

**Reprinted from *IndieSlate Magazine*: April 01';**  
**Slated to be reprinted in *Tucson Lifestyles Magazine*:**  
**October 2001**

**Indie Cinema:**  
**Making Changes in the Barrios of South Tucson**

By Pablo Toledo

In many ways South Tucson, the city I grew up in, is a wonderful place. People walk to work. You can smell *pon de huevos* (a Mexican pasty) wafting over the neighborhood in the early mornings from the local bakery. Most everyone knows everyone else. It has all the elements that are right with our inner cities.

Yet as I grew older I could see a lot of its magic disappearing. Gangs and drugs began to sweep through the community I could feel a lot of hope being lost around the 'hood. The eyes of the youth seemed to be getting duller by the day, disillusioned with a life that was offering them less and less opportunities for enrichment, empowerment and education.

Still, despite the worsening conditions, I knew the community could prosper once again.

So, when I left Arizona to study film at USC I vowed to someday return to South Tucson, to these city streets that were becoming more frightening by the day, and try to return some of the hope that had been lost. I knew I would return to capture the magic I had once known in living there, and perhaps shed some light on the heartache that is tearing apart so many of our youth.

While at USC I began writing a script entitled *Runnin' At Midnite*. The story revolves around a group of kids struggling to escape the urban streets through participating in a midnight basketball league. It explores the relationship between the police and the neighborhood kids, both whom know and respect each other yet find themselves on opposite sides for much of the day.

Each sentence and scene was written as an independent movie, emphasizing character and story rather than effects and stars. It slowly became apparent that this film could only succeed by returning to the place that inspired it.

I finished the screenplay during my senior year at USC; a year that I became fascinated with the power the process of filmmaking had within it. The intensity and teamwork a production generates reminded me of basketball, a sport I played up until my sophomore year of college. I was quickly convinced that filmmaking, similar to sports, could capture the imagination of young people, particularly those who feel they don't have an outlet to express themselves. This became my own personal rallying cry for making *Runnin' At Midnite*. I decided to make the production of *Running at Midnite* into an 'experience' for the entire community to share in and to take pride.

Upon returning to Tucson I began assembling a production team. I didn't have to look too far. My father, a former athlete and educator, shared my passion for empowering youth and quickly became a driving force behind the movie. The third member of our production team, Ms. Jennifer Santiago, also believed in the inspirational and educational value of making *Runnin' At Midnite* in the barrios and joined the team.

When the decision to go forth with the production was made we gave ourselves 90 days to assemble all the parts for the film. At this point in the process we had no money, no crew, no actor and no locations. We did, however, have an unwavering belief that this would become more than a film, but a force for social and individual rebirth. We were counting on the power of cinema to transform lives on and off the screen. This is how we did it.

We choose a small preproduction time frame to capitalize on the energy we were confident would begin to sweeping through the neighborhoods once the word on the streets got out. It was a gamble that paid off. Within weeks people in the barrios had heard of "that basketball film" that was coming to their neighborhoods. They were still a bit unsure of the scope, but the word was out there!

I went on a speaking tour, for lack of a better phrase, to all the barrios in South Tucson speaking about the film and my plans to involve the community. From numerous Boys and Girls clubs to various at-risk programs to basketball gymnasiums and playgrounds, I visited them all. I visited with dozens of neighborhood kids, telling them about the film and inviting them all to our open call auditions.

Many people in the community and the industry said my "community plan" wouldn't work. One local agent even told me, with a straight face, that I couldn't pull this film off because "Latinos don't like to act." Well, we had over 300 kids show up the open call audition! It was at that point everyone in the production team knew we were onto something special.

One thing you must understand. These weren't actors showing up with resumes and headshots under their arm, although we did have a few of those. Most of these kids were traveling from the most impoverished neighborhoods in our community to audition for the film! Some were on parole or intensive probation. One young kid who auditioned for a speaking role could barely read yet he struggled through every line in hopes we would give him a shot. Why did these kids go through all of this?

I think they were excited about finally having their faces, voices and neighborhoods portrayed on screen. They all wanted to be part of something bigger and larger than their own poverty. And, most of all, they were hungry to learn about filmmaking; an activity that has traditionally been denied this segment of the population. It was like a traveling film school was coming to their neighborhoods and they all wanted to sign up.

. The energy was sweeping through the barrios of South Tucson and everyone could feel it.

From those auditions we cast our entire film, from principals to extras to some cast members. But the work had just begun. Now our attention turned to the task of fund raising. Our hard drives became littered with letters and appeals to the greater Tucson community for support. Similar to the auditions, a wave of excitement began to sweep through the business community as well. We managed to secure over 1400 meals from various restaurants, bakeries, roasters, and even a miniature golf complex! And when And1, a national athletic shoe company heard about the project and supplied the kids with shoes, well, we knew we were on our way.

The final piece of this puzzle was put in place when I brought to the team one of my former professors at USC, Mr. Robert Ballo, to DP the project. Robert and I had both been toying with various DV formats for years when we began discussing using HDTV as our acquisition format. It fit perfect. The hyper real colors of HD reminded me of some of the famous muralist to come out of Mexico. The script was similar to those murals, both being a tapestry of color, emotion and social change. Also, I wanted to not only expose these kids to filmmaking, I wanted them to be able to work with the best technology available.

We settled on using Sony's HDCAM 700A 1080i. Fortunately for us Robert had been working on HD for over a decade, dating back to HD's early development in Japan. His experience in feature film lighting and understanding HD's pros and cons was invaluable. *Runnin' At Midnite* is as aesthetically pleasing and interesting as the story, something we felt was vital to making this independent stand out from the crowd.

Our audio design was a trick to pull off. We split the digital audio coming to the camera and sent a signal to a time-coded DAT for backup. Our Mic package was pretty small, with only a few shotguns to work with. The great thing about digital, even HD, is when it comes to an indie environment and you have actors without a lot (or any) experience your shooting ratio is much greater than film. This will allow several takes and plenty of coverage. HD tape stock is still expensive, but nowhere near 35 MM. During *Runnin' at Midnite* we were able to get some tremendous performances out of our cast simply because they didn't feel the pressure of having expensive stock running through the film gate each second. It created a much looser and more creative on-set environment. Still, with only 16 days to shoot the film, we keep our shooting ratio between 5 and 10:1.

The actual filming of this movie became an amazing display of resilience, courage and improvisation. We had over 20 distinct locations, 4 main characters, 2 pit bulls and 20 degree weather to battle. All of this on a shoestring budget and a sixteen day shooting schedule.

But each day we would feed off the enthusiasm emanating from the community towards our production. When food would get low people from the neighborhoods would bring us tamales or carne asade or some warm cocoa for the crew. Gangs in the various projects we were shooting in would hang around the set all day, watching me direct and eagerly awaiting a chance to jump into a scene. Even probation officers would stop by the set looking for their kids and would leave amazed at how engrossed they were in the process.

Perhaps the most amazing thing to observe was the parents' support of their kids participating in the film. One family donated their RV to the production so the actors could keep warm, while another mother spent forty dollars on cab fare to travel across town to see her son, who had previously been running the streets, act in one of his bigger scenes. Kids who had never spent anytime with their families were now discussing their scenes and lines with their parents and hugging them after good takes. It was sight to behold.

But, as the production's end drew closer you could tell that the cast and crew were carrying heavy hearts alike. Never before had a positive force like *Runnin' At Midnite* swept through a community like this and many of them had nothing to look forward to once the cameras stopped rolling. We decided then and there to continue to include these kids in each subsequent phase of the film, from editing to marketing and soon, the premiere. Many of these kids have continued on the positive road that *Runnin' At Midnite* started them down. One kid, a high school drop out who

was running the streets when he auditioned for the film, is now close to getting his high school diploma and continuing on a newfound acting career.

Since *Runnin' At Midnite* the City of South Tucson has undergone a revitalization, so much so that it now has a Arts Council and is sponsoring a documentary on its history, using kids from the neighborhood to produce it. The headlines are slowly turning from murders and gangs to movies and murals. I think the film had a major role in that change. We showed the entire community that we could celebrate our culture, stories and lives through cinema, and in making cinema we can teach, educate and inspire our youth.

As the premiere draws close we are all excited to show America what wonderful stories are found buried in these neighborhoods, both on and off screen. In the movie we portray the human side of these kids and the complex and deeply disturbing situations they must cope with on a daily basis. Our hope is that we will usher in a newfound interest among our nations inner city youth in independent cinema. Perhaps, through *Runnin' At Midnite*, we will have created a new wave of filmmakers who emerge from our nations epicenters of poverty and social strife to bring us their powerful and often forgotten stories.

There is many success stories tied to this film. Too many, in fact, to recount in this article. Yet they all share one main theme: the inspirational and educational power of independent filmmaking can serve to change lives and, if done right, can even transform entire neighborhoods.

As my father put it, hope doesn't have to appear only on the screen.

Pablo Toledo is an independent filmmaker and graphic designer located in Tucson, Arizona. He also teaches film and video production at the University of Arizona and is the project co-ordinator for the Youth Opportunity New Media Program, which teaches at-risk youth film and video making. His first feature film, *Runnin' At Midnite*, is scheduled to premiere this spring. For more information, log onto [www.runninatmidnite.com](http://www.runninatmidnite.com) or email him at [diesel601@earthlink.net](mailto:diesel601@earthlink.net).