

CC grads' film trails president of Liberia

[ANDREW WINEKE](#)

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When Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was inaugurated as Liberia's first freely elected female president in 2006, two Colorado College grads were there, capturing what became a watershed event for the PBS documentary "Iron Ladies of Liberia."

"I met the president between her election and her inauguration," said Henry Ansbacher, who produced the documentary. "I presented the idea to her and I don't think she knew quite what she was getting into."

Johnson Sirleaf agreed to allow the filmmakers to follow her for two weeks. They ended up filming for nearly a year.

"We tried to convince her that the first year of her administration would be a document for history," said Daniel Junge, the film's director.

Junge and Ansbacher both graduated from CC in 1992. They first teamed up for the film "Chiefs," a documentary about the role of basketball on Wyoming's Wind River Indian Reservation, which was also shown on PBS and won best documentary at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2002.

Ansbacher founded the documentary film company Just Media in Denver after the success of "Chiefs."

Going from Wyoming to Liberia is a stretch, but Ansbacher knew Johnson Sirleaf through a family connection and believed her election, which came after 14 years of civil war in Liberia, was an important story.

Still, neither Ansbacher nor Junge had any experience or background in Liberia.

They recruited Siatta Scott Johnson, a Liberian journalist, as co-director, and Jonathan Stack, director of "Liberia: An Uncivil War," as co-producer.

"In a way, it was easy because we were in the president's back pocket," Junge said. "It's not like we landed in Liberia and were looking for a story. We were really handed this amazing story."

Often, Americans hear nothing but hopeless and depressing news from Africa, so Junge and Ansbacher said it is rewarding to have a success story to share.

"I think in many ways this is one of the most positive and hopeful stories to come out of Africa since the end of apartheid," Ansbacher said. "It's also very relevant that our country is poised to possibly elect a female president."

The filmmakers shot nearly 400 hours of footage of Johnson Sirleaf and her cabinet, then pieced together their story line back in Denver.

"We were really trying to capture everything we could over there and then make sense of it on this end," Junge said.

Judge the results for yourself at 9 p.m. Tuesday when "Iron Ladies of Liberia" airs on PBS' "Independent Lens."

'City Kidders'

Closer to home, the city of Colorado Springs has a new, bimonthly program aimed at children, "City Kidders." The program, aimed at elementary schoolers, airs at 9:30 a.m. daily on Springs TV, Comcast Channel 18, and can also be viewed on the Internet at www.springsgov.com.

In the first 15-minute episode, 6-year-old Tyra Marlar interviews councilwoman Jan Martin. There's also a segment from the fire department on smoke detectors and a presentation from the police department on bullies.

Devra Ashby, "City Kidders" producer, said the city has wanted to do a children's program for a long time.

"I thought we could do something like this that would be kind of like a 'Sesame Street,' so they learn civic processes and learn what the city does for them," Ashby said.

Future programs will cover topics that include storm drainage safety, vandalism and the importance of wearing elbow and knee pads.

CONTACT THE WRITER: 636-0275 or awineke@gazette.com