Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

CHERYL MCCALL INTERVIEW
LIFE TURNS 50
LIFE STORIES

Cheryl McCall, Journalist, Life Magazine
July 31, 1986
Total Running Time: 13 minutes and 5 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents
Cheryl McCall
Journalist, Life Magazine

00:00:07:00

CHERYL MCCALL:
There's a certain kind of photo essay that life magazine does that, and that it does better than any other kind of magazine, I think. And one of those was streets of the lost for me and for the photographer Mary Ellen Mark, which became a nine page photo essay on lives of runaways and how they survive on the streets of America. And it was one of those stories that obsessed us. Like Ethiopia, every journalist has 1 or 2 of these in their lives, I think, and it became such an obsession that we went back and developed it into a 90 minute documentary called streetwise that later went on to show around the country and get nominated for an Academy Award and whatever. And I think that really effectively was able to show, between the story and the film, the problem in America, the real social problem about runaway kids that people hadn't paid attention to before. The article and the movie tried to illustrate

how desperate the situation is on the streets, and how savage and and how incredibly depressing it is for an 11, 12, 13 year old child to have to turn to prostitution, to be able to eat, to have to sleep in abandoned buildings, to have to rummage through garbage bins to for a meal. In America today, that our children, a million of them, have to survive like this. How dangerous it is, the kind of fights and, the kind of crime. I mean, 38 of these kids have already been killed by an unknown serial killer there who is already got 38 of the teenage girls he's called the green River killer. I don't think people realize. And children didn't realize this was the important thing. The children thought it was romantic to run away, and they didn't realize what happened when you ran away. And, if anything pleases me, it's that the article and the film really brought that home to kids, that it's really not wonderful on the street. And I actually get a lot of letters from kids saying they won't run away now. So, you know, besides showing America the problem. And we I was able to show it before a Senate subcommittee that was having hearings on funding the Runaway Youth Act. I think the best other effect was that it kept children from running away, or really showed them the dangers that were there.

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INTERVIEWER:
Could you, in a summary sentence, tell me about the impact of running it in life or the movie itself? Just bridging the two and how important it was. Like no one paid attention to this before. And then as a result of this.

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CHERYL MCCALL:

The article and later the film had an incredible impact. We know from the the amount of letters we receive back, but we also know from the amount of reprints and how it's and the request to reprint it and use it in, in programs that deal with teenagers in schools, in legislatures where they're contemplating the problem. We're trying to vote, money for the problem. Then when the film opened, the impact was even greater. I mean, we showed up before a Senate subcommittee that was dealing with the runaway act. And I think and I know out of there some very good things came because some senators contacted me afterwards about getting it for every single high school in their state. They thought it should be mandatory. So I know that that something has come out of it, and I know that it's had an impact on kids, because kids are not running away because they've seen this film.

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INTERVIEWER:
So it seems no one paid attention to this problem before. The life article is.

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CHERYL MCCALL:
What made this article so special and powerful compared to other stories that have been done on Runaways is that they use models. We didn't use models. We went and lived on the streets with these kids for weeks and then months. From the the two things, the article in the film, we became so intimately involved in their lives, they trusted us, and we never betrayed the trust. And we were able to really set up an intimacy so that we could be right there, fly on the wall kind of journalism and see it all in here at all. And that's

what made it so different, because it's so real. And real reality is powerful. It's far more powerful than fiction.

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INTERVIEWER:
Is that typical of lives coverage, getting that involved.

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CHERYL MCCALL:
And I don't think it's typical of life's coverage generally to get that involved. I think it's typical for me to get that involvement, but I think that's why life wanted me to work for them, because I do bring them a certain kind of story, and I do bring them a certain kind of intensity, that they don't get. And as a result, they get a certain amount of rewards that they wouldn't get. So I think there's a trade off there somewhere.

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INTERVIEWER:
In the editor's note, they were describing how the story came about. They said, you say we're from life. Interesting about how kids survive on the street. I mean, it seems to me, these kids wouldn't even know what life magazine is.

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CHERYL MCCALL:
Oh, no kids. The kids know what life magazine is. I mean, that's it is amazing because life was not around for a couple of years, but I think everybody all over the world, I mean, I've been all over the world. They know life magazine.

Even illiterate people in Ethiopia have heard of life magazine or have seen that read logo. They know something you know about life magazine. And these kids immediately understood about life magazine, but that that didn't necessarily make them capitulated mean die to be in the article because we were threatened a lot was very dangerous. Pimps were threatening us because they thought we were gathering information on them and they could be prosecuted. I had a 357 Magnum held to my head for an hour in the back of a car while I was doing that story with, warning me not to talk to any of his girls. I was physically roughed up by some other people, you know, pushing me around, trying to keep me on the street. The cops didn't like that I was there and they tried to arrest us and harass us. It wasn't easy doing the story. It wasn't easy during the film. But, you know, that's that's part of the perils of the job.

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INTERVIEWER:
Well, it sounds like it's a little bit more than just a job. I mean, what makes you commit yourself to some spooks, putting yourself in that kind of danger?

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CHERYL MCCALL:
Insanity. You. Know, you get obsessed with a story. I mean, sometimes you can't let go, and and it's so important to you to show this that you will, you know, you blot out everything. You don't even see the dangers. You don't even contemplate how terrible it's going to be or how difficult it's going to be ahead of time. Mary Ellen and Mark, the photographer and I work the same way all the time. I think that's why we're such a good team. We don't stop at

5:00 for cocktails, you know, like a lot of teams that go out, we we work until two, three, four in the morning. Sometimes. Sometimes we're there 24 hours straight on the street because so much was happening, you know, with the night stuff that goes on in the day stuff and so forth. You just don't stop. You get kind of obsessed with it, and you really want to bring back the, the real slice of life. And so it requires you to be there all the time.

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INTERVIEWER:
You were very good when you were talking specifically about what this article in the movie was illustrating. If you could tell me a little bit more about the difference between the movie and the article.

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CHERYL MCCALL:
The most important thing about the film, in my view, was that the kids tell the story themselves and not have a narrator because I thought it was so powerful to hear out of their mouths kind of things that came out. They were so adult. I mean, to have Tony talking about having four different venereal diseases, and she's only 14 and she knows the name. She knew chlamydia. I had never even heard of chlamydia before. A new tiny, and, you know, gonorrhea and your kids are totally illiterate, but they can spell off these and the names of the drugs to treat them, you know, just everything. And how much money they get for a date. You know, their quote, dates, that kind of stuff is amazing. And to have that come out of a kid's mouth, I think has more impact than for me or anyone else to narrate it. So that was the big difference between the article and and the film.

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INTERVIEWER:
And how did the movie actually come about as a result of the article? You could just tell me.

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CHERYL MCCALL:
That, when the article came out, I got a lot of different phone calls from people who thought it would make a good documentary film, and they wanted me to help produce it or whatever. And the more I talked to them, various networks or whatever, I realized they would not do the film the way I wanted to do it, which was in in the kid's own words and have the kids do it, a real fly in the wall kind of cinema verité. I didn't want someone walking through, and so I decided to do it myself and, well, with Mary Ellen and, her husband, Martin.

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INTERVIEWER:
Is there anything else, any other points you want to make about the movie? Or just if you want to think for a second, anything else in terms of what the movie was trying to illustrate or any other editorial points that we could run, why are you seeing the clips of the movie? Because.

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CHERYL MCCALL:

Just the the danger of that kind of life and how damaging it is to our children, really affected me, and it affected Mary Ellen, and I hope it's affecting the rest of America as they see this film. Did you know to stand over the coffins of two of those children, as I have now and, expect to probably stand over the coffins of the other ones, and I'm twice their age is pretty hard. And to know that it's because we as a society haven't done anything to help them. And we've done what we could with the article and with the movie, but it's still not enough. One of the big questions many people ask is how did you gain their trust? The kids in street wise? How did you get so close to them? And it's not a question that you can easily answer. You can say, well, this I had, I did A, B, and C, I just know that I like those kids genuinely. And I think kids are very smart and they know whether you like them or not. I'm from a family of eight kids, and, I sort of know how to deal with kids. I may be one of the few human beings in the United States who likes teenagers, who really likes teenagers. And I think that they knew that. And we had a lot of rapport between us right away, because I understood their problems and where they were coming from. And I wasn't judgmental, and I wasn't looking down my nose at them. And because I really listened and I cared, very few people ever really listen or care about these kids. And I think that made a big difference.

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INTERVIEWER:
So. So this article was actually a lot different from the other articles in that regard.

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CHERYL MCCALL:

What other other articles that I've done or that other but.

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INTERVIEWER:
Which is not particularly on Runaways.

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CHERYL MCCALL:
Yeah, I think this article was very different from other articles that have run in other publications, because we didn't use models because we were so close to the kids, because there was a real rapport, and they couldn't, con me, you know, or, bullshit me at all because they knew that. I knew when they were telling me stuff like that. So, we said it. We established it right away, you know, a pretty good level of truth and trust. And we worked with it for months. And in fact, I still have it. I mean, many of these kids still call me all the time. I see them all the time. I'm out in Seattle, I'm in LA. I find them on the streets. It's amazing. I was in LA on another story cover, We Are the World and I'm driving of Hollywood Boulevard. And who the hell's on the strip? You know, there's tiny, you know, turning tricks. I go hollering her in and, you know, took her to a concert where Willie was playing to meet him. And so it's amazing. I run into them all the time, and, they stay in touch. They call all the time. Collect. You know, I send them postcards if I go away. So it's a it's a kind of story that you have for the rest of your life. You know, you've adopted a huge tribe and they're with you.

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INTERVIEWER:

But there isn't a happy ending on this tour. I mean, you told me that most of these kids are doing the same thing. Can you tell me about that?

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CHERYL MCCALL:
Yeah. There isn't a happy ending because society hasn't done anything really about it. The story can't change it. Society's got to change it. We can only make people aware of it and encourage more effective solutions, which is what we've done. But the kids, well, a couple of their lives have changed where they're off the street. Kim is off the street. Shelley's off the street. Two girls in the film. But the other kids, well, Lulu's dead and Duane's dead, and Patrice is in jail and rat. It was in jail for a long time and is now drifting somewhere. Shadow has been in and out of mental hospitals and jail and so forth, and he's back on the street and Patty and munchkin are still in the street. Except munchkin recently wrote me a letter that he's converted. He's become a Jesus, freak. And, you know, so they go through various changes, but none of them have the happy ending. They didn't end up with jobs at GM. No. You know, as executives or something.

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INTERVIEWER:
If you could talk about another Willie Nelson short film.

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CHERYL MCCALL:
When Willie Nelson agreed to let life come exclusively on location with him. We asked. I asked for a photographer who would not be obtrusive in any way,

who could get along with Willie because we'd be there 3 or 4 weeks. And they assigned Michael O'Brien, who turned out to be the perfect photographer, a real fly in the wall type of photographer who doesn't ask people to pose, doesn't get in the way, doesn't give orders, doesn't demand a lot of attention, doesn't demand a lot of ego stroking or anything like that. He's totally, together. And he also has a very wry sense of humor. And he's a very patient person, which is a real quality in a photographer. That's hard to find because when you're 14 hours a day waiting for the right shot or something to happen, you need patience. And Michael O'Brien was perfect.

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INTERVIEWER:
Five. That's it. It's perfect.

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