

PRODUCTION NOTES

I didn't set out to be a filmmaker. Although I didn't know it at the time, my journey started when I married William Storey some 30 years ago. I've never been a member of Up With People or Moral Re-Armament, but I came to learn that William was a former member of both. He was the black spokesman for the group who proclaimed before massive audiences that he was from one of the toughest gangs in Chicago but learned to first change himself in order to change the world. But William never told me about his past – all I knew was that he was intense, dedicated, and passionate about justice in the world. On rare occasions, he would sing Up With People songs to our children and tell elaborate stories of how he met with presidents, kings, and popes, and worked with some of the most genuine and dedicated people on the face of the earth. He stated that even after decades of no communication, he could still call any of them at any time and the friendships would be instantaneous. But, there were never any photos or phone calls from his past. And quite frankly, coming from the suburbs of Detroit myself, I found it hard to believe that a black man in the 1960s could have traveled and experienced what he said he did.

I eventually learned that he walked off the stage in Chicago in 1969 and never wanted to meet up with anyone from Up With People or Moral Re-Armament again. Ever. I never understood why, and he wouldn't talk about it. He just said, "Lee, you don't understand. When you open a door to these people, you can't shut it again." So we rarely spoke about it, and we were married some 15 years before I met anyone from either Up With People or Moral Re-Armament.

While traveling through the San Ildefonso Reservation in New Mexico many years ago, we stopped at a roadside stand. Nearby was a mailbox that said "Sanchez," and William quickly wrote a note that said, "If this is Gilbert Sanchez, whose father was the Governor, who was in Moral Re-Armament and Up With People, this is Willie Storey. Call me." and he left our number. Gilbert drove out to Phoenix that very same weekend. Others learned of the chance meeting and before we knew it, the calls were non-stop. Everyone wanted him to be at the 25th UWP reunion in Denver. He didn't want to go. I can't express the emotions he experienced, but as an outsider, I felt it was important for him to come full circle with his past, so I encouraged him to go. He relented and we went and took our two children with us. And I've been shocked, fascinated, perplexed, and surprised with every discovery of the Up With People/Moral Re-Armament story ever since.

I've been compelled to figure out the dynamics of William's past (by the way, he was never in a gang), and all the propaganda that went along with Up With People and Moral Re-Armament on an ideological, political, and religious level over the years. As an outsider, people have been willing to entrust their stories with me, and for the past three years I've documented them. I've been everywhere from Mackinac Island, Michigan to Cape Town, South Africa interviewing members and alumni. Many are angry and feel used. Others are in denial. Some remain gung-ho. Some are embarrassed. Still others are apologists or revisionists and tell a story that my research simply doesn't support. I've also interviewed outside commentators to assist in piecing together the story of youth, idealism, and hope against political and religious backdrop of the turbulent 1960s and the changing American values over the decades.

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William refused to be involved in the making of SMILE 'TIL IT HURTS, so that I would be free to form my own views. It has been fascinating for me to glimpse his past, not to mention the history and impact of both Moral Re-Armament and Up With People. In the process, I've learned about the funding, political agenda, stringent standards, arranged marriages, sexual politics, and broken families of these "true believers" who set out to change the world. I've also met amazing and dedicated members of both organizations who genuinely care about making a positive difference in the world and who willingly committed their lives to works of service benefiting others. Because so many of the founding members of Up With People who were also involved in Moral Re-Armament were aging, my motivation has been to document their fantastic personal stories before it was too late.

In the process, I've combed through mountains of historical research, news articles, and search engines. I've also hired forensic accountants and investigators to uncover financial, political, and corporate accounts, as well as documents from government agencies. Up With People generously entrusted their rich archival history, and we sifted through 40 years of media in just about every format imaginable, all of which was new to me.

Getting inside the organization had its challenges. Founding members of Up With People guarded its bumpy history, but were nevertheless willing to open up to an outsider like me. I must admit that the often cheery, overly happy outlook was draining at times. It was like being around "The Borg" from Star Trek: resistance was futile, and the crew had to assimilate or die. We attended annual alumni reunions that were like Amway conventions on steroids. Zealous energy abounded, with outgoing, enthusiastic happy therapy sessions. However, in all fairness, the reunions served to reunite genuine, cross-cultural, and life-long friendships that provided a surprisingly hopeful glimpse of a united world.

One of my fondest adventures in uncovering the Up With People story was having the opportunity to interview the group's founder, J. Blanton Belk, while hunting. It was his favorite sport, and he was willing to teach me to shoot and bring the crew along for the ride.

SMILE 'TIL IT HURTS is privately funded. From the start, I refused financial offers from anyone associated with Up With People or Moral Re-Armament. I wanted this documentary to be a critical and objective analysis of the organization in a historical and political context, including the heartfelt and sensitive portrayals of the experiences of key members. I did not want to be in the film myself; rather, I wanted it to be the story of its members. We approached every interviewee with sympathy and understanding, in order to create a three-dimensional portrait that tells the truth first and foremost.

The UWP documentary received positive attention at the Sundance Independent Producers Conference in 2006. It was there that I met Bari Pearlman, who became my Producer and who introduced the project to Jack Lechner, my Executive Producer. From there, the team was assembled and SMILE 'TIL IT HURTS unfolded into a story that had to be told.

- Lee Storey