, The Miracle Child*, Kimeca tells the story of her disabled child and explains her reasons for not choosing adoption or abortion. "In my community," she says, "every child is a blessing."

DESIRE'S dramatic arc is provided by the girls' own development during the course of the project. As the girls grow more comfortable as collaborating filmmakers, they challenge Gustafson's premise that young women's choices are shaped by unseen forces in the complex family and social environments from which they emerge. Kimeca tells her peers: "Miss Julie asked my teacher the dumbest question. She said, 'Do teenage girls have choices?'" The question sets off a vigorous debate in which the young women move beyond the starting point of the film – teenage sexuality, early pregnancy, and motherhood. They begin to question the factors that influence their youthful desires and choices, as well as their achievements and mistakes. Were their hopes and dreams a product of what their families, teachers or peers found desirable, or even thinkable? Were their aspirations and, ultimately, their decisions and actions, a response to optimistic promises society made to them, or the reality of what society actually provided for them?

Epilogue

CASSANDRA tries the military, but when told that she must give up custody of her infant, she refuses to do so. Eventually she moves to Arizona in search of better opportunities. In order to provide for her daughter, Cassandra defers her own dreams.

TIFFANIE flourishes in college and uses the video-making process to come to grips with desires that she is afraid to reveal. In *Girlfriends*, she asks the audience to listen sympathetically as she reveals that she is bisexual. Later she enters into a relationship with another woman and together they raise her son.

PEGGY, growing into her own voice as an artist, makes *Clinic*, a video about young women with unplanned pregnancies who must decide whether or not to have an abortion. Her conclusion: it is not the easy choice she had originally thought it would be. She also creates *Secrets*, a poignant video about body image and eating disorders. By the end of the documentary, Peggy moves to New York City to start a career as a web designer.

TRACY resists her parent's overwhelming expectations for her by dropping out of college and taking a job at a video store in order to rethink her priorities. Ultimately, she decides to finish her B.A. As the film ends, she has graduated from college and is heading off to law school.

KIMECA drops out of high school for the third time. She dedicates herself to taking care of her children. Without a diploma or G.E.D, the only work she can find is a low paying job as a nursing home aide.

Hurricane Katrina, 2005

Shortly before Hurricane Katrina, the Desire Housing Development was torn down by the Federal Government and rebuilt to modern standards. Unfortunately, the massive flood waters that followed the hurricane and devastated much of New Orleans, also washed away the new Desire housing complex. By then, the teenage video makers seen in the film were in their mid-twenties. Of these women, Cassandra and Peggy had already left New Orleans for wider opportunities. Kimeca and Tiffanie were forced to evacuate (to Jackson, MS and Atlanta, GA respectively) and did not return. Tracy evacuated, but came back in an effort to rebuild her life and city. Julie Gustafson evacuated with the edited copies of the completed documentary. Luckily, the original 700 hours of footage archived at the Newcomb College Institute of Tulane University were spared.

Just prior to Katrina, the New Orleans Film Festival notified the filmmaking team that we had swept their awards for 2005. But the Festival was cancelled because of the city's catastrophe. In 2006, after *DESIRE* had been featured at numerous national film festivals, the New Orleans Film Festival premiered the film for the city and people who had nurtured the project from the beginning. Several of the original teen videomakers joined Gustafson in accepting the long-delayed prizes. With that, the circle of collaboration was complete.