

## The Xaverian High School Super 8 Club

By

James Russo

After the end of my sophomore year at Xaverian High School in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, I thought up the idea of a Super 8 film club. We had dozens of clubs at Xaverian –more than I think any other high school in Brooklyn did and that went for public, private, charter, or parochial.

The one problem that nagged at me is that I knew making films even short ones took time. Before forming the Xaverian Super 8 Club, I had made some short Super 8 films of my own going back to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade with my grandfather's Kodak Super 8 camera. The one thing very few students at Xaverian had was spare time. We had 7 classes every day 5 days a week. Don't forget my high school years were 1981 to 1985 so we did not have the Internet nor remote learning.

In addition to the classes and heavy doses of homework, many students are enrolled on various sports teams or other clubs and organizations. Most students myself one of them only had a few hours on Friday afternoons to attend extracurricular activities.

Then I thought suppose we did not make the films during the school day, but rather on our breaks. We had one week off in December and another one in April for Holy Week. In April of 1983 I asked four of my classmates if they would like to assist me in making a film. None of them had any experience in making Super 8 film, but a couple did take 35mm photos for the yearbook and were on the yearbook staff.

Incidentally, Xaverian had an annual yearbook that would put most university yearbooks to shame. Each year of the four years we were there the school published a lavish, 120 page plus yearbook complete with color and black and white photos as well as a hardback binding.

Despite my colleagues not having any experience in Super 8 filmmaking, they were intrigued by the project. As far as I know, no Catholic school whether the level be elementary, high school, or college had a Super 8 film club...or any film club for that matter.

Incidentally, whenever I mentioned a film club most people would tell me..oh that's something they would have in public school to which I would always answer: Why can't a Catholic school have one ?

My four friends and I decided to shoot the film around Brooklyn during our week off for Easter. At the time, I owned two Super 8 cameras: my grandfather's Kodak Ektachrome which as one of the first Super 8mm camera created for home use. The camera was bulky, hard to hold, and had zero features.

Using money I had saved from painting job I did in the community, I purchased a Sankyo XL-320 which was lightweight, had a convenient pistol grip, and had various shooting speeds as well as auto focus. I also purchased a Tiffen filter ring along with a slew of filters to do special effects with.

With a little more money that my Father loaned me, I purchased a tripod and some lights. In addition, I added a GOKO Super 8mm film reel-to-reel film editor to my arsenal of equipment as well as a CIRO tape splice so I could do my own film splicing and editing. Finally, I added a new Chinon projector and tossed my grandfather's old Eumig projector.

I would say that in 1983 prices this equipment came to roughly \$2,000.00 give or take a dollar. This was still cheap compared to what it cost in 1983 to purchase a camcorder as they were just coming out.

Now that I had a crew of four and all the necessary equipment my next hurdle was: what will be the story of the film ? As I said previously, I had made sort Super 8 films where I animated Christmas ornaments and did some work with miniature space craft models. Those films ran only around three and a half minutes which is

one 50 foot roll of Super 8. This film I was going to do with the Super 8 club had to be larger in scope and longer.

Since I could not think of a story I thought why not adapt an existing novel into a short film. I always loved Michael Crichton's novels and when I formed the Super 8 Club I had just finished reading his novel *BINARY* written under the pseudonym John Lange. I copied the major scene and lines of dialogue onto large size index cards. I would play the main part and my friends would be the supporting cast. For their scenes, I composed separate index cards with their dialogue typed on it (this was before word processors) and some simple stage directions.

At the time, I had saved up a bit more money so I bought more lights and light stands, more filters for the camera lenses so I could do more lighting effects, and we even built a few props. My grandfather's Kodak Super 8mm camera, the Ektachrome 160, bought the farm after twenty years of use so I borrowed from my Dad to get another Sankyo Super 8 this time with the 200 foot film cartridge. Kodak had introduced these cameras a few years prior to my forming the Super 8mm Film Club at Xaverian, but right after I purchased the camera Kodak discontinued the 200 foot cartridge. So I could only use 50 foot magazines in each camera.

We shot for the entire week we had off from school in April. We shot exteriors in and around Brooklyn and I used my house for interiors and my garage for some scenes. In addition to adapting Crichton's book into a short screenplay for our film project, I also acted in the film, supervised the camera work, did the editing, produced and directed. I also oversaw the music we chose for the film. My friends also acted in the film, worked the camera, held the microphone, and helped out with the props.

We learned so much about filmmaking in that one week that looking back on those few days I was surprised how much we accomplished in such a short window of time. We learned about acting, dealing with lighting issues, handling electrical problems,

handling camera issues, and many other areas of the film production process. I personally also learned a great deal about the financial end of filmmaking – how to budget a film, how to stay on a financial track, how much was too much to spend on equipment. When we shot *BINARY*, film for the Super 8 camera was expensive as was developing. It was not like today where you can make a film on a iPhone or DSLR and record for hours without cost. With Super 8, you had to plan shots in detail and shoot film economically. Each magazine only held 3 and a half minutes of film so you had to be careful not to waste it.

Shooting Super 8 was one story, but after photography was finished there was also the cost of developing the film. Each roll had to be mailed in a special, postage paid mailer to Kodak in Rochester, New York. Sometimes we waited weeks even months to get film back.

We learned so much and has such a good time shooting *BINARY* that by the time our December break came, we were ready to make another film. This time I wrote the film's story myself. The film was called *MIND GAMES* and it was a giallo type thriller. Both films, *BINARY* and *MIND GAMES* were about 25 minutes long which at that time was unheard of for a Super 8 film.

We even started on a third project – a police drama called *DEADLY PURSUIT*. However, graduation came and we all went our separate ways. We did shoot a few reels of film, but to this day the film remains unfinished. I have been contemplating purchasing a Super 8 camera and attempting to complete the project with a new cast. I'll keep you posted.

Xaverian never did start a formal Super 8mm club, but I do believe that my film projects while I was a student there did make an impression. Xaverian is one of the only Catholic high schools that does teach film theory and analysis courses. I like to think that my friends and I and the projects we made had something to do with it.