

from THE VISION MAKER
Fall and Winter, 2002/2003

VIDEO PRODUCER PROFILE: Darren Kipp



Sometimes in life, an individual just has to make a choice between two things that are very important to him or her. Blackfeet filmmaker Darren Kipp had to choose between fulfilling careers as a community developer and a full-time movie producer.

Both projects vied for his attention for several years, one project allowing him to write a story for his community and another allowing him to tell one.

Fire Warriors made the decision for him.

"This is a big step," Kipp says. "I never really decided to be a producer, but the first time I saw my name at the bottom of a [movie] contract, I began to realize more is at stake. I realized Fire Warriors would require my full attention." Kipp has always been handled issues with high stakes within his own community. As one of the developers for the non-profit arm of Blackfeet National Bank, Kipp helped to initiate a community endowment fund designed to enhance and develop community-based programs, including a minibank program for grade school children and a local recycling project. But filmmaking skill had always been in Kipp's repertoire, a technique Kipp honed working with Blackfeet filmmaker George Burdeau during a project called Backbone of the World.

Kipp had talked with his production company 360 Degree Films about doing a series of productions on the Blackfeet Tribe. Several years ago, Kipp was urged to film the Chief Mountain Hotshots, an elite firefighting crew from the Blackfeet Indian Nation. The two projects came together as Kipp lobbied to accompany the professional group for 21 days during the worst fire season in United States history. It was there that Fire Warriors became the first installment in the four-part Blackfeet saga.

Ultimately Kipp realized he didn't have to choose between his community development and his filmmaking career, but that he could merge the two in the way that best helped not only the people around him, but people in other communities as well.

"These stories needed to be heard," Kipp says. "Films like these allow me to meet people you see every day in the grocery and to share what they have to offer with communities everywhere."

Kipp realizes new challenges as a filmmaker representing his people. He now feels the need to strengthen the rest of the country's perception of the Blackfeet Nation by showing its identity.

"There is the whole issue of "Pan-Indianism"," Kipp says. "Funding agencies want us to tell every Indian's story. We want them to realize that we [Indians from around the country] are different people, we all have different viewpoints, languages and religious customs."

Kipp recently received a stipend from NAPT to attend a production workshop at this year's Sundance Film Festival. By talking with other Native producers in the industry, he realized what an opportunities he has created for himself by staying involved in his own unique community.

"There is not a lack of Indian filmmakers out there," Kipp says. "To produce films such as Fire Warriors has been a challenge and a joy. I've had doors opened for me, and I am now able to open doors for other people as well."