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Searching for Angela Shelton Finds Harsh Truths and Healing

Angela Shelton's *Searching for Angela Shelton* started with a simple concept: to uncover the attitudes and experiences of women across America by interviewing those who share her name. Shelton, an accomplished screenwriter (*Tumbleweeds*) and actress, wasn't sure what she would find while making her first documentary. However, as she and her crew set out to meet this random sample of namesakes, a pattern soon emerged. What might have been a lighthearted road trip turned into a personal exploration of the harm and healing of childhood sexual abuse - a surprisingly common theme among more than half of the women she interviewed and an experience that Shelton understood firsthand. With this turn of events, the film became more of a personal journey for Shelton as she confronted her own past on screen while acknowledging the prevalence and damaging legacy of childhood abuse.

During postproduction, Shelton made another unexpected discovery: pulling the footage together was a more challenging feat than she had imagined despite working with professional editors who brought their considerable talent and objectivity to the story. However, after spending two years and more than \$50,000 on the editing process, Shelton felt that the sensitive material was not coming together in the way she had hoped, so she decided to try cutting the film herself. Without any hands-on editing experience, she turned to the Avid Xpress Pro software because she knew that Avid systems were the preferred choice of professional filmmakers.

"I fought the idea of going the do-it-yourself route, but found that editing this myself was key to both the emotional and creative process. Now, I see that editing with Avid Xpress Pro has changed my eye both as a filmmaker and screenwriter," says Shelton.

So far, her success at shaping the emotional story has been impressive. Riding on Shelton's appearances on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *48 Hours*, the word-of-mouth from the July 2004 release of the limited edition DVD and from festival showings has snowballed. A recent deal with Lifetime to broadcast the film in 2006 and a growing international audience has also helped the film find its niche. In the process, Shelton has gained a new perspective on her life and her career.

"Editing with Avid Xpress Pro has changed my eye both as a filmmaker and screenwriter."

- Angela Shelton, Director and Editor, Searching for Angela Shelton



challenges

- Develop the right storyline and tone for a complex and sensitive documentary about childhood sexual abuse
- Take advantage of professional editing tools that could be easily learned and used by a first-time editor

solutions

- Use the Avid Xpress Pro software to fully shape the emotional story from more than 100 hours of footage

products used

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Searching for Angela Shelton was originally envisioned as a way to fill some downtime. With the writers' strike looming in the summer of 2001, Shelton decided to develop an idea she'd had about profiling other women who shared her name. An Internet search of phone listings turned up a few dozen women named "Angela Shelton" scattered across the country. Shelton began contacting them about the project as she gathered together a travel trailer, a four-person crew, and a Sony PD-150 DVCAM camcorder for the shoot. By the end of that summer, she and her crew had crisscrossed the country, traveling 13,261 miles over 57 days to meet the 15 "Angela Sheltons" who agreed to participate. As Shelton looked to her own history, additional interviews with family members were added. Altogether, interviews and B-roll added up to almost 100 hours of footage.

"We ended up with so much because the project's focus shifted completely, taking me out from behind the camera," she explains about the film, which speaks directly to her own childhood experiences. "Also, we made a point of shooting a lot of scenery to capture the beauty of America, to include it as one of our characters. We needed this beauty for balance as we looked at the ugly subject of childhood sexual abuse."

Of course, one of the challenges of working with such a wealth of content is exploring the many possible editing approaches to tell the story. Shelton initially felt that she had already invested as much of herself as she could while shooting the project, so she hired an editor to bring out the story. However, the first cut missed the tone she wanted - it was too lighthearted for the serious story. So she tried working with a second editor, who overcompensated by replacing the levity of the first cut with too much gravity. Dissatisfied with these professional edits, Shelton still hadn't found the documentary she knew was waiting to emerge from her footage.

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- Angela Shelton, Director and Editor, Searching for Angela Shelton

If You Want To Do It Right ...

A new urgency to complete the project came in 2003 with an invitation from *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to appear on the popular talk show and discuss the film. "Friends said I shouldn't go on without a finished product in hand, but I figured that when *The Oprah Winfrey Show* gives you a call, you go," says Shelton .

The enormous publicity that stemmed from the November 2003 *Oprah* appearance gave Shelton the encouragement to press on for a third edit, which she completed herself. To fully prepare herself for editing with the Avid Xpress Pro software, she took a three-day seminar at Hollywood-based Moviola Education Center, an Avid Authorized Education Center . "I'd watched people run the system before, but hadn't been in the driver's seat. I was really surprised at how fast I took to it. I loved it immediately and became hooked, like I was playing a really addictive video game," she says.

With Shelton 's budget nearly exhausted, she used what resources she had on hand to create a video editing workstation. She installed the Avid Xpress Pro software on a laptop that she was using for screenwriting. While the previous edits had also been done with Avid, she decided to start fresh. As she loaded tapes, a daisy-chained array of 16 FireWire external hard drives were used to contain the DV data. For the next eight months, Shelton devoted herself to the project. Along the way, another television appearance on the CBS News magazine show *48 Hours* generated tens of thousands of e-mail inquiries from viewers wanting to buy the documentary, which gave her the final push to complete the director's cut. While she was ready to add the finishing touches with the Avid Xpress Pro software's color-correction capabilities, High Technology Video (HTV), the Hollywood-based postproduction facility, volunteered its services. She delivered her edit to them by outputting it to one of the external hard drives. HTV returned a color corrected DigiBeta master that was used for DVD preparation and replication. The receipts from pre-orders funded these final postproduction expenses.

“I was really surprised at how fast I took to [Avid Xpress Pro]. I loved it immediately and became hooked, like I was playing a really addictive video game.”

- Angela Shelton, Director and Editor, Searching for Angela Shelton

Happiness is a Good Edit

In the months following the release of the DVD, *Searching for Angela Shelton* has become an underground hit on the film festival circuit and received strong word-of-mouth from numerous abuse/survivor forums and support groups. “This doesn't fit in any box; it is not a typical documentary,” says Shelton . “I've seen people in the audience that have watched this film 14 times. It's something like a therapeutic session, so people come to experience it time and time again.”

The buzz on the film is also driving demand in foreign markets, with subtitled DVD versions in the works in 12 different languages and television broadcasts scheduled for Iceland , Norway , and Australia . In the U.S. market, the Lifetime Channel will broadcast a specially edited version that Shelton is preparing for the channel to air in 2006.

In the meantime, she has also written a book about the entire experience. Not surprisingly, her work with the Avid Xpress Pro software is central to her journey. The overall theme of her message is how empowerment turns victims into survivors. Taking charge of the editing to create the story that she wanted to tell was essential to her own healing. She took the raw footage of her life and created a singular cinematic expression.

Despite her success, Shelton is not ready to turn pro as an editor though she expects to continue developing these skills. Meanwhile, the confidence that she gained by mastering editing skills on the Avid Xpress Pro system has helped feed her work as an actor, writer, producer, and director. “Even if I'm not doing the editing, I now know what's really going on when an editor says ‘that doesn't cut together.’ It's very liberating knowing Avid,” she says.

For Shelton , pushing forward and knowing when to take a stand seems to

have been critical to both her personal and professional journeys. By confronting her own past and sharing an all-too-common tale, Shelton has crafted an unforgettable portrait of perseverance, forgiveness, and emotional power.

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