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Production Workflow for Investigation Discovery's The Shift Following Indianapolis Homicide Cops with a Stripped-Down Shooting Style

By Bryant Frazer

January 13, 2010 Source: Film & Video

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The highest-rated program on Investigation Discovery is The Shift, a reality show about homicide investigations in Indianapolis, IN. Footage is captured on location by a mere two shooters who double and triple as producers and directors, wielding Sony HVR-Z1U HDV cameras with Sennheiser shotgun mics. The tapes are then edited and finished at Mega Playground in New York City. Film & Video asked executive producer Kathleen Minton and supervising producer Pauline Mason to talk a little more about the concept and execution behind small-footprint reality TV.

Film & Video: How did this show evolve, and why were you drawn to this subject?

Kathleen Minton: This show initially came about because I knew one of the homicide detectives featured in The Shift, Christine Mannina. I had done a feature documentary on her years ago, and that was showcased on Oxygen. It turned out great, and I knew that I wanted to work with her again. She's just fabulous. She's very dynamic, and she's a warm, wonderful person. Over the course of getting to know her, we realized she worked with a number of equally great people in her homicide unit. And we thought, wouldn't it be great if we could build a show around this amazing group of detectives with a great solve rate and a passion for the work that they do — in particular, a passion for justice.

Indianapolis was very welcoming to us, including the chief of police, in allowing us to tell the story of these detectives in an open and honest way and to show what the work involves from the detectives' point of view. We wanted to embed ourselves with them so that we really get to know them as people, personalities, and characters, not only over the course of an investigation, but over the length and breadth of the series. Doing a homicide show is really hard, just because it's about homicide. So we wanted to showcase the good work of the detectives. Yes, they get frustrated, it's a difficult job. But at the end, their passion speaks to anyone.

F&V: What was it like pitching the show to the police in Indianapolis? Did you have a lot of explaining to do in terms of your intentions?

Pauline Mason: They were very receptive, mainly because we had worked with Christine Mannina before. They knew the kind of work that we did, and they knew that we were going to portray them in the best light possible. Christine was our entree into the IMPD, but they really believed that it improved the morale of the detectives to have a show like this. The detectives love it — they're recognized a lot on the street.

F&V: So you embedded a production team with the police. It's a two-person team — is that one camera and one sound?

KM: No, it's two cameras that also operate sound. They are producer/director/shooters. They do it all.

PM: They show up at the office every day at 2 p.m., when all the detectives show up, and work until 10 p.m. But if there is a homicide, they follow that homicide and work with the detective leading the homicide until whatever hour of the night or morning. So they're on call for new homicides, and they're also following developments in older ones.

KM: We don't want to interfere with the detectives' work in any way. We're very much a fly on the wall, as unobtrusive as possible. That was always the goal.

F&V: Did that impact your decision to shoot with the Sony Z1U, a small HDV camera?

KM: Yes. It's good for the detectives and it's good for us, because there's an intimacy you get in capturing those moments with a small, handheld camera.

PM: Also, you can't really be showing up on crime scenes with a boom and a giant camera that's heavy and unwieldy. You need to be very fluid, and ...

KM: ... and not step on the evidence!

PM: And the camera is really good in low-light situations. They have to go into dark alleyways and into the backs of cars, places like that.

F&V: How does the camera perform for you? HDV is a highly compressed format.

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PM: Because of the nature of the show, we have a lot of leeway. It has a gritty, documentary feel. Sometimes the picture is not ideal — like in a very low-light situation — but if it's a good scene, we use it. And we make it look as good as possible in the finishing.

KM: We spend a lot of time in online. We work with Larry [Schmidt] here at Mega Playground, who has a great eye. He color-corrects it and makes it look very filmic. That part of the process is really important to us in terms of what the finished product looks like. It looks great, and that's due not just to our shooters in the field, but also to Larry here onlining the show.

**F&V: How does the footage get to Mega Playground?**

PM: If we're not in a rush the tapes will get Fed Ex'd every couple of days. If we're in a hurry, we'll Fed Ex them immediately.

**F&V: What's the process for helping editorial understand what's coming in on those tapes? Do they do scene logging in Indianapolis?**

PM: They really don't do extensive logging in the field. It depends on how busy they are in the field and what kind of time crunch we're under. They can write out a description of what's on the tapes, but generally they'll just label the tapes and we do the logging here.

**F&V: Are you in constant touch with them to keep tabs on what they're doing at any given time?**

PM: We phone them and email them.

KM: We talk multiple times a day. And it's not just us. Our story producers are in constant touch. They're really a part of our team here, in a virtual way.

**F&V: How big is the post operation?**

PM: Right now, we've got five editors working with three assistant editors. There are four loggers, four story producers, Kathy and myself, and a production manager. There are about 15 to 20 people total.

**F&V: Is there anything especially challenging about telling these stories?**

KM: We have to stay on top of legal notes, but that's a good thing — that we have different sets of lawyers vetting the shows. That can be a challenge, but we think of it as a positive thing as well.

PM: Yes. It's real life.

KM: We have to be sure we're doing what needs to be done. The other challenge is the amount of footage we have. We average anywhere from 40 to 100 hours per case. How do we tell the best, most honest, story — while keeping in mind the families involved. There's heartache on both sides.

**F&V: What's the turnaround time in general?**

KM: There is no set turnaround time. We spend roughly a year in the field for 13 shows, and it really varies from case to case.

**F&V: Some cases might resolve quickly ...**

KM: Exactly. And some of them don't. Some don't resolve at all. And that's part of our story, as well. Sometimes the detectives, through months and months of working, aren't able to solve the case. And that's a positive [aspect] of having a show on the air. We can run a message: "If you know anything [about this crime], please call this number."



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