



I WITNESS

See it, film it, change it:

A human rights organization started by musician Peter Gabriel broadcasts underground issues to the world. **By Erin Brereton**

MOVIES PRODUCED BY THE GLOBAL ORGANIZATION WITNESS DON'T HAVE HOLLYWOOD ENDINGS—quite the opposite, in fact. But the films aren't about conclusions; they're about new beginnings. That's the WITNESS way.

What WITNESS does is simple: It gives local activists a video camera to document a specific topic. WITNESS then helps get the films to news outlets, film festivals and schools. Movies also are shown at www.witness.org, which attracts more than 1.5 million hits a month.

And it works. In the past 10 years, WITNESS has provided video cameras to more than 150 groups in 50 countries to document human rights violations. Some success stories:

- Because of events shown in "Rule of the Gun in Sugarland," the Philippine government arrested two men in connection with the killings of several indigenous activists trying to gain control of their ancestral lands.

- The United States enacted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, and the United Nations approved a new protocol against human trafficking, thanks to a WITNESS film that exposed the Russian mafia's trafficking of women for prostitution.

WITNESS recently was honored by Fast Company/Monitor Group as one of the top 20 groups working for social change worldwide. Its Web site also received the Knight Ridder Equality Award.

Musician Peter Gabriel, known for hits like "In Your Eyes," first dreamed of starting an organization like WITNESS in the late '80s. But it wasn't until Gabriel saw the 1991 home video of several Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King that he knew video had advanced enough for WITNESS to work—so he founded it, using seed money from the Reebok Human Rights Foundation, in 1992.

After all, Gabriel figured, if one person with a video camera could inspire such a widespread debate over racial issues and police brutality, couldn't the same medium be used to highlight human rights violations around the world?

"At WITNESS, we know that a few committed people can change the world. Our site is a vehicle to catalyze action," says Gillian Caldwell, executive director of WITNESS. Since 1996, the group has given its camera recipients, also called partners, a crash course in basic filmmaking and editing to produce better movies.

WITNESS partner Joey Lozano, who made "Rule of the Gun in Sugarland," found the

human rights group's help priceless.

"WITNESS opened opportunities to develop myself and the organization to which I belong," Lozano says. "It made our advocacy work faster and thus more effective on a worldwide scale. Because of the new technology [especially Internet and the Web] it made available to its partners, WITNESS really uplifted the lives of those long abused ... in a manner we never expected."

WITNESS also works with partners like Amazon Watch, a California-based group dedicated to environmental issues and indigenous people's rights to get videos to news outlets in order to drum up media coverage.

"We rely on WITNESS to provide us with technical assistance and distribution," says Atossa Soltani, executive director of Amazon Watch. "Film is very helpful. Video's been a tool to educate the public.

"It saves the news media time and money to have our footage to them," she says. "We're working in the middle of nowhere—it takes

days to get in and out of these places. You can't expect CNN to come down here and shoot. We give images to media, and they still do their research and story, but it helps."

When a cable news channel recently approached WITNESS about doing a story on the organization, WITNESS gently suggested the focus be on some of the work its partners were doing—another bonus of working with the group.

"Media gets attracted to a larger focus of WITNESS and covers other issues in the process," Soltani says. "The more visible these issues become, the more people's rights can be protected."

Celebrities like Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon have signed on to support WITNESS, and you can, too. Even if you're not working directly with a human rights group, you can learn about and help the various partners WITNESS works with. For more information on WITNESS and its partners, visit www.witness.org. ■

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You can also learn about helping various social causes at eActivist.org. Visit the site's Act Now! section at [>> www.eactivist.org](http://www.eactivist.org) for more details.

EDUCATION INSPIRATION

Want to help out? You can help Books Not Bars, a California-based organization that was documented in a 2001 WITNESS film, work to transform the criminal justice system. Books Not Bars has youth street teams, letter writing campaigns and more. For additional information, visit www.booksnotbars.org.



IMAGE COURTESY BOOKS NOT BARS/WITNESS