

## **WITNESS AND PETER GABRIEL**

Conceived by musician Peter Gabriel and founded in 1992, WITNESS uses video to advance human rights. WITNESS has provided video cameras and training to over 150 groups in more than 50 countries around the world. WITNESS helps them use video as evidence before courts, regional commissions and the United Nations, as a tool for public education, and as a deterrent to further abuse. WITNESS also gives local human rights groups a global voice, by distributing their video to the media and broadcasting it online at [www.witness.org](http://www.witness.org).

Recently, Peter Gabriel provided his music to the WITNESS production, 'Behind the Labels: Garment Workers on U.S. Saipan,' narrated by Susan Sarandon, about sweatshop and labor abuses on this US pacific island territory. He also turned down a request from the Gap to use 'Solsbury Hill' in an ad campaign because of his concerns about the Gap's record on labor rights. The Gap is one of the most prominent retailers contracting on Saipan, and has consistently blocked settlements of lawsuits alleging forced overtime and indentured servitude, which other major retailers have agreed to settle. On September 26, as a result of pressure brought to bear by labor and human rights organizations including WITNESS, the Gap finally signed on to the settlement in these cases.

"A Lens on the World" by Ann Hornaday. The Washington Post. November 21, 2002.

Psst. Don't tell Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks or Rupert Murdoch, but the most influential filmmakers in the world aren't in Hollywood.

For the past decade, activists and nongovernmental organizations all over the globe have taken up video cameras to document injustices in their countries, sometimes risking their lives to bring human rights abuses to light.

Women in Afghanistan used hidden cameras to capture the depredations of Taliban rule and, later, the aftermath of the U.S. military campaign. Garment workers in the U.S. territory of Saipan smuggled a camera into sewing factories where women worked 14-hour shifts under lock and key, often without pay, to make clothes for the Gap and other American retailers. In Sierra Leone, young women spoke publicly for the first time about the rapes they endured during a brutal 10-year civil war. In Burma, civilians who are being forced into relocation camps by that country's military regime are filming the activities of the very army that threatens to kill them.

What these and more than 150 other groups have in common is Witness, a nonprofit group founded by musician Peter Gabriel in 1992 that provides cameras, technical training and distribution support to people whose stories would otherwise most likely go unheard and unseen.

The more than 25 documentaries co-produced by Witness have been broadcast on television, used in network news stories, shown at film festivals and meetings, streamed on the Web and presented as evidence in federal courts, international tribunals and the United Nations. Though only one film has resulted in the filing of criminal charges, many have been used as evidence in war crimes trials or have prompted long-awaited policy changes. Others have simply spurred progress toward collective healing. Nearly every Witness film has illuminated crimes, injustices and crises that otherwise would have been known only by their perpetrators and victims.

## Visual Impact

By 1997 Eric Rosenthal, the founder and executive director of Mental Disability Rights International, a nonprofit advocacy and advisory organization, had visited a half-dozen countries where patients in psychiatric institutions were living in filthy, abusive and inhumane conditions. His reports on the hospitals received extensive attention in the countries he was writing about, but he still hadn't landed on the international radar, nor had he been able to persuade the human rights community at large that the mentally disabled should be included in their purview.

That summer, Rosenthal visited Witness's office, learned the rudiments of documentary filmmaking during a three-hour crash course, took away a Sony Hi-8 video camera, batteries and tapes, and began recording what he saw in Russia, Hungary, Armenia, Romania, Azerbaijan and Kosovo. And he and his team filmed in Mexico, where they found psychiatric patients living in a state of near-total neglect.

"At one facility there were children who, due to a total lack of any form of human attention or stimulation, were just on mats on the floor, rocking back and forth," Rosenthal recalls. "Many of them were self-abusive, hitting themselves. They had open wounds that were raw and untreated, they were tied down to beds, to window frames and fences. At other facilities we saw adults naked, eating off the floors, covered in their own filth. Broadly speaking, the conditions were totally dehumanizing and degrading."

In 2000, the producers and editors at Witness suggested that Rosenthal create a six-minute video showing the worst of the abuses in Mexico's facilities. They also helped him contact CNN, ABC's "20/20" and the Spanish-language network Univision, all of which went on to do stories on MDRI's campaign and all of which used footage that Rosenthal had collected. (The New York Times had also written a story about Mexico's hospitals.)

That spring, Rosenthal presented the six-minute tape to the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which after viewing the material included a citation of Mexican psychiatric facilities in its annual report. Juan Mendez, who sits on the commission, recalls that until Rosenthal presented his video, the only visual testimony the group

had seen was the occasional PowerPoint presentation. Mendez called the video "very useful to our deliberations and very dramatic. It's one thing to say that in a country with limited resources or great problems of income distribution the mentally disabled poor have a rough time. It's quite another thing to see the kind of neglect, which is by no means benign, that these people suffer under."

The extensive media attention and international pressure prompted the Mexican government finally to agree to reform its state mental health system and close Ocaranza, one of the worst facilities documented by MDRI. Rosenthal followed by producing with Witness a short video called "Forgotten People," narrated by Susan Sarandon, which documented abuses in psychiatric hospitals around the world. "I've been at this for nine years and we've published five reports, which all had impact in their own regard," he says. "But video helps greatly expand the audience and impact of our work."

Gabriel came up with the idea for Witness in 1988, while he was on a world tour sponsored by Amnesty International. "I met, for the first time, many victims of human rights abuses," he said in a recent e-mail interview. "There were people who had suffered all manner of tortures, those who had seen loved ones murdered in front of them and many whose relatives had been 'disappeared.' I was appalled by everything that I was learning, but was just as shocked to discover how often the perpetrators avoided prosecution and successfully buried their atrocities. Although written reports were often published, they often seemed impotent, leaving justice undone and many activists and victims very isolated."

Gabriel had a video camera with him on the trip, and he hit on the idea "to arm the activists with cameras that they themselves would operate" in order to document abuses. He sought funding for the project until 1991, when amateur video footage of Rodney King being beaten by Los Angeles police officers proved how potent a tool for change video could be: Soon the King footage was ubiquitous, sparking a national discussion of racism and police brutality. With seed money from the Reebok Human Rights Foundation, Gabriel set up Witness under the umbrella of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights.

Within a few years, however, it became clear that Witness's initial mission was not enough. "The vision of giving cameras to the world was beautiful and probably oversimplified, in the sense of just dropping a camera without providing technical training in how to use it," says Gillian Caldwell, executive director of Witness. Caldwell herself worked with the organization in 1996, when, as a lawyer specializing in international human rights, she made a documentary about sexual trafficking in Russia.

"I think the Rodney King example perpetuated the early mythology that hand-held video footage is going to be plastered all over the world's television screens and revolutionize the debate.

Unfortunately, because of television's appetite and the audience's limited attention span, most footage our partners are shooting, at least by television's standards, doesn't merit an international audience," Caldwell says.

Since 1996 Witness, which occupies the second floor of a loft building in downtown Manhattan, has been a full-service organization for its partners. It provides not only cameras but training and assistance in editing footage and in creating game plans for getting it seen, whether in a full-blown TV documentary or as streaming video on the Witness Web site. This year it has given cameras to groups in India, Romania, Gambia, the Philippines and Palestinian communities of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, and trained groups in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

Among its works in progress is a documentary about forensic anthropologists who investigate the human remains of massacres, "disappearance" and other crimes for evidence of human rights violations. The 40-minute film will be shown to judges, forensic anthropology and human rights students, and human rights organizations to encourage them to use forensic anthropology in their work. Witness might also create a shorter version suitable for a television audience and will show it on its Web site.

The goal is what Caldwell calls the most effective approach to video advocacy, a multi-pronged strategy wherein the material that activists shoot can be used in full-length documentaries, as fodder for network news stories, as legal evidence and as an organizing tool at meetings and conferences.

"Most of our work finds its way into a variety of venues," Caldwell says. "The ideal is where you can develop one piece that actually speaks to all of those audiences."

### Who Needs Hollywood?

Like the Depression-era photographers Dorothea Lange, Paul Strand and Lewis Hine, as well as '60s-era filmmakers including Frederick Wiseman, who used hand-held cameras to create unvarnished portraits of American social institutions, Witness is furthering a tradition of working with film to create politically aware and provocative documentaries. And with digital cameras and editing systems and the Internet at their disposal, Witness is poised to take egalitarian ideals to even greater lengths, says filmmaker Peter Wintonick.

"This kind of catalytic work that Witness is doing is really erasing a lot of the boundaries, and maybe even erasing the definitions of what a filmmaker is," Wintonick says.

Indeed, Witness helps make possible the sort of decentralized filmmaking famously anticipated

by Francis Ford Coppola when he predicted that one day even "some little fat girl in Ohio" would make great movies.

"In this era, when a camera can cost \$1,000 and an editing system can cost \$1,200 to \$1,500, the costs of production make it feasible for a community group or an activist to start using these tools," says Wintonick, whose film about Witness, "Seeing Is Believing," is currently on the festival circuit. "And in fact there's been a kind of paradigm shift in distribution, where we don't have to rely even on community church screenings and cycling around prints and videotapes. Witness is at the forefront of this revolution of micro-documentaries, as I call them, or digi-documentaries, putting documentaries up on the Net, so they're not only available to the North American community of activists, but in theory to anybody who wants to log on."

According to Caldwell, Witness.org receives hits from 37,000 users a month. Visitors to the site not only see a "Rights Alert" (streaming video of one of Witness's recent co-productions), but they also receive advisories on how best to take action regarding what they see.

For example, earlier this year the Web site played "Rule of the Gun in Sugarland," made by members of Nakamata, a group of landless peasants in the Philippines whose leaders were murdered while pursuing ancestral land claims. Viewers were urged to write Filipino authorities, urging them to investigate the murders and protect Nakamata. The ensuing letter-writing campaign, along with Witness footage used as part of an investigative television broadcast and as evidence presented to the country's National Bureau of Investigation, resulted in a government probe and the filing of homicide charges against three people.

The interactivity of the Web is what makes Witness's enterprise so potent, says Pat Aufderheide, director of American University's Center for Social Media.

"For example, you can go to Witness and watch the Nakamata atrocities via broadband," she says. "And that can be a [way of] linking you to a human rights organization. So it's a path for people in one organization to communicate with people in another organization. They've really shown some of the versatility of the Internet platform."

Gabriel says partners in the field will soon be given laptop editing systems so that they can cut their own films rather than have to send them to New York. And, he says, wireless communications technology holds untold potential. "Televisions will operate more like computers in terms of user interaction. I am sure that news, like many things on the Net, will develop filters, so that individuals can receive what really interests them, and that has tremendous potential for an independent organization like Witness."

For Caldwell, the technology is just one more way for Witness to bring its work full circle.

"What we're focused on is not just what's wrong but how it can be made right," she says. "The point is not just to educate and inform people about problems, but to present solutions and to encourage governments to implement solutions. It's not just mudslinging."