



MAKING REALITY A REALITY

Alumnus **Jon Murray**, known to many as the **father of reality TV**, is also a trendsetting producer of documentary films. His \$6.7 million gift to the Missouri School of Journalism will found the **Jonathan B. Murray Center for Documentary Journalism**. The center, and the success of the **True/False Film Fest**, could establish Columbia as a leader in this storytelling form.

MIZZOU
SUMMER
2014


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ROB HILL

IT WAS
1992

when Jon Murray first set out to discover what happens when people “stop being polite and start getting real.” So go the opening lines of MTV’s *The Real World*, Murray’s groundbreaking and pop culture-altering TV series that set the course for what we now know as reality TV.

After 15 years mostly spent producing television news, Murray, BJ ’77, and his business partner, the late Mary-Ellis Bunim, charmed MTV executives with a wild idea for a new show. The formula: Put seven diverse 20-somethings in a New York apartment, and film what happens next. No script. No story outline. Just young people living, working, laughing, loving and finding themselves in the Big Apple.

When cameras rolled, and crew and producers huddled in a back room watching it all unfold on monitors, they knew they’d struck gold.

“There was just something truly innovative and exciting about what we were watching,” says Murray, remembering that seminal moment in television history. “When you’re in your early 20s, it’s a time in your life when you’re figuring out who you are. You’re allowed to make mistakes because you’re young. The learning from those mistakes would be the story arc for the series.”

The show was a smash hit. It laid the groundwork for Bunim/Murray Productions, now a company responsible for big-time reality TV titles, including *Project Runway*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Simple Life*. More recently, BMP Films, a subsidiary of Bunim/Murray, has produced powerful documentary features including the Emmy Award-winning *Autism: The Musi-*

cal, Valentine Road and *Shadow Billionaire*.

On Feb. 11, 2014, the Missouri School of Journalism and Murray announced an unprecedented \$6.7 million gift to establish a documentary film journalism program at Mizzou. It is the single largest outright gift by an individual in the J-School’s history and the only one that endows an entire program. The program, which will offer undergraduate and graduate degrees, is scheduled to launch in fall 2015.

“Documentary is a really important form of storytelling,” Murray says. “It has been proven time and again that Missouri knows how to strike a wonderful balance between teaching craft and teaching ethics and history. It’s the Missouri Method, ... and I think that method is perfect for documentary.”

A REEL VISIONARY

Murray grew up in Syracuse, N.Y., another university town known for its journalism school. While majoring in political science at the State University of New York at Geneseo, he worked for the campus cable TV station. It wasn’t long before he was running the news department and looking for a school that could better prepare him for a career in broadcast news.

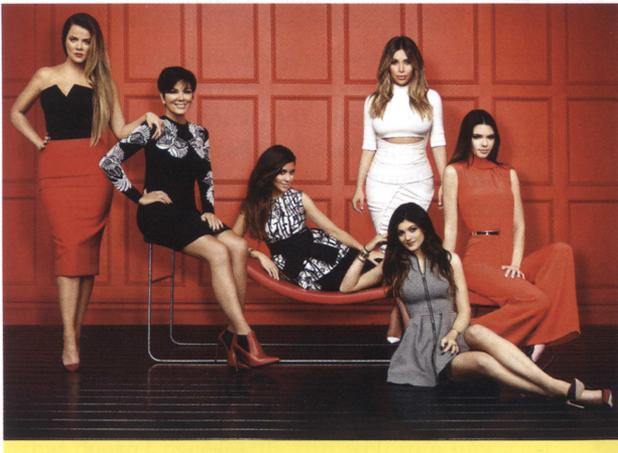
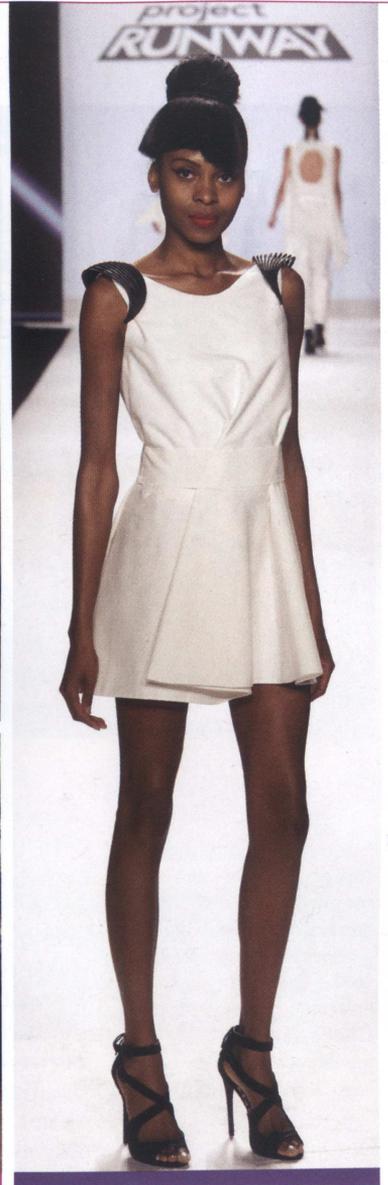
On the recommendation of his university’s president, Murray enrolled at Mizzou. He arrived in Columbia in August 1975, sight unseen.

Murray fondly remembers influential J-School professors such as David Dugan; Roger Gafke, BJ ’61, MA ’62; and Ralph Lowenstein, PhD ’67, as well as an early radio broadcast journalism assignment that foreshadowed his maverick storytelling style. In 1975, a promotional stunt called for thousands of Ping-Pong balls to be dropped on campus from a plane.

“I had this idea I would cover it like Edward R. Murrow covering the bombing of London,” says Murray, laughing. “I recorded all the natural sound and wrote this brilliant *As It Happens* sort of narrative that I would deliver as though it was unscripted. I was so proud of myself. When I told the professor, he said, ‘Oh, my God, that’s completely unethical!’”

Fortunately, Murray’s creativity was accompanied by a keen news sense. After graduation, his car broke down following an interview at a Green Bay, Wis., TV station. The unexpected extended stay netted him a job offer, and he still has a napkin on which an older colleague helped Murray map out his first show.

“WLUK was in the shadow of Lambeau Field,” Murray says. “The market covers so much territory — it goes all the way into the Upper Penin-



sula [of Michigan] — that when you tell a story, you have to tell it in a way that will be interesting to people who live 100 miles apart.”

The fledgling producer tried to open every newscast with an unexpected, humorous twist, when appropriate. His news anchor, spoofing a local conductor who eschewed sheet music, once threw the script over his shoulder with a flourish at the beginning of the show. During the famous New York City blackout of 1977, Murray split the screen with a WLUK anchor on the left and a darkened “Live from New York” screen on the right. The following night he began with a clip from *New York, New York* and Liza Minnelli singing as the lights in the city reignited.

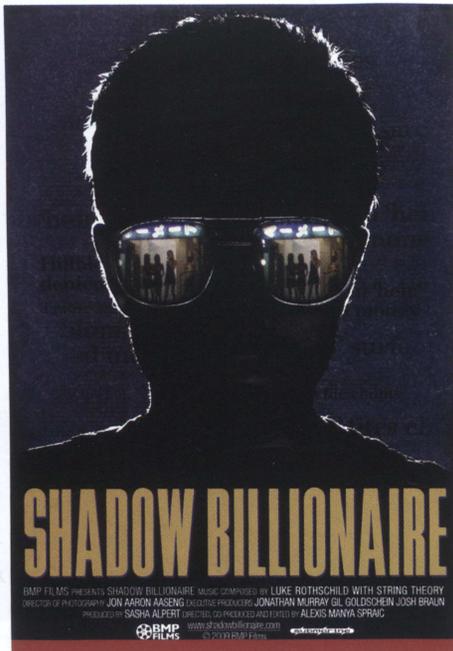
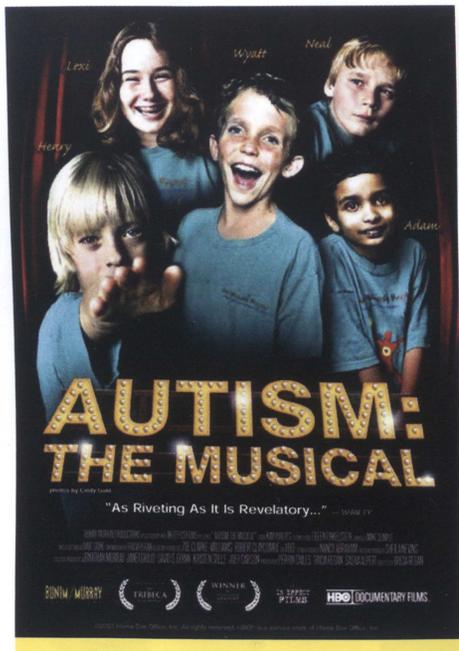
“[Station executives] were a little nervous,” Murray says. “They thought this kid from Missouri

might think he knows everything. After all, he attended the prestigious Missouri School of Journalism. But it was a great learning experience.”

In 1978, Murray moved south to a much larger station in Atlanta where he had less freedom but more viewers. From Atlanta to Rochester, N.Y., to Cleveland, Murray soon rose to the top of the news chain as station manager in 1984. Next, he took a position at a TV firm in New York helping local stations buy and schedule syndicated programming.

“That’s where I really began to understand how programming works,” Murray says. “I would get the best people in the business pitching me their shows, whether it was *The People’s Court*, *Donahue* or a talk show featuring a young woman named Oprah Winfrey.”

† TV pioneer Jon Murray’s shows have influenced American pop culture. Clockwise from top: Characters from *The Real World*, including Puck and Rachel from season three in San Francisco, have challenged young people’s perspectives for 22 years. *Project Runway* fused high fashion with reality TV. Wealthy divas Paris Hilton, left, and Nicole Richie made comic-reality in *The Simple Life*. *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* was the second-highest rated reality TV program in 2013.



† Murray's passion is making documentaries. His company, BMP Films, has produced movies about autism spectrum disorder (2007), the aftermath of a deceased billionaire's philandering (2009) and murder at a California junior high school (2013).

In the mid-'80s, Murray began pitching his own ideas with modest success. In 1987, his agent introduced him to Mary-Ellis Bunim, and the two collaborated to create *Crime Diaries*, a detective show based on real police cases. Murray's news background melded well with Bunim's career in soaps, including *As the World Turns* and *Santa Barbara*. Although *Crime Diaries* didn't make it past the pilot, the duo teamed up in Los Angeles and continued working. It was only a matter of time before they hit it big with *The Real World*.

As Bunim/Murray Productions grew during the following decade and a half, Murray began producing documentary films.

"We have this wonderful physical plant, a big music department, lots of edit bays and lawyers, so we have this big infrastructure," Murray says. "Wouldn't it be great to help young filmmakers? We did that with *Autism: The Musical* and again with *Valentine Road*."

The latter is BMP Films' latest example of a documentary that tackles a weighty subject, in this instance the murder of an eighth-grade boy, who was openly exploring his gender identity, by a classmate in Oxnard, Calif. For Murray, the movie is just one example of the genre's power.

Throughout his career, Murray would take an occasional hiatus to direct his own documentaries. The goal was to keep his hands in "making something rather than just administering." One of his films investigated life on

the Genesee River, the waterway that flows through Rochester. Another studied Rochester's public housing by embedding a reporter in a rundown complex.

"A documentary doesn't necessarily have to tell you how to think, but hopefully it can get you to re-examine something and come to a more educated opinion," Murray says. "I hope [Mizzou] can ground people in the history of doc filmmaking and then teach the skills."

DOCUMENTARY JOURNALISM: TAKE ONE

Columbia is perhaps not the country's documentary film mecca. Yet.

However, the immense popularity of the True/False Film Fest, which wrapped its 11th celebration of nonfiction cinema March 2, grows annually in spirit and reputation while remaining small and accessible. With screenings at eight locations throughout CoMo, including Jesse Hall and the Missouri Theatre, it attracts filmmakers and enthusiasts from around the world.

When Murray signed the big check and J-School administrators began mapping curricula and forming faculty search committees, they tapped True/False founders Paul Sturtz and David Wilson.

"This is a timely and important move," Wilson says. "For Mizzou to continue its tradition of being not just a great journalism school but also a leading

journalism school, it needs to embrace the future. I think Jon is especially prescient about this.”

Murray, who participated in a 2013 T/F discussion panel alongside *Jersey Shore* creator SallyAnn Salsano, BA '95, foresees a close-knit relationship between Mizzou's documentary journalism students and the festival. Although it's too early to outline details, suggestions include workshops, short-film contests and collaborations with working filmmakers.

Pending approval from the University of Missouri Board of Curators, the documentary journalism curriculum will feature a lab in which students study the concepts and language of the craft, as well as courses that explore the history, production elements, advocacy and business models of the industry.

“We can't just have a hands-on, practical program,” says Kent Collins, BJ '70, associate professor of journalism. “We have a mission to extend good journalism — with all the best practices, best ethics, best storytelling techniques — into new worlds. We have a mission to see to it that important issues get the best possible explanations.”

The program will also employ three new faculty members, at least two of whom will be active filmmakers. On Feb. 24, Mizzou announced Stacey Woelfel would be the first director of the Jonathan B. Murray Center for Documentary Journalism at the MU School of Journalism. Woelfel, BJ '81, MA '90, PhD '06, has spent 24 years as news director at KOMU.

“There has always been a desire at Mizzou for students to do longer-form, in-depth reporting that doesn't necessarily run well in a newscast,” says Woelfel, previously an associate professor of broadcast journalism. “In some cases we've had people put together half-hour and one-hour programs that will air outside a newscast, and that's one way we have been able to serve that. This will be a chance not only to serve the students better but also to put together films that don't have to work around a TV station.”

Although reality TV made most of Murray's fortune, documentary filmmaking is his passion. He credits the J-School with providing a path — the main reason why he has invested so handsomely in Mizzou's future.

“We've seen in the past 20 years the entry level for producing documentary films come way down. You can make one on your phone and put it on YouTube,” Murray says. “The foundation I received at the J-School allowed me to build this wonderful career that I've had, and that's why I wanted to give something back.” **M**



† Murray arrived at Mizzou in 1975 looking for a journalism program that could match his ambition. He was a reporter and producer at KOMU-TV.