

Giving Them A Shot

Spy Hop helps misfit teens find their voice through film

by Daniel Pimentel

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hen I first walked through the doors of Spy Hop I was a scrawny sixteen-year-old with hair down to my shoulders. I didn't know anything about filmmaking, and I barely understood how to operate a camera. But I had stories to tell; I had things I was burning to say, piling up inside my head, filling up space, and I was itching to get them out. For whatever reasons, making movies seemed like the most exciting way to do that.

I had heard from a high school teacher of mine about Spy Hop, a non-profit organization in downtown Salt Lake City that mentors youth in the digital media arts; mainly filmmaking, music production, and radio broadcasting. Well I was a youth, and I wanted to make movies; surely Spy Hop was the place to be. They could work on their name, though. Spy Hop sounded like an indie rock band from Portland, or maybe a hamstring exercise. But the brochure for their Reel Stories documentary film class claimed to be partnered with the Sundance Film Festival, so I figured this Spy Hop had to be the real deal.

After an interview and screening process, I enrolled in the Reel Stories class in summer of 2008. Reel Stories is a month-long intensive program that helps high



Photos by Daniel Pimentel

school students create their own short documentary film projects and tell a story close to their heart. After bouncing ideas off of my instructor and the other students in the class, I decided to make a film about my mother, who escaped from an abusive polygamist marriage when she was twenty-eight years old in order to find a new life for her children. I called it "*From the Ash Heap*" after a psalm she used to quote. I wrote, directed, shot, and cut it together myself. I even recorded an original piece of music for it. All of this with the resources that Spy Hop had immediately available to their students. Later my film premiered, along with the other students', at the Tower Theater on 9th & 9th in Salt Lake City. There was a Q&A. I wore a tie. The experience was surreal.

This past October, Spy Hop was one of twelve organizations to accept the National Arts & Humanities Youth Program Award presented by the White House. Spy Hop's executive director, Kasandra VerBruggen, traveled to Washington DC, along with an audio engineering student, to personally accept the award from First Lady Michelle Obama. According to VerBruggen, this is the nation's most prestigious award for after-school arts programming. It certainly is a recognition well-deserved. What an impact Spy Hop has had and what a long way it has come in such a short time when you consider its humble beginnings.

The inception of Spy Hop can be traced back to 1999 when Nick Wray and Eric Dodd came together to create an after-school film project wrestling with the implications of the impending turn-of-the-century. It was made up of about twelve students. After a year, the project's success would prompt them to pursue legitimate non-profit status and create Spy Hop Productions. Eventually, Spy Hop would expand to include projects in the wider range of digital arts such as audio engineering and graphic design as they moved to their current location in the heart of downtown Salt Lake City. Today the number of students being served by Spy Hop's core community programs has reached the thousands.

Before graduating from high school I would enroll myself



in two more film classes at Spy Hop, and during my time there it really became a home-away-from-home. I looked forward to heading over after school and spending countless hours on Final Cut Pro cutting my projects together, or talking to my instructor about Quentin Tarantino, or taking a break and jamming with some fellow students in the recording studio. As somebody who wasn't exactly built to thrive in the current public school system, Spy Hop was a critical learning environment for me. I needed the hands-on experience, I needed the relaxed, creative workflow. I needed to be a part of a team of people who were genuinely excited about a common goal. I built lasting friendships with the other students and formed meaningful relationships with the staff as well, many of which still exist five years later. And I never had any doubt that every one of them wanted to see me succeed in everything I did.

In the summer of 2009 I was given an opportunity to enroll in Spy Hop's king of all film classes: Pitch-Nic. Again with the weird names, I know. That's part of their thing, I guess. That and apparently an ocean of quality resources available to budding high school filmmakers that you would be hard-pressed to find anywhere else in the country. The Pitch-Nic class is

Photo Courtesy of the United States White House



Spy Hop was one of twelve of the country's best youth development programs recognized for programs that engage students in arts and humanities. In picture above: First Lady Michelle Obama, Kitzia Rodriguez, an Audio Apprenticeship student, and Kasandra VerBruggen, Spy Hop Executive Director. They were presented the award on November 17th by First Lady Michelle Obama in Washington D.C. in the East Room of the White House. Learn more at spyhop.org/nahyp-award

split into two sections: documentary and fiction. I was given the choice to take either, but I decided on fiction. Documentaries are great, sure, but I really wanted to tell my own stories; the ones that were constantly cranking out of the factory in my head. Those are the stories that needed to get out; the ones I knew would never leave me until I brought them to life. So over the course of an entire year I would band together with five other students to make a short film from beginning to end. And this time, we would have a budget. But of course, we needed a story first; and I was determined that it would be mine.

We met every Wednesday at four o' clock. We learned about the three-act structure, character arcs, and the Hollywood script format. Each of us were to write a script, fully aware that only two of them would be made into films. The race was on. I formulated my plot. I wrote countless drafts of the same

screenplay. It was read aloud in class. It was torn to pieces several times, both literally and figuratively. Then the deadline came. I pitched my story to scary adults who asked me even scarier questions. I froze up and gave bad answers. The six of us cast our vote and my screenplay was one of two chosen. Together with this small handful of students, I would toil for months to bring it to life. It was a dark comedy about a man in a top hat who rode around on a tricycle and killed people with a two-by-four, but underneath it all, he had a heart of gold. I called it "*The Antagonist*." We gathered a crew, we held auditions, we hired actors, we bought costumes, we rented lights and a fancy camera with a dolly track, we spent ten days on set. Afterwards, we gave it the professional post-production treatment: a picture-locked

edit, color-correction, a sound mix, and a score. The film went on to be an official selection at several festivals around

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the country including the Los Angeles Film Festival in 2010. That same year it won the 'best of' award at two different youth festivals. Here I was, hardly a senior in high school, and I was already a filmmaker—a real filmmaker.

I paid a visit to Spy Hop recently, nearly eight years after I first walked in the door, to say hello to some old friends and to gather resources regarding this article. The framed poster for my Pitch-Nic film is still one of the first things I see when I step inside. And now, a year removed from finishing film school, I have worked on several projects since I took my last film class at Spy Hop. But I will forever look upon those days as fondly as any movie-making experience I've ever had. All of my fundamentals, all of my trial and error, it all started there. Honestly, if it didn't start there, it might never have started. Certainly not the way it did. I still feel like a kid when I see my name on that poster. I still feel the excitement. Somehow, a drawing that I scribbled on the back of a homework assignment in English class had turned into a movie in a matter of a year. Kids are doodling on their homework all across the world right now. How many of them will get to see their drawings come to life in a movie theater before finals week? This is the magic of Spy Hop.

As it turns out, there is actual meaning behind Spy Hop's name. Their own website defines 'spy hop' as a verb: "the act in which a dolphin rises above the water in order to navigate and determine its position in relation to other members of the pod". Secondary definitions include "to look ahead" or "to tune in". Ultimately it's teenagers who will be inheriting the world in the years to come. They will be the driving force of change and they have the capacity for it even now. They simply need the wisdom and the resources to make it happen. This is the whole idea behind Spy Hop's mentor-based model. "We've always said we're not about making media-makers," VerBruggen insists. "We're about creating engaged, 21st century citizens that are ready to succeed." Whether or not that success is found in the world of digital arts, she says, is secondary. 🍷



Daniel Pimentel is a lifelong musician, writer and, now, producer. He has a BFA in Cinema & Media Arts. He began writing early, completing his first screenplay in the fourth grade and developed a talent for song writing, starting in eighth grade. He has self-released three records, produced several of his own music videos and has also written and directed award-winning student films.

Learn more at danielpimentel.bandcamp.com.



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