The Middleburg Page

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"Steal This Story, Please"

Journalist Amy Goodman: Independent journalism is vital

By Leland Schwartz
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Shortly after KPFT radio in Houston went on the air in 1970 as one of the first progressive Pacifica radio stations, the Ku Klux Klan strapped dynamite to the base of the transmitter and blew it up, journalist Amy Goodman – who built and runs the acclaimed Democracy Now! news broadcast – told a rapt Middleburg DocWeek audience.

The station repaired the structure and went back on the air in two weeks, Goodman said, "and then the Klan strapped 15 times the dynamite to the transmitter and blew it to smithereens, right in the middle of Arlo Guthrie singing Alice's Restaurant."

KPFT spent months rebuilding, and in January of 1971, Guthrie came back to Houston to finish his song live on the air, Goodman recalled.

"The head of the Klan said it was his proudest act, and I think that's because he understood how dangerous Pacifica is … dangerous independent media is … dangerous because it allows people to speak for themselves."

PHOTO: LELAND SCHWARTZ

That's why, Goodman told the packed Middleburg Community Center "the media can be the greatest force for peace on Earth. Instead, all too often, it is wielded as a weapon of war, and that's why we have to take the media back, and we all have to be a part of that."

Therein lies the central point of the film, "Steal This Story, Please!" which traces Goodman's 30-year career as an unstoppable investigative reporter for a nonprofit, not corporate, newsroom, breaking stories from hotspots all over the world by seeking out people where they live, despite threats by soldiers, governments and rioters.

"I think what we do at Democracy Now is not bring you the typical pundits who know so little about so much, explaining the world to us and getting it so wrong. I don't want to be one of those pundits," she told the audience. For instance, when the program covers the Iran war, "we try to bring you as many Iranian voices as we can. That's the kind of media I think we should be building."

DocWeek founder Tom Foster, who has built the series into a treasured piece of Middleburg's cultural landscape, said he choose the movie for the five-film series because "In the current political environment, free speech and independent journalism are under attack. They should be sacred to all of us. No one has carried that torch longer and more consistently than Amy Goodman."

Democracy Now! broadcasts an hour-long newscast on the Internet from its studio in New York City and is carried by more than 1,400 radio and television stations worldwide. Donations from listeners, viewers and nonprofit foundations, including the Ford Foundation, provide the news organization's roughly $10 million annual budget.

Produced by, among others, Jane Fonda, the film is not distributed by a large, corporate studio, but by the filmmakers themselves. Goodman said the film has been booked in over 150 theaters across the country. (Watch the trailer stealthisstory.org/#trailer.)

"Steal This Story, Please" follows Goodman as she and her team secretly travel to Nigeria's Delta to investigate pollution, as she chases then President George Bush to ask, "what do you say to people who think you're a war criminal?" and later insists that then President Bill Clinton answer voters critical of his policies in the Palestinian Territories. Over and over again she inserts herself between riot police and protesters and other news media. "We're journalists! Journalists!" she yells as if stuck in a time when it mattered in the mayhem or a war zone. Instead, she is repeatedly forced to the ground and handcuffed.

Co-Director Tia Lessin, an Oscar-nominated and Emmy-winning filmmaker, who was at the screening, said one of the largest threats to independent journalism are the corporate mergers that are going on, particularly the ones involving CNN's and CBS' parent companies, whose owners have indicated their desire to give their properties a new conservative bent.

"It's going to be dangerous and damaging for the practice of journalism," she said. "It's going to be damaging to audiences who are looking for varied content on their broadcast networks, on their film screens, and it's going to be damaging to the workforce, the creative community and the journalists who work for these entities because we know that after mergers there's always layoffs."

Lessin urged everyone to spread the word about the film. "Steal This Story, Please!," she said, adding "Well, it's right in the film's name, right?"