

Alumni/ae Profiles

Barney Elliott '88

When asked how my Trevor experience influenced the person I am today, the answer is actually unequivocal: in every way.

I attended Trevor from Kindergarten through eighth grade. Because I had multiple learning disabilities, school was difficult for me. I became adept at pretending that I just wasn't interested. But no matter how disruptive I was, Trevor faculty always focused on my strengths: what I *could* be good at, rather than what I *should* be good at. Thank you, faculty.

Miraculously, I found that I could control my chaotic behavior through self-expression. Almost every year I had a lead part in the school play. Singing, dancing, performing of any sort...you name it, I was up for it. Finally, the attention and recognition I longed for came my way, as I was not only accepted but appreciated. I learned to play the piano, recorder, trombone, and drums, and also gravitated to early hip-hop, soul, break dancing, and the grandmaster of all street instruments, the beat-box.

Amongst all these creative outlets that I encountered at Trevor, I eventually stumbled upon a form of expression that was for me more internal, more delicate, and certainly the most humbling. Creative writing was my salvation, and it chose me. For the first time, homework wasn't a chore.

During college, I continued playing the guitar and piano while taking a slew of courses that didn't work for me. Oceanography sounds cool, but, then again, so does bungee jumping. After two years of mind-expanding electives, I knew I needed something new. Before long I was traveling the country as a water-filter salesman. For nearly three years I struggled to survive in a setting where everyone thought I was nuts. I was never nuts; I was just doing what felt right. One thing I can say for sure: I was eventually bored with sales.

In an attempt to pull myself out of a rut, I found myself in a course called *LIGHT: The Art and Technique of Filmmaking*, and haven't looked back since. In 1997 I took a module at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts called *Sight and Sound*. We made five short films in six weeks, all shot on 16mm reversal film. By week 3 you were cutting week 2's film, shooting week 3's film, and writing week 4's film. I was hooked...and still am today.

I graduated from the University of San Francisco in May 2000 and high-tailed my way to the London Film School. For three years I learned how movies are made from some of Europe's greatest professionals and tried all facets of the process. We also had the opportunity to use Panavisions, the Rolls Royce of cameras, to shoot on 35mm formats—a thrilling experience for a student!

TOP: Barney Elliott in advertisement for the London Film School master's degree program; BOTTOM: The author on the red carpet at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival; RIGHT: Cover for *Oliver's Deal*.



At this point, I truly began to understand the power and the finesse of editing. Looking back as a director, I understand how I was intuitively drawn to the cutting room floor, in my humble opinion the greatest place for a director-in-the-making to study “character.” When you see the same take a hundred times, you learn so much about the actor’s character, mannerisms...his person. It’s true that the editor is the actor’s best friend. Go to a wrap party or, for that matter, any place where the actors and film editors mingle. Actors schmooze editors. They know what’s up.

In 2004, I opened a production company with a schoolmate. As the technical director, I was in charge of shooting and editing. I tried millions of things and confirmed that directing was my true calling. This was scary because, as an editor, I could always get work, but directing...well, the odds are even less than making it as a professional musician or actor. Nevertheless, I had to face the fact that this was for real. I had to make a film.

In May 2006, I wrote and directed my first professional short film. *True Colours* premiered in January 2007 in Premiers Plans, a respected international film festival in Angers, France. The short won Best Actor In A Short Film and the coveted Special Jury Prize. Winning a few Euros and receiving recognition was nice, but by far and away the best part of it was knowing: *I can actually do this. This is possible!*

True Colours played in nearly 90 international festivals, won prizes and put me on the map. I was invited to apply to the Cannes Film Festival’s prestigious five-month residency for film writers in Paris. Many apply, twelve are flown over for interviews, six are selected. I was lucky. While there, I wrote the early drafts of my first feature script, *Oliver’s Deal*. Since

then, the Cannes Film Festival has been enormously supportive, helping facilitate this project, and has continued to open doors for me.

The following year, I was accepted into a five-month writers’ workshop at Amsterdam’s Binger Filmlab, which offered the highest-level institutional training I’ve ever had. The Binger Filmlab did more than just teach me to write in a way I don’t believe I would otherwise have discovered; it taught me to think in a way which, in turn, changed my approach to the creative process. What a place!

Today I live in Lima, Peru, with my wife Valeria, the love of my life (and also a filmmaker). After three years of full-time work and support from the Binger Filmlab, I’ve completed my final draft of *Oliver’s Deal*. We aim to shoot in February 2011 in New York and Peru. I have also just finished editing *Último Recurso (Last Resort)*, my second professional short film (and my first Spanish film) in Lima, and am hoping to complete the work in time for the Sundance Film Festival’s submission deadline.

I am comfortable saying that Trevor gave me exactly what I needed at the time I was most vulnerable. Trevor cultivated my strengths and also helped me acknowledge and understand my weaknesses. Trevor pushed me to trust my intuition instead of teaching me how to get an “A.” And through these lessons, I’ve learned that there is a spirit inside me that has purposefully chosen this body, this machine, this me—all in the name of exploring this physical world. Of course I’ve been confused at times, but everything to date tells me we are here to learn. And regardless of life’s perpetual traps, obstacles, and hurdles that can force me to question myself, somehow I manage to stay the course and ward off the ever-so-tempting dark side of the “rational.” For this I am endlessly grateful because it has kept me true to myself. I like who I have become...most of the time. Thank you for helping me do this, Trevor. Really...thank you!

Name: Barney Elliott ’88

Number of years spent as a Trevor student: Nine years

Best Trevor memory: I really have so many. But if I had to pick one, I think it was when Atari staged a cattle call casting for a commercial for their new video game; it had 64 kb of processing power, cutting edge at the time. They set up shop in the Upper School: “Lights, camera, action!” They asked questions that I don’t remember, but I do know that I was one excited little buck-toothed cat. Six weeks later, I was at the tail end of their nationally televised commercial. There I was, seersucker and side part, dropping knowledge...for any corporate executive building an “educational” campaign on its new product, that is: “It teaches you E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G.”

Trevor taught me: Follow my intuition

Current Occupation: Filmmaker

