SIPA Graduate Edet Belzberg’s First Documentary Reveals Plight Of Romanian Street Children and Receives Academy Award Nomination

BY Jo Kadlecek

Edet Belzberg, SIPA ’97, didn’t get much sleep the night before the 74th Academy Award nominations were announced. Though she spent two years making a documentary film, “Children Underground,” she had received the Sundance Film Festival Special Jury Prize two months earlier and enjoyed a successful year of film festival honors and conference screenings. Belzberg was understandably nervous about the possibility of Oscar recognition.

Then the phone started ringing and it hasn’t stopped since. Her nerves have jumped between elation and shock, and life for the 32-year-old Los Angeles native has picked up steam since the nomination.

“My phone calls get returned a lot faster now, a lot faster than I ever imagined,” Belzberg said. The calls are for more screenings at film festivals, or human rights conferences, or meetings with funders or editors, interviews with journalists, or well wishes from friends and colleagues. Belzberg sees each as an opportunity to advance her passion for social justice with her love for storytelling through film.

“It’s an incredible honor that the film is receiving such recognition, but what I hope is it will do some good on behalf of street children in Romania,” Belzberg said referring to the subject of her documentary. The film, which follows five street children through the streets of Bucharest, Romania, and introduces to a “family” of orphaned, abandoned, or well wishes from friends and colleagues.

Belzberg initially got the idea for the film by reading an article about street children in Africa, South East Asia and Romania. That propelled her to begin subway station. It intimately portrays the children begging or stealing food or sniffing a toxic silver paint called Aurolac, anything to survive the horrific conditions created by both the policies of former communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu and the transition to a market economy that left thousands of children homeless in the nation’s cities.

What resulted of Belzberg’s gutsy project is a dramatic blend of investigative journalism, human rights advocacy and cinematic savvy that left audiences at dozens of film festivals last year both disturbed and engaged.

Belzberg ultimately chose Bucharest because of her investigative journalism. She spent the next two months in Bucharest filming the children in grueling 18-20 hour days. The chaos of the children’s lives was relentless,” Belzberg recalls. “Sometimes at night violent intruders came in from other subway stations. Predicting what these children were living through, Belzberg says, “The idea for the film came out of the belief that a full-length documentary could provide more for long term solutions than any immediate intervention she could offer the children.”

At the end of the two-month shoot, Belzberg and her team realized that “our utter exhaustion was what the children experience constantly. Back in the States, the director of photography discovered that he had contracted tuberculosis, which prevented him from working for the next six months. I returned with only lice and scabies.”

Such conditions greatly contrast the glamour of the Academy Awards, but Belzberg is hoping the film will now have more opportunities to increase awareness and encourage response. Consequently, Belzberg is at work planning several screenings that can also serve as fundraisers for organizations which helped street children—many of which are listed as resource links on her website. Plans are even underway to include a fund-raising screening for Child Hope International at Columbia in June.

In the meantime—for except for a trip to the Oscars ceremony March 24th—Belzberg has already begun working on her next documentary, one which follows the lives of U.S. gymnasts as they prepare for the Olympics.

“I’ll be making films for a very long time,” Belzberg said. “There’s nothing else I could imagine myself doing.”