

## Finding Heart in the Huddle: The Story that Moved a Philly Director

By Jalissa Breeland

He didn't know much about the sport of cheerleading.

He didn't think it had much of a story, either.

That changed when Matt Howley stumbled across an article about a cheer team just down the street from where he grew up in Northeast Philadelphia.

A La Salle University graduate initially intrigued with radio found his passion in producing, editing and directing with the help of his internships at Fox 29 and WIP.

"I wanted to be on radio coming into college," Howley said. "I didn't have a radio voice so I only did a couple of years in radio, then started doing some editing for TV."

A couple of years out of college, his love for storytelling grew fonder.

"I just knew that I wanted to do some type of storytelling," Howley said. "As I got older, I wanted to do longer forms. Recently, I really loved doing episodic. Telling a story over six to eight episodes, figuring out story arcs, where you're going to start the story, where you're going to end it, what's going to go in between, and tease people to come and stay with it to watch the next episode."

Howley reminisced about his early years as an editor for NBC Sports Philadelphia, formerly [Comcast SportsNet](#). He had to transition into a new role and into a rebranded company.

"I got a job there in 1997 as an editor," Howley said. "Then switched over to a producer. In 2002, I started doing long-form features and documentary work which then turned into my true love."

And just like that, [Spirit](#) was born—a four-episode docuseries entailing the underdog journey of the co-ed George Washington High School cheerleading team, which became the first in the School District of Philadelphia to make it to National Cheerleaders Association High School Nationals.

*Spirit* was more than a big deal to Howley. Familiar with the area, the Philadelphia-native took a chance on the team.

"I like to tell stories that are based in sports, but sports are secondary," Howley said. "The cheerleading team on its surface doesn't sound that exciting but when you meet these kids, and you see what they're going through and what they've overcome, it's so much bigger than the sport."

With a chance to make history on the line, the cheerleading team at George Washington had to come up with \$30,000 to accommodate 16 kids on a flight to Dallas.

When the news broke, the team received a lot of positive publicity. That made it that much harder for Howley to get a hold of this story, with so many companies trying to get a piece of it.

"That whole night I was thinking about the story and I just kept saying it's worth pursuing," he said. "I called the school the next day and I talked to one of the principals and he said, 'Get in line. You're the fifth production company to call.'"

Skeptical that there might not be a deeper story, his doubts faded when other production companies from Los Angeles and New York showed interest, confirming that there was something worth telling.

It was an underdog story anchored by deeply layered characters.

With enough convincing, he was able to get the school on board.

But telling this kind of story wasn't as simple as showing up with a camera. Howley had to gain the trust of his subjects to make the film more authentic.

"I didn't know what to expect going into it," George Washington's cheerleading head coach Michele Socki said. "We were a little bit hesitant in the beginning because we were being filmed and trusting somebody we didn't know."

Howley spent some time sitting in at their practices and getting to know the team off-camera. He didn't come in with a script or a camera, but a willingness to listen instead.

"I watched practice and then I fell in love with every kid I talked to," he said. "Every kid was better than the next, that's when I knew there was a deeper story here. Someone needs to tell it."

"He was very invested in these kids," Socki said. "For somebody else who is not a coach to really invest their time into my athletes, that means a lot to me."

Finally able to crack the shells of this cheer squad, he honed in on the challenges they faced, especially in the stories of Adamaris Lopez, Simone Felder and Aaliyah Armour.

But these stories stretched beyond the mat. From the pain of losing a father to immigration to using cheer as a lifeline after the trauma of losing a father to gun violence, cheer became a shield against the harsh realities of life in Philadelphia.

"He did enough to tell their story but didn't do too much to make them uncomfortable," Socki said. "The way he told their stories was very accurate. They were very personal, but they were

comfortable with letting Matt and the world see what they had to say and the trauma that they went through."

Howley emphasized that building genuine connections with his subjects is significant and also one of the most challenging aspects as a director.

"If you can't have a discussion and get a person to trust you and care about you and the project, you're never going to get those heartbreaking moments," Howley said. "We had to work overtime to get these kids to trust us."

"There were times Matt showed up with his crew but didn't film anything," Lopez, a former co-captain, said. "Instead they would sit and talk with us and our families. That made me feel like somebody actually cared about us and our stories outside of cheer."

Lopez's experience with Howley was just one of the many examples of him going out of his way to build deep trust with the team. For Armour, that same sense of being seen and valued made her comfortable enough to speak on parts of her life she didn't feel was worth sharing.

"I invited him to come back to my house for dinner," Armour said. "I explained to him how I was struggling with the death of my dad and how I used cheerleading almost like a bandaid to heal from my hurt."

"He really formed a bond with them," Michele Socki said. "He's very patient and sensitive to the kids because they've been through a lot."

Howley was patient with the cheer team and with his own team—remaining committed to the project through months of uncertainty.

The film took over three years to complete—eight months of shooting, six months of editing, a year to sell, and additional time before its release.

*Unanimous Media*, founded by Golden State Warriors' star Stephen Curry, helped elevate the project, leading streaming platforms Comcast and Tubi to express interest in acquiring it.

With more money on the table, Comcast proposed that the film would flourish on its newly launched "[Black Experience](#)" platform on Xfinity, which, according to its website, "offers one-stop access to a collection of content that showcases the breadth of Black culture."

Shortly after the film was completed, Comcast postponed its release, choosing to debut in February to align with Black History Month.

Rated nine out of 10 stars by Internet Movie Database (IMDb), *Spirit* isn't Howley's only successful film. He also directed *Basketball or Nothing* and *Pitino: Red Storm Rising*, both of which have shown the raw portrayal of athletes and the hardships they face.

Further solidifying his reputation for creating impactful content, his latest project, *Traveling the Spectrum*, about three families living with autism, has been renewed for a third season.