



MIGHT OF THE *movies*

Jessica Mayberry hands cameras to those who have stories to tell. By **Aarthi Gunnupuri**

As a young Oxford University graduate, New Yorker Jessica Mayberry, 32, dreamed of becoming a TV reporter. She worked with different television production houses in New York for about three years, but a trip to India in 2002 put her on a different path. "I realised that the last thing the world needed was another opinionated white reporter!" she smiles. While volunteering with an NGO in India, Jessica realised that the underprivileged and marginalised communities lacked an authentic voice. Video Volunteers was born out of this need.

Launched in 2003, Video Volunteers provides men and women from poor communities across India the skill and the equipment to shoot, direct and create their own films about issues that affect them. Since then, 2,000 screenings have been held across 300 villages with over

four lakh viewers.

But it's not just about the numbers "When I see a Dalit woman in a village in interior Gujarat holding a microphone and talking about her film to a largely male audience, who at some point in the speech have forgotten their prejudice and are listening to her attentively, I feel we must be doing something right."

Better than Bollywood?

Jessica found immense support from the country's vast NGO base. Video Volunteers collaborates with NGOs working at the grass-root level. Another ardent supporter is actor Abhay Doel. "At a screening in Mumbai, Abhay told the directors that their films were better than some Bollywood movies! While it's an exaggeration, you can imagine how good it made them feel."

From wanting to be a reporter to creating hundreds of reporters in



VIDEO WARRIORS

In 2008-2009, Video Volunteers Apna Malak Ma screened three films in 42 villages of Gujarat's Surendranagar district. Following the screening, women in seven villages decided to fight for basic rights, like water and sanitation. The women from Chaurania, Chowki, Siyani, Bhojpora, Ratorki, Nana Shahpura and Parali villages formed a group called Mahila Panch. In February 2010, all the members of the Mahila Panch in Nana Shahpur village organised a sit-in protest at the district collector's office. A month later, the district administration passed a grant of Rs 7 lakh to provide water to 150 families.

a foreign country—did Jessica ever imagine all this possible? "Never! I had no idea I would do anything like this," she says. "Sometimes, I look at my journal from seven years ago, with the typical first-time impressions of India. I wondered if I'd even be able to survive in this chaotic, but beautiful country."

Falling in love

Jessica met her husband Stalin K in India, while conceptualising Video Volunteers. "The only thing friends and family back in the US object to is his name—Stalin!" she adds with a chuckle, referring to the American dislike of anything 'red'.

Jessica is excited about the future, as Video Volunteers plans to expand to include the Internet, creating reporters across the country who will tweet, Facebook and blog about the issues that affect them. Log on to www.videovolunteers.org for details. •