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## Top Stories - News

### Local man's films make a difference 1/5/04

By TARA BRADBURY BENNETT, The Telegram

Although you may not have seen any of his work, St. John's native Gary Smyth has been a successful filmmaker for several years.

He's not into action or comedy and has never met Julia Roberts or Ben Affleck.

You could say Smyth specializes in reality TV. But unlike Survivor or The Bachelorette, Smyth's productions deal with serious issues, including malaria, leprosy and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).



**Gary Smyth works on a film about SARS during a trip to Beijing in 2003. His work has taken him to medical facilities around the world to gather information on often highly contagious diseases, and protective gear is required. (Photo Courtesy of Gary Smyth)**

Smyth's interest in filmmaking began while he was a student at Memorial University in St. John's. In addition to studying German, Smyth — who had spent many summers in Europe — volunteered at MUN's educational television centre, where he later landed a job.

Then, after dabbling in filmmaking, and working for a while for Avalon Cablevision, Smyth moved to Germany so he could put his degree to use. Once there, he began making films for local television stations.

"I did a lot of travel films for the stations," Smyth said. "For instance, I did six films on Canada, and one on Newfoundland. It was very nice."

Smyth also began doing freelance work for the Geneva, Switzerland-based World Health Organization (WHO).

Since he moved back to Newfoundland three years ago, he has continued his work, which has turned into pretty much a full-time job.

The WHO has sent Smyth all over the world, where he has filmed a number of videos on various diseases, mostly those of a tropical nature, alongside doctors and other world-renowned medical professionals.

Typically, Smyth and his team investigate a particular outbreak of a disease and the treatments used to cure it. He then takes the tape back to WHO headquarters, where he is responsible for developing a concept for the film before putting it together.

Smyth's films are distributed to doctors and medical centres worldwide in order to provide training and insight into world-changing illnesses.

The WHO and its teams — including the Global Outbreak Emergency Response Network, for which Smyth works — gather information from a number of sources, including the Internet.

“They have a special website that scans the Internet constantly and it has certain buzz words in there that it picks up — like ‘medical’ or ‘sickness,’ etc.,” Smyth said.

“I came to work sometime in the fall, and one of the ladies who runs the daily meetings said to me, ‘What’s been going on in your neck of the woods?’

“I said, ‘I don’t know,’ and she said, ‘Did you ever hear of a place called Arnold’s Cove?’ I said yes, and she said there were hundreds of people who got sick there after (eating) turkey teas. That came up on their network — that tells you how detailed it is.

“Then she asked me what a turkey tea was.”

Smyth said he’s been on many exciting missions, most recently a six-month tour that took him to Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila and Beijing, following the course of the SARS virus. Although he admits investigations into infectious diseases are dangerous, he says he’s never nervous, since he has been properly trained in how to protect himself.

“I was taught how to dress up properly and how to take (the protective gear) off properly and, if you follow really simple rules, it’s easy,” he said, describing the full-length gown, helmet, and gloves he wears.

“Even the camera has a casing around it. I had all these gowns with me, and what I did was cut the sleeve off and put the camera into it, then taped it up in front right on the lens and on the viewfinder in the back. That meant that when I was finished, all I had to do was take the sleeve off and disinfect the lens and the viewfinder.

“That’s how a lot of health-care workers were getting infected — they were taking care of people then taking off their gear, and some got infected that way.”

Smyth says he loves his job, but it wouldn’t be suitable for those with weak hearts or stomachs, since he is often thrust in the middle of hospital wards where patients are suffering with serious illnesses.

One of his most memorable trips was to Uganda in 2000, where he covered the outbreak of Ebola — a hemorrhagic illness characterized by severe fever, weakness, stomach pain and internal and external bleeding.

“When we landed there, it was known that there was Ebola, but it was very rough,” Smyth said.

“There were a lot of people dying, and to see the organization that went up there in a couple of days — people stopped dying, the situation stabilized — seeing maybe 50 different international organizations working with each other to stop this thing dead in its tracks was absolutely amazing.”

Meanwhile, Smyth is returning to Geneva tonight and will leave for Africa later this month to complete a film on a new lumbar puncture (spinal-tap) kit that is being used to test for meningitis.

Later on, he will be going back in China and possibly to Toronto for a second film on SARS, where he plans to interview survivors of the virus in a focus on early diagnosis.

He continues to freelance for German television stations, and does work for Memorial University when the opportunity arises.

He says that as long as he is able, he will continue making films for the WHO, no matter where his work might take him.

“Some of the things you see are not very nice, but you know what you have to think of when you’re filming stuff like this?” he said.

“The stuff that you’re shooting, someone’s going to learn from that and it will be a program that will help people. If you don’t go in with that attitude, you’re not going to have a good experience.”

Garry Smyth can be reached by e-mail at [smythvideo@thezone.net](mailto:smythvideo@thezone.net).

[tbb@thetelegram.com](mailto:tbb@thetelegram.com)

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