

New Moon Rising: An Interview With Alverno Alumnus, Janet Fitch Jennifer Kaufman

Documentary filmmaker, Janet Fitch, the President of Milwaukee's New Moon Productions, uses the power of film to inspire discussion and hopefully, change. The award-winning filmmaker calls herself a media activist, which she defines as, "staying away from the polarized ends of a story." Her films examine thorny issues like race relations and gun violence without ever pointing an accusing finger.

But before she was a documentary filmmaker, Janet Fitch was a Professional Communications and Philosophy major at Alverno College. Professional communications was a natural choice; she has been a communicator her entire life. Studying philosophy happened by default. She simply liked the various course requirements. Fitch, who graduated in 1995, chose Alverno because she knew it was a place where her voice would be heard. The Alverno culture treated her like a fully dimensional human being, not a number.

Fitch says two classes, General Semantics and Confronting Evil, were life changing. Both classes allowed her to strip away assumptions and bring a new understanding where she once held things firm.

Fitch says, "You may find yourself doing the same things (in life), but there is something very different how you do it." This idea, Fitch stresses, defines Alverno.

Fitch's use of Alverno's eight abilities did not disappear once she graduated from Alverno. All of them are important to her work as a filmmaker and they can't be isolated from each other. "Some you do more naturally," Fitch articulates, "but getting a balance is really important." Fitch juggles the abilities at New Moon Productions whether she is writing a grant to fund her work, presenting her films to civic and religious groups, or giving an interview to the local media. Fitch wants to tell Alverno students, "When you get your education, you really want to pay attention that those abilities go back out...you want to nurture it."

New Moon Productions may have never happened if Fitch hadn't taken a semester abroad to study women in European politics for an Alverno women's studies course. She had very little background on this issue so she had to really immerse herself in the research of this topic. She studied history, read biographies, and interviewed women involved European politics. She loved every aspect of this project. "It just stood out like a diamond." She recalls tracking down these women and hearing their stories, "They were so alive to me."

This project inspired her while she was studying mass communications as a graduate student at UW-Milwaukee. She says she started seeing pictures in her head that were like mini movies and she got an internship at a local production company. She later co-produced a documentary that she used as her master's thesis. The documentary,

"Through One City's Eyes: Race Relations in the Heartland", got her the recognition and financial help to go out on her own. She says what she did during her semester abroad, the research, interviewing, and studying, is very similar to goes into making a documentary film.

New Moon Productions, whose homey location is nestled in Milwaukee's Brewer's Hill, is currently working on the third installment of the three-part series "Guns, Grief, and Grace in America."

The first installment, "Dear Rita", portrays a Milwaukee family and community devastated by the shooting death of a young child.

The second installment, "The Promise of America", which was filmed at the Million Mom March in Washington D.C., portrays how gunfire is affecting us as a nation.

The third installment will examine gun violence at the state level. Fitch wants "Guns, Grief, and Grace in America", to be used as a catalyst to see gun violence not as a second amendment issue, but as a public health issue. "This affects all people, crosses all lines of humanity," Fitch says. She wants people who see these films to question how we, as a country can come to grips with this issue. "Questioning," Fitch offers, "is a good thing."

However, Fitch also wants to encourage her Alverno sisterhood to believe in themselves.

"Trust yourself. Behave in a way that allows you to trust yourself," Fitch advises, "Don't compromise anything that would make you doubt yourself...and believe in others. Know you are wonderful and so are others."

Fitch can't imagine anyone leaving Alverno without being profoundly changed in both the way she looks at the world and the way she looks at herself. With her Alverno education and New Moon Productions, Fitch feels she has come to exactly where she should be, "...I am so much more competent than I was...and fearless."

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