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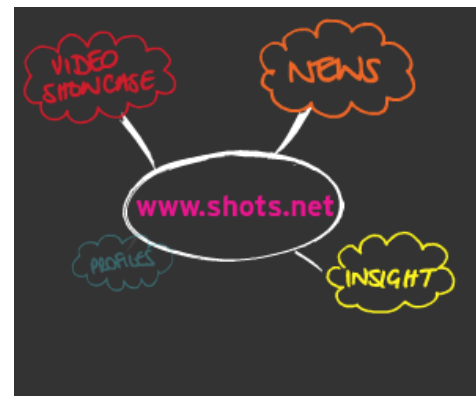
Face to Face with... Steve Hoover

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Creative Connections

DIRECTOR
Steve Hoover

PRODUCER
Danny Yourd



Four years ago American youngster Rocky Braat found himself in Chennai, India, while travelling around the country. Having visited a hostel that cares for orphans suffering from HIV he was unable to leave, compelled to stay there to try to help them.

In 2011 commercials director Steve Hoover and his producer, Danny Yourd, at production company Animal, took a few months to visit their friend and make a documentary about his work. The result, Blood Brother, which was funded entirely by donations, is soon to be released. We caught up with Hoover to find out about the story behind the film.

What's Rocky's story? How did he end up in India, working with these kids?

Rocky and another guy, Jay, went to India with a one-way ticket. He wanted to check out the country and had plans to travel around. He flew into Chennai and a friend he had met through a church there encouraged him to visit a hostel that houses HIV positive orphans. More than anything, I think he was just humouring the suggestion and didn't really have a set agenda, so he went.

Initially he didn't really like it so he planned to leave. After a month or so at the hostel they decided to take a trip to Rajasthan. He said on the train he couldn't stop thinking about the kids and their situation. Long story short, he and his friend parted ways and Rocky returned to Chennai after only a week or so in Rajasthan. He was moved by the kids. He ended up staying for three months in total – a summer trip. He returned to the US after pledging to the kids that he would be back in one year. He held his promise and has been there ever since.

What made you decide to make the film?

When I began studying film/video production I always wanted to make some sort of documentary, preferably in a third world or a developing third world setting. I never pursued that dream because of my career [taking off] and a lack of direction. Seven or eight years later, the planets aligned and I found myself deeply inspired by my best friend who happened to be living an incredible story in a developing third world setting. Rocky had been inviting me to visit him at the orphanage/hostel for a couple years. I was inspired by his blog entries, hearing about the challenges he encountered while trying to serve the kids. It was time for me to follow through.

How long did the whole process take and what was involved in terms of raising budget and travelling to India etc.?

Everything started in about 2009 and I began tossing the idea to Rocky which he encouraged. I'm slow to make things happen so I more or less talked about it for a few months. My wife and I were going to go alone, but then I met Phinehas Hodges, who was interested in helping to develop the story. Then Danny Yourd offered to help produce. When he came on board we began raising funds to make the trip happen. John Pope offered to come and do a week of heavy shooting. Tyson Van Skiver offered to come to assist with shooting and manage massive amounts of data. The first trip finally happened in January of 2011. The funds were all raised through [funding platform] Kickstarter.

We had to work out all of our visas etc. Rocky housed us all, with the exception of my wife, who stayed at the hostel and a single mother's house. Travelling with all the gear was not fun.

What was living and working there like? What kind of challenges did you face?

Living and working in the village was a great experience. It was amazing to be invited into peoples' homes in the village and have dinner with them. Every day was new and exciting. The kids were a true joy. Overall, it was raw and we were dirty. Thankfully we had electricity, but it was somewhat sparse. The government shuts the power off at certain times during the day and night so we had to plan data management around that. We prepared ourselves pretty well for our filming needs so the challenges we faced were few.

The worst part was hauling huge backpacks around in the heat. The kids absolutely loved our cameras; we made the mistake on the first day of letting them use them. It was common to look down and have a kid hanging from your waist asking to use the camera. That made it hard to get shots at times.

I didn't enjoy waking up to rats though. One night I woke up to a particularly large rat scratching my head. I swung and hit it open-handed and will always remember it feeling like the size of a cat. I had nightmares about it afterwards. On my flight home I woke up suddenly and punched the window because I had a nightmare about the rats.

How did you deal with the emotional battering?

The kids are giving. They don't try to make you feel bad for them. They were very fun and uplifting. They would jump at the opportunity to serve you, get you food or tea. If you came across as sad they would be greatly concerned and try to cheer you up. I was very emotional on my last night in India and the kids swarmed around me. Every one of them asking, "what's wrong Steven Anna?", "you crying aaa?", "sad aaa?", "why you feeling?". When you get close to them, they begin to trust you with their pain. They're overjoyed to have you, but deep down, there is the tragic pain of having lost parents and or being abandoned.

The situations were relentless. On both trips I saw things that I never have before and experienced extreme highs and lows. I'm not really sure how I personally dealt with it. I cried. I think a lot of it hit me when I got home and I realised what I had just gone through.

Did your presence lift Rocky's spirits? There's a sense that despite his good work, there is still infinite work to be done. How does he deal with the reality that the problem is never ending?

I believe so, Rocky really loves having guests. He was very hospitable to us all. Anytime he and I are together we try to build each other up. He is much better at it, I believe. He had been asking me to come since his first trip. I know he had a lot of plans for things to show us all. I think sometimes he can feel very alone and misunderstood, especially being a minority. We had a lot of fun. The idea of the work never-ending will be discussed in the film. That was a major factor in his equation.

The project must have put things into perspective. Was it hard to come home and adjust back to 'normal' life? Did it make you feel like people shouldn't take the ad industry so seriously?

Ha ha, no. We should always take the ad industry seriously. It definitely put things into perspective. I think about it daily. Sometimes I daydream about being there. I miss Rocky and I miss the kids. I miss going to the stand and buying a Coke bottle for 15 rupees. I miss the challenge of not being able to effectively use words and so communicating love through smiles and simple affections. Thankfully I have a nice home and life to come back to. India was hard. The experience was equally amazing and difficult, but I would return in a heartbeat. Sometimes when I'm working though, I do question the relevance of what I'm 'selling' in

relation to what is out there. Typically in the ad world, we're paid to make things look cool, or good. There really is no substance to that.

What are your plans for releasing the film and raising cash for the relevant charities?

The film release doesn't have solid plans yet; we need to work out distribution. My ultimate goal is to raise money for dreams that Rocky has to build halfway houses to transition the kids into society once they reach the age limit of the hostel. There are many details on that, but the goal is to generate and use profit from Blood Brother to fund that project, then document it and show the viewers of Blood Brother that they were able to make a difference simply by watching a film. Ideally watching the film will be done through donation. I don't want to force anyone to give. If someone wants to watch and donate that is on them, if not, that is also fine. Currently the film was entirely funded through Kickstarter donations. So potentially, all profit would be given away. But we have to figure this all out.

Is Rocky still there?

Rocky is still there.

How can people donate or get involved in the project if they want to help?

There are two ways to give. Either directly to Rocky through his personal [website](#), or directly to the hostel, [The Arias Home of Hope](#). This is a non-profit organisation.

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