

by Nat Burns

Debra Chasnoff Spreading the Word



Debra Chasnoff, the documentary filmmaker who won an Oscar for *Deadly Deception*, her film about nuclear danger, is addressing a new topic, expected gender roles. We were able to catch

up with her at her San Francisco home during the release of her latest film *Straightlaced: How Gender's Got Us All Tied Up*. The film features teen interviews, examining attitudes about gender expectations. *Straightlaced* will air during a benefit premiere in Los Angeles on April 30th at the Harmony Gold Theater. <http://groundspark.org>

LN: You grew up in Maryland, then went to school in Boston. Were you studying film?

DC: Oh no, I majored in economics because I wanted to change the world and figured I'd better figure out how all the money works. Then I was a telecommunications rate analyst.

LN: That didn't work out for you?

DC: What happened was, some clients that we were representing were major utility companies. At that time, I was getting involved in the anti-nuclear movement. So, during the day, I was representing clients like Westinghouse and in the evenings, I would be learning about Westinghouse's role in the nuclear weapons industry and organizing people to protest against them. I couldn't really keep the disconnect between those two parts of my life, so I decided to stop working in corporate America. I traveled for almost a year in Central America and when I came back, I decided that I really wanted to find a way to keep my professional life aligned with my social activism. I've been fortunate to be able to do that.

LN: You're a busy woman. Can you delineate life and work? Or do they merge?

DC: They're all kind of the same to me. My life does not have super boundaries, I guess. I work really hard and I work a lot and my work is engaging and meaningful to me, so

it doesn't feel like a job I go to and then shut down and go back to my real life.

LN: So making documentary films is meaningful to your personal life?

DC: Well, documentary filmmaking, but also what the organization I built, Groundspark, which I'm executive director of, does. It's one thing to make a film and that's an incredibly huge thing, to be a filmmaker. But I've also figured out a way that ensures that all the energy, resources and talent that goes into making these films, from so many different people, really is a good investment. We work hard to make sure the films get used effectively to make real change. So it's more than just filmmaking. There's educational and political work involved too.

LN: It probably never occurs to people that the distribution is just as important as the production.

DC: Absolutely. I can't believe how hard it is to make a film, how much money goes into it, how much time. I feel like each film I've made, I've gotten a PhD in the subject. I figure, if we're gonna put that much energy into something, it damn well better get used and get seen and really get used for good.

LN: In the course of your work, you encounter interesting people. Any one person impact you more than most?

DC: Wow, you mean in all the films I've made, the people I've met? There are so many. I guess the film that I just made, *Straightlaced*, is very much on my mind. In part, because the students that are in it are around the age of my two children. The student I met in that film that really, really blew me away is the young person whose name is Rey. She's transgender and has figured out how to be herself in the midst of a diverse high school environment and has a lot of courage to live openly as female, even though she was born male. I was struck by her courage in the movie.

LN: You have chosen documentary film as your medium of expression. Do you think this visual medium is more effective?

DC: I think all mediums can be really powerful. It's not like one medium is better than another. I don't really believe that. I

think what's great about documentary film is that if you do it right, you can create the sense that you're having an intimate conversation with somebody else, a real person, and that you're getting a real visceral experience of their world. If you do your job right, you get to be in another person's reality.

LN: In 1992, upon winning an Oscar for *Deadly Deception*, you thanked your partner and son for their support. Why did you choose that moment to come out?

DC: I've been asked that question many times and I always turn it around and say, you know, if you won an Academy Award, wouldn't you thank the person you live with and that you're building a life with? It actually wasn't a deliberately political act, it was a



just like 'well, of course I'm going to thank my partner.' That's my main emotional support, you know, so why wouldn't I do that? When I did it, I thought, this is really

astonishing to me that this hasn't happened before. We all know plenty of gay people who have won Academy Awards but we're all just quiet about it. I couldn't imagine having that profound of an honor and not acknowledging my partner.

LN: Can you tell us about your partner and your two sons?

DC: Actually, it's not the same person I thanked when I won the Academy Award. Life evolved. Although that person, Kim, still is, of course, my children's other parent, so I co-parent with Kim Klausner. My partner's name, well actually, she's my wife, her name is Nancy Otto. We're one of the eighteen thousand whose status is in limbo. Nancy has two professions; she's a glass blower artist and she also is a non-profit fundraising consultant.

LN: You have two boys. They're in high school?

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