When I tell people I am pursuing my MFA, they always have a few simple questions.

Q: In what?
A: Film, I say.

Q: Oh cool, where?
A: At Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Q: In Vermont?
A: Yes.

Q: Did you leave Los Angeles?
A: No, it’s a low-residency program.

Q: It’s a what?
And this is when it gets more complex.

It’s hard to explain because it is unlike anything else out there. As far as I know this is the only low-residency graduate program for Film in existence. Those of us who come on board early, not only get the benefit of an amazing cutting-edge program that allows us to earn an advanced degree without quitting our jobs, moving, or halting work on our own projects, but we also get to help shape the program as it evolves. Talk about a win-win!

A residency is: a semester’s worth of lectures and screenings compressed into 8 days, combined with super high-energy networking sessions with amazing filmmakers and peers, mixed in with some intense, project-specific mentoring opportunities, topped-off with a healthy dose of summer camp hijinks, and you have some idea about what a residency is.

VCFA programs a full slate of currently working filmmakers to present during each residency in addition to what our accomplished faculty provides. In April (residency #2 for my class), Debra Granik visited to show us her latest project, a work-in-progress documentary entitled, Stray Dog. Whether or not you prefer a more linear style of filmmaking (as I do), or a more free-flowing work, this type of intimate access is priceless. Later that evening, Debra also showed her film Winter’s Bone at the local art house theatre for us and the community. All in all, she spent about 6 hours with us. It was like having a VIP behind-the-scenes pass to a significant and relevant film festival.

ASC Cinematographer, Denis Maloney taught a hands-on workshop on lighting in which he gave us the actual script pages to read, and then showed the same scenes from the completed film. Afterwards we had the opportunity to recreate those lightening choices to the best of our circumstances. Many of the students have basically an
academic background or are more focused on screenwriting, whereas I and several others have greater production experience, so what I think is especially valuable is that each of us could get something out of this workshop—even if it wasn’t the same thing.

In spite of appearances, I am a traditionalist at heart.

I like stories with a beginning, middle, and end. Ones that have something to say—and that I understand what that something is by the end. I’m not an art for art sake, free flowing kind of movie watcher or maker. However, I am now gaining an appreciation for work that is different from mine due, thanks to events such as Elaine McMillion’s presentation of her interactive documentary, Hollow at VCFA. My point is, my development as an artist, is also growing as a direct result my residency.

When I leave each residency with a freshly written 6-month plan, I feel exhilarated and so ready to get back to work. Each month, I have a set of deliverables that are due on a specific date. Of course everyone’s plan is individually tailored to their project, but for me since I am in post-production, all my tasks are centered around reaching my overall goal—a rough cut of the film by the next residency. Being held to deadlines, receiving guidance and basically having an accountability coach, were the main reasons I enrolled in this program. Of course, it will be great to have a Master’s degree—nearly everyone in my family already does. I think the degree will also help me secure funds for future projects, raise my profile as a documentarian for hire, and with it I can also teach film, but my overriding objective is to finish my projects. Since my film is now tied to my education, I know I will.

Is it perfect? Of course not. I am far too tall to sleep comfortably in a twin sized dormitory bed. It is exhausting? Absolutely! But also very energizing. I think it is inevitable that you’ll question your commitment and focus—and very likely your film project itself—at least once during each residency and many more times...
during the intervening six month semester off-campus. Which brings me to best part: you aren’t
going to go through it alone anymore. If you are anything like me, you are better at starting
projects than you are at finishing them. I think for me it was important to learn that when I’m
feeling blocked, it may seem that jumping to another project is easier than pushing through the
current crisis, but it isn’t ultimately productive. But in this program, your faculty mentor will be
there for you, as will your fellow students. It may just be Hollywood legend, but it is said that
Morgan Freeman and Clint Eastwood met at Los Angeles City College over 60 years ago, thus
beginning an epic partnership. In this business, your peer group will be critical to your success.
People you can depend upon, to share resources with, and receive support from and offer
guidance to, are truly and completely rare.

What do you need to succeed at VCFA?

Vision and drive are important. Knowing your own voice,
or at least being willing to search for it, is also necessary.
But I would say a sense of adventure and openness to
rethinking everything you thought you already knew, is the
key. Whether you need structure and deadlines to complete
a film or script, or you want to discuss, collaborate and create
something new and fresh, or you just want to earn an MFA to
advance your career without taking two years off from your
life, I believe you can find it at VCFA. Besides, it’s Vermont—
life really doesn’t get any better!