The University of Alabama’s Documenting Justice film course offers a rare opportunity for students to step outside their comfort zones and see the world from someone else’s perspective, says award-winning filmmaker and Documenting Justice director Andrew Grace.

“In the process of making most of the films in this class, students interact with people who have vastly different life experiences than their own,” Grace says. “Putting students in situations where they really have to listen and learn from others is in some ways unique.”

It’s an experience that students, most of whom are not film majors, come to appreciate and even treasure. This was the case for Rachel Ahrnsen, who was a senior majoring in journalism when she made her film, “Sanctuary,” which follows a Christian church where LGBTQ+ individuals are accepted. “Being so welcomed by the church and hearing everyone’s intensely personal stories was a gift,” Ahrnsen says.

The project built her technical skills as well. “Before this, I had edited a few videos,” she says. “Afterwards, I had created a documentary, which is one of my greatest accomplishments.”

Kyle Leopard, a senior majoring in history and political science, says the Documenting Justice course was a challenge that showed him he could create something both meaningful and beautiful. “I’ve never considered myself the artistic type,” Leopard says. “It almost felt like I wasn’t capable of it.”

Leopard’s film, “Run of Mine,” documented the lives of coal miners in Alabama. “My film has no agenda,” he says, “It was to shed light on this aspect of society – our main power source and resource. The vast majority of people have never seen a modern coal mine.”

The course aims to teach students how to use film to tell stories of justice and injustice through film.
Grace says the Documenting Justice program introduces students to seeing the world in new ways. “Film is a powerful medium for communicating, and many of the subjects of the students’ films have been deeply impacted by the attention the films have brought to their personal stories,” Grace says. “It’s my hope that this experience develops stronger empathy in our students.”

Documenting Justice focuses on issues of justice and injustice within Alabama, while International Documenting Justice, for those who plan to study abroad, gives students the opportunity to tell social-justice-themed stories from all corners of the globe. During the first semester of the course, Grace and co-instructor Rachel Morgan, lead programmer for the Sidewalk Film Festival, teach documentary theory and history as well as the ethics of cinematic non-fiction.

The second semester of the course is dedicated to the production of seven- to 10-minute documentaries. Students work in pairs to produce, shoot, and edit their films. Documenting Justice film topics have examined the impact of the state’s immigration laws on Hispanic residents, the transformation of a low-performing, high-poverty school into one of Alabama’s most outstanding in just three years and the internal struggle of recovering from sexual assault, among many others.

Students enrolled in Documenting Justice International have explored topics including the relationship between history and culture in post-apartheid Johannesburg, South Africa, the work of Uruguay’s clasificadores, who make a living by digging through garbage to find recyclable materials and the power of friendship for two Kenyan girls who live in a home for children orphaned by AIDS. These films and more are available at documentingjustice.org.

Amy Reisch, a senior telecommunication and film major, made an Alabama film during the 2012-2013 academic year and then created a Documenting Justice International film during a trip to Sierra Leone.

“My film chronicles the story of Kenawa Abdulai, a former child soldier in the Sierra Leone Civil War,” Reisch says. “Despite his horrific experiences as a young boy, Kenawa remains hopeful for his future and the future of his country. I felt compelled to tell his story to bring audiences into a world they may never see, allow them the opportunity to sympathize and feel for someone on the other side of the world and to share Kenawa’s spirit of hope for the future, despite his traumatic past.”

Students also have invited viewers into seldom-seen realms closer to home; Johanna Obenda, a junior majoring in history, and her partner, Gabby Taylor, directed the film “Black Noise,” which profiles three black, deaf individuals and explores larger issues of race, disability and identity. Obenda says she chose the topic because it is something that is often overlooked.

“I think the story needed to be heard,” Obenda says. “Rarely do we, as a society, consider the complexity of deafness and deaf culture and how that culture intersects with others, such as African-American culture.”

Christopher Scott, a senior majoring in religious studies at the time he and law student Mary Bachub made “The Chief,” which captures Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore’s reflections on his controversial life in politics, said Documenting Justice was his most challenging academic experience at UA. “I think education in the U.S. in general could benefit from the example set by Documenting Justice regarding what students can achieve when they’re consistently held to high standards,” Scott says.

Judged by a jury of film professionals from around the world, “The Chief” won Best Alabama Film at the 2011 Sidewalk Film Festival. Documenting Justice students Mary Sellers Shaw, a 2014 graduate who majored in communication studies, and Carlos Estrada, a 2013 graduate who majored in interdisciplinary studies, won Best Student Film in 2012 for “Undocumented,” which explores implications of Alabama’s immigration laws.

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“Documenting Justice is offered annually, beginning in the fall semester. The application process takes place in February. For more information, contact Andrew Grace at 205-348-8245 or agrace@ua.edu.