

Review: *Living on One Dollar*

By Alison Eagles

The documentary, *Living on One Dollar*, follows two American college students who, after taking some classes in international development, seek to experience for themselves what life is really like for the millions of people around the world who live below the poverty line, surviving on less than one dollar per day.

Their project began as a series of YouTube videos, (Boardman, 2012) and grew into this full documentary film. Friends Chris and Zach head to a small village in rural Guatemala for two months, joined by a film crew of two other young men. While in the beginning this film may appear to be from the perspective of some privileged white Americans, as the narrative unfolds, the viewer sees them come to achieve a deeper understanding of and empathy for the people they meet and get to know during their experience.

As the film progresses, we see the filmmakers increase their awareness of everyday reality of life in this village. For example, what would be a relatively minor medical issue back home can be a huge financial stress for someone who is barely making enough to get by. As a result, their empathy deepens, in both the affective and cognitive sense. They come to care a great deal about the people they are living next to, as well as acquire the ability to take on their perspective. It is interesting to watch this level of empathy emerge through the relationship building that takes place. In one scene, we witness a gap in understanding between the two participants who speak Spanish, who have been learning more about their neighbours through interviews and conversation, while the other two who do not, had a more limited understanding and seemed to project their own experience onto the people who live their whole lives in this village. Through their conversations, they learn these people actually do have goals and dreams, for themselves and their children, beyond just their daily survival.

What is also interesting to observe, is how empathy leads people to take action to help others. After making this documentary, the filmmakers wanted to find real solutions to help their new friends improve their lives. They have since gone on to start a foundation dedicated to raising awareness through more films, and to partnering with organizations that provide microfinance loans to people who would otherwise not be able to obtain loans from traditional banks. For example, in the film we see Rosa, a woman from the village, is able use a small loan to start a weaving business, which in turn allows her to pay for education to follow her dream of becoming a nurse.

The themes and content of this film are fairly accessible to both young adults and

adults; economic concepts such as the precariousness of informal employment, and micro-financing are introduced in a way that is simple to understand. Hopefully, watching this film will help encourage young viewers to see beyond the news stories and statistics about poverty, and get to know the reality of the people who live it.

Recommended for young adults of any age (12+)

References

Boardman, M. (October 28, 2012). Living On One: College Students Live On \$1 A Day In Documentary. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/28/living-on-one-college-students-one-dollar-a-day_n_2034537.html