

AN INTERVIEW WITH OSCAR NOMINATED FILMMAKER,  
**GREGG HELVEY**  
WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER OF KAVI

Kavi tells the story of a boy in India who wants to play cricket and go to school but instead is forced to work in a brick kiln as a modern day slave. It has played in over 100 film festivals world wide and has won over 50 awards, including the 2009 Student Academy Award and was nominated for an Oscar in 2010 for Best Live Action Short Film. You can view Kavi at [www.KaviTheMovie.com](http://www.KaviTheMovie.com) or on iTunes.



## WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO BE A FILMMAKER?

I love stories, music and photography. Part of why filmmaking was appealing to me was because it's a combination of those mediums. I love telling stories about the issues that I really care about. I also love to travel and experience different cultures. Filmmaking is an opportunity to take audiences on those journeys, too.

Growing up, I always loved getting my hands on the camera or the camcorder. If I couldn't do that then I'd just get in front of it. The thought of having a career as a filmmaker never really crossed my mind; nor did it seem practical. However, during my second year at the University of Virginia I took a film analysis course; everything clicked and I realized that I wanted to be a filmmaker.

But after those three rainy weeks, the monsoon finally cleared and we got our 60-person crew out to the location 4 hours outside of Mumbai to prep the location and shoot under the radar. We had to shoot in 7 days rather than the 10 we had scheduled since we were losing crew from delaying the shoot for so long. Two hours after we wrapped the shoot the monsoon rains returned and poured through our set. It was a miracle that we made it.





## WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO CREATE THIS SHORT FILM?

After graduating from the University of Virginia in 2001, I worked briefly for an editor at National Geographic Traveler Magazine, who was starting a non-profit organization targeting sex slavery in Eastern Europe. That's when I learned that slavery still exists. I was shocked.

After that, I moved to England where I taught in a boarding school. Even though I was teaching French and was an artist in residence for photography, I would hand my students photocopies of modern-day slavery statistics. During my time in England, I got a job shooting documentary footage in India for a BBC One science show. I fell in love with India and knew I wanted to return.

Three years later, I applied and got into USC's Graduate School of Cinematic Arts. I really wanted to tell people about important issues like modern-day slavery and realized that perhaps films would be a more effective medium than photocopies of statistics.

When it came time to make my masters thesis I was reading a book called Disposable People and came across a chapter about brick kilns in India and Pakistan where entire families are forced to make bricks in order to pay off "loans" they are tricked into taking. These bogus loans can be passed down through generations, resulting in families who have only known a life of forced labor. That's when it hit me. "I'm going back to India. I'm going to make a movie in India." And to clarify, Kavi is not a documentary. My goal was to make a fictional movie. I thought it was important to focus on forced labor slavery because there was very little out there about bonded labor... and definitely no fictional movies about slavery in brick kilns. It's also the least known type of modern day slavery.

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## WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES THAT YOU FACED IN MAKING THIS FILM?

Well... I don't speak Hindi, so that was a little tough. But shooting the movie in English was never an option for me. It was essential for me to create a film that was authentic and took audiences right into the heart of a family trapped in a brick kiln and having them speak English would have completely subverted that. Plus, Sagar Salunke, who plays Kavi, and some cast members didn't speak English.

It was a fun challenge directing in a language that I don't speak. I had to really focus on each actor's authenticity and believability, hitting each emotional beat rather than the exact words.

In December 2006, I went to India for a month of location scouting and to find a crew. When I returned in August 2007, everyone told me that I was 3 months early, and it wasn't brick-making season after all. I wracked my brains wondering why no one told me this until I had arrived! The plan then was to find an old dormant brick kiln that we could turn into our film set. But, it turned out that it was an abnormally long monsoon season and it looked like we'd have to cancel the shoot (it also didn't help that the

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Indian government rejected our shooting permit due the film's content). But after those three rainy weeks, the monsoon finally cleared and we got our 60-person crew out to the location 4 hours outside of Mumbai to prep the location and shoot under the radar. When we got there the entire place was overgrown in lush green vegetation-- not exactly a place to make bricks. So we had to clear the grass, bushes, anything that was green so it would look like the hot, arid location where you'd find a brick kiln. On top of that, we had to hire brick-makers from another village to come make the thousands of bricks in the film.

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### WHO IS YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE FOR THIS FILM?

Everyone. That's another reason why I wanted to tell a story about bonded labor slavery rather than sex slavery.



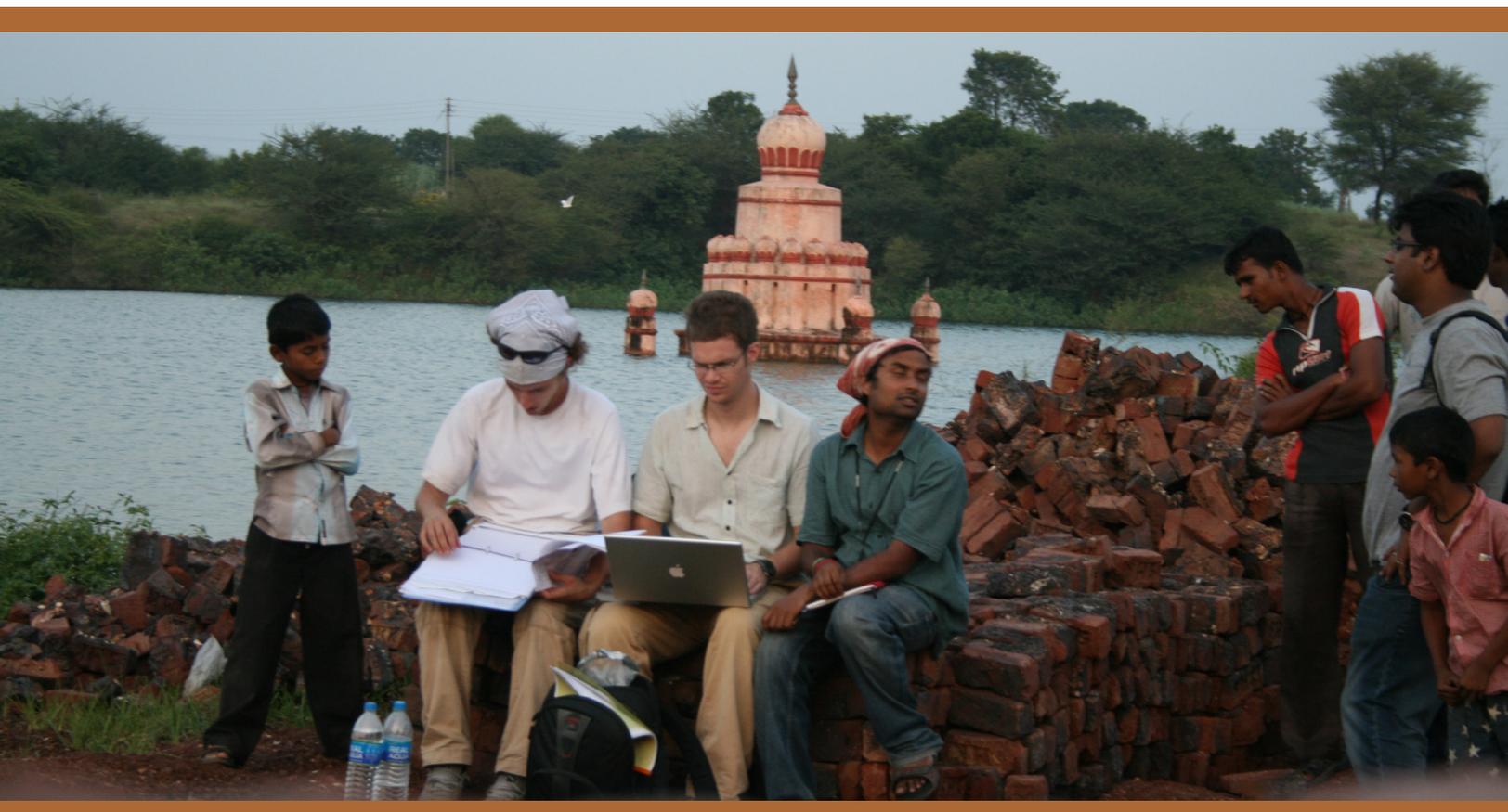
## WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR AUDIENCE TO BE MOVED TO DO AFTER WATCHING THIS FILM?

Tell others. I used to think that raising awareness was a cliché, but then I realized that it took someone else raising awareness for me to learn and consequently do something. I think that we all have unique skills and talents that can be used to serve the big issues we care about... I tell stories and make movies. So that's one of the best ways I could personally serve this issue. And modern-day slavery is a world-wide issue, not just an Indian one. Closer to home, human trafficking thrives right under our noses in the US, as well.

My hope is that people can use Kavi to raise awareness that turns into action. I love getting to screen Kavi and to speak to groups about slavery, my experience with Kavi and filmmaking, and how individuals can make a difference for the issues they care about.

You can learn more at [www.KaviTheMovie.com](http://www.KaviTheMovie.com). And, be sure to check out the page about the organizations that are actively fighting slavery and the specific ways you can get involved in helping end modern-day slavery.

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**WHAT ARE YOUR OTHER FILMS ABOUT?**

I directed a short documentary, *Overexposed*, about how pornography affects men. It examines 2 guys' different views on pornography and their abilities to navigate intimacy, and also includes Dr. Drew, Adam Carolla and other cultural pundits. ([www.overexposedthemovie.com](http://www.overexposedthemovie.com))

I also helped produce RL Hooker's short film in Kenya called, *The Knife Grinder's Tale*. It's based on the short story, by award winning Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and is about a father's journey to understand why his son was pointlessly murdered in the slums of Nairobi. (<http://www.theknifegrinderstale.com>)

I'm now developing other feature film projects including some in China. An agent at a major Chinese studio saw *Kavi* and said that if I could direct in India without speaking Hindi then I could probably direct in China without speaking Chinese... so I'm now working with them to direct movies in Chinese and co-producing movies in English with people in China and the US.

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# Just Bee Films

Just Bee Films is a production company that focuses on sharing real-life stories with the hope of raising social awareness. By sharing compelling stories that explore the struggle for equality, we can inspire others to take action and be the positive change.

[www.JustBeeFilms.com](http://www.JustBeeFilms.com)

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