



Earlier days: Simonee and Edgar Chichester

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# BITTERSWEET ABANDON

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When Simonee Chichester meets her father for the first time, documenting the reunion is both a trial and a triumph

BY BUNMI ADEOYE

**H**er journey began with a phone call to her Toronto home from the Canadian consulate in Brazil. They were reporting her homeless, alcoholic father's failing health. Her father, Edgar, had been living on and off the street for 23 years and she hadn't seen him in that time. When the call came, Simonee Chichester knew that not only did she have to see him, but also she had to document this reunion.

And she had to act fast. With her father's health deteriorating and her need to find answers to crucial questions about being abandoned, she got on a plane first to her father's birthplace Guyana to interview and meet with her extended family and then to Sao Paulo, Brazil, where her father had been living

for years. "When this came up with my father, I had to decide whether I wanted to meet him or not," she explains, "because it seemed as though the issue of mortality all of the sudden took centre stage. Even if it wasn't going to happen right away, eventually he wasn't going to be around, especially given the circumstances of his life. All of the sudden I was looking at it a little bit differently. I decided I wanted to meet him before he died. Documenting it? Believe it or not, very little thought went into it; it came naturally."

She had always pitched Chichester's Choice as a documentary of a father gone wrong, but deep down Chichester knew that this was her story. However, she had some misgivings: "It felt really arrogant for me to think that I could do

a film about my life. I think I started doing a documentary about my father and his life and what a charismatic man he was. How does this person with so much promise and talent end up on the street? Eventually, it became a film about me and my journey. It became a search for identity. It wasn't about my dad's journey and it wasn't about his history. It was about my history."

Before her departure, she conducted phone interviews with her extended family in Canada and abroad. She also had extensive conversations with her mother, Neusa, about the past in preparation for what was to come. She had secured some funding for the film, but she decided she couldn't wait for the rest of the funding to come through, if indeed, any more would come at all.



Simonee Chichester

Chichester doesn't regret her decision to continue with her plans despite still having to hold charity events to raise cash for the film. The last event she held was in December 2006. "I think that was smart to go and I would do it again. And I would tell any filmmaker that they're ridiculous to think that they are going to have their financial structure in place [once shooting begins]," she says. "I want to get my projects done. I just did it because I was ignorant and I didn't really know there was another way. I didn't even know what a financial structure was at the time. But I'm really glad that I didn't wait because I would still be here."

Shot on DV, her cameraman had captured tense moments with her Guyanese relatives, the frantic search for her father in Brazil, and the emotional meeting — and inevitable parting — of father and daughter.

She returned to Toronto with 80 hours of footage and the monstrous task of piecing together a story. The first edit of the film wasn't what she had envisioned so she went back to the drawing board, assembling a new team to craft the film that she wanted. She's philosophical about the whole experience: "[The first editor] was really involved in

sifting the story out. The new team saw the old cut. They saw something really special and there *was* something really special there. It just wasn't what I wanted to release. It would have been easy for to say, 'I'm done. I've done my first feature film. I've done my project. Here you go.' A lot of people do that. That was hard for me to say: 'I'm starting over.' Holy shit! It's so horrible and I have no money and I'm starting over... That was very, very hard, but you know what? It didn't take that long after..."

Chichester continues to take risks and she searches for funding for the film. She has submitted the film to several festivals in North America and in Europe. Chichester's *Choice* has garnered some mainstream buzz, but there's still work to be done. She hopes for the film to eventually be picked up by a broadcaster or distributor. She's started work on a short film script and she would like to work on another documentary, one that's "a little bit easier". Personally and professionally, Chichester experienced a sort of rebirth during the month-long shoot; a quickening that was captured through the camera lens. "I see somebody different," she says. "The physicality, my facial expres-

sions, everything seems different than it is right now. Life happened and this particular story happened and it changes people. I can't even pinpoint the change in me. It's just interesting to see that, to have the visible proof of it."

To meet her father and share that story, she put her heart on the line. It was also her way of drawing a line in the sand. "It's my life story. It's part of who I am. Why it's important for me personally [to tell this story] is different from why I wanted to put it in a film. I was left by the first man I ever loved and there were issues to address with that. To me it was a no-brainer. I can honestly say that with my dad I don't have any baggage anymore. Everything's been dealt with. Even though it wasn't a happy ending, I don't have any baggage, you know what I mean?" ■

For more details about **Chichester's Choice**, visit [www.myfriendsimonee.com](http://www.myfriendsimonee.com).