

A conversation with Austin Chu, co-director of *The Recess Ends*

A film about the impact of the economic crisis in the US

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Austin Chu was laid off from his job at an Orange County, California startup in December 2008. Thinking that the mainstream media wasn't adequately covering the effect of the recession on ordinary people, he decided to make a road trip and film it, letting the people and places speak for themselves.

Austin convinced his brother Brian, a San Francisco State University graduate with a degree in television and radio, who has experience as an editor and camera operator, to quit his job and join him. Two weeks later, they pooled \$4,000 and set off.

The brothers "relied on the kindness of strangers," using Facebook and Twitter to contact friends along the way and find places to stay. They traveled to every state in the union and met, talked with, and filmed working people and people who had lost their jobs.

In *The Recess Ends*, shown in San Francisco in late November, the Chus interview individuals who have taken various emergency measures, including all moving in together, to survive the crisis. We meet a single mother in Florida, an extended family in Illinois, we see a hog shoot in Arkansas, a copper mine in Utah, abandoned and repossessed homes in Las Vegas, and more.

The scenes filmed in Detroit are the most devastating. For several minutes, the Chus' camera simply pans over the vast empty spaces where houses used to stand and over the wrecked ones that remain. A young Detroit resident takes the Chus into the ruins of the Jane Cooper Elementary School, closed in 2007, where empty rooms with smashed windows open to the air are filled with piles of trash. The present area of empty space in Detroit is equivalent to the square mileage of the city of San Francisco!

A young man in Youngstown, Ohio tells the filmmakers, "Everybody else in the country is about to feel the brunt" of the crisis. The conditions in Youngstown, a former steelmaking center, are a preview of what the rest of the country is going to

look like, unless things are changed," he says. He goes on: "Nobody in my neighborhood is saying, 'Oh, my god, it's getting worse,' you know? We can't tell."

The Chus' emphasis tends to be on people helping themselves, rediscovering their humanity and finding new, communal ways of getting along. They learned, they repeat a number of times, that it is the solidarity of families and communities that sustain their members and tide them over "until things get better." The brothers demonstrate their compassion, but also the limitations of their political and social understanding at this point.

I met with Austin Chu in San Francisco and we discussed the experience of making the film.

I told him that I enjoyed his film and that I admired him and his brother for taking the initiative and responding to the crisis in the US by going on the road and making a film, something neither brother had done before.

I asked Austin whether he had participated in any social protest before this. He said that although he had not attended any antiwar protests, he had supported the effort to obtain the release of the two American journalists, Euna Lee and Laura Ling, arrested in North Korea. He also worked on a class action lawsuit against Abercrombie & Fitch for racial discrimination, which was successful.

His motivation for activism is a profound sense of the injustice in the world today, he said, and the fact that the real conditions in the country are not reported on in the media. He and his brother's idea was to allow the people and images to do the speaking and to let the audiences draw their own conclusions.

The young filmmaker was very specific about this point. We discussed the images of devastated Detroit. Austin said he was shocked at what he saw there. "And bombs didn't do that," he said. "And the news doesn't show that." Regarding the recession, he said, "It isn't over. It's going to get worse." He

felt that it was important to slap the audience, as it were, into awareness by presenting the conditions without commentary.

We discussed how the Obama administration has found money for war and the bank bailouts, but has refused to offer any help to the states. He agreed that this was wrong, and added, “I hope it all crashes down.” He believes that only when the system falls apart will there be any chance for a real change.

Austin shook his head, however, when I mentioned world politics and the capitalist system being the cause of poverty and war. He said that his goal is just to communicate with people about the effects of the crisis on American workers and cities. He believes that it is love and compassion among people that is the ultimate solution.

“What surprised you on your travels?” I asked. “Everything,” he replied. The brothers tried to cover a wide range of different situations and conditions in their film, from homelessness, to collapsing industries, to the massive wave of foreclosures, to individuals struggling to earn an income. “Every state was different,” Austin said.

Austin was particularly impressed by the self-sufficiency of the Amish community they visited in Ohio. “These people grow their own food. They own their own land. They’re already off the grid. They will survive, no matter what,” he told me. But the rest of the working population could not live in isolation like that, I replied, or return to the conditions of another century. There must be a more serious and realistic solution for the vast majority in a complex, mass society.

We also discussed how modern technology—cell phones, the Internet, video—affected social protest and resistance. Austin agreed that these technological advances made it easier to communicate an alternative narrative to the world. He and Brian feel it is their obligation to spread this alternative as widely as possible. It is their eventual hope to make the film available free on the Internet.

I asked him if his experience in question-and-answer sessions with audiences helped him focus on the points he wanted to get across. Austin said it definitely did. “The question-and-answer period is always my favorite part. I love to get feedback from the audiences.”

I asked him whether there had been a response from young people in other countries to the film’s web site. He said that there had been a lot of interest. He also pointed out that they had applied to several film festivals, including Sundance and Ann Arbor, and would be glad to enter their film in any international festival as long as they could raise the money for the application fees.

“We were rejected by Sundance,” he told me. “I guess they figure we’re too small.” He said they had thought that there was a niche for their film in the Sundance low-budget, “indie” category.

He particularly wants the film to be seen at universities and

by high school students, he said. He and his brother are hoping to inspire other young people to do their own investigations and reporting on the crisis.

On the whole, the learning curve has been huge for Austin and his brother. “I feel like a better person,” he said of his decision to make the film. He has concluded that it is more important than just going out and making money. “I’m not doing this for money,” he said. It is something he believes is needed in an era where big media control the discussion.

Austin and Brian Chu are very intelligent and curious young men, interested in the conditions prevailing in the country and around the world and wanting to cover stories that the corporate media ignores. The brothers’ tenacity is admirable, particularly given the fact that on the second day of their expedition their car was wrecked and they kept on anyway, obtaining a cheap, used van with the help of their family.

At the same time, one is struck by the absence in their thinking and their film of any discussion about the source of the financial crisis and other issues. There is no mention in *The Recess Ends* of the bank bailouts, for instance, or the wars and occupations in the Middle East and Central Asia. The Chus did talk to a veteran, but this segment is short and inconclusive. There were a few references to the waste of money on the wars expressed by some of those they interviewed.

Like many young people today, they are astounded by the deterioration of the society around them and are searching for answers that popular culture does not offer. While they were inspired by the efforts of the people they met to reach out and help each other, they have not yet developed their views to the point where they can identify the roots of the vast social problems in the profit system itself.

They do not follow any particular political line, but are distrustful of the current two-party system. Austin is not enamored with Obama or the Democrats. However, he does not see any viable alternative at this point in time. He is interested in listening to the ideas of socialism, but does not know much about the subject.

This is the film’s website: <http://therecessends.com/>



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