

‘Give me a camera, and I’ll go do it’

A workplace conversation saw Johnny Hall’s career shift and now he’s living his dream telling stories onscreen in the American Midwest.

WORDS **Craig Sisterson**

FOUR YEARS AGO JOHNNY HALL WAS SITTING on the side of his bed in Blacksburg, Virginia, shaking back and forth in front of his wife. His life had taken several byways since he was a Christchurch kid shooting home movies with his friends, blowing up models with firecrackers for action sequences. Now, unexpectedly, Johnny was on the cusp of turning his passion into a career. He had a chance – was he ready?

‘I was just having a full-on panic attack, thinking “I don’t know if I can actually do this”,’ says Johnny. A glib comment made months before to his boss at the Chicago agency where Johnny worked as a web developer saw him preparing to travel around the state of Illinois, camera in hand, to shoot 15 short documentaries in 10 days for the state’s office of tourism.

‘That’s just bonkers; I ended up losing 9 lbs, it was crazy ... But it’s kinda like I learned doing 48Hours, you just throw yourself in the deep end and trust your instincts.’

Web design was Johnny’s job, film was his passion. For years he’d used his spare time to make everything from music videos for friends to ‘turn your cell phone off’ ads for his local cinema. He’d even made a feature film with friends, the ‘10 days of shooting on a Canon 550D, five years of post-production’ supernatural horror *Ghost Shark 2: Urban Jaws*.

So when his boss said a client was having an issue, Johnny uttered fateful words: ‘Hey, you know what, give me a camera and I’ll go do it.’ Months passed; Johnny forgot all about it.

‘Then my boss came back saying, “The client’s signed off”. I was like, “Signed off on what?” “The documentary series.” I

thought “Oh no”, because I’d always had reservations about turning a passion into a profession. The stakes are so much higher when you’re doing something for somebody else rather than just yourself. But it’s ended up being phenomenally rewarding in a way that I wasn’t anticipating.’

Johnny’s résumé now includes more than 50 short films in that series (covering everything from people who make baseball bats to winemakers, brewers, and alpaca farms), among many other film projects. He’s Creative Director of Cinematography at TimeZoneOne, helping organisations and businesses tell their stories onscreen. His staff bio ends with ‘We should make something cool together’.

Talking to Johnny in late 2020, it’s clear he lives that philosophy. There’s a joy that bubbles through when he talks about screen stories, about how in his job he gets to meet and talk to people from so many different backgrounds and help them share their stories. How he gets to spend his days thinking creatively and making something cool.

‘Every time we do one of these, when we get to a place it’s our first time seeing the location other than photos, the first time meeting the person face to face, and we basically get a look inside this person’s life for three or four hours,’ says Johnny. ‘There’s times when we’re leaving the shoot, and we’re hugging. We’re a tiny crew and you’re having this intimate access to somebody that you wouldn’t have on large-scale productions, which I really like.’

The first time, though, was horrifying. Not the panic-inducing in-the-deep-end road trip of 15 docs in 10 days to





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start his pro career, but the first time Johnny fell in love with filmmaking.

It was the sight and sound of a grizzled old fisherman being eaten alive by a great white. 'I was about nine years old and I saw *Jaws* for the first time,' he recalls. 'I just had this visceral reaction to Quint being eaten at the end. It was the most horrible thing I'd ever seen and gave me a lifelong fear of the ocean. But it also struck me that there's something I'm watching and it's having an emotional impact on me and my life. In that instance, you know, it was horror and something I'd think about for a long time, but film can also give you good feelings, and I liked that impact you can have on people's lives through images and sound.'

After dabbling in short films with his friends as a teenager, Johnny earned a Diploma in Information Technology and then came to a crossroads. 'The day I applied for film school was also the day I applied for the job that I've now had since I was 19 years old,' he says. 'So it was a weird divergence that eventually led back to the same place, because now I'm a cinematographer that didn't go to a film school, and trained as a web developer.'

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love won. 'My wife, Abby, is also a Cantabrian,' says Johnny. 'We were neighbours and I crashed her house-warming party, then it became a whirlwind romance where she got a scholarship to Ohio State University, and I followed. I'd do three months in the US because that's all my visa would allow, then I'd do a month in New Zealand and save up enough money to come back. I did it so much that customs started getting weird with me.'

Later the couple moved back to Christchurch, got married



and lived through the earthquakes, before returning to the States for Abby to complete her doctorate in linguistics. Serendipitously, the Christchurch firm Johnny worked for was bought by a Chicago-based company, who he continues to work for today. So why live in Blacksburg, a college town a little larger than Ashburton, 1,000 kilometres from Chicago?

'When my wife got her PhD, she immediately got a job at Virginia Tech,' explains Johnny when I ask about his long commute. 'We've lived here for five years now, so I'm a New Zealander who lives in Virginia and works for an agency in Chicago. It's about 626 miles, I'm very familiar with that

drive, I just got back on Thursday. It was 22 hours of driving in two days, through some of the most Covid-ravaged areas. Pre-Covid I would regularly fly into Chicago and spend a week there, sometimes a month during summer, shoot various projects, just go into the weeds, then come back here into the safety of my own home.'

Reflecting on the winding road he's taken to where he is now, Johnny leaves a final thought for anyone searching for their own path: 'Don't box yourself into one idea of what you want your life to be because then you'll miss other opportunities that might get presented to you.' ●