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Asian-American director honored at film festival

by Emily Wilson *Sat Mar 24, 2:40 PM ET*

Armed with a camera and a desire to educate, Emmy award-winning documentary film-maker Spencer Nakasako has made chronicling Asian-Americans his life's work.

For the past two decades, Nakasako has spotlighted Asian communities in the United States in a series of acclaimed documentaries, most notably with his 1995 film "A.K.A Don Bonus."

Nakasako is currently being honored at the 25th International Asian American Film Festival in San Francisco, where for the past 15 years he has taught video to Southeast Asian youths in the rundown Tenderloin neighborhood.

"He's freewheeling, he's raw and he tells it like it is," said festival director Yang Chi-hui of Nakasako. "He brings us stories of people we would otherwise have no way of hearing about."

Nakasako, whose parents are second-generation Japanese, was one of the pioneers of do-it-yourself documentary film-making, giving a camera to a Cambodian refugee living in the projects and then editing the resulting 60 hours of footage into the acclaimed "A.K.A. Don Bonus."

The film has been adopted as a source material for US colleges offering courses in documentary film-making or ethnic studies.

Nakasako followed that with "Kelly Loves Tony," about a teenaged Laotian couple in Oakland, California, and then "Refugee," about three young Cambodian men who go back to their homeland.

Together the film trilogy offers a startling account of the impact and the consequences of the Vietnam War upon successive generations of refugees.

Nakasako says he looks for something that he can't get out of his mind when working on his films.

"I like to try and understand what makes them tick and why," he said. "Human beings are just incredibly layered. Those layers are interesting."

Nakasako thinks more film-makers need to be more willing to fail and to try new things. He says it was the opportunity to fail and start again that drew him to making movies.

"I wasn't really good at anything," he said. "Then I saw a shoot and they were going 'Nah, that's no good -- take two.' 'Nah, try it again -- take 12.' And I thought, 'Wow, this is cool -- if you mess up, you get to do it again.'"

Nakasako, who graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1980s, said his inspiration comes from working with young people.

"One thing about me is I know my limitations," he said. "I know I'm not Hitchcock and I know I like working with people -- why wouldn't I want to benefit from what they know?"

While Nakasako plans to continue teaching and taking residencies at universities, he is hoping to begin shooting feature films.

"I have all these stories hanging around for 25, 30 years," says Nakasako. "I love the stories as much as the movies. I could just sit and listen to people all day."

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