

(l-r) Trunesh Kassaw and Bloomington native Brooke Bierhaus after filming a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony for Bierhaus' documentary, *The Connected Cup*. Photo by Mulugeta Workye



# Brooke Bierhaus

A Young Woman Pursuing a Dream,  
One Cup of Coffee (or Tea) at a Time

By Carmen Siering

**In an era where the most common way for people to stay in touch is on Facebook, it might seem unusual for a young woman to explore the intimate ways people can connect over a cup of coffee or tea. In her documentary, *The Connected Cup*, Bloomington native Brooke Bierhaus examines how sharing in the age-old ritual of making and drinking coffee or tea brings people together despite the seeming barriers of race, religion, ethnicity—even language.**



(above) Bierhaus at the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro in 2017. Courtesy photo

Bierhaus, 26, spent three years traveling the world filming her documentary. She says it was in Bloomington that the idea of connecting over coffee or tea was first planted. “The people of Bloomington were the ones who would pay for my coffee when I was a high school student studying downtown,” she says. “They were the ones who sat next to me at Soma and shared stories or insights from their lives. It was growing up around the intersection of education, art, activism, and local pride in Bloomington that provided the basis for *The Connected Cup*.”

### First connections

Born in Vincennes, Indiana, Bierhaus moved to Bloomington when she was in the fourth grade and attended St. Charles School where her mother, Julia Bierhaus, was a fourth-grade teacher. She attended Bloomington High School South through her sophomore year, but graduated from Pleasant Valley High School near Bettendorf, Iowa, then attended the University of Iowa where she ran track and cross country and majored in journalism.

After graduating in 2015, Bierhaus went to the New York Film Academy where she participated in a two-month intensive acting course. “And that’s all I could take of New York,” she says with a laugh. Looking for a way to further

(below) Matcha tea ceremony in Kyoto, Japan, while filming *The Connected Cup*. Photo by Brooke Bierhaus



her growing interest in photography, she applied to SEEDS Iceland, a nonprofit, non-governmental organization (NGO) that promotes environmental protection and awareness and intercultural understanding.

“I taught photography [in Iceland],” Bierhaus says. “I would teach about 10–15 people at a time and they would live with me. That melting pot was what drew me to *The Connected Cup*. First thing in the morning, we would all have coffee and talk about the day. People from Korea, South America, a lot of Europeans. That intrigued me, and I started thinking about the documentary.”

From Iceland, Bierhaus traveled to Costa Rica to work with another NGO, staying a total of five months. And then, in 2016, at the age of 22, she started working on *The Connected Cup*.



(above) Bierhaus filming in the Kefa region of Ethiopia, where wild coffee grows in the cloud forest. Photo by Mulugeta Workye

*When the right people get on the path, it all comes together.*

Nine countries are represented in the film—Costa Rica, Ethiopia, India, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Morocco, Tanzania, and the United States. The interviews incorporate nine languages: Spanish, Amharic, Kafa, Italian, Japanese, Samburu, Berber, Swahili, and English.

Getting to those nine countries, paying translators, and finding accommodations was a lot of logistical work. And it could have taken a lot of money. How did someone fresh out of college do it?

“I was lucky that I didn’t have to pay for college—I had scholarships,” Bierhaus says. “I saved up. I sold my car. And I dedicated all my time to the film. It was self-financed.”

She found work every month or so with a different NGO, sending examples of her work, mentioning she would be in the area, asking if they had a need. She also asked if she might be able to do a home stay. And then pitched her tent in someone’s backyard if that was all that was available.

Bierhaus says she felt there was a bit of luck involved when it came to the people who ended up working with her as she traveled—for example, the translators she found in Ethiopia, Morocco, and India.

“It was my first time traveling to those countries,” she says. “I wanted to do that the right way, so I wanted to stay in those countries for three months at a time. I wanted to understand the communities. So, with those translators, I was lucky they were all aspiring photographers and videographers and I could pay them for those skills. And I was lucky I didn’t have to pay four different people for those jobs [driver, translator, photographer, videographer].”

Finding the right people to work with took time—she had to weed out those who were just looking to make a profit off of a single, Western female traveling alone with a lot of equipment. She says she would go through the same

(below) Bierhaus, in traditional Berber dress, serves tea as a gesture of thanks to the nomadic Berber family who allowed her into their home in the Sahara Desert. Photo by Mbarek Ouhasa



explanation about the documentary with 10 different travel agencies before someone understood what she was doing. “Then that person might say they couldn’t offer me a huge discount, but they would be more reasonable,” she says. “It’s uncomfortable to ask for discounted rates because everyone should get fair pay, so I made sure to tip and pay for meals. But it was a way to get the right people to work with. When the right people get on the path, it all comes together.”

### *Nobody does it alone*

Three years is a long time to travel by yourself and, Bierhaus says, it took her awhile to realize she couldn’t do everything on her own. “It took a really long time for me to ask for or accept help,” she says. “I would rather be uncomfortable than take someone else’s offering. But that’s actually the most selfish thing you can do because you’re taking away their ability to give. Changing the narrative on that helped me tell this story.”

A family in Ethiopia asked her to stay with them in their home. Reluctantly, she accepted. “But that’s when things started rolling,” she says, smiling. “My language skills got better, I was able to understand the culture better because people take off their armor when they’re at home. I would make them food or tea and give something back. The film I had to do myself, but I couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t had that help along the way.”

That help started with her mother, who, Bierhaus says, is her greatest supporter.

“My dad died when I was 7 and my mom’s been my rock forever,” she says. “When it’s scary, she reminds me I have a safe place to come back to. There are positives [of traveling] but there is also trauma. And I think that is how I am able to do what I do. I dedicated the whole documentary to her because in everything I’ve done, I’ve had her on my side.”

(right) Taking a break in the Sahara Desert outside Merzouga, Morocco. Bierhaus stayed with a camel herder and visited with a nomadic family while filming there and wore traditional Berber dress as a sign of respect.  
*Photo by Mbarek Ouhasu*





### 'I keep betting on myself'

When she started filming *The Connected Cup*, Bierhaus had an idea. When she finished, she had a documentary. And a lot more.

"The entire three years I was filming *The Connected Cup*, I was creating quick, informative films for NGOs," she says. "And I was editing for three years. Every two weeks I would be working on a different video." Those efforts paid off, with Bierhaus learning to edit on the fly. She originally thought she would have to pay someone to do her editing work. "But I ended up editing the film myself," she says. "And it saved a lot of time and money."



(above) Bierhaus with two women from Unity, a matriarchal, women-only village in Samburu, Kenya. The village and the women play a significant role in Bierhaus' documentary.

Bierhaus says her dream job after graduation was to be an international correspondent. She wanted to focus on conflict resolution and human rights. "I wanted a job with a [television] network," she says with chagrin. "I had a lot of audacity sending things out that I thought were really impressive." But the job offers never came. After a lot of soul searching, she understood she needed to take a different approach.

"I realized I had to create the job I wanted and show them I could do it without being paid," she says.

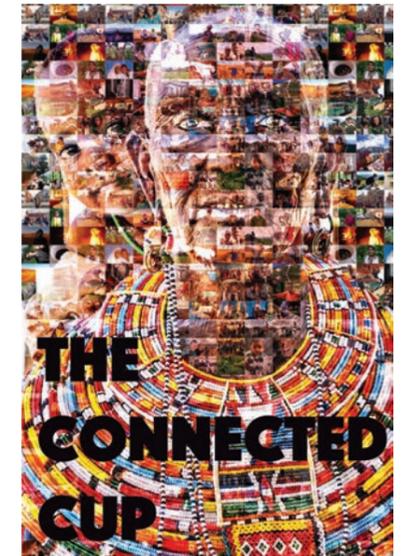
She finished *The Connected Cup* in October 2018. It premiered on iTunes in April. She says it's been doing well, but

(opposite page) Taken at Karanga Camp at 13,066 feet, two days before summiting Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Photo by Brooke Bierhaus

adds, "Sales could be higher. I feel like I'm putting more money into my work and hoping it pays out on the back end. I'm betting on myself because if I don't, who will?"

Now that the film is finished, Bierhaus says it's easy to want more ... and more. She tries not to let it get out of hand. "I live by the quote, 'Remember when all you wished for is what you currently have?'" she says. "I think about all the times filming when I couldn't wait until it was done, and people could watch it on iTunes. And then it came out and I couldn't figure out how to get more people to watch it. And I have to stop and realize that one person impacted by my film is more important than 1,000 people who watch and aren't impacted by it."

Today she's getting more response. "I'm getting calls from networks now," she says. "Calls I would never have gotten a year ago. I think I would have freaked out to get those calls a year ago. Today, I think, Well, it's all talk and I still don't have a job. But I have to be thankful for the calls. I have to have confidence that it all works out. I have to keep betting on myself." ✨



(above) Movie poster for *The Connected Cup*.

To view more of Bierhaus' photographs and see "Coffee Conversations" with interesting people from around the world, visit her website at [vidbee.org](http://vidbee.org)

To watch Brooke's film, *The Connected Cup*, visit [theconnectedcup.com](http://theconnectedcup.com)