

Chichester's Choice

A Documentary By Simonee Chichester

Featured on Entertainment Tonight, Much More Music and CBC Radio

Official selection of Hot Docs International Film Festival

Official selection of MOSTRA, Sao Paulo International Film Festival

Official selection of The Whister Film Festival Film Festival



Sure to invoke discussion and remind audiences everywhere of their most important freedom - CHOICE.

"It's never easy to walk away from the dreams we invest in." *Neusa Chichester*

TV World Premiere on TVO'S The View From Here. Wednesday, December 12th 2007



Produced, Directed and Written By: Simonee Chichester
Produced with the Support of: Toronto Arts Council, Canada Council For The Arts
and The National Film Board Of Canada

CHICHESTER'S CHOICE

A Documentary By Simonee Chichester

SYNOPSIS

Simonee Chichester never understood what had led her father to a life of despair and poverty but 23 years after he had abandoned her, she decided to reunite with Edgar in the hopes of better understanding her father and herself. During the summer of 2003, Simonee received a call from Foreign Affairs Canada informing her that her father had a severe, possibly fatal case of tuberculosis. Edgar Chichester was now living on the streets of Sao Paulo, Brazil. *Chichester's Choice* is a personal documentary about Simonee's journey through Guyana and Brazil to find her father.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When I was told by Foreign Affairs Canada in 2003 that my dad could be dying, I knew I had to see him before he was gone forever. It had been 23 years since I had last seen my father, Edgar Chichester. In all that time, I never understood what led him to a life of homelessness on the streets of Sao Paulo, Brazil.

I had been involved in the arts for ten years. Mainly as an actor who dabbled in dramatic writing and hoped to eventually make my own film. I never anticipated that I would make a documentary, much less, one about my life and journey to find my father.

When I started to work on the treatment for the project and investigate my father's life, I began to realize how other people would relate to my story. Like so many people today, I am the child of immigrant parents whose dreams had ended in divorce and a sense of failure. A single mother, with little resources, raised me and I struggled to define myself without having my father around. I wanted this film to be more than a chronicle of our reunion. I wanted to explore and mirror other people's search for identity; as I believe we are all on a life-long journey of figuring out who we are.

THE PROCESS—An Interview with Simonee Chichester

Why share this story?

Once I accepted what a remarkable story it could be and what a beautiful honest journey it would make for others to watch, I felt compelled to share it because I knew it would be a moving film.

What was most important in the telling of this story?

From the beginning I knew that the most important part of telling the story would be my honesty. Although I was the director, I could not edit myself. I would need to be vulnerable even if that meant unflattering or uncomfortable situations. I wanted a raw, real piece that would know no boundaries for discovering truth.

How did the filmmaking process begin?

We began shooting footage of my story and me and eventually put a demo together. At that point, I applied for funding and was fortunate enough to receive my first grant from the Canada Council for the Arts and was very eager to shoot the film because my dad was sick and could very well die. Without waiting for the post-production financing to come through, I shot when I could, taking cinematographers with me from Canada to Guyana and Sao Paulo, Brazil. We shot on DV in cinéma vérité style.

Was it difficult to edit the footage?

Upon returning to Canada with 80 hours of footage, I had a momentous task ahead of me. Screening the footage, I knew I had achieved what I set out to do. The scenes and material were mesmerizing. I was surprised at the authenticity we had captured and amazed at my willingness to be honest. It was raw and different from other documentaries I had seen. I decided that the film should be a first person narrative and I knew I would need a strong, creative team to help me tell my story—people who shared my vision. After searching and meeting with editors and other filmmakers, I met Nadine Pequenezza and Ricardo Acosta.

How was the National Film Board involved?

Nadine, Ricardo and I reworked my rough assembly into a number of scenes and presented to the National Film Board. After being approved for programming we began a five-week development phase that resulted in most of the film being edited. Through the development phase with the NFB we were able to bring to life the film known as Chichester's Choice—a riveting, honest, personal story that explores universal issues such as: homelessness, race and poverty.

Tell us about the finished product

The personal, cross-cultural story makes for an incredibly textured and nuanced film and through my personal journey these issues are made more relevant and accessible to an audience. The relationship with the National Film Board came to an end and with half my film completed I found myself frustrated; I almost quit my film. After much hard work and sacrifice, I got back into the edit suite and the film was picture locked in August 2006. Additional post-production sound and music composition was complete in October 2006. I see *Chichester's Choice* as a ground breaking, quiet film with the punch of a gripping drama. It's sure to invoke discussion and remind audiences everywhere of their most important freedom - CHOICE.

PROFILES

EDGAR CHICHESTER

Edgar Chichester is a 53 year-old homeless, alcoholic living on the streets of Sao Paulo, Brazil. He is Simonee Chichester's father yet he abandoned her, leaving her with mother, when she was six years old. Edgar was bastard child who was born in Guyana. He grew up surrounded by sexual and emotional abuse, a debilitating environment that explains Edgar's need for approval, and his inability to accept love.

Simonee's discoveries about Edgar reveal a well-liked, charismatic, talented man. His charming ways are often the subject of conversation, but always accompanied by frustration over Edgar's shortcomings – his drinking, philandering, financial irresponsibility, and his unwillingness to change. When Simonee finally finds her father, he is a shadow of his fabled self. In his previous life he was a stylish, handsome man; now he is undeniably homeless and grasps onto Simonee as proof of what he once was, and could have been.

As Simonee spends time with her father, he remains unable to accept responsibility for his life and his choices. When pressured for answers Edgar plays the victim. He diverts serious questions by becoming a charismatic storyteller and entertainer. Simonee's hope that Edgar might change his life forces him to reveal his true colours. Edgar's story is that of an abused child, spirited artist, and homeless drunk. It is through Simonee's changing view of him, as she comes to better understand his life, that his character arc is revealed.

A year after reuniting with her father, on February 11th, 2005, Simonee's father Edgar Chichester died in the streets of Sao Paulo, Brazil of Tuberculosis. He was 56 years old.

SIMONEE CHICHESTER

Simonee's father left her and her mother when Simonee was six years old. An only child, she was raised by her immigrant mother in Toronto. For 23 years it was the two of them against the world - with her mother's family in Brazil, and her father's in Guyana. The absence of her father has left Simonee angry and unsure of what she might become. She knew a part of her was missing, but not which part. Simonee is an opinionated, strong-willed, and independent woman. These combined attributes set her on a journey to find her father when she learns he has a severe, possibly fatal case of tuberculosis. Simonee is looking for Edgar to find answers, an explanation for why he left. She feels the pain of an abandoned child and the hurt of being unloved. It explains her moments of insecurity, indecision, and also her determination. She is a survivor.

When Simonee learns from her uncles in Guyana that her father told them he sexually assaulted her, she is devastated but not defeated. Her courage comes from her need to know the truth— why Edgar chose the streets over her. Simonee's journey is a journey of self-discovery. Her close but difficult relationship with her mother, Neusa, is tested when she confronts her about stories that Edgar tried to rape her. Their relationship is strengthened as the two join forces to

help Edgar get off the streets, but their efforts are in vain – something Neusa knows from experience to expect. With the help of her mother, Simonee learns to accept her father for who he is, and to accept his choices. She finally realizes his lifestyle is a conscious decision. He has chosen to be a victim of his past, his colour, and his struggles. What Simonee learns about herself is that she will not allow herself to be a victim. She is of her father, but she is not he. She also understands for the first time what her mother has gone through having been Edgar's wife. This deeper understanding fortifies their relationship, allowing both women greater independence and security in their love for one another. After Edgar's death, Neusa moved back to Sao Paulo. Despite the distance now between them, the mother-daughter bond is stronger than ever.

NEUSA CHICHESTER

Neusa is Simonee's mother. She is a youthful, 51-year-old; who raised her only daughter alone. Typical of most mothers, she is overbearing, protective, and loving. Neusa is Simonee's rock throughout her journey, although her daughter begrudges her presence almost every step of the way. Being the parent who stayed, Neusa is taken for granted and under-appreciated by Simonee.

Neusa bears her soul in the film by sharing humiliating stories of Edgar's cheating, lying, and irresponsibility. She does it because she loves her daughter, and wants to help her overcome the pain of abandonment – a feeling Neusa is well acquainted with having been abandoned by the same man. Neusa was insistent that she accompanies Simonee to Brazil, fearful that her father might disappoint her once again.

In Sao Paulo, Neusa acts as Simonee's translator, and connection to her extended family – the people who will tell Simonee about Edgar's life on the streets. Initially Neusa did not want to see Edgar, but curiosity and the protective instinct of a mother drew her in. Neusa's meeting with Edgar is a moment infused with a torrent of mixed emotions – anger, resentment, and love. Since Edgar left the family, Neusa and Simonee have had a codependent relationship. A survival tool that worked well in the past, it causes conflict when Simonee tries to break free from Neusa to be with her father. Neusa is often left behind finding little room for her role as the protective, life-saving mother. Simonee often dismisses her and Neusa is forced to become more intrusive, if she is to be recognized at all.

Neusa's anger toward Edgar surfaces in off-handed remarks like, "Aren't you happy to see your daughter, she's a woman now." When Edgar disappoints his daughter by missing appointments, drinking again and disappearing; it is Neusa who offers her daughter love and compassion. Neusa's dreams were once shattered too: "It's never easy to walk away from the dreams we invest in," she tells Simonee.

GUYANA AND EDGAR'S FAMILY

A tropical paradise on the surface, Guyana is a poverty stricken country – the poorest in the Western hemisphere after Haiti. The littered streets, dilapidated houses, and neglected towns are a metaphor for what has happened to Guyana's people. It is here, that Simonee sees how and why drug addiction, alcoholism and suicide have afflicted Edgar's six half-siblings.

Those remaining in Guyana form a dysfunctional family, each of them scarred by abuse often accepted in this culture. Their dead father, also a drinker, sexually abused his daughters and deprived all of his children. He used money to lord power over them. Each of Edgar's siblings has dealt with their pain in different ways. Ricky is an alcoholic, living in a shack along the coast. Kim is a three-time divorcee, unable to trust men. André, the most functional, is married with three children, but operates with a skewed moral compass. About his father's rape of his sisters André says, "He was a nice guy, but a dirty old man." Simonee visits her father's three half-siblings and learns about his childhood. How he acted out movies for money, and loved to entertain. They have different levels of sympathy for Edgar. Kim's attitude is if she survived sexual abuse, then there's no reason for him to be on the streets. She tells Simonee he was bothered by his race and never liked himself. André is more forgiving. He excuses Edgar's failure, saying he just wasn't strong enough. André is Simonee's guide in Guyana. He takes her to Edgar's old school and to places where they used to hang out. He brings her to meet Ricky, who immediately asks for money. Then Ricky tells Simonee something that shakes her foundation – Edgar left Canada, because Neusa caught him trying to rape Simonee. It's a shocking revelation that almost ends Simonee's quest to find her father.

SAO PAULO, OLD FRIENDS AND NEUSA'S FAMILY

Sao Paulo is South America's largest city with a population of 20 million people. It's where Edgar met Neusa, before moving to Toronto where Simonee was born. For the past 23 years Edgar has survived in these streets, often relying on the support of old friends and a scant social system. With the help of her cousin, Marcos, Simonee navigates through Sao Paulo to find her father and the details about the later half of Edgar's life.

Marcos is especially invested in Simonee's journey as he too was abandoned by an alcoholic father. Simonee tries to understand her father's life by talking to friends and family including Edgar's best friend since age six, Ben. They came to Brazil together from Guyana and Ben feels indebted to him. Over the years Ben has taken Edgar into his home, fed and bathed him. It was Ben who first told Simonee and Neusa of her Edgar's homelessness many years ago. She is amazed by Ben's sense of loyalty to her father. Ben is worried Edgar will soon die if he continues to live on the streets. He hopes that seeing Simonee will give Edgar a reason to change and his optimism fuels Simonee's own hopes.

Edgar's friends share stories of the fun-loving, charming Edgar and Simonee has to press them for information about the homeless Edgar. Eventually they tell her of his inability to keep a job, or stay sober. Neusa's sister and husband tell Simonee how Edgar came to stay with them, until he eventually wore out his welcome. Simonee visits shelters to see for herself where Edgar went when friends and family lost patience. Social workers who know her father help Simonee to understand how life is on the streets of Sao Paulo. Learning about how her father is forced to survive, invokes empathy in Simonee. It increases her desire to help him, but she is weary having spoken to so many people who have already tried and were left disappointed.

SIMONEE CHICHESTER

Biography

Simonee Chichester is a multi-disciplinary artist who acts, directs, writes and produces. She has committed herself to the art of storytelling through various mediums for over 15 years. Her first feature length documentary, *Chichester's Choice* was invited to The Reel World Film Festival and premiered at the Hot Docs International Film Festival to 2 sold out audiences and won audience top 10. It begins its world tour in fall 2007 and makes its TV premiere in winter 2007.



Chichester began acting and modeling in her early teens. While attending the Etobicoke School for the Arts, she was a host on a college community radio station. This led to her pursuit of a diploma in Radio Broadcast from Humber College.

Chichester has worked in a variety of jobs—owning her own pet care business, managing bands, service industry and filmmaking. In all of her undertakings, she has gained skills that have complimented her artistic endeavors while allowing her to pursue her own projects on a full time basis.

As an independent filmmaker, Chichester is familiar with all aspects of development, production and post-production. In 2000 she wrote, directed and produced *Rejuvenate Live*, a half-hour pilot of a music variety show. Hosted by Chichester, the show has an international focus on the small live music scene in New York and Toronto.

In 2004, Canada's award-winning *Maclean's* magazine published 'The Beggar Of Sao Paulo,' an article written by Simonee Chichester. It is a revealing and personal article that discusses the story of Simonee's search for her homeless father and her decision to make the film.

As a professionally trained actor, she has appeared in film and TV projects including *Dark Angel* and *The Associates*. Chichester currently curates events including a bi-monthly word/theater event, *ProACTIVE Words* that she hosts and in which she performs; and also auditions regularly for film and TV roles. Chichester has 3 film projects in development comprised of a narrative short and two documentaries. She will begin shooting her next documentary, *The Next Chapter For Us* - a follow-up to *Chichester's Choice* in early 2008; and is in the midst of developing a lifestyle, *IT'S ON MY 100 LIST*, a show which she will host. *Chichester's Choice* continues to tour internationally at film festivals and will make its television premiere on TVO in December.

CREDITS

A My Friend Simonee Films Production



Produced, Directed, Written
and Narrated By:

Simonee Chichester

Lead Cast:

Simonee Chichester, Edgar Chichester & Neusa Chichester

Produced With The Support Of:

Toronto Arts Council, Canada Council For The Arts and
The National Film Board Of Canada

Associate Produced By:

Kristina McLaughlin

Edited By:

Ricardo Acosta

Story Edited By:

Nadine Pequenezza

Additional Editing By:

Angad Bhalla

Composed By:

Edgardo Moreno

Camera and Sound By:

Monica Guddat and Christopher Behnisch

Additional Camera and Sound By:

Rhett Morita and Simonee Chichester

Editing Facilities By:

Fearless Films

Post-Production Sound By:

Kitchen Sync

Colour Correction By:

Joe The Editor

Opening and Closing Credit
Design By:

Victor Mare

Poster Design By:

Hiram Pines

Publicity Representation By:

Pennant Media Group

Legal Work By:

Terry Markus

SELECTED PRESS

Chichester's Choice was invited to participate in the Reel World Film Festival and the Hot Docs Film Festival. It premiere at *The Hot Docs International Film Festival* in April 2007.

November 2004

Canada's leading magazine, *Maclean's*, publishes an article written by Simonee Chichester discussing the emotional and professional challenges of making *Chichester's Choice*.

December 4 2006

In an exclusive live interview, beloved journalist, *Andy Barrie* talked with Simonee Chichester on *CBC Radio Ones' Metro Morning*. The conversation gave listeners the opportunity to hear about the film and an up-and-coming fundraiser for the known as *The White Party*. *Metro Morning* is the most listened to radio show on the CBC.

December 7 2006

An exclusive interview for *CBC's Big City Small World* airs on *Here & Now*. Hosted *Matt Galloway* on *CBC Radio One*. The show focusses on the hottest local, national and international news. *Here & Now* has a listenership of 1 million people.

December 15 2006

Simonee Chichester and coverage of *Chichester's Choice* was featured on *Entertainment Tonight Canada*. The show brings audiences the latest in celebrity news.

February 19 2007

A feature story, excerpts of *Chichester's Choice* and a interview with Simonee Chichester air on *Much More Music ClipTrip*. A show that travels the globe in search of the roots of contemporary world music and pop culture as well as information and interviews from major artists on the international scene.



THE BEGGAR OF SÃO PAULO

Knowing where you come from can make the world seem more fragile

I WASN'T ready! I was in São Paulo, Brazil, making a documentary, and after tracking our subject to all the places he was known to hang out, my cameraman and I found ourselves at a gas station. In my broken Portuguese, I asked about a Canadian *mendigo*, the local slang for beggar. One of the regular customers told us the barber down the street had befriended a *mendigo* who talked about being from Canada and once having a life there. As we headed for the barbershop, I wondered if we'd hear more stories about him, or maybe we'd see him from afar and get a visual without him knowing. In truth, I don't know *what*

I was thinking. I was consumed with all the details of filmmaking—but the documentary was about to take a back seat to the biggest moment in my life.

To Canada's Foreign Affairs Department, the *mendigo* is Edgar Chichester, file number 01-SPALO-736516. To me, he's my dad. I hadn't seen him in 23 years. I vaguely remembered an intelligent, well-spoken, well-liked man with a sharp sense of humour and an even sharper sense of style. He looked like he had it all. But he had demons he was not prepared to battle, and after eight years of struggling with his drinking, infidelity and neglect, my mom asked my dad to leave. I know he left with dreams of becoming a photographer or artist; instead he ended up homeless in São Paulo.

He often visited the Canadian consulate there, looking for help with lost documents or whatever, and then Foreign Affairs would call, giving my mom or me updates about him. In the summer of 2002, Foreign Affairs said my dad was about to be released from hospital after being treated for tuberculosis. Alcoholism and his life on the streets had finally caught up with him. I had grown accustomed to hearing various stories about him, but this time it was different. I don't know whether I was simply ready to deal with some tough issues (why did he have this life; why didn't he stay in touch with me?) or I realized that my father would not survive long, but something lit a fire under me and I had to see him. The artist in me decided to make a film about my search and before I knew it, I'd secured some funding from the Canada Council for the Arts

and I was on my way to South America, making a documentary. My main goal was to get a fresh but honest perspective on my dad. This meant going to the beginning.

My first stop was Georgetown, Guyana, where he was born. I learned he was the result of an affair his father had had with a 14-year-old black servant. A successful businessman in what was then known as British Guyana, my grandfather simply handed my dad to his wife, saying, "You can't have children, so mind this one." He then moved in with another woman and had six more kids. My dad grew up with his father's wife and was apparently treated very well. Still, he



struggled with his identity. Not only was he given the maid's surname, Chichester, he was the only black child in the extended family. He masked his pain with wit and charm.

A promising photographer, my father left home in his 20s and travelled widely. While in São Paulo, he met my mother, who, although she was from that sprawling city, was really a naive country girl. To her, the stylish, English-speaking man was special. Within months they married and moved

to Canada. In the '70s, Toronto was a challenge for an interracial couple. My mom would hear comments such as, "You're so pretty, you didn't have to marry a black man." For my dad, who already had problems with his skin colour, this was hard. He also had difficulty finding work as a photographer and eventually ended up in the nine-to-five world. He drank—a lot.

As I learned more about my dad, I began to understand more about myself. My mom is a practical, no-nonsense person, so I wasn't surprised to learn I inherited my artistic bent from him. Also, like my father, I dream big and am afraid I'll never be recognized for the work that I'm passionate about. Am I predisposed to a life like his because I understand how he gave up? I'm starting to think we're more alike than different, and the whole world is more fragile than strong.

Looking at the excited face of the barber who wanted so badly to lead me to my dad, I still didn't feel ready. But, my mother says, "Nothing happens before its time." Obviously it was time.

Meeting him was different than anything I'd imagined. I was now a grown woman and a filmmaker. How would he respond? Would he recognize me? I had already decided I wouldn't be offended if he didn't, but you never know how you're going to feel. In subsequent talks, I finally asked him all my "whys." I returned home with few answers and the understanding that his life would continue on as before. But as I knelt down in front of him that day and told him who I was, I couldn't for the life of me remember what I wanted to ask him. It's probably because when you hug somebody, you feel. When you let go first and they hold on longer, you know. You know what's real and suddenly the answers aren't all that important. ■

Simonee Chichester is a Toronto actor and filmmaker. To comment: overtoyou@macleans.ca

Daughter's journey to peace

The path that led Edgar Chichester to Toronto wasn't an uncommon one for many immigrants.

He was born in Guyana, met his wife, Neusa, in Brazil and came to Canada to make a better life for them. Shortly after arriving here, his wife gave birth to a daughter they named Simonee.

Edgar was a well-liked, charismatic and talented man but he struggled with the responsibilities of raising a family. What got in the way were his shortcomings — his drinking, philandering, financial irresponsibility and his unwillingness to change. Instead of dealing with his problems, he decided to run.

Simonee was 6 when her dad walked out of her life. For a while, she thought it would only be a matter of days before he returned. But those days turned into weeks and weeks turned into years — 23 to be exact.

During that time Simonee

and Neusa had only a vague idea of Edgar's whereabouts.

"Up until I was about 14 years old my dad would write to my mother every now and then," Simonee says. "But after that we never received any correspondence from him. Then one day back in 2003, 23 years since I had last seen my father, my mother and I received a call from foreign affairs Canada. They said my dad was very ill and was in a

hospital in Sao Paulo with a severe and possible fatal case of tuberculosis. At the time he was living a life of homelessness on the streets of Brazil."

Realizing her dad may not survive, Simonee wanted to see him before he died. She also wanted to know why he left his family.

"I struggled with abandonment issues my whole life," Simonee says. "I was an often angry and difficult child, and I really couldn't explain why. I felt if I talked to my dad not only could I get to know him

better, but I also could get to know myself better."

Simonee's mother wasn't enthusiastic about her decision to go see her father. Neusa was afraid Edgar would only hurt his daughter again.

But instead of discouraging her, Neusa decided to help. With her mother, Simonee brought a camera to document her journey.

"I had been involved in the arts for about 10 years as a writer and actor," Simonee says. "I had always hoped to make my own film. I thought why not make a documentary about my life and journey to find my father?"

By the time she arrived in Brazil, her father had left the hospital. But with help from a local barber and her mother's family, she was able to track him down on the streets.

"When I first saw him, there was no emotion that could describe how I felt," Simonee recalls. "Right away I was calling him 'dad.' It was like we picked up right where we left off ... But when I started asking him questions about why he left, he was very evasive, and when the questions

were about his accountability, he wouldn't answer them directly. But I was happy to see him. I left feeling he was a person who cared about me tremendously and felt guilty about the choices he made in his life."

In 2005, 1½ years after Simonee was first contacted about her dad, he died of TB on the streets of Brazil. It was a sad day for Simonee, but she was at peace with herself.

"If I had gotten the news that he died and I never went on this journey, then I would have baggage," Simonee says. "But I have closure and I know he loved me, and I have come to accept what he was."

Simonee's feature-length documentary, *Chichester's Choice*, screens Thursday at the Boulevard Room, 81 Peter St. It's a Brazilian-themed party and fundraiser. Visit myfriendsimonee.com.



Nicholas Davis



SIMONEE CHICHESTER
Documented reunion with dad

December 4 2006

Simonee talks to Nicholas Davis of the *Sun* about her film and journey with Chichester's Choice.

March 2007

Simonee talks to Bunmi Adeoye of *Film Print Magazine*. The story *Bitter Sweet Abandon* focusses on trials and tribulations of filmmaking.