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Chico Colvard's
cinematic journey into his
family's heart of darkness

BY JANE WHITEHEAD

movie

CHICO DAVID COLVARD '01 is an independent filmmaker. It's taken him years to get used to saying that aloud. But since his wrenchingly personal first documentary, *Family Affair*, premiered at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival in January and was acquired by the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), he's coming to terms with the label, he said, speaking by telephone from the Somerville studio where he was making last minute minor edits.

Family Affair tells the story of a childhood accident and its long aftermath. Described by OWN CEO Christina Norman as "a multi-layered, raw, and provocative family story," the film is a history of violence, sexual abuse, betrayal, loyalty, and survival. *Family Affair* is the first film chosen for the OWN Documentary Film Club, founded to showcase real life stories of self-discovery and transformation.

Ten-year-old Chico Colvard was pretending to be his TV hero, Rifleman, when he accidentally shot his older sister Paula in the leg with one of the military rifles his father kept in the house. "There's nothing about that day that was real," says Colvard, now 42, in voiceover on a trailer on the film's website, www.c-linefilms.com. "I do remember that I was downstairs in the family room watching *Rifleman*. It was make-believe. I don't remember pulling the trigger." The gun-



BC LAW ALUM CHICO COLVARD

shot was deafening. But the sound was nothing compared with the decades of emotional fallout that the accident would detonate.

Rushed screaming to the hospital, terrified that she was going to die from her injuries, Paula disclosed to her mother and then the police that her father had been sexually abusing her and two sisters for years. Colvard's father was arrested, found guilty of sexual assault in the first degree, and sent to a minimum-security prison on Valentine's Day, 1979. With husband,

income, and health insurance all gone, Colvard's mother was unable to keep the family together on food stamps and what she could earn as a seamstress, and the children were separated and sent to foster homes or to live with relatives.

Looking back on what he calls "the crisis of disorder" that overtook their lives, Colvard sets his family tragedy in a wider social context of racism and domestic violence. At the time of the accident, the family was living in Radcliff, Kentucky, near Fort Knox, after a peripatetic life on US army bases in Germany and the US. Colvard's African-American soldier father, raised in the segregated south of Georgia, had met his German-Jewish mother when he was stationed in Germany, in 1959. They married at a time when so-called anti-miscegenation laws still applied in many American states.



Colvard sees his mother—a white woman married to a black man, a foreigner who could barely speak English—as a vulnerable figure, isolated and friendless. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he grew up watching TV shows like *The Honey-mooners* and *I Love Lucy*, in which “women being slapped around” was part of the comedy. “That’s the environment in which my father began to physically abuse my mother,” he said.

After a troubled adolescence marked by minor vandalism, truancy, and time in a juvenile correctional facility, Colvard took a turn for the better when he was accepted at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. There, he took film and video classes, always with the goal of using the media to shed light on social justice issues. At BC Law, he gravitated to the Juvenile Rights Advocacy Project, headed by Professor Francine Sherman. But economics ruled out juvenile justice as a career path. “I was very focused, and at the same time I needed to pay my bills,” he said.

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As a first-year associate working in corporate litigation at the Boston offices of Brown Rudnick, Colvard joined Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts. He helped independent producer/director Lucia Small secure music rights for her documentary portrait of her estranged father, visionary architect Glen Howard Small, *My Father, The Genius*, (2001). “It was the highlight of my day to be somewhat connected to that moving image world,” he said.

When Brown Rudnick let him go after eighteen months, Colvard took the opportunity to move “towards the thing I wanted to do.” While teaching courses in race, law, and media at UMass-Boston part-time, he began the eight-year-long process of excavating and retelling the story of his family’s history of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and its long afterlife.

“When I started this project, I didn’t know I was making a ‘documentary,’” wrote Colvard in his Director’s Statement for the film’s Sundance publicity package. “It felt more like I was lawyering with a camcorder: gathering eyewitness testimony, preparing evidence and arguments to present later at trial.” He set out to indict his father, but soon realized that the story had many other dimensions. He had not been in touch with his father for 15 years when, at a Thanksgiving gathering in 2002, he was shocked to see that the man who had abused his daughters was still emphatically a part of their families, welcomed into their homes. “Why were my sisters and others accommodating this man,

who did these terrible things?” became the question that shaped his narrative.

As the hours of filmed interviews accumulated, over years of painful conversations with his sisters, parents, and other relatives, Colvard reached the point at which he knew he had to commit to the documentary project. In late 2008, award-winning documentary film producer Liz Garbus, co-founder of the independent production company Moxie Firecracker, Inc., was so impressed by footage from Colvard’s work in progress that she arranged a meeting and told him she wanted to help him finish the film and get it out into the world. “I was incredibly impressed with the graceful and masterful way Chico walked the difficult tightrope of filmmaker and film subject,” Garbus wrote in an email message. “Chico allows the story to unfold like a mystery, a journey into the past and its ripple effects on the present, which keeps viewers engaged through some difficult territory,” she said.

With Garbus on board, Colvard built an impres-

sive team, including Emmy-award-winning editor Rachel J. Clark, and Executive Producers Dan Cogan and Abigail Disney. Even with such support, the transition to full-time filmmaking has been unnerving: “Your film becomes a business, and that’s the very unsexy side,” said Colvard. “You’re either going to succeed or fail in a very public way. And it’s terrifying.”

Colvard hopes that *Family Affair* will not be pigeonholed as an “incest” film, and believes that the story will resonate with anyone “who’s found him or herself making accommodations for a parent who was abusive, neglectful, or harmful in some way.” Garbus agrees. “Ultimately, the film is a universal one about family, and the longing for our parents, despite the most grave trespasses,” she said.

Even following the limited exposure of the film so far, Colvard has been deluged by people calling and emailing to share their own stories of parental betrayal and abuse. “There are so many grown people who’re still grappling with these issues,” he said. “The film gives people permission to talk about it.” Thanks to its acquisition by OWN, *Family Affair* is set to reach a mass audience. But the most important reward for Colvard is that “this project be accessible to women like my sisters.”

Family Affair will be shown at film festivals nationwide in the coming months. For a full schedule, see www.c-linefilms.com.

Jane Whitehead is a regular contributor.