

**Announcer:** Welcome to Hancock Conversations, an Allan Hancock College podcast. Join President Dr. Kevin G. Walthers and members of the Hancock community as they explore the stories behind the people and places that make Allan Hancock College the unique hub for learning that it is today. You're sure to learn something new and even have a little fun along the way.

**Kevin Walthers:** Welcome to Hancock Conversations, the podcast for all things Allan Hancock College. I'm Kevin Walthers, the superintendent president here at Allan Hancock College, and today we're joined by Chris Hite, professor of film and video here at Hancock College. Hello, Chris.

**Chris Hite:** Hello, Dr. Walthers, glad to be with you today.

**KW:** Great to have you here. So, let's jump right into the primary reason we had you here. You just finished a sabbatical. For those who don't know, faculty can take some time off and work on a project that will help their teaching later. Your project was to create a documentary about a horrible fire that happened out at Vandenberg Air Force Base in the 70s. Why don't you give us a little background on your film?

**CH:** Absolutely. So, the title of the film is *Firestorm 77: The True Story of the Honda Canyon Fire*, and it details the events of December 20, 1977, in which a wildfire broke out on Vandenberg Air Force Base. The story, as told by the participants that day, goes on to recreate the events that included hurricane-force winds, just the least ideal conditions to even fight a wildfire, and also a conflict of cultures in which you had civilian firefighting men and women coming to the base, and finding that, in the Cold War era, there were a lot of secrets that needed guarded. So, the Air Force had certain limitations on where they were allowing these firefighters to go on the base. So, all of that is documented in the film. We were fortunate to have a number of participants who witnessed these events firsthand. And, I think you get a sense by watching them retell their stories that, for this day some 40 years later, that event still looms large in their memory, in their experience.

**KW:** Yeah, and I saw some stills that you showed us of people from that time, and you can kind of see them off talking to themselves. What was it like for those folks to come back and kind of recount what happened during that summer?

**CH:** In my assessment I think it was a cathartic experience for them. And, that's part of the subtext of the film is this was seen as part of their job, and when it was over, there wasn't really an official acknowledgment. It was kind of part of the culture of the time to just move on. But

as we've come to learn, events like this stay with people for a long time, especially traumatic events like this. There was a loss of life involved in these events, as well. And, so, I definitely think a catharsis occurred for those who were participants in the documentary. They got to talk about something that affected them deeply and on a personal level that, for decades, they really just had bottled up. So, it was a rewarding experience, I think, for everyone in that regard. We got to provide that outlet for them, and for them to allow their story to be heard.

**KW:** You're getting some interest from film festivals. Tell us a little bit about what's going on on the film festival circuit with this.

**CH:** Absolutely, we've been very pleased with the critical response, most recently at the local San Luis Obispo International Film Festival. The film did win the Best Central Coast Feature-Length Film award, and we were just absolutely honored and floored by that. We've been having success outside of the area, as well. We are going to be screening the film in April at the Dubuque International Film Festival in Iowa, and it will also be appearing at the Malibu International Film Festival in April, as well. Beyond that, it won the Award of Excellence at the 2021 Impacts Documentary Awards, as well. And there's a number of other festivals that we have lined up throughout the year. The True Stories Festival in Las Vegas and many others that we're going to be proud to screen this work, and it's really allowing us to give this story more of a platform than we even envisioned we'd have for it.

**KW:** Now, I'm assuming that, given that we're hopefully on the tail end of the pandemic, these screenings are all happening virtually at this point, right?

**CH:** The majority of them are. There are a few that are going to attempt to weave some type of social distancing protocol into it. They'll definitely have reduced audiences than they would in non-pandemic conditions. But to me, that's a great bellwether because the film festival people are very conscientious of these types of issues and events that affect society, and if some of them are seeing a potential to reopen even partially, I think it shows we're turning the page somewhat. But, we'll have to see overall how it goes.

**KW:** I think that's great. I spent about 13 years living in Utah and was fortunate to get to participate a little bit in Sundance. You know, actually going in and having a chance to talk to the people who were in a movie or who made a movie was always a great part of those festivals at the end. So, I guess today, do you like have a Zoom conference with people who watch it after you screen the film?

**CH:** Absolutely! A lot of festivals, they do it differently, they have their own protocol. But, that's definitely part of the festival experience that when you go, you not only see a film, but typically, the filmmakers are there for the question and the answer session, and it's a really engaging experience as you noted. So, that's transformed into largely Zoom-based question-and-answer sessions in these pandemic conditions but, nonetheless, that's the number one thing filmmakers love--not just to release the film but actually engage with the audience and take in that reception from them.

**KW:** Great, great. So, now, speaking as a college president and educator, as great as the film is, and, when you told me about how you made a documentary about making a documentary for your students, that, you know, looking back now, it seemed so obvious that that would be a great idea for a film instructor to do. But, at the time, it floored me. Share with us how your students are going to benefit from this going forward.

**CH:** Absolutely. So, it started just as a matter of course for doing a documentary. We had a staff photographer who worked with us on set. His name's Glenn Fuss. He is an incredible photographer, and he was just documenting our daily production that we would do on the set, but eventually, I started to realize this is going to become a document that I can then utilize in a teaching capacity, these are teachable moments. And so I asked him to document certain ways we were setting up the set, including lighting and various equipment. I've been able to, in turn, use that in my classes to show them how we dealt with various lighting conditions, various cinema-to-graphic concepts that we had to overcome, whether in kind of a studio capacity or live in the field, Glenn was always there to capture those, and I've been able to utilize those to great effect in my classes. I think it's, it just kind of takes it past that barrier of I can talk about it, or I can show you it, and that's where the real value of it comes in. So, we have just a plethora of media that shows us actually putting this film together.

**KW:** That's amazing. So, it sounds like you're saying that I can't just run down to the cell phone store and buy an iPhone and go start shooting major motion pictures.

**CH:** Well, you can. That's a start. And, I wouldn't discourage anyone from doing that. You've got to jump in, but ultimately, at the end of the day, there are just a number of steps that are involved, especially when you're trying to get to the film festival level. There's a lot of bases you have to cover legally, as well. And, that's another great aspect of being able to teach documentary filmmaking that are classes that I have a humongous binder that is overflowing with legal documents, receipts, invoices for every service that we did. These are the realities of filmmaking. I always tell my students, making a film--it's more than just being creative. The

reality of filmmaking is it's a lot of paperwork, and that's not always the vision everyone has when they want to get into filmmaking, but it is a practical reality.

**KW:** Well, they make it look so easy in those 60-second commercials that Apple runs. I can just tape a phone to the front of my car and film a chase scene. That's what they say. I don't think my insurance company would like that, so there's more paperwork.

**CH:** There you go.

**KW:** So, so tell me, what was it that sparked in you the idea that, hey, I like doing film, and I want to I want to teach film? How did you kind of get started in this business?

**CH:** Sure. Well, I'm originally from Pennsylvania. I attended the film and video program at Pennsylvania State University. I went on from there to work for various video production companies on the East Coast before transitioning into the academic teaching of film, and I eventually came to Hancock in 2006. When I was working professionally on the East Coast, I had a number of offers from community college programs to come in and teach a course. And, to be honest, for a number of years I always denied them because my schedule was just, it was just too onerous. I couldn't actually get into the classroom. But eventually, one year my schedule resolved itself that I could teach a course, and it was like a light went on. I absolutely realized I love teaching film and video as much as I do making the films because you get to see the passion and spark of people coming to life. you get to see in their eyes the idea of possibility coming to fruition. And so, it just really was me trying it out that I came to the conclusion that I love teaching. And so, I've stayed with it ever since, proceeded to go and get more degrees as a result, which was something I never intended to do. But, I've come fully to the conclusion that I just love the academic atmosphere surrounding teaching film and video and the potential outcomes out of that.

**KW:** That's awesome. So, when we look forward and when we see what students are going to need to know for the next the next generation of filmmaking--I mean obviously, well I shouldn't say obviously, it seems like everything is shot digitally now unless, you know, it's intentionally not. The idea of actually putting film in a can is gone away, right?

**CH:** Right. Outside of Christopher Nolan, the director of Batman and Dunkirk. He's about the only director I can think of that actually intentionally tries to shoot on celluloid film. There's an economic cost to that, as well. But, when I started working professionally in the mid-90s, the cost of equipment was astronomical. The idea of making your own film was just a distant dream, but all that has changed because of a technological revolution that's added affordability

and accessibility to the process. And now with this online internet culture that has blossomed, there's a multitude of ways that young filmmakers can have an outlet and an audience for their films. I would say the biggest impact in recent years though, on top of that, has just obviously been the COVID-19 pandemic. Filmmaking's a very public and group-oriented endeavor. This end of it has been greatly challenged by the current conditions, but we're seeing unique patterns and unique approaches coming out of that. I don't think we'll ever get back to just the traditional way films were made in the immediate sense. It might eventually come back, but for the next couple of years, students will be dealing with the conditions that really are hewn out of this moment of a global pandemic, and we're trying to prepare them for that currently in our classes.

**KW:** Nice, nice. You know, it strikes me that what we're going to have in our new building, as I walked into the LRC here, and I see the steel structure that's now up. The entire new Fine Arts building is up. How excited are you about that?

**CH:** I'm extremely excited. It will be wonderful to have the family all under one roof. Right now, we're all under separate roofs. And, that's a big part of what we do in the film and video program. It's a fantastic program in that we offer production courses, screenwriting, film studies, a very robust approach to understanding film from an academic perspective and undertaking it pragmatically, but I always encourage our students to look and take other courses from my fine arts colleagues. So, for example, if you wanted to be a film or TV director, you need to understand what the actors' process is, so take a drama class, take a dance class. Go to the music program to understand the audio recording process. Take courses in graphics, arts, photography will further your knowledge of color and design. It'll be nice that that will all be under one roof and that possibility of educational collaboration will be even more expressed.

**KW:** I'm really excited to have kind of an arts magnet just right there in that building, where art students of all kinds can congregate and right across the courtyard is PCPA. And, I'm just thrilled about the synergy that's going to come out of that space. I think it's going to be fantastic for our students and for our community.

**CH:** I agree. I think that's one of the great charms of Hancock currently--that we have such a robust arts community and that we, you know, in the fine arts department, we always talk about they're not just film students or photography students or dance students, they're our students. They end up taking a multitude of courses under the rubric of fine arts and, again, I just think that's going to be amplified in this new building, and it's truly is going to be a

communal centerpiece for people who are visually oriented and people who just want to experience the arts.

**KW:** Yeah, I agree, I absolutely agree. It's been great talking about, not just your film, but the classes and hopefully we're going to recruit some kids from that. I got just a couple of random questions to ask you as we as we go out. So, you're from Pennsylvania, so is it Steelers or Eagles?

**CH:** For me, it's Steelers. I don't even know how to pronounce that other team name. It doesn't even make sense. I can say the word Steelers. I can say Penguins. I can say Buckos, but I can't say anything other than that.

**KW:** You know, that's awesome because I lived in West Virginia for a couple of years and people used to ask me what do you do for fun in West Virginia. And, I'd say, "I drive to Pittsburgh."

**CH:** There you go.

**KW:** And, it's such a great city. I mean the way that city has come back after losing it's, essentially, it's steel industry and is now an educational and medical hub. It's a beautiful place to go. It's a great place to visit. For me, it has special connotation because I grew up, kind of came of age, watching sports in the late 70s. Man, what a great time that was with the Pirates winning World Series and the Steelers were winning Super Bowls. I've still got my Pops Stargell baseball card and an old folder I had in seventh grade that had pictures of Mean Joe Greene and Terry Bradshaw and Lynn Swann that I had cut out of Sports Illustrated and put in a little plastic cover.

**CH:** That's fantastic.

**KW:** And, as a kid from Dallas, that didn't go over so well.

**CH:** I was going to say, you know, the Cowboys might be America's team but the Steelers definitely have an appeal to people all across the nation. There's just something about that working-class personality that just comes out of that city and speaks to people all across the United States. And those are definitely my heroes growing up--Stargell, Jack Lambert--these were just very hard-nosed athletes who really played the game seriously and brought a lot of great entertainment to the fans. It was a very unique place to grow up. It was somewhat distant from the allure of Hollywood, and so it was a little bit of a leap of faith for me to take

the path that I did. But, I was able to do that because I had a very supportive family. My parents didn't necessarily understand what I was undertaking a lot of times because it just was not a concept that was very prevalent in Western Pennsylvania, but nonetheless, they supported me in my endeavors. I just can't say enough about how appreciative I am of that.

**KW:** That's great. And I think that's the message that we have for all of our students, right, is that we're here to help those students that what might not seem obvious to them as possible when they come to school, and being able to take the class from you and your colleagues in the arts department or anywhere on campus, I think really, really sets the tone for our kids that they do have an opportunity to pursue anything they want to pursue right here in Santa Maria, California and Lompoc, California. So, Chris, thanks for joining us, fascinating conversation and, well, we're not going to read out websites that people probably are driving or walking but if you'll Google *Firestorm 77: The Real Story of the Honda Canyon Fire*, so probably if you just Google *Firestorm 77* You'll find information about how you can watch this great film and see how it's going to impact our students. So, Chris, thanks for being here.

**CH:** Thank you very much Dr. Walthers. I'm very glad to have this opportunity. Thank you again.

**KW:** Thanks. This has been Hancock Conversations, your podcast for all things Allan Hancock College. We look forward to seeing you at the next podcast.