

Branching Out: Beyond the Family Tree feat. Byron Hurt

Music: Enters

Tommy: Welcome back to another episode of “Northeastern Next.” On today's episode, we have Byron Hurt, a 1993 graduate of the College of Arts, Media, and Design. A documentary filmmaker, Byron's latest film, “Lee and Liza's Family Tree,” debuted on PBS this past November. We'll discuss his co-op experience, career in journalism, and his inspiration for this project. Let's get into it.

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Tommy: Hi Byron, how are you doing today?

Byron: I'm doing great. How are you, Thomas?

Tommy: Good, I'm doing really well too. It is the first day in Boston that I'm actually feeling cold. It's about 23 degrees here, and usually I can handle the cold, whatever. But today's the first day where I actually am like, oh yeah, it's winter. Where are you based right now? Are you in Boston?

Byron: I'm based in New Jersey.

Tommy: Oh, okay, nice. Are you feeling any of the cold too?

Byron: Yeah, I mean, you know, it's cold, but you know, I sort of brace myself for this time of the year. I just layer up and keep it moving.

Tommy: Yeah, that's really all you can do. There's not really another way around it.

Byron: You know, I actually enjoy working out, exercising in the colder weather. You know, it's something about that crisp fall air, that cool air.

Tommy: Yeah.

Byron: It feels good, you know, when I'm exercising. I don't want it so much. It's when it gets into like the teens and the sub-zero weather, like that's when it starts getting really crazy.

Tommy: Yeah, that's not when it's fun anymore.

Byron: No, exactly.

Tommy: But yeah, thanks again for joining today. I'd love to talk about your Northeastern experience and just how Northeastern has gotten you to where you are today. And then, of course, since it's “Northeastern Next,” would love to hear about what your plans are.

So just to start us off, just a little bit of background on yourself and Northeastern. What college from Northeastern did you graduate from? And just what was your overall Northeastern experience like?

Byron: So, I graduated with a degree in journalism. So, the School of Journalism is, you know, where I sort of got my background and education around television and print media and just media in general. I started out as a speech comm major. I'm not even sure if they still have that major at Northeastern, but that's how I entered Northeastern and I transferred into the journalism school. And so, I thought I wanted to get into radio and television broadcasting.

I used to work as a DJ at WRBB. I had a couple of shows on the radio show there, late night, slow jam shows, which I loved. I really loved doing that. I had co-ops or internships at WCVB, WHDH-TV, WBZ-TV. And then my last co-op was at The Patriot Ledger. So, I wrote for The Patriot Ledger, which is out in Quincy, Massachusetts.

I was able to land a front-page story, you know, as a student reporter, which was really, really cool. And I was able to write a couple of fairly big features. My job really as a student writer, a student reporter at The Quincy Ledger was to write obituaries.

Tommy: Oh, wow.

Byron: Very interesting experience. Yeah. So, I would have like two deadlines, one at like 7:15 in the morning and the other was like 7:45. And I'd have to, you know, gather all this information about deceased people and basically turn it into an obituary, which was a very interesting experience.

Tommy: Yeah, that sounds like a very interesting experience. It's one of those things that everybody knows what an obituary is, but you never really think to take a peek behind the curtain there.

Byron: Absolutely. The one thing I learned about writing obituaries is that it's the most read section of the newspaper.

Tommy: I can believe that.

Byron: Yeah, and I learned a lot of really important lessons about accuracy as a reporter and making sure that people's information is right. Because when you get it wrong, it's a big deal for somebody who lost their loved one. And this is the last thing that people will see written about them. So, I learned some really important lessons about making sure that all of the information that is contained in that obituary is 100 percent accurate.

Tommy: Yeah, no, I think that's something, too, especially I'd imagine as like a young and blossoming writer, you know, accuracy. I mean, I write for a living, too. I'm not...I don't just do the podcast as cool as that would be. I do all the writing for alumni relations here, and accuracy is definitely something that I can tell you when I was learning to write, I could definitely overlook it. But that's super interesting. But it sounds like, you know, obviously, I'm not trying to make this about myself. But you also worked at Northeastern for a little bit, too, right?

Byron: I did. I did. So, when I graduated back in 1993, which is like a long time ago now, I worked for the Center for the Study of Sport and Society. That was my first job after college.

Richard Lapchick was my boss. Richard Lapchick is a very powerful man in the world of sports. And then I worked there for a few years and then I struck out on my own and I made my first documentary film. I received a fellowship called the Echoing Green Public Fellowship. And that was my first grant that I received to make a documentary.

So, I left the center so I could focus on getting that film done. I was the first, to my knowledge, based on what I was told, I was the first former student at Northeastern to receive an Echoing Green Fellowship, which was really cool. And so that gave me an opportunity to really focus on working on and completing my first documentary.

After I got finished with that, I needed money. I was broke, you know. And so, I got a phone call from Northeastern Communications and they were wondering...because I had done an internship, a co-op at Northeastern Relations, Public Relations, when it was on Huntington Avenue. And so, they reached out to me, and they told me that they were looking for someone to do media relations within the department. And so, they wanted to know what I was doing. And it just so happened that I needed a job. I needed money. And I went in for an interview when I got that job. So, I did PR and media relations for one year in that department, which was cool.

I enjoyed it, but it wasn't really me, you know, like it was something that I could do, but it wasn't really my passion. And so, I kind of had a, you know, a heart-to-heart talk with myself and asked myself some hard questions about whether or not I wanted to continue working in media relations or whether or not I wanted to pursue a career in documentary filmmaking. So, after about one year, I resigned from that position, and I decided to move back home to New York to pursue a full-time career in documentary filmmaking.

Tommy: That's really cool. So, I guess my next question is, is because one, first of all, I think that's awesome because I think a lot of people that will listen to it are going to take that and think to themselves, maybe I need to have that heart-to-heart and actually pursue my passion or even just thinking about what their passions even are. So that's really cool that you were able to identify that at such a young age and be able to just focus on it and hone in and move forward with it.

But kind of just a little bit to go back to when you were talking about writing for the paper in Quincy. I'm just wondering, you know, graduating from the School of Journalism, when people think that, I think people will tend to think of a journalist as writing more print-based or just doing a lot of writing. What made you want to go into documentary filmmaking opposed to, I guess, a more traditional journalistic route?

Byron: Well, that's a really great question. So, I wanted to just dabble in all facets of journalism. So print, radio, broadcast. Right? Those are the things that, you know, I was trying to decide whether or not I wanted to pursue. And then when I did my internships, I was a production assistant at those three television stations in Boston. I loved it. I mean, I loved working in broadcast media. I thought it was cool. I love the pace. I love the frenetic energy, you know, like, you know, pulling scripts together for the anchors right before the broadcast. It was really, really

fun. It was intense. And it was like, I would say it was kind of a toxic environment too. But there was something about it that I really liked. I really enjoyed.

So, I thought that I wanted to pursue television broadcast, right? And then I started, you know, like I would sit in a newsroom and I would be there for hours and I would see like these news feeds. They used to have like, you know, multiple TV monitors that had like these news feeds that were coming in from all over the world. And I would see all kinds of like social unrest and, you know, violence and protests and all these different things, like, or just the feeds. Like, you know, this is not footage that was cut into like a one minute, five second piece. I mean, this was like the actual footage that I was watching all of it, you know, just raw and uncut.

And I started thinking to myself, “Wow, this is a really interesting world out there.” And I felt like broadcast journalism, TV journalism didn't really capture everything that was really going on. It wasn't really putting things into like a larger social and political context that I thought was important. I was curious about what was really going on in many of these places and whether it was here in the United States or somewhere else around the world. Like I just wanted to know more.

And I felt like a TV newscast doesn't really get into that kind of stuff. And then at the same time, I took a class at Northeastern called “Blacks in the Media and the Press.” And it was like a media literacy class that focused on the representation of black people in the media—television, film, magazines and on the news. And it really deconstructed a lot of images that we often see in the media of black and brown people. And during that class, we watched a couple of films by a filmmaker named Marlon Riggs. And his films really blew me away. I was really transformed by his work. And his films opened my eyes to the different ways that black and brown people were talked about in the media.

And I immediately said, “That's what I want to do. I want to do that.” You know, I want to have the kind of impact that Marlon Riggs has had on me, I want to have that same impact on other young people, other students. And so that was when I first decided that I wanted to become a documentary filmmaker. But I didn't know any documentary filmmakers. I didn't have any filmmakers in my family. So, it was it was kind of it was overwhelming, you know, to kind of pursue that particular craft. You know what I mean? And then I also heard that there was no money in it, which is true. But so, I was scared to really go in that direction. So that was that was how I made the shift from television broadcasts and print journalism to documentaries.

Tommy: That's cool. I really like, too, that...what I got out of that was that inspiration can really come from anywhere from that film class. And you never really know what is going to impact you. And I'd like to imagine that your documentaries the same way are impacting people where they're like, “Wow, you're bringing to light something that I would have never even considered.”

And just speaking on that, just the topics of your films. You know, I went through your filmography a little bit and I am curious because a lot of these topics, they feel like not niche. I don't know how to explain it, but they're not necessarily the most common things that people are

talking about. So not only how are you coming up with the ideas for these films, but at the same time, how are you...what is your process to like digging through them and getting to the bottom of it?

Byron: Well, usually there has to be some sort of personal connection or at the very least some curiosity about a particular topic. So, I'm very much into race, gender and class issues. So, those are the issues that I think most about in my day to day. And as a filmmaker and a storyteller, whenever I see, you know, whenever I see an issue that is affecting people, I always ask myself, is there a way that I can put this issue into a much larger context and deconstruct it by telling the story in a film? And so that's kind of like how I make a decision about whether or not I should pursue a particular documentary or, you know, the topic that the documentary is going to focus on. So, there has to be a personal connection.

And I think having a personal connection is important or at least some passion about that. Yeah. Connection or passion about that topic is important because documentary films usually take at least a year or two, if not more, to get done. Sometimes five years. My film "Hazing" took 10 years to make. So, it has to be something that I'm personally connected to or that I'm passionate about.

I also make documentary films that address cutting edge issues, which you referred to as niche issues. I prefer to say cutting edge. In other words, issues that are hot button issues or taboo issues or sensitive issues, issues that really haven't been explored a whole lot or treated in a documentary film. And so that's also very important to me because, you know, when I make a film, first of all, because I know they take a long time to make, I want the issue to still be relevant three years, five years, ten years from now when the film is done. Right? So, if it's more cutting edge it is, the less people are talking about it, the more of a hot button issue it is, the more likely it's going to be perfect timing once the film is completed.

That takes a little bit of like a forward thinking and strategy about, "Ok, is this the right topic to address?"

Tommy: Right. And I think you nailed that, too, with your latest film, which I thoroughly enjoyed, by the way. I promise it's not pandering. I really did enjoy it.

Byron: Thank you.

Tommy: And I think you did a wonderful job with it. And what really struck me was, like you said earlier, like you mentioned, you like to have a personal connection with the topic. And I think this was really interesting because you were able to interview and use your own family members as a way to not even just explore your family's history, but to really use them as a sort of, I guess, a vessel to really convey these hot button issues that are really relevant today. And, as you said, they are going to be relevant tomorrow. Where did you get the idea to do that from? Was this something that just kind of struck you in the middle of the night one night or is this something you had been mulling over for a few years?

Byron: Well, the idea of making this film is actually spurred on by Nova. The producers at Nova reached out to me, sent me an email during the pandemic. They told me that they had seen my one of my previous films, “Soul Food Junkies.” They really loved it, and they wanted to know whether or not I would be interested in making a science-based film or film focused on science.

And I mean, I'd never considered that as a as like a topic idea. And so, I didn't really know if I had a science story to offer them. So, I took a couple of days to think about it. And, you know, I came up with a few ideas and I reached out. I reached back out to them. They weren't really all that interested in the first couple of ideas that I brought to them.

And then I thought about my family members and the fact that they were doing this ancestry work and that they were using DNA, you know, to track down or to, you know, to go back in time and learn more about our ancestors. And I thought, “Wow, that's that may be like a really interesting story. Maybe they'd be interested in that.” So, I went back to them with that idea, and they loved it. And so, they asked me to write like a treatment. So, I spent a Saturday morning, and I wrote a three-page treatment. It was really, really, really rough. It was like a big, big, big idea in terms of like, you know, what we could do with the film. And I sent it to them, and they loved that.

And so, then we just started having serious conversations about like what this story could be and, you know, how we could tell the story. And the more we talked, the more I sort of fleshed out the idea and tried to figure out, you know, who would be the key players in my family that I would follow and that sort of thing. And so, then it became a collaboration. They signed off on it and they gave me the funding necessary to make the film. And that's pretty much how it happened.

Tommy: That's awesome. Yeah. I really enjoyed the way that you structured the film, too, where you were leading up to the family reunion. And I thought that was really cool because it's like, ok, 12 months, you know, we have X amount about the Hurt family right now. And then like as each month passed, you're just slowly but surely uncovering, I guess, I don't know what you call it, a clue. But it was really interesting. And then just, you know, you're meeting people that may or may not be extended family while at the same time tying it all back to not only the history of your family, but just, you know, the history in general of what was happening at the time. And I thought that, and I don't want to spoil anything, but I found the ending to be very powerful, too.

Byron: Yeah. Thank you. Well, thank you for not spoiling anything. You know, I have like a list of film ideas on my wall. At least at that point, I had a like a list of film topics and making a film about black family reunions had already been on my list. So, I looked at that list and I said, “Ok, well, what can I do related to black family reunions that could be science related?” And that's when I remember that they were doing ancestry research. And that's when I, you know, put the two together, the family reunion topic, along with the DNA topic. So, yeah, that's how it came together.

Tommy: And speaking just to I know you mentioned that it was going to be science based. I think that all the DNA, everything, all the DNA information that you portrayed was very digestible, especially for someone like myself with exactly zero science background. So, it was making a lot of sense to me. And I think it would make a lot of sense to everybody. So, I really appreciate you honestly sharing that with us, too. So, my next question is, since this is “Northeastern Next,” I always like to ask the guest, what's next? What's next for you, Byron?

Byron: Well, you know, I'm working on a short documentary film now. It's called “Men of Courage,” and it features five to six African American and Latinx men who are working with boys and young men, educating them about gender-based violence and what they can do to end it. They're trying to break the cycle of domestic violence and sexual assault and rape and other issues in black and brown communities in the state of New Jersey. So, I've been funded by the state of New Jersey, the New Jersey Coalition to End Domestic Violence. And so, we're making a short that's going to highlight these five to six men. And so that's the next film.

And then I'm also collaborating with one of my mentors, Stanley Nelson, on a film that I can't really talk about right now. But it really plans to be like a really, really big, big story that we're going to be working on.

Tommy: That's awesome. And that's incredible. And that is something that I'm sure we're all going to look forward to and we're going to be really excited to see. So, the documentary, “Lee and Liza's Family Tree,” out now on PBS. Is there anywhere else that you can watch it besides? I found it on the PBS website. Where else can you go?

Byron: PBS.org/Nova and just search for “Lee and Liza's Family Tree.” And it's also available on the PBS app. So, if you download the PBS app and then search for “Lee and Liza's Family Tree,” you should be able to find it there as well.

Tommy: That's awesome. And we are actually right now we actually have a 30 second preview clip of “Lee and Liza's Family Tree.”

Trailer: Who isn't curious about family history? There's a lot of people that you may feel this way, too, that you just don't know. Like, who is this person? Who is this person? Where we came from? Who our people are? We know nothing. We have to rely on some of our older family members to really tell us what they remember. I heard that they say he was a tall, fair skinned man with green eyes and red hair. My family is on a quest. So, is this the only picture that we have of Lee Hurt? The only known picture. We're hoping that DNA testing can unlock secrets of the past. We're going to have to find the common link somewhere up in the generations. That's one way how the DNA works.

Tommy: Thank you, again, Byron. I really appreciate you taking time to speak with me today. The documentary is amazing and everybody out there listening should go and watch this. It's a really, really great story.

Byron: Thank you so much. I appreciate you watching, and I appreciate you being prepared. That makes me feel great. You know, as a former journalism student at Northeastern, I'm glad to see that you're carrying on the tradition of journalists and great media people coming out of the school. So, thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Music: Enters

Tommy: Thanks for listening to today's episode of "Northeastern Next." Nova, "Lee and Liza's Family Tree," is available for streaming on [PBS.org/Nova](https://www.pbs.org/nova) and on the PBS app. Be sure to check it out. Thanks again and we'll see you soon.

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