

## Why listen to us?

Filmmaking is one of those mystery dream wells from where your mom and anyone else with a sliver of sanity is telling you to put down the shovel and step away. Ours shoveling goes deep, so they'll probably bury us there when we fade to black.

Between us, we've been responsible for millions in indie film financing, producing about 30 features, 20 documentaries, hundreds of commercials, and a few 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. If you're not going to put down the shovel, 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 millions of cold emails, spammy pitches, and late-night DMs from dreamers with 21 pages of booger-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 love helping other filmmakers dodge the landmines we've already stepped on.

But 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 the proper prep and knowledge will *ignite the sky* if the spark is still there.

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

## **Get Back on the Bike**

By Kirk Roos

Let me tell you something right out of the gate. My first feature film? Did NOT make its money back. We 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 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. And guess what? The odds are you'll fail too. Sorry. That's why you "check yourself before you wreck yourself." (Credit to my late wife for that gem.)

When Bryn and I met, I was acting in LA, chasing gigs, scraping by. We were doing a musical in Minot, North Dakota. I was only home for a few weeks but squeezed into a guest role at my alma mater. We tried to stay "friends first," as 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 very 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

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story for another book, but she really 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 were steadfast.

Now, let me be clear, it wasn't a fairy tale. Again, that film didn't recoup its costs. But it taught us priceless lessons. 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! 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 own film. In our hometown of Minot, ND. Better. 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 absolutely 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. Because film isn't just art—it's 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 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, features, 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."

See, Bryn and I greenlit ourselves. We lost money on our first project, but only a year or so later, I was a full-time filmmaker, able to support myself and pay our bills for over 20 years as a filmmaker. 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 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. Build the team. Ride the bike. And when you crash—and you will—get back on. Again and again.

One reason I agreed to 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. Just Green light 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

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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 ever known, 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 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 eastern 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 man 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 cameras, and eavesdropping on the chatter that sounded like a foreign language on the camera headsets when I was on break. It renewed the 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 working away while on stilts, and we started a conversation. I mentioned that I had always loved 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 that had 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 knowledge here and there. Then, a new General Manager came on board who strategized a top-to-bottom rebranding for the entire 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 hired 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 in Amarillo and launched a successful production company, called Ragtown Media. From there, I was invited 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

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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’re missing. 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 on twelve acres. 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 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 face plant you in the dirt. My story also demonstrates the importance of having a team. Never in life is greatness accomplished when you’re 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—personally—we're stepping back. From here on out, this book speaks to you directly, 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 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. Nor will it hand you secrets known only to the Chosen Elders. Professional, successful filmmakers understand this stuff, and now so will you.

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" in this hair-pulling business. 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.

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



“Indie doesn’t mean alone. It means unstoppable.”

