



## Episode 5: Eric Stange (COM'79), Documentary Filmmaker

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

Award-winning documentary filmmaker Eric Stange (COM'79) shares his journey, creative process and lessons learned from personal and professional hardship as founder and executive producer of Spy Pond Productions. His work has been broadcast on PBS, National Geographic, The Discovery Channel, and the BBC. Prior to his career in filmmaking, Eric wrote about art and culture for *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and many other publications.

### Podcast Transcript:

Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU Podcast. My guest today is Eric Stange, award winning documentary filmmaker and founder of Spy Pond Productions. Eric earned a degree in journalism from the College of Communication in 1979. I talked to him about finding his tribe in the documentary film making community, lessons he learned from personal and professional hardship, and the role luck has played in fulfilling his life's passion.

Well, Eric, thank you again for being here with us today. I'd love to hear about where you grew up and I know that you didn't go to BU as an undergrad, but how you ended up getting to BU. So where did you grow up and what did that look like, your path to the Charles River Campus?

Eric Stange: Well, I actually grew up the first half of my childhood in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and then my father took a job here in Boston who's an English professor, was an English professor. And so, we moved to Boston when I was 14. I went to high school in Boston and then went to UMass Amherst, University of Massachusetts Amherst and majored in English and got out and realized of course that an English degree doesn't go very far. I was also certified to teach high school, high school History and English and I really always expected I'd be a History teacher, but that path did not work out. And after two or three years of working at fairly unsatisfying jobs, I started spending my lunch hours reading graduate school catalogs. And that's what eventually led me to the BU School of Journalism. I never had actually seen myself being a journalist, but I knew I could write. And the more I thought about it, this was the post-Watergate era, the more I thought that that could be really interesting.

Jeff Murphy: So did you know people that went to BU or was it just something in one of those catalogs that you were casually reading through that drew you to BU?

Eric Stange: Well, I'd always had friends who had been at BU and actually my sister got a PhD at BU in American Studies, so I certainly was aware of it. But, it had a good school of journalism and I did not have a great track record. I'd never worked on a high school paper, a college paper.

I didn't have much to show. So, somehow I impressed them, I guess with my written essay. I've always wondered frankly why they took me, but it worked out.

Jeff Murphy: So, tell us about your BU experience. When you reflect back on your Master's degree, are there classes or professors or maybe classmates that really stand out to you as being sort of crucial to the experience you had here?

Eric Stange: Yeah, the print journalism program at BU, I don't have anything to compare it to of course directly, but the city room class, which I think is still done largely the same way. It's a kind of a boiler room experience and the teacher I had was John Klarfeld, who just died a year ago or so, unfortunately. He touched a lot of people's lives, including mine, and he was a great no nonsense, hard boiled kind of journalist type. He had been a journalist for quite a while and an editor and he would simulate the mood and the feeling and the reality of a newspaper city room as much as he possibly could, and he was tough. He really held our feet to the fire and made us learn to write quickly and accurately on deadline. All the skills you have to learn, so that was great. And then the other class that really changed my life in some ways was a magazine writing class, taught by a magazine writer who did a lot for the New Yorker. He was only there for one semester. I was very lucky to get him and I'm afraid I'm blanking on his name at the moment. He was there for one semester. I saw it, I signed up. I thought magazine writing would be great.

Jeff Murphy: So you knew who he was?

Eric Stange: I kind of knew the name, I read the New York. And the article I wrote for that class got accepted by the Atlantic monthly, so that was, as far as I was concerned, like going from 0 to 100 miles per hour.

Jeff Murphy: Yeah and it is seen in your bio that you have written for the Atlantic and here you are admiring this New Yorker writer and then you're a published author yourself. That's quite impressive for a grad student.

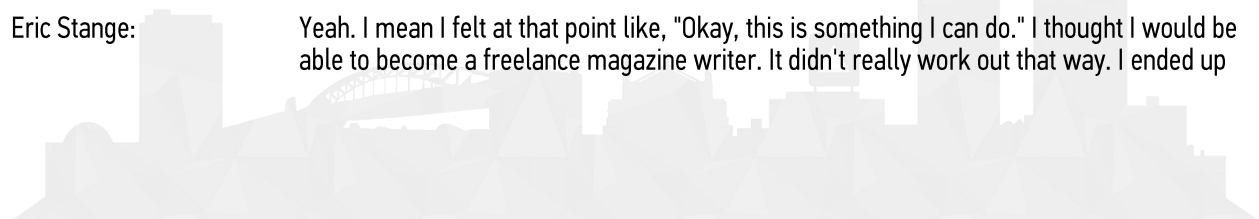
Eric Stange: And it is what a program like BU can do because when you meet people like that, he was wonderful guy and he said, "You know, that article's interesting. Oh, you know, I'm going to call up my friend at the Atlantic maybe they'd be interested." And, next thing I knew, actually I have to say it was one of the highlights in my life. I was sitting in a class, I forgot what, but it wasn't the magazine writing class because the magazine writing was in the fall. By now, it was spring semester and Jim Brand, the chairman of the journalism department, came to the door of the class, pointed at me and said, "Come here." [laughing] "What have I done?"

Jeff Murphy: How many different thoughts went through your head?

Eric Stange: Yeah, exactly. But yeah, it turned out he'd gotten a phone call from the Atlantic and they were interested in the piece and I don't know why they called him. They had my number, I thought.

Jeff Murphy: So we might skip around on your timeline a little bit here now, but you're a grad student, you've just been published in the Atlantic, are you thinking, "I'm going to be a journalist, like this is clearly what I've been born to do." And so you finish your Master's degree and then is that just the direction you're pointed down? Is that the road that you see in front of you?

Eric Stange: Yeah. I mean I felt at that point like, "Okay, this is something I can do." I thought I would be able to become a freelance magazine writer. It didn't really work out that way. I ended up



going to the newspapers. And I wrote a few other magazine articles, never again for the Atlantic, unfortunately. Although I didn't actually try too many, but I tended to be in different kinds of journals and some pretty big ones, so that was good. But yeah, I was just so glad to be able to get a job in a real profession after my couple of years out of college doing pretty mundane and boring things.

Jeff Murphy: Were you on staff at a paper or were you freelancing?

Eric Stange: No, I'm staff for a chain of weekly.

Jeff Murphy: The New York Times?

Eric Stange: No, never that. At first, a chain of weeklies around Boston and then eventually The Tab, which was just starting up. And then the Boston Herald for about five years.

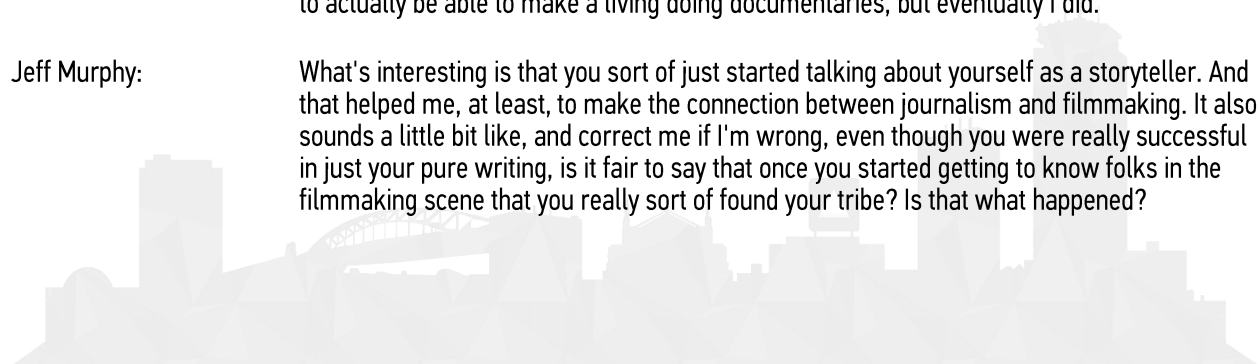
Jeff Murphy: And I also know that you ended up writing for both The Globe and the New York Times. That's why I asked about that.

Eric Stange: Yeah, those were freelance.

Jeff Murphy: So let's get back in the timeline. Recently finished from your Master's degree, working towards a career in journalism, thinking back to your younger self, obviously you always had an interest in history, english, writing, journalism, does Eric, at that time, have any inclination that he might be going into documentary filmmaking?

Eric Stange: No, I really hadn't thought about it and of course BU then had their broadcast journalism program and it never occurred to me to have gone that route instead of print. I just was always thinking of myself as a writer, but I can tell you what happened. In my time at the Boston Herald, I realized I was really less and less interested in daily news and more interested in feature stories, particularly art stories or stories where art and commerce intersected. I liked stories that had sort of ethical and moral dimensions to them. Stories about plagiarism or things that seemed sort of deep but had some intellectual aspect. But I also ended up getting the assignment of writing about documentary films. I mean, in a sense, documentary films are sort of an artistic side of journalism and at the Herald nobody else really seemed that interested. So, I ended up being the one who would write a lot about the local documentary scene in Boston. I started to get to know these filmmakers and they were so collaborative and so collegial and so willing to share credit. I would talk to the director and the director would say, "Well yeah, I'm happy to talk to you, but you really got to talk to the editor." And then the editor would tell you, "You have to talk to the camera man." And they were just that way and I thought, "These people are so much nicer than journalists and they're having so much more fun." After a while, daily journalism wasn't that much fun for me. And I started to think, "Maybe I can do that. Maybe I could make documentary films." I had some friends who did it. I didn't work with them. I didn't really know what was involved. But, I was very lucky that the Herald let me work part time for about five years, so I made the transition. It wasn't easy. It took a long time to learn enough to actually be able to make a living doing documentaries, but eventually I did.

Jeff Murphy: What's interesting is that you sort of just started talking about yourself as a storyteller. And that helped me, at least, to make the connection between journalism and filmmaking. It also sounds a little bit like, and correct me if I'm wrong, even though you were really successful in just your pure writing, is it fair to say that once you started getting to know folks in the filmmaking scene that you really sort of found your tribe? Is that what happened?



Eric Stange: Yes, actually that is exactly what happened and in fact I ended up falling in love and getting married to another filmmaker and through her of course met a whole lot of people because she'd been involved much longer than I had. So yeah, very much I found my tribe and felt very much at home and I still think that, at least in the Greater Boston community, film producers, documentary film editors, producers, cameramen are just the nicest, most interesting people I've ever worked with. It's a great community.

Jeff Murphy: So, you sort of, and correct me if I'm wrong, it sounds like pursuing your own interests and passions is what lead you to finding your tribe. Were there other things, specific decisions that you had to make along the way that sort of set you off on the path that would help you find your tribe? Were there specific skills or lessons that you had learned that also sort of pointed you down the right path as you might see it?

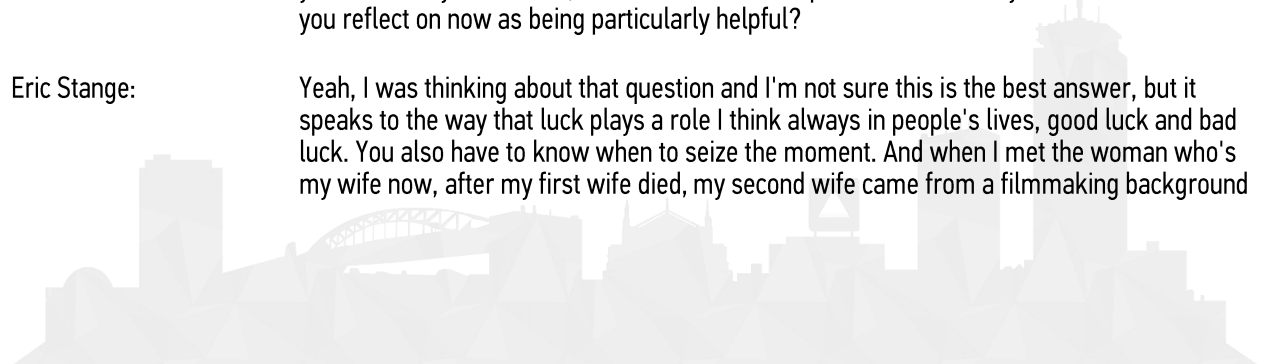
Eric Stange: Well, I'll tell you, it's a pretty personal story., the thing that really did launch me into documentary film, I was already, I guess kind of thinking about it or I'd already decided I liked documentary filmmakers, but then sadly my first wife died of cancer when she was 30 years old. We had only been married a short time and that was so devastating to me. That's when I began to realize that I really wasn't happy as a print journalist. I wasn't feeling fulfilled and it of course made me feel life is too short to be unhappy. And I felt the need to do something new and different and something that might be about her or for her in some way. And so the very first film I ever made, a very simple, straightforward documentary is called "The Pitch of Grief" and it's about grief and bereavement. It follows five people who are going through the experience of grieving for someone who had died recently, someone they love. And it's so simple, such a simple film, just talking heads and a few photographs. And I had a mentor, a guy who ran a local film foundation named Fred Simon who taught at Clark University for many years. He was the one who told me to, "Just do it that way. Just let people talk." And I kept thinking, well, don't we have to go film graveyards or film a funeral or film something? And he said, "Why? It's people's stories that matter. That's what is going to make this be a moving film." And he was absolutely right and in fact, it's still in distribution, it still sells. I still get checks, not big, but occasional checks. Every time we get one we go out to dinner and it is just amazing to me that the simplest film I ever made in many ways has had the greatest reach.

Jeff Murphy: Well, first of all, I'm so sorry to hear about your first wife and thank you for sharing that with us. And, I did want to ask if there is a place or places that our listeners would be able to see that documentary. So where would people go to find it?

Eric Stange: Yeah, it is in distribution with a company called Daedalus Films. But if somebody is interested they could certainly contact me through [spypondproductions.com](http://spypondproductions.com), is my website. There's a contact link and I'd be happy to send it.

Jeff Murphy: One of the things we talk a lot about is just in terms of people's career progressions, that oftentimes those unexpected twists and turns or even mistakes along the way can often be really valuable learning experiences. I am glad to hear that it sounds like you always sort of had an idea of what you cared about and what you wanted to work on and that naturally led you to where you are now, but were there missteps or hard lessons you had to learn that you reflect on now as being particularly helpful?

Eric Stange: Yeah, I was thinking about that question and I'm not sure this is the best answer, but it speaks to the way that luck plays a role I think always in people's lives, good luck and bad luck. You also have to know when to seize the moment. And when I met the woman who's my wife now, after my first wife died, my second wife came from a filmmaking background



and when I met her she was just about to leave for a six month job at the BBC in London. And we'd just started going out and I had to decide how important is this person to me? Am I going to go live in London with her with nothing to do while she goes to work every day? Because I think we both knew that if I didn't do that, chances are the relationship wouldn't last. And so, I said, "Oh, the hell with it. I'll just go to London." And I started a second film by then, but it was kind of stuck because I didn't know what I was doing. First one had been so easy. The second one was really hard. So I decided I'll put that the shelf. I'll go to London with this woman who I thought I was in love with. But it was kind of hard in London. She worked all day. I had nothing to do. I couldn't work legally. But I did meet a guy who would turn out to be incredibly important in my life, a BBC producer who, I don't know, we just hit it off. And that's the luck thing, you know? I told him a few ideas I had, including one that I thought would be a feature film, a fiction film. But it was based on a true story that I knew but all the protagonists were dead and it never occurred to me that it could be a documentary. And he said, "Of course that could be a documentary." But I didn't know enough about how. And he then told me, helped me, and together we figured it out. And we realized, yeah, that could be a documentary. I would have never have done that if I hadn't had the luck of meeting somebody more experienced, quite a bit more experience. Also very bright and being open to working with him and learning from him. And together we made the film and it was on the "American Experience" series on PBS. That was a big jump for me. And that was enormously important. I guess the misstep part of it was not having the imagination myself to realize that that was a great story for a documentary.

Jeff Murphy:

It is a great story though about how the people in your life, and we can talk about this from a career perspective, as part of your network that those folks help you shape ideas and shape your path in ways that you might not have thought of on your own and that is a hugely important reason to have a strong network of professionals that you are inspired by and things like that. And I'm curious, you had the fortune of having this person in your life being a part of your network and as you mentioned that you were sort of sharing ideas with this person, this producer, and I'm wondering, were you pitching him? Or was it purely just talking about ideas that you had as part of your personal passions and things like that? Or did you know at the time that he was somebody who could maybe help you make things happen?

Eric Stange:

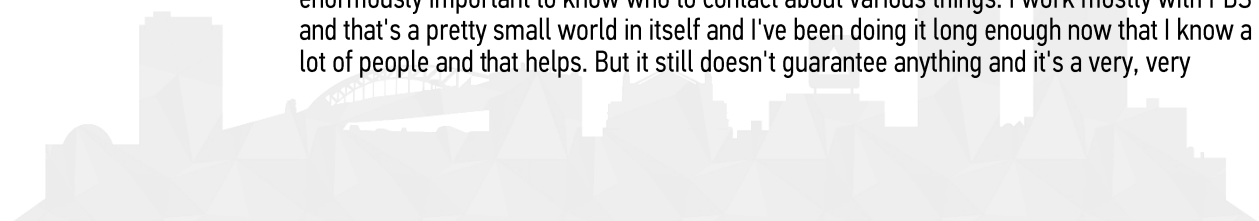
Well, I knew he could help me, but I think it was more. I didn't know much about the business at that point, so I think it was as much just trying to get a sense of like, "Do these ideas make any sense as documentaries? Or how do you even get something off the ground? At that point I was halfway through a film that I just couldn't figure out how to finish because I didn't know enough and so I was feeling pretty disillusioned about the whole business. And he made me realize that, "Oh no, you've just got to take it in steps and here are the steps and this is how you work through it."

Jeff Murphy:

So I'm guessing also that, as a documentary film maker you're relying on your network. That your network of connections is super important to you. You founded your own company, I think just 20 years ago and you might not even think of it as a network, but has your network of connections been super helpful to you as you started your business?

Eric Stange:

Oh yeah, I think it's very important. The documentary film world is very small and there are a few centers: Boston, New York, San Francisco, Washington, a little. The joke is that in LA it's not documentary film, it's reality TV, but there are [laughing] documentaries coming out of LA as well. But really Boston and New York I think are the two biggest places. And so, it's enormously important to know who to contact about various things. I work mostly with PBS and that's a pretty small world in itself and I've been doing it long enough now that I know a lot of people and that helps. But it still doesn't guarantee anything and it's a very, very



difficult world to navigate because there's not much money for these projects and it takes a long time to raise the money. So yeah, networks are incredibly important.

Jeff Murphy: So, I'd love to have you reflect back on starting your own company, starting Spy Pond Productions and knowing what it took to build your business, grow your business to where you are today as an award winning film maker. Are there specific characteristics, skills, or personal traits about yourself that you think have been the most important? And the reason I ask is because if you can sort of share with people who might aspire to do the kind of work you do one day. Just advice you have to share with folks about "here's what you need to do in order to be successful in this industry."

Eric Stange: Yes, there are a few things. Patience is very important. It takes a long time usually to make these films. Most documentaries take far longer than anyone expects they will when they start out. And oddly, if you look at a lot of films, documentaries that have been very successful often in part, their success is due to the fact that they took so long. I mean, there are just many examples. "Hoop Dreams," I mean that's an old film now, but it wouldn't have been the same story at all if they'd gotten it done in the year or the year and a half that they thought it was going to take. It's because it followed people over so much longer that gave it its impact. There's another one, I'm forgetting the name, but it is about the Friedmans. Anyway, it started out being about a guy who dressed up as a clown turned out that it was a film about all sorts of weird sexual predator things and I don't remember the ins and outs, but that was because it took so long to do. That spark wouldn't have emerged and that's often true, so you've got to stick with it. You've got to be open to collaboration. That's what's made me able to do it, open to hearing people's ideas, working with people and not getting defensive if somebody tells you, as one of the editors I often work with says, "That's a terrible idea!" [laughing] But you just have to take it and say, "Why?" And you got to, I think, do that. At least, I think the best films are team efforts. You have to have a visual sense and really think about how to make something that's abstract or inchoate, somehow visual. Somehow something to point a camera at that's not just a talking head and that's the biggest challenge of documentaries. Interviews are incredibly powerful if the speaker is right and the story's good, but you still have to do other things too. And that means you just kind of rack your brain and trying to think of how can we possibly make a visual story out of this? Those are the main things.

Jeff Murphy: And so I'm wondering if you could tell me, as you reflect over the last two decades of Spy Pond Productions, what are the projects that stand out to you most, that you're most proud of or that you want other people to see the most?

Eric Stange: Well, about quite a while ago now, 15 years maybe, we did a film called "Murder at Harvard" and that was the first dramatized documentary that I did. That's become kind of a niche for me, the idea of taking a historical film and dramatizing parts of it. The drama is always based on the written record, on the documentary record. And so, that film we did with a historian named Simon Schama, who's gone on to become quite famous. He wasn't as famous when we were working with them and I was proud of that because it's more than just a history documentary. It's a film about a famous murder in 1849 at Harvard, when a Harvard Medical School professor murdered a Harvard benefactor and then cut the body up and hid it in the medical school. But it's also about the nature of studying history, the nature of trying to figure out what actually happened in the past and whether or not we can ever certain the facts about something that happened long ago. And, that's what Simon Schama does for it. So I really was very happy with the way the layers worked in that and made it much more than just a story about a fascinating gruesome murder. It was that too, but had these other layers.



Jeff Murphy: And I had known from visiting your website that that was a project you had worked on, but I think that story is recently in the news, am I right? What happened?

Eric Stange: Well oddly, a guy who's an English professor on the West Coast named Paul Collins wrote a book about the case, but what was the funny coincidence is that Paul Collins is also in the most recent film I made, which is a film about Edgar Allen Poe. Because Paul Collins had written a biography of Poe as well as now this book about the Parkman murder. Anyway, yeah, it was a funny coincidence. .

Jeff Murphy: So can you give us a tip on projects that you in development now that you're excited about and when we might be able to see some of those things.

Eric Stange: Well, I can tell you about projects. I don't know when you'll see them. You never know. It's always hard to predict that. I'm doing a film about activists, about people who have recently become politically active. People who never saw.

Jeff Murphy: Good timing for that.

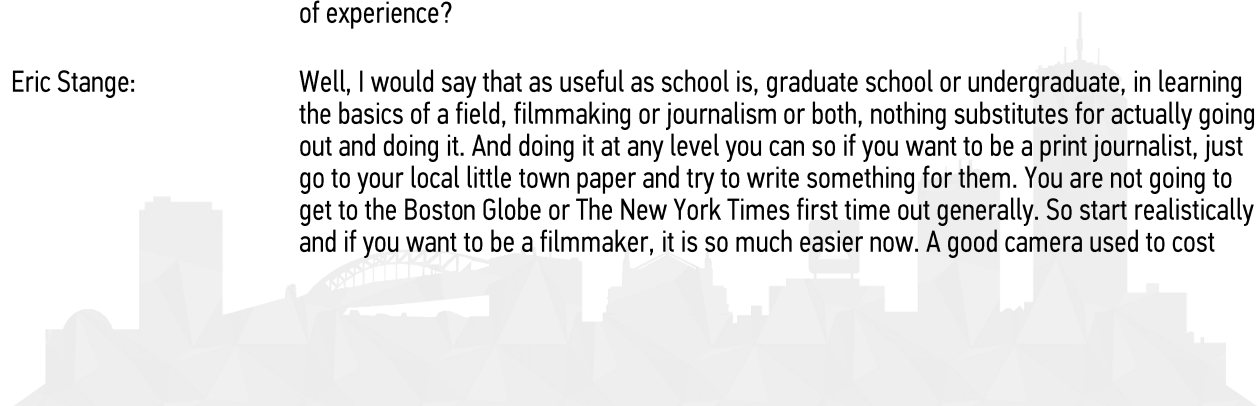
Eric Stange: Yeah, exactly. The idea is to show that the climate now is encouraging people to jump into a level of activism they've never done before and we're looking at people from all walks of life and all backgrounds. A rich lawyer, a young 20 year old woman who's getting involved in gun control issues, people in North Carolina who are working on voting rights issues, so looking at people who have just made this sudden change in their lives. Following them as they try to achieve something over the next few months. And so I hope that will be done by early spring, mid spring. I'm working on a screenplay trying to get that done. So that's a new, in a sense, a new departure. I've always tried to dabble and screenplays, but now I have a little more time.

Jeff Murphy: That was actually my next question for you. Are you still writing? And I guess the answer to that is "yes."

Eric Stange: Yeah, I'm not writing any journalism. For a while I was writing in a regular column about history and new media or history and new technology, digital technology for American Heritage Magazine, but unfortunately the magazine folded so that came to an end. I still occasionally write articles generally having to do with film and history and some kind of overlap but I haven't done that for a bit. So screenplays are what I'm trying to do and it's funny in a way it brings me back to when I was first trying to get into documentaries. It's a whole new way of thinking, a whole new way of trying to tell a story and a lot of rules to learn or rules to learn so you can break them and that sort of thing.

Jeff Murphy: You know, the reason why we do this podcast is for folks like you to be able to share advice and things that you've picked up along the way. If you had to kinda wrap your advice for today's journalism students or you know, filmmaking students, wrap it up and put a bow on it. What are the things that you'd want them to know that you've picked up in your decades of experience?

Eric Stange: Well, I would say that as useful as school is, graduate school or undergraduate, in learning the basics of a field, filmmaking or journalism or both, nothing substitutes for actually going out and doing it. And doing it at any level you can so if you want to be a print journalist, just go to your local little town paper and try to write something for them. You are not going to get to the Boston Globe or The New York Times first time out generally. So start realistically and if you want to be a filmmaker, it is so much easier now. A good camera used to cost



\$40,000, now it's a few hundred or you can use your iPhone. It's amazing and the editing software is practically free, so nothing's holding you back from making a film. And there's a demand for films more than ever. [laughing] So if you make it, there are so many different ways to get it out there. So I just encourage people to go and do it. And don't think that you need to get an entry level job necessarily and work your way up from that. I mean, you often have to earn a living, but if you can do this other stuff on the side, actually do it and don't wait for someone to come along and give you the chance to do it. You have to make your own chances.

Jeff Murphy: Well Eric, this was a pleasure for me. Thanks for taking the time. You had mentioned earlier, if people are interested in learning more about your work or hopefully even connecting with you, what's a good way for them to do that?

Eric Stange: The best way is to go to my website, [spypondproductions.com](http://spypondproductions.com) and use the contact link there and I'd be happy to talk to people and send them links or whatever.

Jeff Murphy: Awesome. Thanks again, Eric.

Eric Stange: Thanks Jeff.

Jeff Murphy: Thanks again to Eric Stange for joining me on the podcast. What he shared on the importance of patience and a willingness to collaborate are lessons that I think we can all learn a great deal from. To connect with Eric or learn more about his company, visit [spypondproductions.com](http://spypondproductions.com). Thanks again for listening to the Proud to BU Podcast. If you like what we're doing, please be sure to subscribe, rate, and review Proud to BU wherever you download your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy and no matter where your path takes you, be Proud to BU. The Proud to BU Podcast is produced by Boston University Alumni Relations. Our theme is from Jump and APM music. To learn more about Proud to BU, visit [bu.edu/alumni/podcast](http://bu.edu/alumni/podcast).

