

## SENSITIVE DOCUMENTS

Anne Aghion '82

In our fast-paced, adrenaline-fueled world, Anne Aghion prefers the opposite: "It's all about slowing down," says the French-born acclaimed documentary filmmaker. After working in Paris for *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune* for several years, she left the daily news grind in 1992 to experience events more fully.

"The idea that a correspondent would fly into a country and four hours later would have to write the paper's lead story was terrifying," she says. "For me, 'documentary' is about taking time, going much deeper and trying to understand not just the facts and figures, but everything else behind that, and what it means to the normal people."

It wasn't until after the end of her journalism career, on a trip across Latin America and into Antarctica, that Aghion first found her true calling as a documentarian. "The original plan was to go around the world without taking airplanes," she recalls. "Because when you get on airplanes, you get on and then you get off and you miss out on what's in-between."

As part of her nearly year-long journey, she visited Nicaragua's capital city Managua, which she found compelling enough to return to a year later with camera in hand. As the subject for her first documentary *Se le movió el piso* (*The Earth Moved Under Him: A Portrait of Managua*), a portrait of the city's war-ravaged, earthquake-shattered citizens.

Her most ambitious project consists of different films that follow Rwanda's citizen-based *Gacaca* tribunals (literally "justice on the grass") in the wake of the country's 1994 genocide. A triumph of patience—they were filmed over 10 years—and powerful humanitarian work, the films include, *Gacaca*, *Living*



*Together Again in Rwanda?* (2002), an introduction to the reconciliation process; the Emmy-winning *In Rwanda We Say...The Family That Does Not Speak Dies* (2004), which looks at the impact of a prisoner's return to his community; *The Notebooks of Memory* (2009), which weighs survivor accounts against the testimony of alleged murderers; and *My Neighbor, My Killer* (2009), Aghion's culminating and definitive work about the trials, which traces the intermingled lives of victims and perpetrators.

Though Aghion never makes any direct connections to the infamous mid-twentieth-century Holocaust in the films, she admits, "Rwanda is definitely about connecting to the pain of where I came from, of what my parent's generation lived through in Europe."

At the time of their making, however, Aghion says she wasn't traumatized by the harrowing testimonials she captured on video, which included repeated stories of children murdered in front of their mothers. (It was only several months later in the editing room that she began having nightmares.) Her ability to stay focused was partially because she didn't understand the language. But it was also a result of her work ethic, staying attentive and respectful of her subjects. Her recipe for filmmaking, she says, is humility and making sure those in the films would embrace the final product.

"There is an enormous issue of trust," she explains. "Access is a renegotiable thing every day. For me, we're in this together, and we're going to figure this out, but you have to trust me at the end of the day and I have to trust them that they're going to play ball with me."

Aghion says she applied that same ethos to a very different project; her latest, *Ice People*, is a lyrically photographed portrait of scientists working in Antarctica. Though shot half a world away from Rwanda with differing subject matter, Aghion sees similarities: "I'm drawn to issues of how people deal with sociability in extreme situations, and how we build or rebuild our personal identities and our own collective identities in a group."

With the completion of the epic *Gacaca* films, Aghion is now intent on getting the work seen. "Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, there have been something like 125 civil wars throughout the world, so unfortunately, there are countless places where the films can go," she says. "Now, I'm looking for funding to take this show on the road, whether it's to Cambodia, Kenya, or Sri Lanka."

"I've seen how people relate to the films in post-conflict societies," she adds. "They see the impact and they think, if these people can talk again after everything they've been through, maybe we can, too."