

Documentary Filmmaking Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Robert Darwell** (February 3, 2025)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

As an entertainment lawyer with more than 30 years of experience working on hundreds of motion pictures and TV shows, my professional career has largely revolved around the business of storytelling in its many forms — from movies and television series to podcasts and video games.

I've navigated contracts, intellectual property issues, film finance transactions and the intricate legalities of the entertainment industry.

However, during the pandemic, after years of supporting the creative visions of others, I found myself yearning to do more; I wanted to create and share some stories that matter. I never imagined that the journey would result in making me a better entertainment lawyer.

While doing so, it became apparent that synergies existed between filmmaking and practicing law. I was surprised to learn that skills obtained from filmmaking improved my abilities as a lawyer.

Vision and Storytelling

My first foray into producing and directing was a documentary titled, "The 90s Club." It featured individuals over the age of 90, and was meant to tackle the issue of ageism in an entertaining and inspirational manner.

Crafting a compelling story to captivate and emotionally engage an audience is the main goal of filmmaking, and the same could be said about lawyers presenting narratives during negotiations to persuade opposing counsel. Both must distill information into understandable and relatable stories, and filmmaking has made me even more cognizant of that.

As production on "The 90s Club" was ending, I knew that I wanted to quickly start another documentary that would capture another oral history milestone.

To me, filmmaking and practicing law share several key similarities from a personal development perspective. Both professions demand a blend of technical expertise, creativity and interpersonal skills, offering unique opportunities for growth. In essence, these fields challenge practitioners to think critically, communicate effectively and work collaboratively, all while balancing creativity and discipline.

All of this led to my next project titled, "Black Uniform," featuring the voices of 12 Black



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veterans. The film included centenarian Romay Davis, who was one of the very few surviving members of the only Black female battalion sent overseas during World War II, and former New York Rep. Charles Rangel, who received the Purple Heart for his sacrifice during the Korean War. They shared heartfelt perspectives on what it felt like to be on the front lines as a Black person in the U.S. military during a time when the military was still segregated.

I knew that I wanted to focus on sharing stories from veterans over the course of various U.S. military conflicts because my dad, who served during the Korean War, never really talked much about his military experience. His passing was the genesis for the film.

Throughout the course of preparing to film the interviews, I conducted research on the interviewees and learned the importance of not merely asking questions, but becoming an active listener. Since making these documentaries, I now use those skills as part of my approach to dealing and negotiating with opposing counsel.

Casting

Going through the process of conducting interviews for the documentaries with new acquaintances renewed my understanding of the value of patience and connecting with people, especially with clients and opposing counsel.

In the corporate media business world, we're often going from one meeting to the next and maximizing every second of the day. But in filmmaking, the pace forces you to be deliberate and to take a step back, to analyze and reflect. That was something that I needed to bring back in my law practice, and it enabled me to exercise just a bit more patience and empathy.

Collaboration and Communication

Filmmaking involves working with others — including producers, writers, talent and crew — to ensure smooth production. The same goes for being a good lawyer. Collaboration with clients, paralegals and colleagues is paramount while leading negotiations to successful resolutions.

Further, communicating ideas effectively to intermediaries to bring a shared vision to life is essential. Having everyone on the same page and setting expectations upfront is the hallmark of creating a successful project, both in the legal and entertainment industries. Resolving on-set challenges is an almost certainty of any film project.

How I've handled those experiences has improved my ability to use clear and persuasive communication to advocate for clients in negotiations. It has also demonstrated the importance of mentally preparing to handle unexpected developments, such as surprise arguments from opposing counsel.

A Natural Evolution

Adding filmmaker to my busy legal career might seem unexpected, but for me, it was a natural evolution. My legal career provides a unique perspective on the film industry, equipping me with a deep understanding of how stories are crafted, financed and distributed. However, I began to realize that my passion lay not just in the mechanics of filmmaking, but in the power of film to inspire change.

Stories have the ability to connect us, to challenge our perceptions and to drive action. Throughout my legal career, I've seen how film can influence culture, shape public opinion and even affect policy. Documentaries have a unique role in this landscape — they can reveal truths often overlooked in mainstream narratives and shine a light on voices that are not often highlighted.

Documentary filmmaking is a powerful medium. It allows for an exploration of real-life stories that can illuminate injustices, celebrate resilience and foster understanding. This realization sparked my interest in using my skills and experience to create films that not only inform, but also empower and motivate audiences.

From the outset, I knew that I would never appear on camera or narrate for any of my films. It is the interviewees' stories and perspectives that I wanted to share — not mine. So it was a challenge to find a device to advance the narration without a narrator, and I think I succeeded.

The skills I honed as a lawyer — negotiation, critical thinking and problem-solving — have all translated into my work as a filmmaker and vice versa. Strong legal writing skills include the ability to eliminate unnecessary contract language. Going through the editing process for two films has further improved my ability to draft and revise legal contracts.

Credits

Every project I take on is driven by a desire to make a difference. Whether its filmmaking or working with new or existing clients, the goal is the same — make a positive difference.

The journey from entertainment lawyer to documentary filmmaker has been both challenging and rewarding. It has allowed me to merge my legal expertise with my passion for storytelling. Now, having worked on two films and started a third, I have a closer connection to my chosen field of law.

As I continue to produce and direct films, I am excited to explore new narratives that not only entertain, but that also foster understanding and empathy, and that positively affect our society. So many stories, so little time!

Robert Darwell is a partner and head of global media at Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP.

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