

meet

INTERVIEW BY JESSICA SICK

Heather Winters

Executive producer of *Super Size Me*

Life for Heather Winters is sweet – kind of like a McDonald's hot fudge sundae. The executive producer of *Super Size Me*, a documentary that follows one man's month-long *Mickie D's* binge, took a break from shooting her latest project – a documentary on arts programs in education (and the lack thereof) – to talk MTV, Sundance, and why she'll always be an East Coast girl.

You were born and raised in Miami, but went to Sarah Lawrence in New York City for college. What was the reason for heading north?

Every summer we would go to New York and see all the plays. My father was a producer and a photographer and involved in film, so I was exposed to all that at a very early age. It was wonderful to have that in the summer, in contrast to growing up in Miami Beach, where we didn't really have that much to do as far as culture. So I remember wanting to go north as soon as I graduated. I went from a high school of over 3000 people to a college of about 1000. It was great.

It sounds like you come from a very creative family.

My parents were very progressive, very creative. My mother was an English teacher, so we were very well trained in writing and speaking, and my father was a photographer in the Air Force. After that, he had a studio in Manhattan and Hollywood, where he shot celebrities. He was also a film producer and distributor.

Have you ever thought about going Hollywood?

Hollywood is great. It actually reminds me a lot of Miami Beach – it's warm and sunny – but it's a one-industry town. I love the theater, and New York is where that's at. Also, I'm in independent film, and there's a lot of that in New York.

Has independent film always been your main focus?

I actually started as a musician. I started piano when I was nine, and I went into the music program at Sarah Lawrence. I always knew I wanted to do film, though. It was a way to bring everything together – photography, music, storytelling, writing – into one discipline.



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RICHARD PATTERSON

Once you decided on film, did you know you were best suited to be a producer?

I always knew I was much better behind the scenes. I have an ability to see the big picture, plus I was very shy when I was younger. I was just talking about that with Jay Jensen, the drama teacher [at Miami Beach High], who we're shooting a new movie with. I sort of credit him with not forcing me to be on stage [when I was a student at Beach High]. He would make me the stage manager or the musical director, so I knew that I was very comfortable backstage. After college, I worked with a couple of animation producers who did children's television and found out I loved producing. I love being able to work with energetic, visionary directors.

You said you were shooting a film down here. What's it about?

It's about arts in education, but it's also about Jay Jensen, who has been a drama teacher at Beach High for over 30 years and has turned out incredibly successful people like Brett Ratner, who directed *Rush Hour* and *Family Man*, and Andy Garcia. So it's about him and also the national picture of arts in education funding cuts. Ten years ago, 85 percent of schools had theater programs; now it's down to 44 percent, and it keeps dwindling.

From watching *Super Size Me*, director Morgan Spurlock seems so energetic. Was his enthusiasm one of the reasons you were drawn to this project?

Morgan and I met in 1998. He was doing a project and looking for someone to produce it, and a mutual acquaintance thought we should meet, and we hit it off. We ended up working together on smaller projects - theater installations and some cool multimedia stuff. He's extremely talented, a wonderful writer, and he has amazing energy.

Was *Super Size Me* your first documentary?

I produced another documentary at the time we were making *Super Size Me*; it was a political documentary for the small screen. I made one narrative feature before that, which was sort of my rite of passage. I quit my job at MTV, and my dad told me, "You just have to leap off the building and spread your wings, and see how it feels as you're going down."

What did you do at MTV?

I worked on the first season of *The Real World*. I was working for a film company that was based in that loft on Broadway and Prince, and the scout came in. They were looking for a loft to do this new show about seven people living together, and they liked the space, so they rented it. They completely rebuilt two lofts, built a control room, and I helped them manage that whole thing. So they said, "Come work on it."

The documentary genre has finally been accepted by mainstream audiences. Why do you think that is?

I think we're spending so much money on studio films that don't touch you as deeply as documentary does. Documentaries feel real. It's a difficult political time right now, so to have something personal that can really help you or guide you or educate you - people are really embracing that.

Getting back to *Super Size Me*, has there been any response from any of the corporations you featured in the film?

These are huge companies, and they're going to do what they need to do. If this film influences just one young person who has a problem with obesity, then we've done our job. It's not an attack; it's just a look into this country's lifestyle. We drive everywhere, we eat out all the time, and it's taking its toll. Some people say [eating nothing but fast food from McDonald's for an entire month, as Spurlock did] is an extreme experiment, but there are people, as we all know, who do eat that way. This is a situation where the little guy has taken on the big corporation.

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