



- Courtesy photo

A look at New Orleans

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ASPEN, Colorado – Filmmakers Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno have been to post-Katrina New Orleans. They’ve seen the devastation and, in Marylou’s words, have been wowed by the “enormous, positive energy” they got from its survivors. But people are not the subject of their documentary “Protecting New Orleans.”

Originally meant to be only a research piece for a fictional film by the couple, the short ended up taking on a life of its own and telling the story of the Hurricane Katrina debacle – from an environmental perspective.

In the movie, which screens Tuesday as part of the traveling “Wild & Scenic Environmental Film Festival,” the filmmakers follow Louisiana State University’s Dr. John Day as he describes how the devastation of New Orleans could have been prevented, if only its surrounding natural environment had been treated differently.

He also offers some hope – and a few suggestions – for the city’s future.

I’m just curious what, in you, makes you want to make movies. Marylou: “Oh wow, that’s a great question. Well, I think for Jerome and I, who do both documentary and fictional film, making movies is the culmination of all of our passions in the arts. So, you know, the photography, the still photography, the music, painting, drawing, writing – I mean, all of this combines in really one medium, and it’s film. So, for us, it’s the ultimate form of expression.”

What’s it like working on art like this with your spouse? (Marylou laughs)

Jerome: “We highly suggest it.”

Marylou: “Yeah, it’s great, because when you need to rely on someone, you know, there’s no one better than your spouse. We can work 24/7, and there are no complaints on that end. And I think it’s also that we divide the work. I mean, I’m the producer/director of the pieces. Jerome is the cinematographer, the editor, the animator, and we co-write. So I think there are defined roles. I do recommend it. I think more married couples ought to work together.”

What was the biggest thing you walked away with from all that environmental knowledge you gained (while making the film)? Jerome: “That you have to live with your environment, not against it. Because, you know, eventually your political system of government is going to fail. It’s inevitable. So, you really should live with your environment, so that things like that (the Katrina situation) don’t happen. Living within a levy-protected zone is really living without protection, eventually.”

Marylou: “– ‘Cause we talked to so many people who were even advised to not – or not given – flood insurance, because they lived in a levy-protected zone. These were people that were hardest hit, as you can imagine. They had experienced inches of rain, flooding, maybe in the ’60s with (Hurricane) Betsy. Nothing that could have prepared them, or anybody, for the kind of devastation that they saw and the amount of water. So, for me, part of it was that we saw, we witnessed extreme damage caused by human activity.”

Jerome: “Unnecessary damage.”

Marylou: “Exactly.”

Jerome: “It was totally, totally avoidable, and nothing was done to avoid it.”

So, why do you think people need to see this film? Jerome: “Because I don’t think it’s clear that marshlands are a natural storm buffer. I don’t know if people know that. I don’t think it’s clear that marshes are an estuary. And I

don't think it's clear to people the events that happened during Katrina are avoidable things. I'm not sure if people understand that. You know, New Orleans didn't have to suffer the fate that it suffered. The wetlands of New Orleans don't have to suffer the fate that they're suffering currently."

What do you think, at its best, the point of documentary film is? Jerome: "Well, you have the major media, and you've got the stuff that the major media shows you. The role of documentaries, as we see it, is to show all the stuff that the major media doesn't show you, you know, all the truthful stuff."

Marylou: "It's such an incredible means of dialogue, because you can, using archival footage and pictures and interviews, in a very small period of time, like an hour-and-a-half, you can show people, take them into a whole other way of living. And then have a dialogue about it, without having to try and convince or explain it to them. So I see documentary film as having this power of immediacy, for people to empathize, usually not just empathizing with someone 'over there.' Usually, it's like their problem is in their own lives, their own backyard, too."

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