

AirSpace Transcript Season 7, Episode 10: One Small Stop in Ohio

Transcript

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Emily: Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Airspace Museum. I'm Emily.

Matt: And I'm Matt. In 1969, Anisha Abraham's family found themselves in Wapakoneta, Ohio, and decided to knock on Neil Armstrong's parents' door. They had a lovely visit, took a picture, and went on their way.

Emily: 50 years later, that visit was just an anecdote told at dinner parties until one of Anisha's friends convinced her the story should be shared with the world.

Matt: It turned into a beautiful short film about opening doors, sharing kindness, and the humanity that unites us all. We talked to Anisha and her friend, the filmmaker, about One Small Visit¹. Today on AirSpace presented by Olay.

Music up then out

Emily: So we should start off Matt, with a cast of characters. This is a short movie. There's not a ton of characters, so we're gonna kind of give 'em all up top. So we start with the Abraham family, which is a young couple with a young daughter, Nirmala and OC Abraham and their daughter Anisha, and then they have their mother, I should say Nirmala's mother, Elizabeth George.

And then we have three Armstrongs, Viola, Steven, and Neil. I feel like you've heard of Neil before.

Matt: Right. And you know, all of these characters, as we've said, exist in real life, and this is all based on a true story of something that happened to Anisha and her parents when Anisha was just a baby.

Anisha: Hi, I'm Anisha Abraham and I'm a co-producer of One Small Visit. The essence of this story, About a family opening doors at a time where it was unusual to be an Indian American family and land up in this small town and for this to happen, um, is very much true to what happened.

Emily: For decades, Anisha and her family just told the story as an anecdote, and one person who heard it, more than once, was Anisha's friend Jo.

¹ <https://www.onesmallvisit.com/>

Jo: Hi, I'm Jo Chim. I'm the writer, director, producer of One Small Visit. Anisha and I are really good friends. And so this is a story that she once told me over a dinner party, which I love.

When I first heard it, I was just struck by the serendipity of it all and that it was meeting, such a historical figure but I also loved hearing it from this very personal side, you know, it's such a global historical event, but it was told from a very intimate memory of it.

And I, I loved that image of these women clad in their saris in 1969, walking down Main Street, you know, middle America. That, to me, was such a powerful image. But it, again, it was really more a dinner party story. And it wasn't until 2018 when the story came up again and Anisha said, 'you really should talk to my mother.'

And then I spent two and a half hours on WhatsApp with her mother. Who, her mother is one of the most magnetic, charismatic storytellers I've ever met in my life. I mean, she's just amazing. And as she was telling me the story in more detail, that's when the visuals really started playing before my eyes. I felt like I was watching a movie right then and there.

Matt: So after convincing Anisha that this story really needed to be shared with the world and that it had the potential to be a really cool movie, Jo took the reins and turned that story into a short film.

Emily: So the movie kind of opens with the Moon landing as a lot of stories do when you're talking about people who are affected by the Moon landing. And it's the Abrahams and Elizabeth George up really late at night watching the moon landing.

Movie Clip: Moon landing

Nirmala: Why's the picture so fuzzy?

OC: They're climbing down, three more steps!

Nirmala: two

OC: There!

All cheer

Elizabeth: They did it! They did it! They did it!

OC: shhhhh he's saying something

Neil Armstrong (on TV): ...one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind. (fades out)

Matt: Then the rest of this story all takes place in, in one day as the family is traveling by car through Ohio

Jo: I really liked the story because it was, it really just took place in one afternoon, so there was a beginning, middle, and end. And for me, I was like, oh, all I have to do is embellish it. And so that part of the story, the events and what took place are real. But I did take quite a bit of artistic license in terms of what, you know, Anisha said what the dialogue actually was because nobody could remember. *laughs*

Matt: As they're driving they, you know, they see the sign for Wapakoneta² and it says that it's Neil Armstrong's hometown. So Elizabeth George convinces them all 'hey, we should really stop and see the hometown of the first man to walk on the moon'

Emily: And I think it's worth saying, right, like, this is a period film. So this is all taking place in the sixties. You're in a period car and the sets are all period. And there's some sort of classic elements that maybe are a little bit more timeless, but there's always you, you know, that you're not in present day.

Matt: And it's also very clear from the dialogue that a lot is happening in America at this time. as we've covered on this podcast before in previous episodes. You know, the late 1960s when Apollo happened, well, let's just say it was a pretty dramatic period for a lot of things that today we think of as these big defining moments for America, like the civil rights movement, like the assassination of Martin Luther King, like the Apollo landings themselves, and Woodstock, et cetera. You know, there's a lot going on in America at this time.

Emily: Right. So as immigrants living in the United States being in rural Ohio plays a big part in how the characters are experiencing this part of the country at this moment in time. And as they're passing through Ohio on their road trip, it's lunchtime. And they end up in a diner, which is really for me, like quintessential 1960s vibes, right?

So they're in a diner. You know, the waitresses are in these classic sort of robin's egg blue uniforms with their beehives, matching eyeshadow, there's a lot of like 1960s love happening here. But it's not lost on the audience, and certainly it's a big part of the experience of the Abrahams that they're having when they walk into this diner, and I mean, heads just turn like, it's like being at a baseball game and watching the wave, like heads just whip around and like, who are these people? And a lot of the way this film is created is around the feelings that the Abraham's are having, being in these spaces as being very different from everybody else.

Matt: Right. And this is where the Grandmother character Elizabeth George really begins to kind of shine in her, sort of, willingness to go into these, what some might consider uncomfortable situations. And this is where we kind of get introduced to the fact that this is the woman who's gonna push the action of this story forward. She is the one who's going to get everybody outside of their comfort zones and willing to knock on the doors of complete strangers.

Anisha: That was very much in keeping with, uh, my grandmother and I would probably say a lot of women in our family. And, um, I've been told that, uh, I hold onto some of that feistiness and, and perseverance and resilience. But that was very much, you know, who she was, that she, um, wasn't going to take no for an answer.

But also, um, felt that, you know, who she was or being from India was not gonna be a limitation, that was not something that was gonna hold her back.

² <https://wapakoneta.net/>

Matt: And you know, she's a great, I would say, kind of counterpoint to OC's character, whereas, you know, OC the father is a little bit more cautious. He's a little bit worried about what might happen to them as they enter into these situations and he's kind of seen some things during his time in America.

He has marched in the Civil Rights Movement. He's seen what happens when people of color go into predominantly white spaces. He knows Ohio isn't quite the south, but he knows it's not that far from the south, and he's kind of worried about what might happen. Whereas Elizabeth George is a little bit more prone to give everyone the benefit of the doubt and assume that everything's gonna work out fine.

Emily: The diner scene is really where a lot of things start to take place, including the family, really having an opportunity to speak with this waitress at the diner and get to know a little bit more about Neil Armstrong and his parents and the town that they're currently in, Wapakoneta, Ohio.

Matt: Yeah, there wasn't much in Wapakoneta to commemorate Neil Armstrong yet, other than the sign the Abrahams saw on their way in. But in fact, you know, a few sort of pilgrims, I suppose, had made their way to Wapakoneta had found out, uh, maybe in a similar way to how the Abrahams find out where the Armstrong's house is and had made that trek and knocked on the door.

Emily: So once Elizabeth George has sort of talked everybody into this idea of going to visit Neil Armstrong's parents. Elizabeth gets out of the car and sort of leads the charge up the driveway and insists that her daughter, Nirmala, knock on the door.

Movie Clip: Knock on the door

Nirmala: Mami, we don't even know if anyone's home.

Elizabeth: Well we won't know unless we try

Matt: So Nirmala knocks on the door and she and Elizabeth are greeted by Neil's parents. They are invited in, they have a lovely visit and eventually OC and Anisha who were waiting in the car because OC was very afraid of imposing on this family at their home, come in and join. And then a surprise guest.

Emily: Yeah. Um, I, I actually really love this scene cause it was filmed in a really interesting way that was reminiscent of the actual Moon landing.

Matt: Yes

Emily: But Neil Armstrong himself in the flesh comes downstairs and actually meets everybody. And there's this moment of like, 'oh my God, he was in the house. Oh my God, he's actually here!'

Matt: So probably like most people who meet an astronaut, one of the first questions that the Abrahams asked to Neil Armstrong is, what did it look like up there? What, what did the Earth look like when you were able to see it from space?

Movie Clip: Overview

Neil: When I held up my thumb and shut one eye, my thumb blotted out the entire planet. I didn't feel like a giant, I felt very, very small. (laughs) I couldn't get over how fragile the Earth looked. It's funny, you know, these borders between countries, these lines that divide us, from space, you see they don't exist.

Jo: I didn't really know about it until I finished the movie that it's actually a documented phenomenon called the Overview Effect³, and, and it's something where, the more you are awed by nature and the the celestial vastness, the more you feel small and you're just a piece of, you know, a speck within this Earth, but somehow through feeling that small, you feel so much more interconnected.

Emily: And you know, Neil entering it's a really fun moment to watch take place. And, you know, as they're getting ready to, to leave, right? Because this is still the sixties, everybody's social graces are really kind of fitting in certain boxes. So, you know, you show up, uh, you get invited in, you get your coat taken, somebody hands you a cup of tea and some cookies, you spend about 25 minutes talking and then you say, 'kay, bye. Thanks for this. Um, and then you leave, right? There's no overstaying your welcome here. On their way out, somebody suggests, hey, let's get our picture taken together.

Matt: So spoiler alert, Neil Armstrong isn't in that picture that they take with them, and that becomes, you know, the memento of this trip for the family because Neil Armstrong is the one who takes the picture. So maybe that's even more valuable, the photo *taken* by the first person to walk on the Moon as opposed to the photo *of* the first person to walk on the Moon.

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Emily: Now we mentioned that Elizabeth George is really the person sort of pushing this story forward. Her granddaughter Anisha is one of the producers on the film. And Anisha's parents were also really involved in the making of the film to try and help the story be told in a way that honors how they remember this moment.

Jo: I was extremely lucky to have complete access to the Abraham family, you know, and they read every draft. And they were so generous in giving time to both me and our crew, our actors, our production designers, about every single detail that we had questions on. And so we had complete access to them.

But in terms of the Armstrong family, we really didn't. I didn't know who to reach out to. And it wasn't until afterwards that they saw the film when it was actually done. Luckily a lot of the

³ <https://www.space.com/frank-white-overview-effect>

Armstrong's history is on public record. So I really just for their side of the story, I really had to extrapolate.

Emily: And that's all to say nobody's memory is a hundred percent accurate. So it's important to keep in mind that certainly things like the dialogue, and other details aren't gonna be a hundred percent accurate. They're not gonna be perfectly precise, but that's because they're memories, right? This is an oral tradition that's been passed through the family that they're really proud of and was really formative for them. But in all other things, this is based on a true story.

Matt: One of my favorite things about this movie, as I said, is sort of the way that the dialogue reveals so many things about the larger things that are happening around this road trip. And I also like the way that that dialogue kind of unfolds over time. It doesn't try to give you everything all at once, and so it's very slowly that we learn, for example, that OC is cautious because of his experiences with racism in the United States. You know, we learned that he had been invited to, you know, a town to give a talk to a Rotary Club and had gone to a restaurant to give that talk. And then going back the next day to eat in the restaurant, was told that he had to come in the back and eat in the kitchen. He couldn't eat in the dining room.

And we learn only over time about these experiences that have led him to be as cautious as he is traveling around with his family, you know, in parts of America that he is not as familiar with.

Emily: We can talk about this film for a heck of a lot longer than the film actually is. And I think that's a testament to how successful the film is at really addressing a lot of complexity without undermining all of the serious issues that exist in this moment in time and all of the really serious experiences that these characters have had, especially living in the United States at this time. Certainly a lot of experiences are similar to what people are experiencing in the United States now. I, I feel like the film does justice to all of those things, but in such a way that like, we're gonna be left talking about this for another, I mean, months.

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Matt: But at any rate, you know, why was Neil Armstrong even there? You might wonder. Shouldn't he have been off, you know, meeting important people and promoting NASA and preparing for the next, uh, Apollo missions? Well, the truth is that in fact, he was just back from a very whirlwind worldwide tour where they visited 29 cities, 24 countries in 38 days, and then finished in Washington, D.C. just that November, 1969⁴. So he and Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin had been out exhausting themselves on behalf of the American Space Program, meeting people and, you know, making friends around the world,

Jo: What I found really fascinating was the whole world tour that these astronauts took. And, and, and that to me was the unification moment, right? That was when a million people showed

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<https://www.nasa.gov/feature/50-years-ago-apollo-11-astronauts-return-from-around-the-world-goodwill-tour>

up in Bangladesh. Millions of people showed up in Tokyo or Mexico, and they went around the world where, where the audience around the world really felt like it was a mission for all of us. For all mankind. It wasn't just for America.

And one reviewer put it really well when he saw the movie, he said, you know, there are very few times in history where people reunite for something positive. Usually it's natural disaster or war or something tragic. And this was one of those few, uh, moments, however brief it was, where the people really felt globally connected and interdependent. And so that was something I did want to kind of set as the bigger message.

Anisha: My parents knocked on Neil Armstrong's parents' door within a couple of weeks of Neil coming back on this global tour and having gone to India. So again, just that impact and that thought that maybe they opened the doors because Neil had just been around the world.

But I think the other concept that comes back to me is when we screened this movie at NASA headquarters one of the things that many people in the audience said is that when you're in space, and certainly when um, people, um, go into space, they can look down on the Earth and realize that it's this very tiny kind of beautiful object and that there are no borders.

Matt: Yeah and I think what's wonderful about this film is that it really humanizes Apollo in, in a way that other films, I mean, other films have humanized it in different ways, but this one is wonderful because it does it from a very different perspective.

Like, we know the story of the Moon landing. We've seen images of the parades. We've seen images of people tuning in around the world to watch it. But you know, this story is so different from most of the stories that get told about Apollo, that it really provides you a new way of appreciating the sort of human impact of that moment and how it persists even after the Moon landing for people thinking about the world becoming more united, people being kinder to each other, and this sort of more positive future for what the world could be.

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Emily: So hopefully after you and I are raving about this movie, everybody wants to go see it. So Matt, how can folks go see this film?

Both laugh

Matt: So, you know, the film doesn't yet have a streaming home. It hasn't been widely distributed, but the filmmakers are still touring with it, and we're gonna put links on our social media to the touring schedule.

Emily: Also, it's worth noting that film festivals often have an online component, so, you know, keeping an eye on the social for the, this film may provide other opportunities to see it even if it's not touring near you.

Music up then under

Matt: AirSpace is from the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.

It's produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouda. Additional help from Amy Stamm and Sofia Soto Sugar.

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