



# home



Chico Colvard's  
cinematic journey into his  
family's heart of darkness

BY JANE WHITEHEAD

CHICO DAVID COLVARD '01 is an independent filmmaker. It's taken him years to get used to saying that aloud. But since his wrenchingly personal first documentary, *Family Affair*, premiered at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival in January and was acquired by the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), he's coming to terms with the label, he said, speaking by telephone from the Somerville studio where he was making last minute minor edits.

*Family Affair* tells the story of a childhood accident and its long after-

Colvard sees his mother—a white woman married to a black man, a foreigner who could barely speak English—as a vulnerable figure, isolated and friendless. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he grew up watching TV shows like *The Honey-mooners* and *I Love Lucy*, in which “women being slapped around” was part of the comedy. “That’s the environment in which my father began to physically abuse my mother,” he said.

After a troubled adolescence marked by minor vandalism, truancy, and time in a juvenile correctional facility, Colvard took a turn for the better when he was accepted at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. There, he took film and video classes, always with the goal of using the media to shed light on social justice issues. At BC Law, he gravitated to the Juvenile Rights Advocacy Project, headed by Professor Francine Sherman. But economics ruled out juvenile justice as a career path. “I was very focused, and at the same time I needed to pay my bills,” he said.

As a first-year associate working in corporate litigation at the Boston offices of Brown Rudnick, Colvard joined Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts. He helped independent producer/director Lucia Small secure music rights for her documentary portrait of her estranged father, visionary architect Glen Howard Small, *My Father, The Genius* (2001). “It was the highlight of my day to be somewhat connected to that moving image world,” he said.

When Brown Rudnick let him go after eighteen months, Colvard took the opportunity to move “towards the thing I wanted to do.” While teaching courses in race, law, and media at UMass-Boston part-time, he began the eight-year-long process of excavating and retelling the story of his family’s history of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and its long afterlife.

“When I started this project, I didn’t know I was making a ‘documentary,’” wrote Colvard in his Director’s Statement for the film’s Sundance publicity package. “It felt more like I was lawyering with a camcorder: gathering eyewitness testimony, preparing evidence and arguments to present later at trial.” He set out to indict his father, but soon realized that the story had many other dimensions. He had not been in touch with his father for 15 years when, at a Thanksgiving gathering in 2002, he was once