

One on One with the Oscar Winner filmmaker Davis Guggenheim

Written by Kam Williams

Saturday, 10 October 2015 18:06



Philip Davis Guggenheim is an Academy Award-winning director and producer whose work includes *Waiting for Superman*, *It Might Get Loud*, and *An Inconvenient Truth*, which won the Oscar for Best Documentary in 2007. The following year, Davis Guggenheim produced and directed *President Barack Obama's biographical film*

A Mother's Promise

, and he also made

The Road We've Traveled

for the Obama 2012 presidential campaign.

In 2013, he directed *Teach*, a two-hour television special about what's working in America's public schools, namely, that at the heart of every great education is great teaching. Besides documentaries, Davis Guggenheim has directed episodes of many television series including *Deadwood*

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He is married to actress Elisabeth Shue who landed an Oscar-nomination for her stellar performance in *Leaving Las Vegas*. Nevertheless, she might still be best known for her breakout role as Ali in *The Karate Kid*. The couple have three children: Miles William, 17, Stella Street, 14, and Agnes Charles, 9.

Here, Davis Guggenheim talks about his latest opus, a feature-length documentary about Malala Yousafzai and her father Ziauddin Yousafzai. He worked closely with Malala and her family, filming their life in Birmingham, England, as well as their travels to numerous countries around the world as they talked about the power of education and its ability to transform a young person's life.

Kam Williams: Hi Davis [Guggenheim], thanks for the interview.

Davis Guggenheim: Thank you, Kam [Williams]. Where are you located?

KW: In Princeton, New Jersey.

DG: My brother-in-law, Andrew Shue, used to live there. Did you ever run into him?

KW: Yes. It's a funny story how we met. He was jogging past me one day as I was putting out the garbage. He stopped to ask if I knew anything about the house next-door which had a "For Sale" sign on the lawn. He looked so familiar that I asked him if we'd met before. He said "No," and that he was new to town. But when I kept insisting that I knew him from somewhere he introduced himself and said he was an actor on *Melrose Place*.

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DG: [Laughs] That's funny.

KW: Are you related to Eileen Guggenheim-Wilkinson of Princeton who is on the University's Board of Trustees?

DG: No relation. I'm not related to the rich ones. I'm related to the sock and shoe peddlers.

KW: I noticed that you and I have Brown University in common.

DG: That's cool. did you like it?

KW: Yes, I was there in '75, the year of the Black student takeover.

DG: I just went back and didn't recognize it. Providence was a darker, more gnarly city when I was there in the Eighties.

KW: Well, I was very moved by *He Named Me Malala*. The movie made me cry as much as *I Am Sam* and *Life Is Beautiful* did. and in my review, I called it the best movie of the year so far.

DG: That means a lot to me, Kam [Williams]. Thank you very much.

KW: I told my readers I'd be interviewing you, so I'll be mixing their questions in with mine. Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier [of www.megadiversities.com] says: I am Canadian and I have to tell you that I loved *Party of Five*, especially [Neve Campbell](#)

. How long did it take to finance, shoot and complete production on *He Named Me Malala* ?

DG: From the first day, until now, it's been a little more than 2 years. I was shooting and editing for 18 months, which is a really long time for a documentary. This one was the most difficult movie I ever made.

KW: I can understand how, since it involved so much travel. Plus, you worked hard to interweave those animation sequences so seamlessly. But I hope you consider it well worth the effort. I expect the film to get nominated for an Oscar. Patricia [Turnier] also asks: What was the most rewarding aspect of making this film about Malala [Yousafzai] ?

DG: Actually, one of the most rewarding moments came recently when we screened the movie for 6,000 public school girls from a variety of backgrounds and some of the tougher neighborhoods in L.A. I didn't know whether Latino and African-American girls would respond to a film about a Pakistani girl. It turned out to be very emotional for them. The atmosphere was very charged. And it was a beautiful and gratifying moment for me to see how universal the story is, and how girls feel like this movie was theirs.

KW: I felt like it was mine, too. What would you say is the most surprising thing people will learn about Malala [Yousafzai] from the movie?

DG: They may have heard that she was shot on a school bus or that she won the Nobel Peace Prize. But those things aren't what make her extraordinary. What is so moving to me is that she made a choice to speak out and risk her life for something that was so precious to her, her school. She made that courageous choice, and that's what makes her extraordinary. And her father made a choice to not stop her, and that speaks to me and makes we wonder whether I'd have the courage to do that.

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