

Dear Francis

Thank you for coming to our country but I have a problem my father forces me to have sex with him what must I do.

Actual letter written by a Swazi teenager.



Dear Francis,

A feature documentary

Directed by Brent Gudgel & Jason Djang | Produced by David Mahanes

Dear Francis brings the African AIDS pandemic to new life as it seeks to answer two pressing questions: Why is the disease so bad and Is there any hope? The film was shot on location in Swaziland just a few months after the United Nations declared this small kingdom to be the world's most HIV-infected nation with a 38.6 percent prevalence rate. In the last several years, the disease has ravaged the Swazi society, leaving severe poverty and despair in its wake. At the time of production, there were some 67,000 orphans among the 1 million total Swazi population, a number projected to rise to 120,000 by 2010. Standard education strategies and condom distribution programs have proven insufficient combatants in stemming the relentless spread of HIV. Experts say that within 50 years, the Swazi people may become extinct unless profound change is realized.



At the time of the UN's declaration, filmmakers Brent Gudgel and Jason Djang began following the story of Lance and Kelly, two Texas college students who volunteer for an unconventional HIV prevention campaign to Swaziland high schools. Taking its cue from the only African country to see a statistical turn-around in infection rate, Uganda, this campaign will similarly center around the controversial message of sexual abstinence.



The two collegians leave for Africa with high hopes and innocent naivete. As they begin to interact with the Swazi teenagers, they quickly discover that the problems surrounding the pandemic are much more complex than they had ever expected. One exercise of the curriculum, anonymous letter-writing to a fictional "Francis," proves to be a most disturbing window into a darker, more complex undercurrent of the AIDS pandemic. Distressing stories of sexual abuse, rape, and incest flood Lance and Kelly's sensibilities. Anger and frustration well up as they pour over tales of students exchanging sex for food with exploitative neighbors or even their own teachers. The devastation is further amplified as we hear the horrific stories of a group of orphans rescued by a

local foster home. The contrast of life experiences between the Americans and their Swazi counterparts could not be more different, leaving Lance and Kelly at a loss for how to respond to such troubling realities.

But just as their hopes begin unraveling, they witness a remarkable breakthrough as Senzo, a soft-spoken Swazi student, eventually realizes that he faces a life-or-death choice and agrees to commit himself to abstinence. However, optimism is quickly tempered as Senzo's sexual history raises questions about his own HIV status. In a courageous step of determination, Senzo decides to get his own blood tested for HIV, despite the potential for social abandonment in a society that ostracizes its sick. *Dear Francis* concludes by taking us behind the scenes of Senzo's bold test, his entire future in the balance.



As Gudgel and Djang track these personal journeys, they intersperse the story with interviews of local and international officials working the frontlines of the pandemic [see inside]. Their insights and commentaries are some of the most enlightening and heart-wrenching interviews on the AIDS crisis to ever reach the screen.

Filled with touching personal encounters and unsettling glimpses into contemporary African life, *Dear Francis* confronts audiences with the stark reality of the AIDS pandemic. Through this unique story, the film highlights the hope of nation's future against seemingly insurmountable odds...one life at a time.

THE FILMMAKERS

Dave Mahanes, Producer

David has overseen the production of commercials, documentaries and short films for the last three years. While working for I-40 Films, a film/video production company, he produced several award winning commercials for Ford and the Carolina Hurricanes. For three years, David provided leadership to a community outreach program for at-risk high school students in Northwest Pasadena. Prior to moving to California, he spent four years as the personal assistant to Governor George Voinovich of Ohio.

Brent Gudgel, Co-Director

Brent is a traveler, filmmaker, and photographer who has worked on productions in over 20 countries through often unexpected circumstances - from getting held by the Vietnamese military to hanging out with monks in Tibet. In fiction filmmaking he won awards for his short film, "Athena's Drive-Through Counseling Center." He also directed the documentary *Hood Ranch* about a group of at-risk high school students on their first trip ever out of Los Angeles.



Jason Djang, Co-Director



Jason began working in editing and post production ten years ago. He has experience in a wide breadth of formats ranging from short films to big budget commercials for the likes of Nike, Pepsi, and Budweiser. He has worked in both Los Angeles and London and edited the documentary *The Big Spin* that chronicled the final years of a friend and cancer victim. *Dear Francis* is his directorial debut.

Chronicle Project

A documentary production company in Pasadena, California, Chronicle Project focuses on telling the compelling stories of life through visual media that move people to offer compassion and hope. Chronicle Project was founded in 2004 by a group of filmmakers and travelers with production experience in over 25 countries for a variety of causes and clients. *Dear Francis* is its first feature length documentary.



INTERVIEW SUBJECTS



ALAN BRODY
UNICEF Representative to Swaziland



LOMCEBO DLAMINI
Program Officer, Women & Law in Southern Africa



SAMUEL HYND, M.D.
Medical Director, Manzini Medical Center



QUEEN INKHOSIKATI LANGANGAZA
Fourth Wife to the King of Swaziland

INTERVIEW SUBJECTS (CONT.)



JAMES MCGEE
U.S. Ambassador to Swaziland



DERRICK VON WISSELL
Director, National Emergency Response Council on
HIV/AIDS (NERCHA)



KEVIN WARD
Director, Lighthouse Foster Care Homes



BRUCE WILKINSON
Founder, Dream for Africa

PRINCIPLE CREDITS

Directed and Photographed by
BRENT GUDGEL
JASON DJANG

Produced by
DAVE MAHANES

Original Music by
NOLAN AND JASON LIVESAY

Additional Music by
RICHARD KENTOPP

Edited by
JASON DJANG

CHRONICLE PROJECT
306 North Sierra Bonita Avenue
Pasadena, California 91106
www.chronicleproject.org
Contact : Dave Mahanes - 818.693.2733

A note about Dream for Africa and Bruce Wilkinson:

We have been asked on several occasions what our relationship is or was with DFA and Dr. Wilkinson. Chronicle Project has at no point received any funding from DFA and DFA has had no creative input or control of this film. DFA generously hosted us in Swaziland, allowed us access to its participants, and introduced us to many of our interviewees. We are most appreciative of their gracious cooperation in making this film possible, but *Dear Francis* is not intended to be a promotional piece for DFA and Chronicle Project does not make any official endorsements of DFA's programs or its methodology.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTORS

What was the motivation for producing this documentary?

[Brent] We found out about the Swaziland statistics through a friend and were really disturbed by them. It did not make sense that there could be a country with 38.6 percent of the adult population infected with HIV/AIDS. If this was true, shouldn't we have heard about it? But we checked around and could only find one American newspaper article that covered the UN's declaration of Swaziland as the worst in the world - and the article was tucked away in the middle of the paper. At this time we did not know much on a personal level about AIDS, but there was something about the country of Swaziland and its crisis that pulled us into this story. I wanted to know why it could get so bad there, why I hadn't heard it was so bad, and what, if anything, could be done to help. And we found it compelling that there was a group of American college students who were going to actively try to combat this spread of the disease. It was a story I felt needed to be documented.

[Jason] I think the American public is pretty well informed that the AIDS crisis is pretty dire in Africa. Most people have heard various statistics but stats can be a bit numbing. They're just numbers and numbers don't really draw out a whole lot of emotion. To truly care about something, you have to be caught up in its story. So we were drawn to the idea of telling personal stories from the midst of the pandemic that bring the problem to life. If we could tell a story that really grabs audiences, we believed we could make a significant contribution to the whole awareness campaign.

How is this film different from other AIDS documentaries?

[Brent] Well first of all it's a narrative. There is a story throughout which I think is often rare in this type of documentary. The story is mostly told through the eyes of some Americans, which hopefully allows an American audience to relate on a much more personal level to the reality of this crisis.

[Jason] And it focuses on just one community, which just happens to be the worst in the world. Other documentaries on HIV/AIDS have tried to cover the issue across the globe. We covered one community in depth which we think could be seen as a microcosm of the greater issue in Sub-Saharan Africa.

What was the hardest part about telling this story?

[Jason] While hearing these tragic stories, you can't help but throw your hands up in the air and say it's hopeless. I mean, how do you tell a kid to be abstinent when there's a darn good chance of them getting raped? How do you hope for moral change when kids are literally starving to death and the only currency they have is their body? It's been so hard to communicate hope in such dire realities. We also realize that it's hard to try to convince an audience that abstinence could be a viable approach to this problem since abstinence isn't exactly a priority in our own culture.

[Brent] The hardest thing for me was finding out about all the horrible circumstances that have contributed to the spread of the disease in Swaziland. Hearing things I never expected to hear. Seeing people at their worst because of the disease.



Is teaching abstinence to the Swazi people an example of forcing morality on them? Why do they say that condoms are not effective?

[Brent] One of the first things that shocked me when I got into Swaziland was the widespread availability of free condoms and the amount of advertisements around for condoms. They were everywhere. The Swazis knew about condoms and how to get them and why to use them. But the infection rate is still rising. At first I wished we could have gotten into the condom issue more, but we didn't have time and in the end it wasn't what the film was about. While I was there I didn't hear any teachers say condoms were bad. But they did say it's not foolproof. Condoms have not exclusively worked in decreasing the infection rate. Look at the research Harvard's Edward Green did for USAID. He used to be a leading proponent for condoms, but after the research he now supports abstinence.

And no I don't think any morals were forced on them. It was a choice that was presented. But you know what, in a sense they were teaching what the Swazi's traditionally believed but have largely fallen away from - faithfulness. Being faithful to a spouse is a pretty ancient idea.

Is abstinence realistic?

[Brent] I'm going to ask myself a question instead of answering that. Is stopping the spread of AIDS realistic? I think so. I think the past success in Uganda shows that abstinence is realistic [as the first step in their ABC approach]. But there is more to it than just abstinence.

[Jason] An abstinence message in any culture certainly isn't popular. But that doesn't need to mean it's unrealistic. If Uganda has successfully curbed their prevalence rates though the ABC approach, there must be something to it. I can't imagine only the B [Be faithful] and C [Condoms] being the only relevant factors. And as Alan Brody from UNICEF told us, if the statistical age at which kids start having sex can be pushed back a couple years, then that will have a significant impact on a population's infection rate.



[Brent] The thing is, it comes down to the choice of the person. The fact is that those who get HIV/AIDS through sex made a decision that led to their contraction of the disease. Unfortunately sometimes this decision is made out of ignorance, denial, or even apathy. If you follow the ABC's then your chances of contraction go down drastically if not completely. And yes there are people out there who abstain from sex until they are married, and then they choose to remain faithful, so yes abstinence is realistic. And it's guaranteed. So it's all up to the person.

What do you think the average American can learn from the movie?

[Brent] I would like to think the movie would allow them to experience on a more personal level what's going on in Africa. Before doing the film it was all just statistics and words that I had a hard time comprehending. Now it's real. I would hope that after seeing the film the viewer knows how real the situation is.

[Jason] ...and feels compelled to do something about it, whatever that might be. Whether it's finding a way to give financially to the AIDS crisis or encouraging their political representatives to get our governments to help more.