

Why listen to us?

A lot of things look easy until you try them. Acting. Stand-up comedy. Starting a business. Parenting. Writing a book (sheesh—this one took forever). And making a movie. Filmmaking is one of those things you look at and say the famous last words, “Well, dang, I could do better than that!” So, you write a script and get your Uncle Fred to pony up the money. Three years later, you’re knee-deep in legal documents you don’t understand, your distributor is demanding 5.1 surround stems you don’t have, and Uncle Fred wants to know when he’s getting his money back.

Welcome to the beautiful chaos of filmmaking.

Of course, film is art. But it’s also contracts, insurance, logistics, emotional endurance, and a hundred people asking you what time lunch is. And that’s before you try to sell it.

Filmmaking looks easy until you try it. Then you realize you’re over your head after it’s too late to back out. There is no Command Z button to undo the mistakes (or Control Z if you’re Windows). Not to mention the countless films that never get made.

If it was easy, everyone would do it.

You might be tempted to skim this book or cherry-pick sections. Don’t. You’ll miss the full picture. It’s structured so that each chapter builds on the last, and if you skip *one sentence*, you’ll miss something critical. Every piece matters if you want to understand the full picture of the independent film business.

We've been responsible for millions in indie film financing, producing about 30 features, 20 documentaries, hundreds of commercials, and a handful of TV shows. This business punched us in the mouth more times than we can count. We've navigated shady contracts, nightmare shoots, miracle wins, and agonizing losses and still woke up the next morning ready to do it again.

You shelled out money to buy this book, and now you're reading it, so we can assume you're wanting to understand this wacky business that's about as dysfunctional as a 3 am Vegas wedding. Okay then. Let's dig deep.

Beginning with a fun and slightly painful set of unofficial stats for you:

For every movie we helped to get made, we estimate we were either rejected by or had to reject at least 25 other projects. That's over 600 movies that almost happened... but didn't. They fizzled. Fell apart. Lost steam. Or it just never quite caught fire. These weren't bad ideas, either. Many had momentum; some had money, a cast, and even a start date.

For every movie that *did* get made, we reviewed about 150 scripts or pitch decks, totaling more than 4,500 projects that crossed our desks but didn't proceed.

Getting one movie greenlit takes about 2,000 emails, intros, LinkedIn exchanges, and festival handshakes. Do the math—that's 60,000 professional interactions.

Professional.

We're not even counting the countless cold emails, spammy pitches, and late-night DMs from dreamers with 21 pages of booger-

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soaked napkin scripts. Those deserve their own chapter.

Despite that, we love this madness. We love the puzzle of putting a movie together. That about-to-run-out-of-daylight moment when the scene finally clicks. And we live to help other filmmakers dodge the landmines we've already stepped on.

But the question of the month is, why does anyone sign up for this insanity? If you can survive twelve-hour days on set with your underwear sticking to you, try to sleep for a couple of hours, and wake up wanting more, that's the hunger legends are made of. Sometimes, the fire in your belly dwindles into the ashes of doubt and anxiety, but proper prep and knowledge will ignite the sky if the spark is kept alive.

Before we dive in, we want to share a bit about ourselves. First up: Kirk.

Get Back on the Bike

By Kirk Roos

My first feature film did NOT make its money back. My late wife, Bryn, and I made an indie film for under \$75,000, but we came up short. I felt like a failure. And yet, here I am, decades later, still in the game, making films, and now writing this book because I greenlit myself.

This book is all about adapting a mindset of *greenlighting yourself*. It means putting your own money, sweat, tears, and sanity into a project because no one else is going to do it for you. For the past 30 years, that's what I've done. Over and over. The odds are you'll fail too. Sorry. That's why you "check yourself before you wreck yourself."

(Credit to Bryn for that gem.)

I had returned to my hometown of Minot, North Dakota to squeeze in a guest role in a musical at my alma mater. Bryn was in the musical, and the relationship quickly sparked. At the time, I was acting in LA, chasing gigs, and scraping by. I was only home for a few weeks, and we tried to stay “friends first” when I told her I had to go back to LA. But I promised her I would take the relationship very seriously if she moved to California. To my surprise, she did. Immediately. It was great. We started our life together. And right away, she encouraged me to keep chasing my dreams but also to take the reins and pave my own path. She loved talking about “Manifesting” and put a lot of faith in me.

While bouncing around some short films, commercials, and documentaries, as well as musicals and other side hustle work, she confidently told me, “You need to make your own feature film. That’s the only way your dreams will come true, by doing it yourself.” I was nervous, but she assured me with all her heart that it would change our lives and trajectory. And it did.

We got married, and soon, we were making our first feature film. We pooled all our resources, friends, family, old theatre colleagues, and the entire community. That’s a story for another book, but she greatly challenged me, and I’m grateful to this day for that experience. Her dreams were often very lofty and sometimes unrealistic. But her passion and faith steadfastly pushed me forward.

Before our first film, I had just come off a brutal shoot in Yosemite, where I was an actor, and I was also roped into lending them my box truck as a makeshift grip truck. Yosemite is gorgeous. It was a really fun location, sure, and by the way, hiking in Yosemite is the best!

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But the film nearly collapsed, we weren't paid what we were promised, and the producers had no idea what they were doing. They had money and good intentions but no roadmap. And I thought: "I could do better than that." And she agreed.

So, a year later, we made our first film in our hometown of Minot. Better than Yosemite, but... it failed. We failed. I failed. But we tried again. And again.

And...

Each time I failed, that gut-wrenching feeling came. But each time I got back up, the feeling faded. That's the real secret: Success is *inseparably* dependent on how you rise up after failure. You start asking better questions, building stronger teams, and learning to delegate. You stop wearing all the hats and begin understanding the business. *Film is art, but it's also commerce.* And the marriage of the two is where the magic happens.

I'll never forget the day my daughter learned to ride a bike. She was four years old, wobbling down the sidewalk with me jogging behind her, one hand gently gripping the back of her seat. "Are you still holding on?" she asked with a smile on her face despite her fear. And like any good parent bluffing their way through a rite of passage, I lied. "Yes, sweetie, I got you." But I'd already let go. She didn't know she was pedaling on her own, gliding forward with her hair blowing back and singing, "I'm doing it! I'm doing it!" It was pure magic—until she turned, saw my empty hands, and panicked. Boom. Crash. Tears. Then laughter. Then, the moment of truth: she got back on. That crash was a baptism. That moment, that messy, glorious recovery, is what *success really looks like*.

I've made documentaries, commercials, short films, fea-

tures, and quirky little passion projects. I've been the writer, actor, director, driver, editor, fundraiser, and janitor. But the turning point was when I learned to delegate. I took the advice of an agent I had years later, "Be an Executive Producer on a bigger film with more experienced producers. Learn from the top down." I stopped lifting the gear and started lifting the vision. On one project—an indie comedy called *High Road*, directed by Matt Walsh, we improvised the entire film. Literally. Matt is known for being an improv King and founder of *Upright Citizen's Brigade*. The movie was entirely improvised. I produced. But with a team. I helped find the money, built the team, and stayed through to the end; focusing on festivals, marketing, and even working with Conan O'Brien! We also developed a unique touring concept that featured a comedy show preceding screenings. It was wild. And I didn't have to wear all the hats. I just had to wear the right one.

And through all this, I started mentoring others, because producing is about coaching. It's about passing on your scars so others don't get as bloodied. I loved that I could share with new producers, "learn from my mistakes," and "You don't have to do everything. Just choose your lane and go."

Bryn and I greenlit ourselves. We lost money on our first project, but only a year or so later, I became a full-time filmmaker, able to support myself, and I've done it for well over 20 years. Other people started hiring me. Corporations and nonprofits. And it all started with a leap of faith and a failed feature film. But did it start there? Or did it start with Bryn challenging me to take a huge risk?

So, my invitation to you is... *take the leap*. It's not guaranteed to work, but it'll definitely teach you something. It's your real-world

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film school. Your spiritual training ground. Your entrepreneurial boot camp. Your bike. And when you fall off—and you will—get back on.

Like my daughter did when she learned to ride a bike, fell off, and got back on again with tears of pain, embarrassment, and... JOY.

That's filmmaking.

This book is full of cliches. You've been warned. Mostly tongue-in-cheek. But they're all true. The real heart of it is this: Create the path you want, but *learn the lessons in this book so you don't have to learn the hard way*. Build the team. Ride the bike. And when you crash—and you will—get back on. Again and again.

One reason I agreed to co-write this book was that I wanted to share our experiences from the inside and discuss some of the things they don't teach in film school. But the real secret sauce is humility.

To me, success is knowing you've failed, admitting it, learning from it, and picking yourself up to do it again. And improving each time. I think back on my late wife and one of our first conversations when she said, "I want you to do this movie and stop chasing everyone else's dreams and praying for a one-liner in a Pepsi commercial. Greenlight *yourself*." We did. Not I, alone. WE. A team. A community. We built something together. One day at a time. One movie at a time. Good luck y'all!

Swinging Hammers and Building Dreams

By Roger Lindley

Roger v1.0 worked in construction. I grew up with a grandpa, uncles and cousins who worked in the drywall business. My father

died when I was seven, and mom moved us around a lot. But all of my high school years were lived in Chetek, Wisconsin, an idealistic tourist town in northwest corner of the state. My favorite high school teacher was Gary Mohr, and we struck up a friendship during my Freshman year that lasts to this day.

One of my favorite subjects in high school was AV. At the time, Chetek High School boasted a quaint audio-visual department that taught basic camera skills (which were mostly film-based at that time) and photography, including film development and printing photos in a darkroom. Mr. Mohr was the photography teacher. He was also a carpenter as a side hustle. During one summer break, Gary hired me to help build a house; an experience unlike anything I had known at the time, as I learned how to construct a home from a pile of lumber stacked in the dirt of what would become the front yard. Gary had a blueprint. From those plans, he measured, and I cut. Gary pointed, and I carried lumber and toted boxes of nails from the truck. As the house progressed, I learned about door cripples (84-1/4 inches tall, as I recall), headers, stringers, top and bottom plates, why 2x4s don't quite add up to 2x4, and why that's important to know when building just about anything that involves lumber. Gary taught me why door frames need to be 3" wider and taller than the door itself and why the bottom plate of a framed wall isn't cut away from the door frame immediately. Framing a house sounds simple enough when a layperson explains it; "That's when you build the structure of the house," but myriad techniques and nuances of the craft of framing are impossible to capture in that statement.

That summer had a lifelong effect on me. It spurred a desire to make a career out of construction, to which my grandfather warned, "Don't be a dummy; get into computers." Not one to listen to sound

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advice at the time, I worked with anything other than computers. After graduating from high school, I worked a winter as a derrick hand on an oil workover rig in Sidney, Montana. An acquaintance invited me to go with him to Texas where he was going to start a roofing company. With construction still smoldering within my desires and a distinct lack of appreciation for -20-degree weather while tripping pipe, I was stupid enough to follow the dude to Amarillo, Texas.

Amarillo is a great place, don't get me wrong, but the job lasted exactly four months before the guy skipped town in the dark of night and stiffed me for \$800 in wages. Yeah, that dude. I felt stranded. But, I fell back on what I knew: drywall. Things started looking up when I landed a job with a respected painting contractor in Amarillo, working on a crew that taped and bedded drywall. Excellent pay, and I was doing what I loved: Building things.

But then came the fateful job when the crew was sent to help remodel the newsroom at the local CBS affiliate, KFDA. It was glorious. I had stars in my eyes, seeing the news set I saw on TV each night, the full-sized studio cameras, and eavesdropping on the chatter that sounded like a foreign language on the camera headsets when I was on break. It relit another spark of passion in me that began in the little AV class back in Chetek. One day, the station's Chief Engineer strolled into the newsroom while I was tromping around on stilts, and we started a conversation. I mentioned that while I enjoyed construction, I had wondered about the idea of working in film and television but didn't know how to get started. It so happened that a position was open for operating the studio cameras during the weekend newscasts. I spoke with the production manager and, to my startled glee, was hired for a part-time position on the spot.

That flowed with a journey of figuring out life with no real plan. A pattern was set after my father's death; my mom moved us around so much that I never had the chance to grow roots. I got used to figuring things out as I went—new towns, new schools, new people. That rootlessness followed me into my career. I didn't know where I was headed, just that I was moving. No roadmap. Just movement. And mistakes.

I left construction and began working full-time at the TV station. I moved up rather quickly. A salesman named John Mott invited me to help him with an industrial video the station was hired to produce for the regional power company that became my introduction to operating a Sony Betacam. A few months passed, and I picked up a few bits of basic production skills here and there. Then, a new general manager came on board who strategized a top-to-bottom rebranding for the station. In my youthful naivete, I asked him if I could produce the thirty-second image promo. He patted me on the head like a good little puppy dog and said, "Sure, sure, you go do that." Not only did he authorize the promo to air, it won a 10th District American Advertising Federation ADDY that year. That experience evolved into being invited to shoot and edit a documentary that won the Chicago International and American Film and Video Festivals. The fire ignited. I set a new course to learn everything I could, and decided that my career goal would be to direct movies. The problem was I knew nothing about the film industry and didn't know where to learn.

My journey was two steps forward, one back. There are no mentors in the fog. Not healthy ones, anyway.

Over time, however, I became one of the top video producers

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in Amarillo and launched a successful production company, called Ragtown Media. From there, I was invited to L.A. by Brad Dorsey to work on films he was producing for PureFlix. I directed one of those films. Bucket list filled. Oddly, that experience got me thinking about getting into distribution. Once again, there was no plan, just ambition. With many closed doors and a few that opened wide, that's where I landed. As I have often said, "I don't recommend my career path to anyone, but it worked for me."

I had no roadmap—just a hammer and the spark of curiosity. Every step forward exposed new gaps I didn't know existed. Cameras, editing, storytelling, contracts, finance—I learned it all the long, hard way. Most filmmakers do. They leap in with passion, unaware of what they don't know. Passion is important, nothing important happens without it. Moving before your fully ready has risk, but you need to start somewhere. It's likely that you'll never be fully ready, but wisdom asks, when are you *ready enough*? Not being ready enough means that diving into something as significant as a feature film with passion only is a near-guaranteed recipe for running off the rails, because the techniques and nuances of the business of filmmaking are impossible to capture with passion alone. This book helps you get ready enough to make the dream happen without a train wreck.

Years after that summer of learning how to build a house and also working in other construction crafts through my young life, I built my two-story dream home in Amarillo on twelve acres just west of town. My wife, Shellie, and I moved in a week before our son, Clayton, was born. There were mistakes, but none so significant that the house was not completed or collapsed in a pile of splinters. It still took a team to accomplish this; I didn't know everything, nor did I have the time, knowledge, or horsepower to do every process myself.

However, my past construction experience made it possible when a large construction project would have otherwise been foolish to tackle.

I wasn't fully ready, but I was ready enough.

My story demonstrates the power of mentors and having a plan. Mr. Mohr provided me with a foundation and taught me how to read blueprints. With mentors, you learn techniques and nuances that you don't have to learn the hard way on your own, and the inevitable mistakes won't be severe enough to face plant you in the dirt. My story also demonstrates the importance of having a team. Never in life will you accomplish greatness as an island.

By the way, our son, Clayton, now operates Ragtown Media in Scottsdale, Arizona. He's taken the company to entirely new heights, and he got his foundation by toting lights, tripods, and batteries for his papa.



So, now that you've heard our stories, we're stepping back. From here, this book speaks to you not from Kirk or Roger as individuals but from our combined experience and *as a team*. We wrote the rest in the third person to provide clarity, structure, and a roadmap shaped by both our scars and successes. Let's get to it.

Your Place in the Picture

This industry will chew you up, spit you out, and invoice you for the damage. But if you're a doer and not just a dreamer, this book

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will hand you the blueprint to help you survive the system, beat the odds, and build something meaningful that lasts.

This isn't a manual on framing shots or how to edit. *Greenlight Yourself* is about the side of filmmaking that wrecks most indie films: the business. This book is about money. Myths. Mistakes. Marketing. Contracts. Deliverables. Distribution deals. Strategy. All the unsexy stuff that determines whether your film and your career survive. We'll also dismantle myths you've heard (and maybe believed) about "making it" as a professional filmmaker. We'll certainly encourage you along the way, but we're going to give it to you straight without asking how you feel about it. Thin skins bleed hard in this business.

This is how successful, career-level filmmakers do it. This is how they get things done and why industry influencers return their calls. The contents of this book can easily intimidate you, but as you allow each word to be absorbed, think about how you can assemble a team to tackle the stuff that makes your head hurt. You've heard it before; surround yourself with people smarter than yourself and doors open you can't budge on your own. *Everything in this book* is important, and once you apply these tactics and strategies in your next project, you'll say, "Ah, now I understand."

Every year, indie filmmakers, against the odds, plant seeds that grow into lasting careers rooted in the fertile ground that merges business and art. That's what we're here to help you build.

This is your shortcut to a smarter start or a course correction if you've already taken some hits. Every pro was once in your shoes. It would've sucked a lot less for us if we would've had a book like this.

You're about to gear up with knowledge and learn how to make a film with your eyes wide open. You're about to become dangerous in

the most excellent way because, in indie films, dangerously excellent is the pedestal you want to stand on.

It's true; you don't need a film degree to be successful in an indie film career. Some of the most outstanding filmmakers come from commercials, web content, or business backgrounds. If you understand story and how money works, you're ahead of the game, but the trick is knowing how to play your hand. It's time to get to work.

— Roger Lindley & Kirk Roos