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## Filmmaker Spotlight: Lañinbwil's Gift

Staff | September 17, 2011

In the GIFF Filmmaker Spotlight, GIFF interviews co-directors/producers from the Marshall Islands, Jack Niedenthal and Suzanne Chutaro, of "Lañinbwil's Gift"; a Grand Jury Award nominee for Best Feature Narrative. (Screening Sunday, Oct. 2, 2:20pm, Stadium 5 at the Micronesia Mall Theatres. [CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFORMATION](#))

**GIFF:** Thank you both for taking the time to do the interview. First of all, congratulations on the recent success of Laninbwil's Gift. Multiple awards and nominations from festivals around the world; and add to that a Grand Jury Award Nominee for Best Feature Narrative here at GIFF. How does it feel?

**JACK:** Our target audience for all of our films is the people of the Marshall Islands. Our mantra and motivation for filmmaking has always been, Imagine growing up all your life never seeing a film in your own language, set in your own country, dealing with issues and values that are unique to your own culture. We want our children knowing that their lives—even though they live on tiny islands in the middle of the Pacific—are worthy of exploration in film. A secondary goal of ours has always been to walk our magnificent culture across the Big Pacific Pond, i.e., make people of other countries see and feel and experience what the Marshall Islands has to offer to the world. This is the first film we have made that has successfully managed to do this. Each and every time we receive an award for Lañinbwil's Gift we feel honored (and stunned!). To be nominated as a Finalist for the Grand Jury Award for Best Narrative Feature at GIFF has lifted our pride to new levels, and not just for us as filmmakers, but for all the people who have helped make our films over the years, and indeed, for our entire country.

**SUZANNE:** I'm especially thankful and proud of all the volunteer actors and supporters in our community in Majuro who saw the value in this project, which is a fundraiser to help one of our local private schools—the Majuro Cooperative School. As a culture, Marshallese are generally humble and shy and these volunteer actors we've recruited from the community for this film have had to step out of their comfort zone to bring this story to life in front of a camera. I am so proud of them all.

**GIFF:** That's great news for any film, not to mention one made in the Marshall Islands which had a budget of less than one thousand dollars. Did I research that correctly?

**JACK:** Our film cost \$943.20 to make: most of these expenses involved the purchase of tapes and food and one \$50 late night traffic violation when Suzanne got arrested for driving without her driver's license while returning an actress to her home. We like to say that our projects are community based films. We are fortunate in that a lot of people gather to donate their time as actors, businesses as sets, vehicles, boats, and in one case even a graveyard, which in Micronesia is unprecedented. It is a tremendous amount of fun to make a film where money is not the driving force in any way, shape or form. We focus on getting people to perform to the best of their abilities and hope that our unusual stories are strong enough to overcome the budgetary issues. We feel this is something that has been lost in the film world. These days it seems to be all about money and big budgets sans fun. We have tried to retain the joy of making film in all of our projects.

**SUZANNE:** That this film was made for less than \$1,000 makes it all the more incredible that it has received such acclaim at the various film festivals. We're a small community and Lañinbwil's Gift as well as the first two films we made — Ña Noniep and Yokwe Bartowe — are perfect examples of a community

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working together to achieve a common goal: the education of our children.

**GIFF:** *Tell us about the inspiration behind the story of Laninbwil's Gift.*

**JACK:** One day I was cleaning out my office and I was about to throw away an old broken cordless phone. As my hand hovered above the trashcan I thought, I wonder if I could write a story about this phone so as to extend its life? I know, How strange can you get? Anyway, I combined this personal challenge with my curiosity about a homeless person in Majuro that had a habit of taping pictures to various store windows and walls around town. He used to doodle with his finger on my dust-covered black car all the time, too. I started to watch him, explore his life from afar if you will, and decided it would be cool to suddenly have his life changed by an outside force where he would become super-intelligent and a magical force in his own right. I stirred in a few legendary characters from Marshall Islands lore and then it became a screenplay. Great fun.

**GIFF:** *Jack, I've been poking around your Facebook page and the Bikini Atoll website and I am totally amazed. Peace Corps, backpacked Europe, NCAA All-American Swimmer, President of the Majuro Cooperative School, Board of Directors for the Bank of the Marshall Islands, met with world leaders, article in Newsweek Magazine, invited to the Oscars and Emmys, a family man and now an award-winning filmmaker. Your life alone sounds like a movie. What's your life philosophy that keeps you so adventurous?*

**JACK:** After spending my first 6 (long) years in the Marshall Islands on the isolated outer islands where the biggest pastimes for me were storytelling and thinking, and then the subsequent 25 years working for the nuclear victims of Bikini Atoll, I can say that for me it all boils down to this: Have fun.

**GIFF:** *The first feature-length Marshallese film was Morning Comes So Soon (2008) from director/writer Aaron Condon. What impact did this film have on you as a filmmaker, if any?*

**JACK:** As I told Aaron early on, Morning Comes So Soon is a fabulous film, and everything after this marvelous project will just be a "movie." His was the first feature film from the Marshalls and broke huge ground, and after each and every film that we complete, I send him an email that I call the "Aaron Condon Bow-down" where I thank him for the positive impact that he has had on my life. This time he wrote back and said, "It is I that should now be bowing down to you, this is your third film." You can't get a better compliment than that. His film, combined with an even earlier event when my 11 year old son asked me while we were in a local video store surrounded by the typical Hollywood fare, "Hey Dad, how come there are no movies in Marshallese?" thrust me into this wonderful filmmaking odyssey.

**SUZANNE:** I was amazed and very impressed with this film. At the time I saw the movie, however, making films was not on my radar. It was Jack who was talking about a movie idea he had in his head at one of our Majuro Cooperative School Board meetings that started this adventure. Not knowing anything about films but having been involved in community plays I told Jack "I want to help."

Some months had passed after that initial discussion about Jack's movie idea, I had just forgotten about it. School had gone into the summer break and I found myself crewing on a luxury yacht that was taking its wealthy owners diving and fishing on Bikini, Rongelap and Wotje Atolls when I received an email from Jack asking — no not asking — but telling me: "You will help make this movie." Now we've completed our third film. When we started our Morning Comes So Soon was our benchmark because if they could do it then we could too. Why not?

**GIFF:** *Tell us about the impact that Laninbwil's Gift has had on the locals.*

**JACK:** As with any work of art those few days or weeks between completion and public viewing are horrible and nerve-racking... I compare it to those last few days before your wife finally delivers the baby. During the editing process in filmmaking you work so hard at being critical of your own art that by the time you are done you have really run it down in your own mind to the point where you become terrified that no one will like it. So when we opened Lañinbwil's Gift in Majuro last May, we had no idea how it would be received. Our films always contain some subtle social commentary, so again, we are usually also taking some risk because our society is so small and tightly knit. The first day was crazy. We planned an Opening Night for those involved in the film and then 2 additional public showings. It was clear by the lines winding out into the street after the first public showing that this would not do. We wound up adding a late night showing. Over 1,000 people watched the first day. We only showed the film for a total of 3 days (12 total showings) and over 2,000 people wound up watching. Very gratifying.

The impact of these films has been huge in more ways than one. Yes, we have a lot of young and old people alike who now know what it feels like to be a movie star. One thing that is different about what we

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do as a company, however, is that we donate—not some—but all of the proceeds from our projects to charity, in this case the Majuro Cooperative School, a small private school in Majuro that depends on outside funding to survive. We have now raised over \$20,000 for the school from box office receipts and the DVD sales of our 3 films. Many of the people in these films are people from Bikini Atoll, the people whom I work for whose islands were used by the US for nuclear testing from 1946-58. They have been very supportive of these projects. Once you have become a “victim,” expecting all of your needs to be taken care of by the country that victimized you, sometimes you lose the valuable concept of what it means to “give back.” The making of these films has helped restore this set of values for some of the talented young Bikinians whom we have worked with in our projects.

**SUZANNE:** People here love the film. Every day I get calls at work, get messages on Facebook and get stopped on the street by people asking: “When will the DVDs go on sale?” People come and give me sob stories like “My kid is leaving to the US for school so I really need a copy of this DVD so I can give him a gift to leave island with.” People have come to really love the characters — Lañinbwil's Gift is the third in our trilogy, which began with Ña Noniep and Yokwe Bartowe. The local reaction to these films had been phenomenal. Children and adults in both urban and outer island communities know these characters inside and out to the point when they even know all their lines. I was walking along the street of Ebeye (on Kwajalein Atoll) several months ago and the kids were singing the songs from Yokwe Bartowe.

The actors are getting called by their character names. One of our actors went to Jaluit Atoll earlier this year and kids in the community were so amazed that they had a real movie star show up on their shores. Even the name of one of the main characters, “Lijimu,” who is the traditional healer in these films, has been adopted into local slang. The impact has been unbelievable. In the first movie Ña Noniep the character Lijimu was a real mean person and as a result people in the community ended up hating her in real life. She was actually getting harassed. When Jack went to write Yokwe Bartowe he realized we had to make Lijimu a nicer person to change the community's attitude towards her and it worked. She's now a ‘good guy’ and everyone loves her. Our young viewers have really come to believe in these stories.

**GIFF:** *I understand all of the characters in the film were played by non-actors. First, how did you cast them? And second, as a director, describe the approach you took with your non-actors while trying to complete a scene.*

**JACK:** In our first film we actually had auditions at the school because it was a children's film and we were not sure who was capable of doing what. For the last 2 films Suzanne and I simply sat down and thought of people in the community who might have the personality, skills and the desire to take on a role. Not everyone says “yes” as people in the Marshalls have come to understand the power of film in that it is not like a stage play where you act out your part one night and then it just becomes a fond memory. These films become DVDs that people play over and over until all the lines and songs basically become memorized by an entire nation.

Suzanne and I have a style of directing that is sort of a “Good Cop, Bad Cop” style. I am the Good Cop, encouraging everyone by telling them how great they are as actors as we film, then Suzanne makes them do the scene over “Just one more time.” Our formula is simple: We tell the actors the lines we need them to recite, explain to them the emotion of the scene and how we expect it to look, and then we just do the scene over and over again until Suzanne says, “Okay.” Regardless of their age, in almost all cases we make sure the actors also have input into what their characters are trying to convey; this is very important in the creative process of making a film, listening carefully to the people most involved in the storytelling.

In the making of one scene we filmed for 5 hours until just past midnight trying to get only 10 lines just the way we wanted them. That was also the night Suzanne got arrested for not having her driver's license. Making films in the Marshall Islands is by no means all fun and games, at times the process can be very intense and even grueling.

**SUZANNE:** Majuro is a small community and as I read Jack's script I would think of potential people on island that we could approach to do the various roles. In some cases Jack had written in characters based on people within the community so we considered it fortunate when they agreed to help. Other times we'd have to beg and plead – usually when we tell them it's for charity they'd agree. Almost all of the actors are in one way connected to the Majuro Cooperative School either as an alumni, parents, aunts/uncles and grandparents or close family friends.

**GIFF:** *What was your most valuable learning experience on this journey of making Laninbwil's Gift?*

**JACK:** This film was so hard to make. When we were done both Suzanne and I were totally exhausted both physically and mentally. It was painful. Unlike our first 2 films, I wrote this screenplay not thinking “Oh, we could never pull this off, I need to change the scene.” I simply wrote the story and said “We'll just

have to figure out how to do this when the time comes.” This film takes you through so many areas and aspects of life in Majuro: You are in businesses, in school classrooms, the hospital, on the beach, in people's houses, in their cars, in the jungle, in a graveyard, at the old men's deli checkerboard, in elected government officials' offices, in the spiritual world and even inside a cardboard box and a young simpleton's mind; you attend the sacred first birthday commemoration of a Marshallese baby, you are present at a funeral, and you watch as black magic is performed and then witness the ugly result of this eerie otherworldly force on unsuspecting victims. Then we top it off with beautiful Marshallese acoustic music to lend the proper atmosphere to the story. After the film showed at the Columbia Gorge International Film Festival in August, a person who was a host and involved in the film industry came up to me and said, “Wow, that was ambitious.” That comment hit the nail on the proverbial head. What we have discovered is that even though we wore ourselves out to the point of almost feeling punished for attempting this project, the accolades we have received in the end have us yet again asking ourselves, What else can we do? The major purpose of art in my mind is to inspire and to motivate not just others but ourselves as well to do even greater things. This film has done just that for us.

**SUZANNE:** That you can take an idea and bring it to life. What we've achieved really amazes me when I think that all of this started with just a simple idea. The most rewarding thing about all of this has been the audience reaction — hearing them laugh or gasp at all the right parts and seeing how the community in the Marshall Islands has taken ownership of these stories and characters.

**GIFF:** *If there was one thing that you wish the audience could take with them after seeing this film, what would it be?*

**JACK:** That even though the Marshall Islands are just small specks of land in the middle of nowhere they are abundantly rich in character and in charm and the local people are fabulous even when confronted with adversity and hardship. Micronesia is the storytelling capital of the earth.

**SUZANNE:** For our Marshallese audiences: I hope that they take away the realization that they can achieve anything if they put their minds to it. For foreign audiences: Appreciation and intrigue about Marshallese culture. We are more than just TB and leprosy cases or groups who don't speak English that are seeking welfare. Marshallese and other Micronesians living in the US are now facing a full onslaught of racism within the small pockets of the communities we occupy. It saddens me that in 2011 racism is still alive and well but I hope projects like these movies can remind foreign audiences that we Marshallese are more than the just the basic stereotypes some people tend to harbor about us.

**GIFF:** *And a question that I'm sure you're tired of being asked as a filmmaker...What's your next project?*

**JACK:** I have just finished our next script. I will only say that it involves ancient Siamese twins, crickets, a powerful reef god, a paranoid yachtie, red fire ants, a horribly dysfunctional family, an American man with memory loss, a Bikinian elder who is dying and longing to be buried on his nuclear fallout-poisoned homeland and his 10 year old granddaughter who is trying to make sense of her own young life in a world-gone-scrambled. We hope to begin filming in October. Yes, it is ambitious!

**GIFF:** *And now for “The Quick Five” survey.*

**1. What I knew about Guam before GIFF:**

**JACK:** I have been to Guam many times and have plenty of friends there. I think Guam is nice place because it is like a “middle stage” between Hawaii and the Marshall Islands.

**SUZANNE:** That it's a beautiful island.

**2. What I would've liked to accomplish at GIFF 2011:**

**JACK:** When I go to film festivals I actually go to watch other people's films and to meet other people involved in this great craft. This is what I look forward to. The more I watch the more I learn.

**SUZANNE:** Meet other filmmakers and get inspired.

**3. How I heard about GIFF:**

**JACK:** I saw an announcement on the GIFF website, which I should add is superb and as professional as they come, which is not always the case in the film festival world.

**SUZANNE:** Through my co-director Jack Neidenthal

**4. Things I would love to do on Guam:**

**JACK:** Watch films and visit with friends.

**SUZANNE:** See the whole island.

5. *As a visitor, I would love to learn more about Guam's \_\_\_\_\_.*

**JACK:** inner culture, i.e. the things we don't see as visitors, which is why I like the Guam-based film Shiro's Head so much. The film took me to places and helped me discover characters in Guam I would not have been able to encounter otherwise.

**SUZANNE:** Military build up status and do some shopping at the Micronesia Mall.

**GIFF:** *Thanks for your time Jack and Suzanne; we're looking forward to your arrival and good luck with the nomination!*

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