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## Putting a Face on the Facts

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# Putting a Face on the Facts

**Abstract**

Dordt College film professor and students work on a documentary on people living in poverty. It's called "The Fourth World".

**Keywords**

poverty, film, documentary

**Disciplines**

Film and Media Studies | Film Production

**Comments**

<http://www.thebanner.org/tuned-in/2011/09/putting-a-face-on-the-facts>

## Putting a Face on the Facts



Mark Volkers and Dordt student Pete Hessels (seated) of St. Catharines, Ontario, film a family living under a bridge in Manila.

**IN MY EXPERIENCE**, reading statistics about poverty has a unique effect on people. It creates a slight rise in blood pressure as people read about “1 billion living in slums,” but then the effect dissipates as the enormity of that number—1 billion—seeps in. “I don’t know any of those people. It’s just a statistic, just a number,” we seem to tell ourselves.

Wrapping our brains around some of the huge issues of the day is a struggle, especially when those issues are given to us in print. But what if we stripped away the glaze of statistics and got more visceral, more real, more personal?

That’s what some of my students and I have tried to do in making *The Fourth World*, a documentary produced by Prairie Grass Productions of Dordt College. We filmed individual slum dwellers in Guatemala City, Manila, Nairobi, Mumbai, and Managua to help tell the stories of the “1 billion” people we sometimes hear about.

People who live in slums have names, dreams, aspirations, and personalities.

In Manila we spent a week with a family who lives under a bridge near a garbage dump. They are José and Elvie Alquino, and their oldest daughter, Jovelyn, wants to be a nurse. In Nairobi, we filmed Felix, a 16-year-old boy who works eight hours a day for 17.5 cents an hour. In Guatemala City, Tanya begs at a busy intersection. Her story forever changed the film crew’s attitude towards beggars.

It’s almost impossible for filmmakers—students or not—to come away from such experiences without being deeply moved. People who live in slums have names, dreams, aspirations, and personalities—just like we do. Working with Christian organizations in the areas where we filmed, we were able to zero in on *individuals*, not statistics.

Paraphrasing Chaim Potok, “the universal is made known in the specific.” Documentaries can do an excellent job of telling specific stories to help us understand the macro-story. ■



Mark Volkers is the digital media production instructor at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa. *The Fourth World* is in post-production. For more information, go to [slumdoc.com](http://slumdoc.com) or visit the “Slum Documentary Film Project” Facebook page.

## THE LOWDOWN

More documentaries that will open your eyes.



**Born into Brothels:** A photographer gives cameras to children of brothel workers to help them document their lives and express themselves. (Think Film)



**Reparando:** Ministry in “La Limonada,” an enormous slum in Guatemala City, brings healing to people who had given up hope. (Athentikos)



**Emmanuel’s Gift:** A young man in Ghana with a deformed leg bikes around the country to help raise awareness and build relationships in a culture that ostracizes those with disabilities. (First Look Pictures)



**Waste Land:** An artist leads an art project using materials salvaged from a landfill in Brazil. See a fuller review at [thebanner.org](http://thebanner.org). (New Video Group)