

## Cinematographer Andrew Droz Palermo documents struggle, life in Rich Hill

By [Allie Hinga](#)

February 25, 2013 | 6:00 a.m. CST



Filmmaker Andrew Droz Palermo is working on a film based in Missouri called "Rich Hill" about a dying town 70 miles south of Kansas City. Droz Palermo had two films featured in the 2013 Sundance Film Festival. ; [Whitney Hayward](#)

COLUMBIA — On a Wednesday in early February, Andrew Droz Palermo was standing in a high school principal's office in the southwest Missouri town of Rich Hill.

The principal and a teenage boy were arguing. The young man had missed several days of school during the semester, and when he did show up, he frequently cut out in the middle of the day.

<b>MoreStory</b>
<b>Related Media</b>

Today, he wanted to go home. The principal was pressing him to stay.

Eventually, the teen put his head against the door, took a moment to think and left the building. Droz Palermo followed, an ultra-HD



Filmmaker Andrew Droz Palermo grew up in Jefferson City and is currently working on a documentary in southwest Missouri called "Rich Hill." Droz Palermo had two films featured in the 2013 Sundance Film Festival, "A Teacher" and "Black Metal."

videocamera perched on his shoulder.

This was one of many stops in Rich Hill for the filmmaker during the past year. He is documenting four teenage boys struggling to come of age in a small, hard-luck town, despite difficult backgrounds.

After a career in music videos, shorts and feature films, "Rich Hill" is Droz Palermo's first documentary. In January, he received a grant during this year's Sundance Film Festival to help him finish the project.

This week, his cinematography plays a part in the [True/False Film Fest](#). He shot a portion of the footage for a short film, "Dear Valued Guests," which will be shown before screenings of "Village at the End of the World."

"Dear Valued Guests" follows a group of artists who move into the Regency Hotel just before its demolition to turn the fifth floor into an art and performance space. It also tells the stories of a resident of the hotel and an employee, said the film's co-director Paul Sturtz.

In "Rich Hill," Droz Palermo wants to tell stories about people who battle the odds to find hope in often withering circumstances.

So far, he has shot more than 350 hours of footage about the four boys and their families. When it's finished, the film will cover 18 months of their lives.

"This small town is emblematic of small towns all across the United States, lots of dying small towns," he said.

"There's a lot of focus on urban poverty in documentary, and there should be. But I don't think there's been a whole lot of really interesting rural poverty stories."

### **Finding a story that needs to be told**

Droz Palermo has lived in Columbia since 2009, and every month, he spends about a week in Rich Hill, logging 12-hour days behind the camera.

He follows his subjects everywhere. Some days, he knocks on their doors before they're even out of bed. He often returns at night, just before they go to sleep.

He rides their buses, walks their school hallways, spends evenings watching television, always with his camera rolling.

When he's not observing, he's filming interviews while his co-director, Tracy Droz Tragos, asks the questions. Most sessions focus on his subjects and their families, but the two have cast a wide net. They've talked to at least 30 people — police officers, librarians, town leaders, the mayor, teachers, grocery store cashiers.

The two co-directors began filming in December 2011 and hope to finish this summer. They have funded "Rich Hill" with their own money and also received help in the form of donations from more than 20 friends and family members.

Two grants, one from the [Sundance Institute](#) and another from the [Pacific Pioneer Fund](#), have netted them an additional five-figure stash to continue production.

### **Droz Palermo's connections to community run deep**

Droz Palermo's mother grew up in Rich Hill, and his grandmother and great-grandmother taught at the local school.

Jerry Pfeifer, who lives in Nevada, Mo., and reports for Rich Hill's weekly paper, finds it representative of many small Midwestern towns. A Mennonite community lies just outside the city limits, and he often sees buggies driving the town roads.

Two parks and a few baseball fields give families a wholesome outlet. A train track runs through the heart of downtown, and locomotives pass through several times a day.

A coal mine used to dominate the town's industry, but it closed in the early 1900s, and the town's population has declined ever since, Pfeifer said.

In 1900, the town had about 4,000 residents, [according to the U.S. Census](#). By [2010, the number had dwindled to about 1,400](#).

Pfeifer describes Rich Hill as a town that struggles, certainly, but is not dying. A percentage of the residents have low-income backgrounds, but he wouldn't call the town impoverished.

The struggles are apparent, but so is progress — a growing group of younger people are working to better the place. The town has begun city-level street projects, and the school board recently approved the construction of a new gym for the school.

There is a lot of enthusiasm for rekindling community spirit. [In 2012, the Los Angeles Times reported that a pie at the community's Fourth of July celebration sold for \\$3,100](#).

"On the surface, it looks dying, but it's not," Pfeifer said.

He said some people are worried that the film will focus on a few negative subjects and miss the bigger picture.

"I hope that enough of the backdrop is that you really see Rich Hill and not the struggles of the few," he said.

After spending so much time in the town, Droz Palermo says he would never want to show the town in a bad light. Ultimately, he wants viewers to see that many of the difficulties his subjects face happen in every town.

"We're not trying to make a film about Rich Hill," he said. "We're trying to make a film about people."

### **Driven, motivated, constantly working**

Born in Columbia and raised in Jefferson City, Droz Palermo studied graphic design at [Columbia College Chicago](#). After finishing his degree in 2007, he traveled with the band White Rabbits for almost two years, shooting footage for his first film.

Then his apartment in Brooklyn, N.Y., was robbed, and he lost everything.

Instead of ending his career, the loss emboldened him. He moved back to Columbia and filmed a video for the band's song "Percussion Gun" in 2009, launching his professional career.

He stayed in Columbia after that, working at Cafe Berlin while creating a short called "A Face Fixed." He quit his job in 2011 to shoot his first feature film, "You're Next," for director Adam Wingard.

The horror movie has since been purchased by Lionsgate and is scheduled for theatrical release in August, he said.

"If it's released in as many theaters as they said initially, I'd be able to go see it in Jefferson City, my hometown, at the theater that I went to growing up, which would just be so bizarre," he said.

He's since been a cinematographer for a number of short films and feature films. He has also directed several music videos, including one for the band Believers. Wesley Powell and his brother Tyler, the founding members of the band, composed the music for "A Face Fixed" and will compose for "Rich Hill."

They shot the music video around Columbia, filming from the open door of an old moving 15-passenger van at one point.

"He's pretty driven, like he's very motivated, and it seems like he's constantly working," Wesley said.

"It's motivating, being around somebody who's so driven, and leads me to want to be productive in a similar vein."

### **Bringing ideas to life**

Droz Palermo was the cinematographer for two films featured at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival.

"A Teacher" portrays the downward spiral of a woman in Austin, Texas, who has an affair with a student. Droz Palermo worked with director Hannah Fidell, It was their third project together.

"He's very collaborative, and he's my right-hand man," she said. "I don't know what I would do without him."

The second film, "Black Metal," is a nine-minute chronicle of a singer in a metal band whose music is linked to a murder.

He shot for director Kat Candler, whom he met at the South by Southwest Film Festival about a year ago when both had short films on the same program.

Droz Palermo introduced himself to Candler afterward and said he wanted to work with her. So she said she went home, researched his work and fell in love with it.

When Candler decided to create "Black Metal," Droz Palermo was the first person she approached. He flew to Austin to help bring the idea to life. Shooting began after a few long days of pre-production.

At one point, Droz Palermo, two actors and a camera were crammed into Candler's tiny bathroom to shoot a scene. The characters held a conversation while Droz Palermo filmed from the corner.

"He's just really great with actors in terms of being in these tight, cramped quarters and really capturing the humanity of the performances with a very gentle hand behind the camera," Candler said.

### **Art, but also entertainment**

Later this year, Droz Palermo plans to direct "One & Two," a movie he co-wrote with his friend Neima Shahdadi. This will be the first time someone else shoots his film, and he said he hopes it signals a move toward more directing gigs.

The story follows a brother and sister who discover their friendship allows them to teleport. It explores some of his favorite themes, such as family relationships and faith, but it is not intended to be intellectual.

"It seems like a lot of artists or art filmmakers or indie filmmakers just want to make stuff that's art for art's sake," he said. "But to me, movies are entertaining, and even if they're challenging, there's still some factor of entertainment in there."

In "Rich Hill," the co-directors must wrestle with heavy subjects of poverty and personal trauma without leaving an audience feeling hopeless.

"It can't be just a document of poor people," he said. "It needs to do something, in our mind."

"I feel like it would be hugely exploitative if we just flew in, filmed these people and left."

*Supervising editor is [Jeanne Abbott](#).*