

#chicagoGirl

THE SOCIAL NETWORK TAKES ON A DICTATOR

Directed by Joe Piscatella

74 minutes

DCP

HDCAM 16x9

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND MATERIALS PLEASE GO TO:

www.ChicagoGirlFilm.com

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

From her childhood bedroom in the Chicago suburbs, an American teenage girl uses social media to coordinate the revolution in Syria. Armed with Facebook, Twitter, Skype and cameraphones, she helps her social network "on the ground" in Syria brave snipers and shelling in the streets to show the world the human rights atrocities of a dictator. But just because the world can see the violence doesn't mean the world can help. As the revolution rages on, everyone in the network must decide what is the most effective way to fight a dictator: social media or AK-47s.

LONG SYNOPSIS

From her childhood bedroom in suburban Chicago, Ala'a, a 19-year-old American girl coordinates the revolution in Syria. Through Facebook, Twitter and Skype, she coordinates protests for Aous, a dental student in Damascus, Bassel, a film student from Syracuse who returned home to Syria after the revolution began, and a score of citizen journalists in Homs. It's Revolution 2.0. Tunisia fell in 28 days when a cell phone video went viral. Egypt fell in 18 days in a revolution sparked by a Facebook post. Why not Syria?

At first, Ala'a helps organize demonstrations for her social network in Syria. Because Syria is rife with government informants, Ala'a helps decide the protest route and the escape routes. She helps small groups of protestors link up so that they can stage giant protests. Six thousand miles away from Damascus, Ala'a is out of the regime's reach. But her social network isn't. As government forces and snipers infiltrate crackdown on protestors and dictator Bashar al-Assad institutes a media blackout to prevent the world from seeing brutality on the ground, Ala'a and her network are forced to change tactics.

Using their cameraphones and digital cameras, Aous, Bassel, Aous and the citizen journalists devise an intricate system to show the world the truth of what's happening in their home country. Someone in the network takes a video and uploads it to YouTube. Ala'a, in her bedroom outside Chicago, downloads the video, blurs faces, subtitles in English and sends it to news organizations around the world where it becomes "breaking news."

Ala'a and her social network help keep Syria at the forefront of the world news. But after dictator Bashar al-Assad bombs the city of Homs, killing thousands of his own people, the videos take on a new meaning. They are cries for help to outside countries, to the Red Cross, to the UN, to foreign nations, to please come help Syria.

While Ala'a and her network are able to show the world in real time the horrors on the ground, that doesn't mean that the world can help in real time. After the UN fails to intervene, Ala'a and her network question their effectiveness in the revolution.

Aous decides to put down his cameraphone and pick up an AK-47 and join the Free Syrian Army. Bassel decides to stay with his camera. He sneaks back into Homs and using what he learned at Syracuse film school, he trains other citizen journalists in how to more effectively film human rights atrocities to be used as war crimes evidence after the regime does finally fall. Bassel pays the ultimate price when he's killed by a mortar shell while filming in the streets with his students.

Feeling helpless from 6000 miles away, Ala'a decides to sneak into Syria to bring badly needed supplies to those in her social network.

The film is dedicated to Bassel Shahade, the cameraman in the film who lost his life showing the world what is really happening in Syria.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I faced two major challenges when I set out in early 2011 to make **#chicagoGirl**. The first was overcoming background. I write talking animal movies. That's my niche in Hollywood. I had to jump from an imaginary world of talking dogs into a very real world where my subjects were facing death on a daily basis, where I had to orchestrate smuggling cameras into war-torn Syria and coordinate smuggling out hard drives of footage.

The second challenge was to make a difficult subject matter accessible to an audience. In a world of 24 hour news, Facebook newsfeeds, YouTube and Twitter feeds, we're inundated with graphic images coming out of places like Syria. I wanted to find stories that put a human face on the story. In searching for subjects to follow, I came across a blurb in a small American newspaper about a 19-year-old American girl in Chicago, Ala'a Basatneh, who had received a death threat from the Syrian on her Facebook Wall for online work she had done for the revolution.

I found Ala'a on Facebook and in our initial phone call she abruptly said, "You're asking me all the wrong questions." I was taken aback. I was the director of this film. How would she know what questions I should be asking? Then she told me that from her childhood bedroom in suburban Chicago, she was one of the major coordinators of the Syrian revolution.

Two days later, my producer, Mark Rinehart, and I flew to Chicago and watched her in action. Using Facebook, Twitter and Google maps, she organized a protest for her social network in Damascus. I knew we had our core story.

Through Ala'a, I connected with people "on the ground" in her social network. I was floored by their passion and their innovativeness. I used social media and the internet to look up old friends and get the best deal on sneakers. Ala'a and her social network were using these tools to overthrow a government.

#chicagoGirl is about more than the new tools of revolution. It's about the people who are now enabled by the new tools to make a difference in the world.

--Joe Piscatella

ALA'A'S BIO

Only being a college student, Alaa Basatneh has accomplished things way beyond her years. Along with studying and working part time at a school in the city, Basatneh has gained a distinguished honor globally in the political world. Whether she is attending high level meetings, meeting with congressmen and/or Foreign Affairs Ministers for Iraq, Morocco, Japan, UAE, UK and Italy regarding political issues, or Secretary Hilary Clinton, she is still just a student as well as someone's daughter.

Furthermore, Alaa Basatneh has kept up with her educational goals while traveling around the world for these meetings. Having a good education is still her number one priority. Basatneh has not let the honor and esteem from these meetings affect her. Volunteering is something she has done ever since she was 14 years old.

Most importantly, Basatneh is very proud of her culture and her past, even teaching Arabic to a class of 36 students alone at a community center. Building a bridge between the Arab World and the United States of America is her ultimate goal. Majoring in political science and gaining experience from these meetings is her way of helping others see the universal connection between us all.

Alaa Basatneh has been featured in several newspapers, including the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times. Basatneh is the main character of a Hollywood documentary that will be on air in the upcoming months. Balancing her political activism, education, work, volunteering, and personal life is positively challenging. However, nothing is impossible for this young girl.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

#chicagoGirl was shot over the course of two years. Shooting took place in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Washington, DC, San Francisco, Damascus and Homs.

For domestic shoots, DPs shot on a Canon 7D and a Canon 5D.

For shoots in Syria, a Canon 7D and an iPhone 4 were smuggled in.

All Syria footage was smuggled out on three hard drives over the course of the first 18 months of the revolution.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

DIRECTOR/WRITER/PRODUCER – Joe Piscatella

Joe Piscatella has written on numerous film and television projects. His screen credits include Disney's *UNDERDOG*, *OZZY & DRIX* for Warner Bros. and *STARK RAVING MAD* for NBC. He has written television pilots for 20th Century Fox and Touchstone Television and has also done production rewrites on acclaimed animated movies for Dreamworks Animation and Sony Animation.

#chicagoGirl is his directorial debut and his first documentary film.

PRODUCER – MARK RINEHART

Mark Rinehart is an Emmy-nominated producer and director whose network credits include programming for Travel, Oprah Winfrey Network, and Current Television. He produced "Decoding Deepak" (a feature film on the relationship between Gotham and Deepak Chopra). While at Current Television, Mark developed and executive produced the critically acclaimed "Embedded" music series. In-depth profiles of artists ranging from Common to Ben Harper earned the show positive reviews in Rolling Stone and Billboard magazine. He directed the pilot episode that featured Mos Def's recent tour of Japan. Mark also executive produced the Emmy-nominated "TV Free Burningman" flagship series. Prior to his tenure at Current, he produced multiple episodes of the PBS series "Spark". His short film "Jumpers" premiered at SXSW and screened in multiple festivals including Silverdocs and San Francisco International. He received an MA in documentary film from Stanford University.

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN SYRIA – BASSEL SHAHADE

Bassel was a 28-year-old Fulbright Scholar in the graduate film program at Syracuse University. When the revolution in Syria began, Bassel took a leave of absence from Syracuse and returned to Damascus to film the historic events in his home city. He was

one of the first protestors to take to the streets in Damascus and used his worldwide social network to bring awareness to human rights violations in Syria. In May 2012, Bassel snuck into war-torn Homs to train citizen journalists in how to more effectively film in the streets. Bassel was killed by Syrian government forces while filming with his students. Bassel's credits include the short films, CHRISTMAS IN HOMS and SATURDAY MORNING GIFT.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Paul Belger

Field Sound

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