Alum Pursues Documentary Filmmaking Career
by Callyn Weintraub

Kiley Kraskouskas (BA ‘00, sociology and political science) fell in love with Colorado as a young teen on a ski trip, came to DU to pursue a degree in Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management (HRTM), and ended up in a career as a documentary filmmaker. Today, she is the producer behind The Last Song Before the War, a documentary about the most celebrated music festival on the African continent, the Festival in the Desert.

Kraskouskas switched from HRTM to political science after taking a two-trimester class entitled Democracy, taught by professors in political science and sociology. It wasn’t until her junior year when she decided to add sociology as a second major.

How did this all lead to filmmaking?

“Looking back, I realize that some of the films used in the classroom sparked my early interest in documentary filmmaking,” she said. She recalls watching Eyes on the Prize in a political science class, as well as Michael Moore’s Roger and Me in a sociology class. “Films that brought to life the issues and topics we were learning about really synthesized the material and once I was in graduate school, I realized that I wanted to be making sociological films.”

After Kraskouskas graduated, she pursued a PhD in sociology at New York University. As a teaching assistant, she would use films in her classes. It was then that she decided that she would rather make films than show them. She began with internships that led to jobs at production companies. “I set a goal that by 35, I would be making and producing my own films,” she said.

A former student from NYU suggested that they make a documentary about a music festival in the Sahara desert, which she had attended. The result was The Last Song Before the War.

“When Northern Mali erupted into civil war a year after we filmed, we were shocked. The film’s story changed quite a bit from showcasing this amazing homegrown approach to creating the festival to showing what it once was and a cry for peace,” said Kraskouskas.

Today, The Last Song Before The War is playing in festivals around the world, and was recently screened by a group of Korbel students on DU’s campus.

Kraskouskas’ most recent film, Can’t Take It No More, tells the story of Walmart workers in the United States that are organizing in their stores and nationally to improve their workplace.
“Through learning their rights, practicing civil disobedience, organizing in-store delegations and speaking to the press, these workers are holding America’s largest employer accountable for low wages, draconian sick leave policies and a culture of disrespect,” she said.

Kraskouskas’ credits her education at DU for leading her to such an exciting point in her career.

“Since much of my studies as an undergraduate and graduate student focused on labor markets, social inequality and social justice, I am deeply proud of this film [Can’t Take It No More] and of its potential to bring social change,” she said.

“Overall, the courses I took at DU taught me to think logically and critically,” she added. “I learned to understand empirical data and how to form arguments without resorting to conjecture or personal observations. I became a better thinker and I think that is most important in documentary filmmaking.”

(Photo: Kraskouskas, second from left, with film crew on location in Mali)