



Run Baby Run

An East coast Producer and a West coast Director team up to create an innovative television special for a legendary ministry.

It took a trip to the hills Las Piedras, Puerto Rico and the mean streets of Brooklyn, New York. But when Producer Norm Mintle and Director Phil Cooke joined together to create a new documentary style television special, they made the decision early on to “push the envelope” and produce a television experience that matched the incredible life story of their subject: *former gang member, Nicky Cruz*.

When the movie “*The Cross and the Switchblade*” was produced in the 1960’s, it told the story of how a young preacher named David Wilkerson answered God’s call to take His message to the most violent areas of New York City. Meeting a young gang warlord named Nicky Cruz was his greatest challenge, and the story of how Nicky struggled and finally accepted Christ has become one of the greatest conversion stories of all time. *The Cross and the Switchblade* was essentially David Wilkerson’s account of those events during the 50’s, and a few years later, Nicky Cruz wrote his own account of the story in a best selling book titled “*Run Baby Run*”.

The project’s Producer, Norm Mintle was Executive Producer of *The 700 Club* before he left to form his own company, *Pure Media* based in Chesapeake, Virginia. Today, he is a consulting producer and programmer for a number of major ministries and Christian television stations.

The program’s Director was Phil Cooke, of *Cooke Pictures* in Hollywood. He has a long list of innovative television projects, some of which have been featured in recent profiles in the national media such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Wireless Age magazine interviewed both Norm and Phil to find out how the special was created, and learn a little about the “behind the scenes” process of making a large scale television event.

Wireless Age: You’re both very experienced at creating successful Christian television programs, had you ever worked together before?

Norm Mintle: Although we had known each other for years, and respected each other's work with various television projects, we had never actually worked together, and that was one of the reasons this program was such a great opportunity.

Phil Cooke: T.J. Malievsky, Chief Operating Officer of the *All American Network* is actually the one that brought us together. Nicky Cruz is a board member of the network, and when he wanted to produce a compelling television special based on his book, T.J. arranged for The All American Network to work with Nicky Cruz Outreach to provide the funding, and then he brought Norm and me to the table.

WA: Where did you start?

Phil: Well, after we both immersed ourselves in Nicky's book, Norm took the first pass at the script. He had also been working with Nicky's overall ministry outreach and had the best knowledge of Nicky's vision, and what he been doing in the inner city over the last 30 years.

Norm: Essentially, I understood Nicky's ministry and message, and the next step was to translate that story to the screen in a creative and compelling way. I also think this is the step where most ministries drop the ball. They don't realize that HOW you tell a story is as important as the story itself. Therefore, I wanted to find a director that had a strong technique and style, and could use camera angles, lighting, editing techniques and music to express not only the rage and anger that characterized Nicky's early life, but also capture his dramatic conversion experience as well.

WA: How did you go about it?

Phil: Right away we realized we couldn't actually film the book – structure-wise, we would have to create something entirely new for television. That's where I have to give a great deal of credit to both Norm and Nicky. They let me have enormous creative control over the project, and allowed me the freedom to express the story in a very unusual way. We used numerous formats: 16mm film, BetaSP videotape, and Hi-8 video. We also shot about 90% of the project handheld, to visually express how out of control Nicky's life really was. Our Post Production Supervisor, Steve Taylor, also made a huge contribution during editing, with the ways he affected the footage – and he even created an entire graphic font style just for the program.

Norm: I see so many Christian programs today that look just like all the others. I wanted to make this one distinctive. Nicky's story is so incredible, that to make it look like a "typical" program would destroy its impact. After I wrote the initial script, Phil did a re-write, and from that point on we both were making changes right through the shooting and editing process.

WA: I noticed that interviews were an important part of the program;

Norm: Nicky helped us locate some members of his original gang – the *Mau Maus* – in fact, two had served some prison time since the gang days. We took them to the old neighborhood and had them reminisce about those times. It was an amazing experience. I asked the questions, and Phil was directing two cameras – which made it difficult, because we were always moving – walking on the streets, in alleys, and in parks where the “rumbles” took place. We wanted the segments to be living, breathing things – and some of their comments will make your hair stand on end.

WA: Was the witchcraft scene realistic?

Phil: Absolutely. Our Puerto Rican Unit Manager found an actress who, before she became a Christian, had practiced Santeria and told fortunes. So we had her help us re-create the scenes involving Nicky’s parents and their involvement in witchcraft. In fact, it was so real, some of the crew members got the heebie-jeebies. Needless to say, prayer was an important part of the shooting process.

WA: Why was authenticity so important?

Norm: Our goal is to reach non-Christians, and they are an extremely skeptical audience. For them to believe Nicky’s life was actually changed, they have to believe his story was true, and the horrors he experienced as a child were real. I think we often “pull back” in Christian programs and are afraid to tell real stories. But Jesus never pulled any punches - and when he told stories, they had power because they came from real life – the Bible says His stories had *authority*. And because we also shot all our interviews in Spanish for a Latin audience - a part of the world where Santeria is very real - we had to be accurate.

Phil: I agree 100%. We made a commitment at the beginning of this project to tell Nicky’s life story in the most truthful and compelling way possible. As a young man, Nicky did some pretty scary stuff, and we didn’t gloss over anything. I appreciate Nicky having the guts to let us do that, and I appreciate Norm being willing to be a “barrier” between myself and Nicky and T.J. when I would get an unusual idea. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn’t – but we always gave it a shot, and that’s what makes the program so effective.

Norm: I think that’s the essence of creative producing – assembling talented people and then creating an environment where they can do their best work. From Andy Hall’s camerawork on the streets of New York, to Steve Taylor’s editing, Brian Miller’s music – every aspect of the program was fresh, innovative, and unusual.

WA: Did the two of you ever bump heads during the production?

Norm: I only fired Phil twice...

Phil: Actually, I don't think I've ever had a better relationship with a producer. In fact, I was amazed at how often we would seamlessly cross paths – he would step in with a great idea for a camera angle, I would step in when they got stumped during an interview, we both wrote the script, we both worked out the vision for the program, etc... And all the time, Nicky was right there working with us.

Norm: The important thing is that we didn't "bump heads" over trivial, ego-driven stuff. Any conflicts we had were about the creative aspects of the program, and that's how you make great television.

Phil: I agree. So often, Christian producers and directors are just "reactive". They create a situation where they only react to the pastor or evangelist. They don't really contribute to the creative aspects of the program – they just capture whatever the pastor or evangelist does and try to make the best of it in the editing room. But I refuse to work that way. Nicky allowed us to be as creative and influential as we wanted to be from the start. Within the context of his life story, he allowed us to express the gifts God had given us, and combined with his calling and gifts, we took the show to the next level.

Norm: I remember shooting the major portion of Nicky's interview in a very rough part of Brooklyn, standing under an elevated train. We were all freezing to death, and wanted to go back to the warm hotel. But at the same time, we knew this was something special, and it was as if time were standing still. When you're on location shooting, and that kind of moment happens, it reminds you of why you do this for a living.

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