



AUTHENTIC PERSPECTIVE

Filmmaker Denver Miller's
appreciation for a balanced
lifestyle and passion to inspire
through storytelling

By Matt Smythe
photographs from the personal collection of Denver Miller

It's a winter Thursday. Lunchtime. Denver and I are at La Casa in the Wedge emptying our second basket of chips and salsa and tableside guacamole. A couple margaritas may be rumored. I ask him how he first became interested in cinematography and he smiles, remembering back, and settles into a happily distant look.

"I would spend long periods of time at my grandparents' house when I was little. My grandfather was a passionate hobbyist photographer (still is at 93 years old) and world traveler. He worked a steady 9-to-5 in the insurance business, but any vacation time he had, he and my grandmother would travel somewhere. I'm talking like India, Africa, Asia, Australia. I would walk into his study in his house—floor to ceiling, wall-to-wall photographs from his travels—and man I used to love to sit in there, he had a swivel chair, and I would spin around and just look at all these images—like he and my grandmother on elephants in India. Every one of those images was like a journey I could take in that space and time. It had a huge effect on me. I would borrow his camera now and again and he would show me how to use it."

“A huge effect” feels like a huge understatement. If you spend any amount of time around Denver, you can’t help but see the world as his grandfather did—as one big invitation to pursue your passions. To date, his *sorties* to shoot films or commercial work read like a New York Times travel section wish list: India, Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, Jakarta, Manila, Mexico City, Japan, Sao Paolo, Norway, Ireland, Hawaii, British Columbia, Alaska, Venezuela, Chile, the Caribbean, and roughly half of the United States.

Even with an enviably well-stamped passport, where he and his family are now is exactly where he wants to be. A filmmaker by vocation and avocation (he also produces, directs and edits depending on the project), he and his wife, Chrissy, moved to Rochester from Jackson, Wyo., 13 years ago. They were expecting their first child, Anna, (their second, Maire followed a few years later), and wanted to be close to her family (all Rochester natives), his own family having roosted in locales out west.

“We had visited her family when we were dating, and I remember thinking I could definitely live here. There’s such a great balance. Diversity, culture, community, access to arts and the outdoors. We can be out the back door and hike trails for an hour, fly fish on world-class water, or be downtown in five minutes—without traffic in any case. My family in Denver, if they want to hike trails, depending on the time of day, they may have to battle traffic for 45 minutes to get there and then try to find a place to park at

the trailhead. Granted, it’s beautiful out there, but if you really break it down to the amount of time we have in our day, at this time in our life, between family and career responsibilities and juggling all that—we have access to a really balanced lifestyle.”

Professionally speaking, he’s found that balance as well. “I’ve been able to create a really fantastic network of professionals in the film-video world here—people I also consider close friends. The talent here is on par with anywhere in the world you go.

Certainly with New York, Chicago or LA. I’ve taken crews with me from here on projects around the country and invariably people are blown away at the level of professionalism and talent from unassuming little Rochester— young, ambitious, highly talented people. I think this goes back to the heyday of Kodak, the sheer abundance of talent in this area and the willingness of the more seasoned people to share and mentor the up-and-comers. There was this inspiration and livelihood, which I think has been whittled down to its core, but

that talent is still here. Combine that with the creative talent of our writers and designers and photographers—there are A-list directors, directors of photography and writers—LA, Chicago, New York-caliber people that choose to live and work here. We’re in the middle of a renaissance in Rochester and we all owe it to ourselves to make the absolute most of it—encourage each other to take more chances and create better things.”

From those idyllic days in his grandfather’s study, his passion for the camera



The filmmaker, assessing footage after a day on location.





and the journey grew. Fast-forward to high school when he and his buddies would take road trips along the Texas Gulf Coast to find waves to surf. Being the only one with a camera, Denver would take pictures to chronicle their travels. Once in college at the University of New Mexico, now armed with a Betamax, he and those same friends started seeking surf and snow in more distant locales, and Denver continued to capture their excursions and all the important, small details of each trip. “I was documenting my way of seeing the world. Telling the story.” After college, a gritty work ethic, some wanderlust and a measure of serendipity directed his path to projects with independent film greats such as Alton Walpole and Ron Fricke, who also served as important mentors as he honed his skill and sensibilities—like

his unyielding motivation for authenticity—something he’s carried with him from those road trips of his youth.

“When it comes to shooting motion, there has to be space or room for a percentage of the day that’s left open to chance. And inevitably, those happen to be the best moments that get captured—regardless if it’s commercial or documentary-side. People, especially today, have a meter in place for bullshit. They know when they’re being sold something. They know when they’re seeing something that isn’t real or doesn’t feel real. It has to be authentic. I prefer the stuff that happens in those moments—the authentic.”

Your ultimate goal?

“I would love to inspire people through my work to live more passionately. To make decisions based on that, as opposed to this

constant message of practicality and fear-based thinking that really is so prevalent in our culture and our society—you have to do this in order to earn this in order to have a mortgage in order to build a wall around yourself. Essentially keeping you from really seeing your true potential as a person. I think there are so many people in this world that are just not psyched—just going through the motions and passing on that tradition. You have children that see unhappiness and frustration and anxiety and limitations and walls and all that. It almost sounds like a cliché thing—and you can call me cliché, I guess—but I’m fully invested in changing that. That is my motivation in continuing to improve my craft. To tell better stories and inspire that change.”

