

In Praise of The Generous - Denny & Terry Clairmont

By David Darby ASC

Most of us know what a disappearing wake from a speeding boat looks like, as we sit looking back at where we've been; when it's only 20' behind our vantage point, it's hard to imagine how it got to looking so distant and faded when it's just about gone - and that's when solid points of reference come in handy, to help us appreciate how fast we're going - and how far we've traveled - things like man-made navigation buoys passing by, rock formations that are as beautiful as they are dangerous, and the Clairmont Brothers - there has never been a more inspirational, dedicated, supportive, and generous pair of human beings working in the world of cinematography - anywhere, ever.

Ironically, there has been an unmovable point of reference for me, right out of the windshield of my car every time I leave the ASC Clubhouse heading east on Franklin Ave - when I reach Highland Ave, there it was - and still is - the original location of Clairmont-Engle camera rental house. High inside 1800 N Highland Ave, is where Denny and Terry Clairmont started their company, in 1976. In 1977, after returning to LA County from four years of working on industrial films and documentaries inside Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, and the Salt Lake City PBS affiliate, I was ready to see if I could "do it" where it counted; "Hollywood". But most importantly, I just wanted to see if I could ever reach - and/or function and survive, at the highest level of our business; it was going to be me, competing against myself. I soon found myself ignored completely, even as a 20-something with a national Director-DP credit on a PBS documentary. Hollywood offered me nothing more prestigious after all that effort, than syncing 35mm film dailies on commercials, and being a Hollywood "runner" picking things up at CFI Laboratory and returning things after shoots.

One morning, at Kaleidoscope Films on Sunset Blvd, I was given the task of returning a camera package to a rental house - which happened to be Clairmont-Engle, on Highland Ave. In those days, a "camera package" used to photograph a national spot often consisted of not much more than an Arri 2C, a couple of zoom lenses, an O'Connor fluid head, and a set of tall legs - made of wood. And the "camera truck" on such a job, was often just the largest full-size station wagon the company could find; in this case, it was a Ford LTD wagon with the then-radical "swing-out" tailgate. At the time, I had never faced anything quite as challenging and nerve-wracking as trying to maneuver that car into the underground parking at 1800 N Highland. And then, after having loaded all the cases onto a small dolly, the elevator doors finally opened and there was a smiling Denny Clairmont; he even smiled at wide-eyed "runners" that felt totally out-of-place. In the course of our lives, there have always been people, places, and things, that instantly just felt "right" - and "better than" - and "hopeful", from the first frame to the last - and the Clairmont Brothers created such an atmosphere of "all things being possible", that even a self-conscious gofer could sense that this might be "the place".

Over the next few years, as I worked my way from runner back to shooting and directing documentaries and industrials - and then eventually being given the opportunity to operate and shoot second-unit on automotive commercials, I found myself in Clairmont Camera after they moved into their Vineland Ave location - a lot. I was also now scouting locations for several of the very best British automotive directors who descended upon Hollywood in the early 1980s, but honestly not all that much closer to the goal of becoming a full-time director of photography. One Friday afternoon, both Terry and Denny told me that I needed to get an automotive commercials reel organized; in case I ever got an opportunity to "do something", I would need to make sure I'd be ready to do it. I had by this time become an absolute fanatic about graduated filters, and no one knew more about the full range of what was possible when using them, than Terry. He piled my arms full of notebooks and catalogs from Hank Harrison of Harrison & Harrison Filters, and told me to take it all home and not bring it back until I knew what every coral piece of glass was for - and when to use it. Next, he told me I was to take home any camera package I could think of over the weekend, that would be the easiest for me to use while working alone - and every graduated filter I might want to play with. The objective, was "Automotive Spec-Spot Number One".

I was so shocked by this offer of supreme generosity, that I essentially panicked - I knew at the time that I should get organized and properly prep my weekend equipment before I left, but I had an even stronger urge to throw it all into my VW Scirocco, and leave before anybody changed their minds; this could *not* really be happening. Once home, well over 90 minutes later, I laid-out all the gear in my living room, as I should have laid it out on the Clairmont prep-floor - and discovered that there was no tie-down for the O'Connor fluid head - and that I was screwed. The mistake was mine; I knew better than to leave without prepping, but I had done it anyway. I stared at the phone, and knew I had to call Terry back in North Hollywood, and admit my mistake - and say that if he wouldn't mind, I'd like another opportunity the following weekend - and that next time I'd slow down and do things right. Clairmont had closed by this time, but Terry was still in his office - and he said that the mistake wasn't really mine, it was on him; there should have been a tie-down in the case, and he would be speaking to whomever gave it to me without one. Now I felt ten times worse; the last thing I wanted to do was get anyone in trouble over something I failed to notice. Terry wasn't having it; he said I had done him a favor, and he was glad he knew that a small mistake had been made. Then he says "you still have all that gear, and you should be shooting with it this weekend and not wasting it". He said that he would go get a tie-down, put it in a large envelope, and leave it in the bushes at the bottom of the stairs closest to his office. He felt we were even; we both learned something, and my only penalty would be that I would now have to drive all the way back to the bottom of those stairs and get the envelope, in order to be able to shoot over the weekend. I did, and I did.

Fast-forward, and somehow I was on my way. Over the next 25 years, the number of man-hours that Denny devoted to making custom one-offs for me and so many other cinematographers in Hollywood and around the world - to solve the unique and individual problems and requirements of so many crazy jobs, was amazing. The wisdom, humor, and

downright endless child-like enthusiasm Denny had for solving your problems - and making it possible for you to succeed with the nuttiest and best ideas you could come up with while under a bit of pressure, was above and beyond - and endless, and so very much appreciated. The Denny and Terry Clairmont "way", of taking care of clients, teaching clients, inspiring clients, and helping the next generation of runners wanting so badly to learn and grow, was also present in the bone marrow of every single employee I ever met and worked with at Clairmont Camera over those 25 years. The priceless help so many of us received from Alan Albert, Andre Martin, Tom Boelens, Mike Condon, Jaymie Bickford, and so many more on the technical side - and rental agents Irving Corea and Sean Jenkins, was somehow cut and tailored from the same cloth that all those Hawaiian shirts must have been; how else could you explain how everybody in Terry and Denny's company, treated you exactly the same way those two brothers did.

I still remember exactly where I was when Denny called me on my cell phone to tell me Terry had passed; that was Shock One. Even after visiting Terry in the hospital - and after he was moved into Denny's with his giant TV, the Shock was still The Shock. And now, after another 14 years, The Shock returns. During the huge memorial gathering for Terry at Mardrie Mullen's house, I remember shaking hands with John Toll ASC, but was otherwise mostly unable to speak - didn't hardly say a thing to anybody; just couldn't do it. The grand and great good fortune to have met Terry and Denny Clairmont, and to have somehow earned their friendship, I count as one of the most significant and sustaining events of my life - and absolutely, one of the most significant and sustaining events of my career as a cinematographer. If it were not for Terry and Denny Clairmont, I either wouldn't be anywhere - or at least I'd definitely be somewhere else. Between the two of them, they created an energy that counter-acted the fear, doubt, and pessimism that we all feel when we're starting-out on a journey that we have almost no idea how to complete when we begin. Through them, what seemed at first like the ultimate in "unlikely", could somehow be seen as possible. If you just kept chipping-away at the rock, it was possible to stand on it someday - just maybe.

So now, as the tectonic waves of Shock 2 run beneath the length of the state for me - along with 43 years of memories with the loss now of Denny, I appreciate more than ever the notion of "points of reference". It is not lost on me, when I find myself sitting at the red light at Franklin and Highland in Hollywood, that I'm once again looking at the original location of Clairmont Camera high atop 1800 N Highland Ave - where I met Denny, Terry, and Alan Albert. As many of us know, that red light can last an awful long time - and I often use all of it, to reflect on the 1977 runner-kid returning a camera package - to the men that would later have a profoundly important effect on my life and career. My sympathies to Shannon, the entire Clairmont family, everybody who spent thousands more hours with those brothers than I did, the family of crew that came through their doors and later walked-out as accomplished cinematographers, all of Denny's esteemed international colleagues who loved and appreciated the elegance of masterful equipment-design as much as he did, and everyone who ever experienced the energy of that prep-floor when it was humming like a rocket to the moon. That rocket was powered by unlimited generosity, and it transported so many people.

If anyone ever asks you how to do something, think like either Clairmont brother would have - sit them down and explain it to them, completely, and then give them your phone number - and be willing to put a tie-down in an envelope, at the bottom of your stairs. You do *all you can*, because that's how it's supposed to be done - and they did it like no others. RIP Denny - and Terry - and I thank you for everything, from the bottom of my heart.