

A Meridian Hill Pictures and
Magic Labs Media Production

in association with
Fork Films, Artemis Rising Foundation, Hidden Empire Film Group,
Kartemquin Films and Big Mouth Productions

THE FIRST STEP



a film by the Kramer Brothers

Directed by: Brandon Kramer

Produced by: Lance Kramer

Featuring: Van Jones, Jared Kushner, Congressman Hakeem Jeffries, Vice President Kamala Harris, Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Cory Booker, Senator Shelly Capito, Senator Rand Paul, Senator Mike Lee, Mayor Karen Bass, Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, Patrisse Cullors, Charlemagne Tha God, Karen Hunter, Kim Kardashian, Donald Trump and many more.

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ELECTRONIC PRESS KIT

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SYNOPSIS



LOGLINE:

In a divided America, Van Jones attempts to bring people together to pass a landmark criminal justice bill — and finds himself under fire from all sides.

SYNOPSIS:

In a divided America, Van Jones controversially works across party lines on landmark criminal justice reform and a more humane response to America's addiction crisis. Attempting to be a bridge builder in a time of extreme polarization takes him deep into the inner workings of a divisive administration, internal debates within both parties, and the lives of frontline activists fighting for their communities.

Facing fierce opposition from both political parties in a climate where bipartisanship has become a dirty word, Jones and his team enlist the support of justice-impacted individuals, faith leaders, grassroots activists and cultural figures — including Kim Kardashian — to pass legislation that would fix some broken aspects of the justice system and bring thousands of incarcerated people home early. The bill's champions immediately find themselves navigating a high-stakes game of political chess in Washington, D.C. Their quest brings them face-to-face with progressive champions like Congressman Hakeem Jeffries, U.S. Senators Kamala Harris and Bernie Sanders, as well as conservative figures like U.S. Senator Rand Paul, Kellyanne Conway, Jared Kushner — and ultimately, Donald Trump himself.

While trying to pass a bipartisan bill through a deeply polarized Congress, Jones is condemned by the right for his progressive beliefs — and by the left for working with conservatives. The film reveals an intimate portrait of an activist's isolation and internal struggles, what it takes to make change in a divided nation, and everyday people in both political parties drawn into a historic fight for freedom and justice.

THE FIRST STEP is an independent production of Meridian Hill Pictures (CITY OF TREES, PBS, Netflix) and Magic Labs Media (THE MESSY TRUTH, Webby Award Winner), in association with Kartemquin Films (MINDING THE GAP, Hulu, Oscar Nomination) and Big Mouth Productions (DICK JOHNSON IS DEAD, Netflix) and the editorial talent behind KING IN THE WILDERNESS (HBO, Sundance) and BIRTH OF THE COOL (PBS, Sundance).

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



I have lived in the DC area my whole life and long heard the refrains: “nothing ever really gets done in Washington” and “working across the aisle is a nice idea but impossible in practice.” But the reasons why always seemed opaque to me. When Donald Trump was elected president, the escalating divisions in the country seemed to only further close the door to any possibility for progress. As an observational filmmaker dedicated to telling intimate stories around social leaders and movements, I felt drawn to making a film that dove into the complexities around a leader attempting to bridge political, racial and geographic divides during this moment.

In a conversation with Van over breakfast shortly after Trump’s inauguration, he shared with me his intentions to spend the next four years doing everything he could to make progress on criminal justice reform and addiction. I had known Van for many years, and he had a compelling theory of change in this moment: common pain could lead to common purpose. Van was prepared to take major risks by breaking ranks from other progressives to work with Republicans while they were in power. It was clear he was prepared to take a controversial path on these issues in a polarized time. Van’s imminent political – and personal – quest felt compelling, urgent, uncertain and perhaps perilous.

I wondered: *What does it look like to try to work across the aisle at such a deeply divided time? Can something be accomplished? What are the consequences?*

A story about Van’s attempt to engage one of the most divisive administrations in history – especially on issues as contentious as criminal justice and addiction – could start to untangle some of the myths of bridge building and illuminate why so few people take this path. I knew we could only do the story justice if we could capture Van and his team’s journey honestly, with nuance, integrity, and intimacy, and with divergent sides represented fully and fairly (including Van’s critics). As a media figure, Van constantly had cameras around him, but I wanted to introduce *our* camera as something different. When the other cameras turned off, we would still roll. I tried to always be transparent about my intentions and process. He did the same about his own actions. The transparency and trust allowed me to capture difficult moments in Van’s work and personal life. I continuously reminded Van that I wasn’t trying to pursue “gotcha” journalism, but I also wasn’t going to gloss over the hard moments either. I wanted to register his humanity and points of struggles respectfully and truthfully. I also tried to carry this same ethic and form into the relationships we built along the way, especially with the ten community leaders featured in the film from West Virginia and Los Angeles and leading activists on the Left who opposed Van’s strategy. By building this level of trust and humanizing all stakeholders, we opened a window to the complexity of different on-the-ground movements, as well as the legislative process playing out in D.C.

This was an extremely hard movie to make. There were many aspects of Van's experience and other participants that I could never fully understand — Black communities in South Los Angeles *and* white, rural communities in West Virginia; conservatives *and* progressives in Congress; leaders in Black Lives Matter *and* the American Conservative Union. I had a responsibility to continuously build my own understanding and work closely with a diverse team. We needed to connect with the life experiences we were trying to represent, and also confront our blind spots, misunderstandings, and prejudices. We not only had to build a team of extremely talented cinematographers, sound recordists, editors, and story consultants with strong artistry and ethics who could capture the story from many different perspectives, but also political consultants and field producers who helped us navigate access to capturing raw, behind-the-scenes moments with political leaders, inside prisons, Congress, and even inside the Trump White House.

In many of these places, the people we encountered were initially skeptical of cameras, as the media has historically looked down on, ignored, or distorted their communities, or the media is just never allowed access. Walking into the office of the Sheriff of McDowell County, West Virginia, there was a sign that read: "the media doesn't define us." Similarly, all doors were initially closed to our cameras from the Trump White House and political leaders. I had to build trust over time first without a camera in order to gain a level of access where our cameras could be present during deeply sensitive conversations within grassroots and political spaces. With time, patience, and persistence, we were able to gain the trust needed to create an intimate documentary that could humanize the political process.

Three threads felt critical to tell this story: Van's personal journey, his political work across the aisle to pass a criminal justice reform bill, and his grassroots work to bring people together around the addiction crisis. The intersection of these people and experiences is what I found captivating. In the field and in the edit, the biggest challenge was how to weave all three threads together without smoothing over the complexities. This led to an involved two year edit, collaborating with incredible mentors like Lewis Erskine, Carol Dysinger, Gordon Quinn and Katy Chevigny. We continuously workshopped the structure to realize a singular film. While the film has a central protagonist and point of view (Van), it also felt essential to represent other activists and leaders with clarity and depth — including the people who opposed Van's strategy and actions. My hope is that audiences can find newfound understanding and connection with people whose perspectives are different from their own.

This film is not narrowly intended for just people who agree with Van. The film exists to create meaningful conversation around the opportunities and limitations of bridge building. I want audiences to walk away from this film with a new understanding of why trying to work across the aisle is so difficult, but also perhaps necessary.

The four years of the Trump administration were a deeply painful time for our country. I realize many people — especially on the left — may just want to move on. But it is critical to look back in order to move forward. The divisions remain and in some respects are still escalating. This story is not a time capsule of the distant past. I think an honest look back at this attempt at making change during this administration — successes, failures, all of it — can help equip ourselves to work through the next four, eight, twenty years ahead. Van and others' experiences during this time can be instructive in figuring out how we move forward, whether you agree or disagree with the strategy. The film (nor myself or Van) have all the solutions to these problems. However, films can provide a space for meaningful reflection and discussion as we urgently confront how to work together in this moment to preserve and strengthen our democracy.

STATEMENT FROM VAN JONES



This is a film about impossible things. After all, it is next to impossible to pass meaningful federal legislation – especially on a hot-button, racialized issue like criminal justice reform. But we did it.

It is also nearly impossible for conservative, rural leaders to join forces with progressive, urban leaders – for any reason at all. But in this film, they came together.

It is almost impossible to capture on film the roller coaster process by which a controversial bill actually becomes a law. It is even harder to transform that footage into a powerful, authentic and moving documentary. But the Kramer Brothers and their team got it done.

After Trump's election, I had to make the toughest choice of my professional career. I had worked for most of my adult life to fix the criminal justice system. During the Obama administration, at long last, we had begun to make bipartisan headway – with both parties finally expressing concern about the system's most punitive and draconian laws. But Trump initially was no fan of justice reform. He just as easily could have launched a "tough on crime" prison building boom – and rendered justice reform as partisan and polarizing as health care reform or climate solutions. To prevent that outcome, I joined forces with Jared Kushner, whose father had gone to prison. And we not only passed the First Step Act – we kept the issue of justice reform so bipartisan that everyone from Bernie Sanders to Joe Biden to Donald Trump ran for office as champions of fixing the system.

Along the way, my team and I came under fire from both sides of the aisle. My organization lost donors and supporters. I lost friends and my brief standing as a darling of the progressive community. But the pain was worth it. More than 20,000 people have come home from federal prison early, thanks to that one bill. Some people – especially those sent away for unconscionably-long crack cocaine offenses – would never have come home.

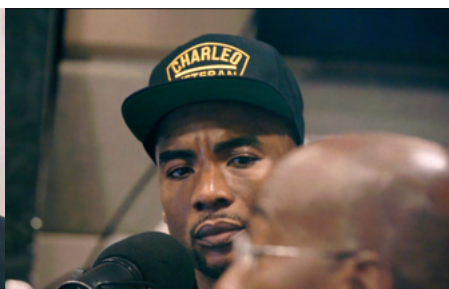
It was important to let the Kramer Brothers film everything we were doing. Win, lose or draw – we knew that we were in a moment of history that needed to be documented. And we knew that there would be lessons for all sides, no matter the outcome.

I am proud that the film shows all of my faults, flaws, mistakes and shortcomings. I am proud that it shows my many critics and detractors in a fair light. I am also proud that nobody in the film comes out looking terrible (except maybe Sen. Tom Cotton, but hey – what can you do?). I think this doc represents a breakthrough, in that regard. The antagonist is really the status quo – mainly the partisan interests and toxic political culture that make change so difficult. That was our real enemy. People think it's impossible to tell authentic stories about American politics without tearing down one side, to lift up another side. But this film shows you don't have to do that. Both as a law and as a movie – THE FIRST STEP proves that much more is possible than most of us dare to believe.

PROTAGONISTS

VAN JONES is a media personality, an entrepreneur and change maker – who has dedicated his career to bringing people together in clean energy solutions, criminal justice reform and racial inclusion in the tech sector. In 2007, Van was the primary champion of the Green Jobs Act, signed into law by George W. Bush. In 2009, he worked in the Obama White House as the Special Advisor for Green Jobs. Over the past 25 years, Van has founded and led social enterprises including REFORM Alliance, Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Color of Change, Green For All and the Dream Corps. He worked with Prince to launch #YesWeCode (now called Dream Corps TECH) to get jobs in the tech sector for low-opportunity young people. Van is also a CNN host, an Emmy Award-winning producer and a 3X New York Times best-selling author.

ALSO FEATURING: Jared Kushner, Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Cory Booker, Senator Kamala Harris, Senator Shelly Capito, Senator Rand Paul, Senator Mike Lee, Congresswoman Karen Bass, Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, Patrisse Cullors, Charlemagne Tha God, Karen Hunter, Kim Kardashian West, and Donald Trump





LOUIS L. REED

Organized a national grassroots network of reform activists after serving 14 years in federal prison

JESSICA JACKSON

A passionate civil rights attorney who joined the reform movement after her husband was jailed for a drug felony

VIRGIE WALKER

Leads People Coordinated Services of South Los Angeles

PETE WHITE

An activist and organizer who has served as director of [LA Community Action Network](#) on Skid Row for 25 years

TYLO JAMES

A former organizer at Community Coalition and native of South Los Angeles who was born addicted to heroin

FABIAN DEBORA

An Latinx artist in South Los Angeles who runs the art therapy program at [Homeboy Industries](#)

NOREEN MCCLENDON

[Leads Concerned Citizens of South Los Angeles](#), which operates real estate and provides low income housing

DOUGLAS COPENHAVER

A native West Virginian and construction worker, who serves as the president of the [Berkeley County Council](#)

MARTIN WEST

A native West Virginian and former laid-off coal miner-turned elected law enforcement official

DEE PIERCE

Co-founder of Bikers Against Heroin

WILLIAM THOMPSON

Presiding judge of Boone County Drug Court

RHONDA EDMUNDS

Co-founder of [Lily's Place](#), a neonatal abstinence syndrome center

SELECTED PRESS

The New York Times

“TACTFUL...COMPELLING...HUMAN”

— NATALIA WINKELMAN, THE NEW YORK TIMES

Los Angeles Times

“CAPTURES SOMETHING RARE IN DOCUMENTARIES:
THE MESSY BUSINESS OF FINDING BIPARTISAN SOLUTIONS IN A HYPER-POLARIZED COUNTRY.”

— RICHARD HARRIS, LOS ANGELES TIMES



“A WIDE-RANGING AND THOUGHTFUL DOCUMENTARY.”

— ADRIAN HORTON, THE GUARDIAN



“THE KRAMER BROTHERS ARE D.C. DOCUMENTARIANS ATTUNED TO THE GUTS OF THE POLICY-MAKING PROCESS”

— KATHY GILSINAN, POLITICO

“RIVETING ... AN EXTREMELY ILLUMINATING LOOK
AT HOW REAL CHANGE OCCURS IN THESE DIVISIVE TIMES.”

— MATT FAGERHOLM, ROGEREBERT.COM

IMPACT CAMPAIGN

More than 20,000 people have come home from prison as a result of the First Step Act.

In collaboration with national impact partners including [Dream.org](#), [REFORM Alliance](#), [Listen First Coalition](#), and their respective networks of local justice-impacted advocates and bipartisan organizations, with the film's release we are advancing campaigns and coalitions who are working to improve conditions in prisons and bring more unjustly incarcerated people home by:

- 1. Building advocacy & leadership skills** for systems-impacted people through public screenings and facilitated dialogues inside prisons and reentry programs in partnership with directly-impacted leaders.
- 2. Maintaining & expanding coalitions of allies** through screenings and facilitated discussions at college campuses, nonprofits, faith institutions, and conferences.
- 3. Providing policymakers with a blueprint to build bridges** on critical issues across perceived lines of difference through facilitated screenings in DC and state capitals where screenings can move the needle on pending bipartisan reform efforts in each state and at the federal level.

Regional partners include:

- **ARIZONA:** [ACLU Smart Justice](#), [Nolan Center for Justice](#), [Awake Window & Door Company](#), [Just Communities Arizona](#), [Arizonans for Transparency and Accountability in Corrections](#), [Americans for Prosperity](#), [American Conservative Union](#), [Arouet Foundation](#)
- **ARKANSAS:** [University of Arkansas School of Social Work](#), [Magdalene Serenity House](#), [Northwest Arkansas Harm Reduction](#), [P.E.A.R.L.](#)
- **COLORADO:** [YOUunify](#), [Community Works](#), [Realness Project](#), [MOTUS Theater](#)
- **FLORIDA:** [Society First](#)
- **ILLINOIS:** [Giving Others Dreams \(G.O.D.\)](#)
- **INDIANA:** [The Facing Project](#)
- **IOWA:** [Iman Consulting](#), [Federal Criminal Defense Clinic at University of Iowa Law](#)
- **LOS ANGELES:** [LACAN](#), [Concerned Citizens of South Los Angeles](#), [People Coordinated Services of Southern California](#)
- **MICHIGAN:** [Safe & Just Michigan](#), [Calvin University](#)
- **MISSISSIPPI:** [Chaplain Maurice Clifton](#)
- **NEBRASKA:** [RISE](#)
- **NEW YORK:** [Social Justice Network](#), The Social Justice Film Festival
- **OHIO:** [Towards Employment](#)
- **OREGON:** [SAGE](#)
- **PENNSYLVANIA:** [Allegheny Lawyers Justice Initiative](#), [West End P.O.W.E.R.](#)
- **TENNESSEE:** [Dismas House](#), [LifeLine 2 Success](#), [Unheard Voices Outreach](#), [The Destiny Theater Experience](#)
- **WASHINGTON DC:** [Prison and Justice Initiative at Georgetown University](#), [Convergence Center for Policy Resolution](#)
- **WEST VIRGINIA:** [Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications](#)
- **WISCONSIN:** [The Community](#), [Milwaukee Film](#)

FILMMAKING TEAM

The film is independently produced by Meridian Hill Pictures (CITY OF TREES, PBS 2016) and Magic Labs Media, in association with legendary filmmakers at Kartemquin Films (MINDING THE GAP, Hulu, 2019 Oscar Nomination) and Big Mouth Productions (DICK JOHNSON IS DEAD, Netflix 2020) and the editorial talent behind KING IN THE WILDERNESS (HBO, Sundance 2018), BIRTH OF THE COOL (PBS, Sundance 2019) and LEARNING TO SKATEBOARD IN A WARZONE (IF YOU'RE A GIRL) (Oscars 2020).

BRANDON KRAMER - DIRECTOR

Brandon is a Washington, DC-based filmmaker and co-founder of [Meridian Hill Pictures](#). Brandon directed [CITY OF TREES](#) (Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, national broadcast on PBS' America Reframed, Netflix); and the Webby Award-winning independent documentary series [THE MESSY TRUTH](#). Brandon won Best Director at the 2016 Chesapeake Film Festival and Indie Capital Awards, received the Audience Choice Award at the 2015 American Conservation Film Festival and was a 2015 DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities Individual Arts Fellow. Brandon has directed [over 30 short documentaries](#) commissioned by public agencies and nonprofits including AARP and US Institute of Peace. Before starting MHP, Brandon served as a teaching artist for the John F. Kennedy Center's national media education program. Brandon holds a bachelor's degree in film and cultural anthropology from Boston University.

LANCE KRAMER - PRODUCER

Lance is a Washington, DC-based filmmaker and co-founder of Meridian Hill Pictures. Lance produced [CITY OF TREES](#) (Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, national broadcast on PBS' America Reframed, Netflix) and the Webby Award-winning independent documentary series [THE MESSY TRUTH](#). Lance was invited to attend the Sundance Creative Producers Summit in 2018, was selected to the 2017 [Impact Partners Documentary Producers Fellowship](#) cohort, and was named to the DOC NYC "40 Under 40" list in 2021. Lance was awarded an Individual Arts Fellow by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities three times between 2014-2020, and in 2014, Lance received the prestigious DC Mayor's Arts Award, the highest honor bestowed upon working artists in the city. Lance has served two terms as Board Member of Docs in Progress, and has been an active member of the Documentary Producers Alliance since 2016, where he served as a member of the drafting committee for the *Guidelines for the Documentary Waterfall*. Lance holds a bachelor's degree in history and film from Dartmouth College.

EMILY TOPPER — DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Emily was born and raised in Baltimore, earned a Bachelors from Swarthmore College in Literature in 1999 and a Masters of Fine Arts from University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts in 2004. Emily got her start coming up through the ranks in lighting on independent fiction features, all the while cutting her teeth shooting shorts, music videos, and experimental art films. In 2007, she began work on her first feature documentary, "Aint In It For My Health: A Film About Levon Helm," an experience that left her infatuated with the itinerant, 'never-a-dull-moment' life of a documentary cinematographer. Emily has since shot several documentaries, including "Miss Americana: Taylor Swift" (2020), "Rebel Hearts" (Sundance 2021), "Framing Britney Spears" (2021), "Strip Down, Rise Up" (2021), "Bulletproof" (2020), and the 2015 Emmy winner for Best Documentary, "After Tiller."

STEVEN GOLLIDAY — EDITOR

Steven served as co-editor with Maya Mumma on KING IN THE WILDERNESS (Sundance '18, Emmy) and co-editor with Ben Gold on FAR FROM THE TREE (DOC NYC '17). Steven was a fellow in the inaugural Karen Schmeer Diversity in the Edit Room cohort. Steven studied conceptual art films, documentary and critical theory at the California Institute of the Arts, where he received a BFA in 2007. Steven resides in Portland, Oregon, with his wife, Emily Singer Chapman, a documentary producer, and daughter. Within the documentary community and industry, Steven is committed to revolutionizing the structures that have long failed to incorporate marginalized peoples in an equitable and meaningful way.

NATASHA LIVIA MOTTOLA – EDITOR

Natasha Livia Mottola was an Editor on Stanley Nelson's MILES DAVIS, BIRTH OF THE COOL, has collaborated as associate editor with Jennifer Fox on MY REINCARNATION and Abigail Disney on THE ARMOR OF LIGHT. Other assistant editor work includes, FREEDOM SUMMER, KOCH, HARRY AND SNOWMAN, THE ABOLITIONISTS and the SUNDANCE Documentary Story Edit Lab. She is a member of NYWIFT and ADE, Blue Collar Post Collective, a past mentor at Reel Works teen filmmaking and has collaborated on murals with Groundswell. Her passion for personal documentaries and cultural preservation have inspired her to begin post production on her film, LA STORIA DI NONNA, about her family's immigration experience from Italy to America.

LESLIE SIMMER – EDITOR

Leslie Simmer is Kartemquin's Director of Editing and Senior Editor on staff. For over twenty-three years Leslie has worked at Kartemquin in various capacities. Most recently, she edited the U.S. episode of the Netflix Series *My Love* (directed by Elaine McMillion Sheldon); co-directed with Gordon Quinn and co-edited *For the Left Hand* (premiering in 2021); and served as a lead editor on the Starz multi-part series *America to Me* (directed by Steve James). Leslie edited and co-wrote *Raising Bertie* (directed by Margaret Byrne) which premiered on POV in 2018, and the Emmy Award-winning film, *The Homestretch*, (directed by Kirsten Kelly and Anne de Mare) which screened on PBS's Independent Lens in 2015. She edited and co-wrote the Emmy-nominated feature documentary which aired on PBS Independent Lens in 2012, *As Goes Janesville* (directed by Brad Lichtenstein. Prior to that, she edited with Steve James on the ESPN film *No Crossover: The Trial of Allen Iverson*. She edited the Emmy-nominated *In the Family* (for which she received the Best Editing prize at the "Best of the Midwest Awards"). In 2005 Leslie was co-editor with Steve James on *The War Tapes*. From 2001-2004 she wore dual hats on the seven-part PBS series *The New Americans* as both Series Story Editor and Post Production Supervisor. Leslie also teaches documentary editing classes at Columbia College, Chicago.

SARA FUSCO – EDITOR

Sara began her work in the advocacy world, creating short videos covering refugee crises in the Middle East, the independence of South Sudan, earthquake recovery efforts in Nepal, and innovation in Uganda. Sara's editorial work on THE MESSY TRUTH web series was the winner of a 2017 Webby Award, and her short documentary MAKAPADS was a semi-finalist in GE's Focus Forward Filmmaker Competition in 2012. When not in the edit room, Sara has worked as a mentor and technical advisor in youth media and teacher training classes in New York City and Washington, DC. She spends most of her free time chasing around her toddler and dog, or training Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. Sara has a master's in Media Studies from The New School in New York City.

LEWIS ERSKINE – CONSULTING EDITOR

Lewis began working in television on Evening Magazine at WJZ, then went on to Maryland Public Television PBS, NBC, The Disney Channel, Arts & Entertainment Television, and the BBC. Lewis has worked with Walter Cronkite, Michael Moore, Ken Burns, Shola Lynch, Bill Moyers, and Stanley Nelson. Notable projects include: BIRTH OF THE COOL (Sundance '19), FREEDOM RIDERS (2011 Emmy), and editing for the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, The Cronkite Report, TV Nation, Faith and Reason, Free Angela, All Political Prisoners, and THE BLACK PRESS: SOLDIERS WITHOUT SWORDS. A born and bred New Yorker, Lewis attended Pitzer College and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from New York University, College of Arts and Sciences. Lewis taught at New York University's Tisch School. Lewis passed away from cancer in June 2021.

GORDON QUINN – CONSULTING PRODUCER

Gordon Quinn is Artistic Director and co-founder of Kartemquin Films, where over the past 50+ years he has helped hundreds of documentary filmmakers advance their projects forward and been a champion of documentary filmmakers' rights. He is the 2015 recipient of the International Documentary Association Career Achievement Award and was a key leader in creating the Documentary Filmmakers Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use. His credits as director and producer include films: *Inquiring Nuns* (1966), *Golub* (1988), *A Good Man* (2011), *'63 Boycott* (2017), and *For the Left Hand* (2021). As executive producer his credits include four Academy-Award nominees: *Hoop Dreams* (1994), *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail* (2016), *Edith & Eddie* (2017), and *Minding the Gap* (2018), and six Emmy Award-winners: *The Interrupters* (2011), *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* (2013), *The Homestretch* (2014), and *Life Itself* (2014). He has also executive produced the acclaimed limited series *The New Americans* (2003), *Hard Earned* (2015), *America to Me* (2018), and *City So Real* (2020), and recent films including *Unapologetic* (2020), *Finding Yingying* (2020), and *The Dilemma of Desire* (2020).

CAROL DYSINGER — STORY CONSULTANT

Carol Dysinger directed the short documentary LEARNING TO SKATEBOARD IN A WARZONE (IF YOU'RE A GIRL) which won the OSCAR® for best short documentary and the BAFTA for best short. Dysinger is known for her feature length documentary CAMP VICTORY, AFGHANISTAN (SXSW 2010, Human Rights Watch Film Festival). Dysinger has edited DEADLINE for Big Mouth Productions (Sundance, and NBC), RAIN for Lola Films, Martin Scorsese Executive Producer (Sundance, Venice International) SANTITOS for Springall Pix, John Sayles Exec (Sundance, Guadalajara, San Sebastian) and PUNK (Warners) which was a finalist for a national Emmy. She is the recipient of the David Payne Carter award for excellence in teaching. Carol was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and is currently developing a semi-autobiographical interactive piece depicting her experience with war and completing One Bullet, a feature length documentary film.

MARILYN NESS — CONSULTING PRODUCER

Marilyn Ness is a two-time Emmy, Peabody, and DuPont Award-winning filmmaker. Most recently, she produced the Netflix Original documentaries BECOMING, about former First Lady Michelle Obama nominated for four Primetime Emmy's, and DICK JOHNSON IS DEAD (dir. Kirsten Johnson), which premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival and won the Special Jury Award for Innovation in Non-fiction Storytelling and was shortlisted for the 2021 Academy Award® - Best Documentary Feature. She directed CHARM CITY (2018 Tribeca Film Festival, shortlisted for the 2019 Academy Award® - Best Documentary Feature). She produced CAMERAPERSON (dir. Kirsten Johnson), which premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, was released by the Criterion Collection and was shortlisted for the 2017 Academy Awards® - Best Documentary Feature. TRAPPED (dir. Dawn Porter), which premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, broadcast on PBS' Independent Lens, and was awarded a Peabody. She also produced the feature documentary E-TEAM, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2014 and was bought by Netflix Original, and later earned two Emmy nominations. Ness is a founding member of the Documentary Producers Alliance.

KATY CHEVIGNY — CONSULTING PRODUCER

Katy Chevigny is an award-winning filmmaker and a co-founder of Big Mouth Productions. She has produced and/or directed over a dozen documentary features. Most recently, she produced the Netflix Original documentaries BECOMING, about former First Lady Michelle Obama nominated for four Primetime Emmy's. Ness also produced DICK JOHNSON IS DEAD (dir. Kirsten Johnson), which premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival and won the Special Jury Award for Innovation in Non-fiction Storytelling and was shortlisted for the 2021 Academy Award® - Best Documentary Feature. She also produced DARK MONEY (dir. Kimberly Reed), which premiered at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival and CHARM CITY, which premiered at the 2018 Tribeca Film Festival. Both DARK MONEY and CHARM CITY were shortlisted for the 2019 Academy Awards® - Best Documentary Feature. She co-directed (with Ross Kauffman) the Emmy-nominated documentary E-TEAM, which premiered at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival and was acquired as a Netflix Original. She also directed one of the storylines in Kartemquin Film's documentary series HARD EARNED, winner of a 2016 Alfred I. DuPont Award. She directed ELECTION DAY which premiered at SXSW and was broadcast on POV in 2008. She also co-directed (with Kirsten Jonson) DEADLINE, which premiered at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival and, in an unusual acquisition, was broadcast as a primetime special on NBC. Her work has won multiple awards, been broadcast on networks including PBS, NBC, HBO, Netflix, Arte/ZDF and has played at festivals around the world.

CHRIS JENKINS — STORY CONSULTANT

Chris L. Jenkins is an award winning journalist, independent filmmaker and political strategist. Over a 20-year career, he has told stories about social justice, identity and progressive culture, with a focus on race, class and equity. Chris is the producer and writer of the Webby-nominated documentary, Trapped: Cash Bail in America streaming on YouTube Originals, and the executive producer, producer and writer for Mavericks, a 7-part docu-series currently in production. For nearly two decades, he was a reporter and editor at The Washington Post where he covered and led award winning coverage around national politics, criminal justice, immigration, culture and race. He has also served as Managing Editor for The Root and producer and writer for ESPN's HBCU Football: Our Time and the independent film Rikers: Innocence Lost; executive producer for BrotherSpeak: Exploring the Lives of Black Men; and the director and producer of numerous ads for a range of national and local political and social justice campaigns. While at The Post, Chris was the author of numerous award winning stories and productions, and was on the paper's team that won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for its breaking news coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting massacre.

EDWIN MARTINEZ — CONSULTING EDITOR

Edwin Martinez is a Bronx born award winning director, producer and editor of nonfiction films. He co-directed, edited, and shot PERSONAL STATEMENT (2019 AFI), the award winning TO BE HEARD (2011 NYT Critics' Pick), and THE SCARS OF STOP AND FRISK (New York Times). He has also brought his other storytelling skills as editor of CITY OF TREES (PBS), THE MESSY TRUTH (2017 Webby Award winner), producer of THE CLEMENTE EFFECT (ESPN), and as director of photography for RACHEL IS (2010 True/False), LEAVE NO SOLDIER, LAS MARTHAS (PBS), and WHAT ALICE FOUND (Special Grand Jury Prize, 2003 Sundance). Martinez was a Gates Millennium Scholar (2004), Firelight Media Fellow (2018), and Rockwood JustFilms Fellow (2019). He is in production on THE MONSTER AND THE STORM as a Concordia Studio Artist in Residence with additional support by the Sundance Institute. He is also developing a new project as a Catapult Film Fund Research Grantee. In addition, Martinez is an Assistant Professor of Film at the SUNY Purchase Film Conservatory.

AMILCA PALMER — ARCHIVAL PRODUCER

Amilca Palmer is a New York-based producer and researcher. She has worked on numerous critically acclaimed documentaries for television and theatrical release, including the celebrated PBS series AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVES with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and the Emmy Award-winning film THE MURDER OF EMMETT TILL. Her documentary work has taken her across continents, onto concert stages, and throughout vast archives, helping to give voice to often untold stories from the past and present. As Archival Producer she has worked on award-winning films, including the Emmy-nominated THE GREAT INVISIBLE, the Peabody Award-winning LENNONYC, and the Peabody-nominated docuseries WU-TANG CLAN: OF MICS AND MEN. Other projects include KOCH, CITIZEN JANE: BATTLE FOR THE CITY, and DETROIT: 48202. Amilca was a 2018-2019 Sundance Institute Creative Producing Fellow. She is currently producing RUN WITH IT, an animated feature documentary about the US criminal justice system, with Oscar-nominated directors Nomi Talisman and Dee Hibbert-Jones.

JOSHUA ABRAMS — COMPOSER

Joshua Abrams is a composer, bassist & improviser. He has appeared on over 100 albums recording & touring with a diverse range of artists including Fred Anderson, Bonnie "Prince" Billy, Theaster Gates, Nicole Mitchell, Matana Roberts & The Roots. Abrams has scored the music for nine feature length documentaries including four by Steve James: The Interrupters, Life Itself, the Oscar nominated Abacus: Small Enough To Jail, & the docuseries America To Me. He has also created the theme music for StoryCorps Animated Shorts. Since 2010 Abrams has composed, recorded & toured North America & Europe with a shifting-line up of musicians as Natural Information Society. Natural Information Society (NIS) creates long-form psychedelic environments that distill a wide range of musics & methodologies including jazz, minimalism & kosmiche. The group has released six albums for Eremite records including Simultaneity (2017), Mandatory Reality (2019) the group's latest decension (Out of Our Constrictions) (2021). Other recent releases include Cloud Script (RogueArt) a quartet with Ari Brown, Gerald Cleaver & Jeff Parker & Mind Maintenance (Drag City), a duo with Chad Taylor. Abrams was a 2018 Grants for Artist recipient from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts.

JANA CARTER — EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Jana Carter co-founded Magic Labs Media in 2013. Jana holds a JD from UC Berkeley School of Law. She practiced civil rights and education law, and holds an MA in theology from Bethany Theological Seminary. Jana received an Emmy award in 2020 for producing *The Messy Truth VR Experience*, Episode 2. She also executive produced the Webby award winner *The Messy Truth Digital Series* and produced Lumiere award winner *The Messy Truth VR Experience*, Episode 1.

PRODUCTION COMPANIES

ABOUT MERIDIAN HILL PICTURES

[Meridian Hill Pictures](#) is a documentary production company based in Washington, DC. Started by brothers Brandon and Lance Kramer in 2010, MHP produces films that attempt to tell deeply-honest and personal stories about diverse groups of people navigating complex contemporary social issues. MHP strives to make films that demonstrate excellence in storytelling craft, establish trust with participants and partners, strategic thinking, and a deep embrace of documentary ethics. MHP's film [CITY OF TREES](#) was broadcast nationally on PBS; played at renowned festivals including Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, St. Louis International Film Festival and the Yale, Princeton and DC Environmental Film Festivals; and is available to stream on [Netflix](#) and [iTunes](#). We have produced award-winning commercial [short-form documentaries](#) and [video storytelling trainings](#) with dozens of non-profit, educational, public and corporate partners. In 2014, MHP received the [DC Mayor's Arts Award](#), the highest honor given to working artists in the District of Columbia.

ABOUT MAGIC LABS MEDIA

[Magic Labs Media](#) is a multi-media production company led by Van Jones and Jana Carter. Van and Jana built Magic Labs Media to support visionaries who capture the world in new ways – or invent new worlds, altogether. In 2020, Magic Labs Media won an Emmy Award and a Lumiere Award for its ground-breaking [Virtual Reality Experience](#). It won multiple Webby awards for its [Messy Truth Digital Miniseries](#) (2016). Magic Labs Media also seeks to tell stories of people and communities who dig deep to find solutions that inspire us. Some of these projects include CNN's prime time series [The Redemption Project With Van Jones](#) (2019); a documentary short for *Sundance Now* called [A Deeper Patriotism](#) (2017); the feature documentary [City Of Trees](#) (2015); and the New York Times bestselling book [Beyond The Messy Truth](#) by Van Jones (2017).

ABOUT FORK FILMS – EXECUTIVE PRODUCER ABIGAIL DISNEY

Fork Films LLC is a New York-based film production company that seeks to shed light, evoke compassion, stir action and build peace. Founded in 2007 by CEO and President Abigail Disney and Chief Creative Officer Gini Reticker, Fork Films creates and supports media that makes an important societal contribution, with a particular emphasis on projects that bring women's voices to the forefront. In addition to its original productions of [PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL](#) and the five-part PBS special series [WOMEN, WAR & PEACE](#), the company has supported nearly 90 documentaries in the promotion of peace building, human rights and social justice, including 1971, CITIZEN KOCH, FAMILY AFFAIR, HOT GIRLS WANTED, THE MASK YOU LIVE IN, OUT IN THE NIGHT, and the Academy Award-nominated films SUN COME UP (2011, Best Documentary Short) and THE INVISIBLE WAR (2012, Best Documentary Feature).

ABOUT KARTEMQUIN FILMS - CONSULTING PRODUCERS GORDON QUINN, BETSY STEINBERG, JOLENE PINDER

[Kartemquin](#) is a collaborative center for documentary media makers who seek to foster a more engaged and empowered society. In 2016 Kartemquin celebrated 50 years of sparking democracy through documentary. A revered resource within the film community on issues of fair use, ethics, story and civic discourse, Kartemquin is internationally recognized for crafting quality documentaries backed by audience and community engagement strategies, and for its innovative media arts community programs. The organization has won every major critical and journalistic prize, including multiple Emmy, Peabody, duPont-Columbia and Robert F. Kennedy journalism awards, Independent Spirit, IDA, PGA and DGA awards, and an Oscar nomination. Kartemquin is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization based in Chicago.

ABOUT BIG MOUTH PRODUCTIONS - CONSULTING PRODUCERS KATY CHEVIGNY AND MARILYN NESS

Started in 1997, Big Mouth Productions (BMP) is a documentary production company co-owned by Katy Chevigny and Marilyn Ness. BMP specializes in films about important contemporary social justice issues. Together, Marilyn and Katy have won or been nominated for a range of awards including Emmys, the Thurgood Marshall Journalism Award, a Peabody, two DuPonts and two Cine Golden Eagle Awards for Investigative Journalism. BMP films including CHARM CITY (Tribeca '18) and E-TEAM (Sundance '14) have been broadcast on PBS, HBO, NBC, Netflix, the Sundance Channel and other outlets around the world. BMP has produced short-form and online documentary-style series for the web and feature-length films for film festivals, DVD, educational distribution and broadcast in the past 15 years.

ABOUT HIDDEN EMPIRE FILM GROUP - EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ROBERT F. SMITH, DEON & ROXANNE TAYLOR

Hidden Empire Film Group (HEFG) is a multi-dimensional independent film company, which has produced highly engaging films since its inception, including multiple franchises, that have been distributed both domestically and internationally. Productions include: *Fatale*, a psychological thriller starring two-time Academy Award winner Hilary Swank (*Million Dollar Baby*, *Boys Don't Cry*) and Michael Ealy (*The Intruder*); *Black and Blue*, an action thriller starring Academy Award nominee Naomie Harris (*Moonlight*), Tyrese (*The Fate of the Furious*), Frank Grillo (*Captain America: Civil War*, *The Purge: Election Year*) and Mike Colter ("*Luke Cage*"); *The Intruder* a psychological thriller starring Michael Ealy (*Fatale*, *Think Like a Man*), Dennis Quaid (*The Right Stuff*) and Meagan Good (*Think Like a Man*); *Traffik*, a phenomenal & chilling thriller with a deep and profound true to life message starring Omar Epps (*Love & Basketball*, *Resurrection*) and Paula Patton (*Mission Impossible*, *Precious*); *Meet the Blacks*, a comedy-horror starring Mike Epps (*Resident Evil*), Bresha Webb (*Ride Along 2*) and Lil Duval (*Scary Movie 5*); *Supremacy*; based on a true story, follows a high-ranking white supremacist (played by Joe Anderson) which won the "Best Diaspora Feature" at the African Movie Academy Awards; and lastly; the thriller *Chain Letter*, featuring a great ensemble cast led by Nikki Reed (*Twilight*). Hidden Empire Film Group is led by founders Deon Taylor and Roxanne Avent Taylor, along with a devoted management team. We are a team of creative and business professionals that have worked hard to build a company that creates story-driven, innovative and relevant content. The library of quality original works we have been able to produce in such a short period of time is a tribute to the perfect storm of ingenuity brought to the table by this team.

ABOUT ARTEMIS RISING FOUNDATION - EXECUTIVE PRODUCER REGINA K. SCULLY

Artemis Rising Foundation is dedicated to supporting media projects that transform our culture and challenge the status quo. Led by founder and CEO, Regina K. Scully, the foundation champions powerful stories about some of the most challenging social justice issues of our time — including gender-bias, healing, trauma, mental health, addiction and women's empowerment. With its focus on human rights, Artemis Rising Foundation has helped produce some of the most impactful documentary films of the past decade, inspiring meaningful policy change to legislation, education, corporate protocol and cultural norms. Films such as *THE INVISIBLE WAR*, *THE HUNTING GROUND*, *FED UP*, *MISS REPRESENTATION* and *WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?* address issues such as sexual assault in the military and on college campuses, women's representation in the media, and pushing back against special interest groups. Working closely with renowned journalists and filmmakers, including Amy Ziering, Katie Couric, Kirby Dick, Morgan Neville, Ross Kaufman and Freida Mock, Artemis Rising Foundation has supported over 100 films, many of which have received Peabody, Emmy and Academy Awards. In addition to documentaries, Artemis Rising Foundation supports a variety of projects that include narrative film, television, theater, education, and social programs.

ABOUT 8 ABOVE - THEATRICAL DISTRIBUTOR

8 ABOVE is a theatrical distributor and rights management partner dedicated to connecting award-winning independent films with audiences. Working in close partnership with filmmakers, 8 ABOVE develops strategies that build community and social impact around unique theatrical experiences. Founded by distribution pioneer Jon Reiss, 8 ABOVE has developed bespoke audience-building strategies and theatrical campaigns for independent films, specialty films, and documentaries, including *Hooligan Sparrow*, *Two Gods*, *The Disrupted*, *Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise*, *Sweetheart Dancers*, *Surviving Sex Trafficking*, *Nasrin*, and *No Small Matter*.



AWARDS

- Oxford Film Festival – Best Documentary Feature
- Boston GlobeDocs – Audience Award for Best Documentary Feature
- Bozeman International Film Festival – Best Documentary Feature
- Lakefront Film Festival – Jury Prize for Best Documentary Feature
- Lane Documentary Film Festival – Best Social Justice Feature Film
- Woods Hole Film Festival – 2nd Runner-up for Audience Award-Best Documentary Feature
- Evident Change Media For a Just Society Awards – Finalist
- DOC NYC 40 Under 40 List – Producer Lance Kramer

OFFICIAL SELECTIONS - US FILM FESTIVALS

1. [AFI DOCS](#) – Silver Spring, MD – June 26, 2021
2. [Woods Hole Film Festival](#) – Woods Hole, Mass. – August 1, 2021 (Audience Award - Runner Up)
3. [Bentonville Film Festival](#) – Bentonville, Arkansas – August 3, 2021
4. [Bozeman International Film Festival](#) – Bozeman, Montana – September 13, 2021 (closing night spotlight, Audience Award Winner - Best Documentary)
5. [Mammoth Lakes Film Festival](#) – Mammoth, California – September 26, 2021 (closing night)
6. [Detroit Free Press "FREEP" Film Festival](#) – Detroit, Michigan – September 26, 2021
7. [Big Eddy Film Festival](#) – Narrowsburg, New York – September 30, 2021
8. [Nashville Film Festival](#) – Nashville, Tennessee – October 2, 2021
9. [Berkeley Springs Film Festival](#) – Berkeley Springs, WV – October 2, 2021 (Best Director Award)
10. [Chesapeake Film Festival](#) – Virtual Only – October 3-10, 2021
11. [Tucson Film & Music Festival](#) – Tucson, Arizona – October 3, 2021
12. [Dallas International Film Festival](#) – Dallas, Texas – October 8, 2021
13. [Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival](#) – Hot Springs, Arkansas – October 10, 2021
14. [Heartland Film Festival](#) – Indianapolis, Indiana – October 15, 2021
15. [Boston Globe "GlobeDocs" Film Festival](#) – Boston, Massachusetts – October 16, 2021
16. [Tallgrass Film Festival](#) – Wichita, Kansas – October 22, 2021
17. [Philadelphia International Film Festival](#) – Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – Oct. 21/29, 2021
18. [United Nations Association Film Festival](#) – Palo Alto, California – October 25, 2021
19. [Central Scotland Documentary Film Festival](#) – Stirling, SCOTLAND – Oct. 31, 2021
20. [Virginia Film Festival](#) – Charlottesville, Virginia – October 31, 2021
21. [St. Louis International Film Festival](#) – St. Louis, Missouri – November 7, 2021
22. [Denver Film Festival](#) – Denver, Colorado – November 13-14, 2021
23. [Lone Star Film Festival](#) – Fort Worth, Texas – Nov. 11, 2021
24. [River's Edge International Film Festival](#) – Paducah, Kentucky
25. [Lake County Film Festival](#) – Grayslake, Illinois – November 15, 2021
26. [Hawaii International Film Festival](#) – Hawaii – November 4-21, 2021
27. [Big Water Film Festival](#) – Ashland, Wisconsin – January 2022
28. [Oxford Film Festival](#) – Oxford, Mississippi – March 25, 2022
29. [Sarasota Film Festival](#) – Sarasota, Florida – April 2, 2022
30. [Cleveland International Film Festival](#) – Cleveland, Ohio – April 7, 2022
31. [DC International Film Festival](#) – Washington, DC – April 23-24, 2022
32. [Pure Nonfiction](#) – New York, New York – April 13, 2022
33. [Pan African Film Festival](#) – Los Angeles, California – April 29-30, 2022
34. [DOXA](#) – Vancouver, British Columbia, CANADA – May 6, 2022
35. Lakefront Film Festival – Washington, DC – August 10, 2022
36. Queen City Film Festival – Cumberland, Maryland – October 8, 2022
37. [All Rise Film & Law Festival](#) – Cleveland, Ohio – October 28, 2022
38. [Black Harvest Film Festival](#) – Chicago, Illinois – November 9, 2022
39. [Three Rivers Film Festival](#) – Pittsburgh, PA – November 12, 2022

CREDITS

directed by
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LANCE KRAMER

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executive producers
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JOSHUA ABRAMS

original song by
ALOE BLACC

a film by
Meridian Hill Pictures
Magic Labs Media

in association with
Fork Films
Artemis Rising Foundation
Hidden Empire Film Group
Kartemquin Films
Big Mouth Productions

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SEN. CORY BOOKER

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SADIE

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Sterling Drive-In
Takoma Bev Co
The Breakfast Club
The Dream Corps
The White House
Tzedek Association
United States Capitol
Washington Post
Women in Film & Video DC
XTR
Zoom

and the people of South Los Angeles
Skid Row
Berkeley, Boone, Logan and McDowell Counties, West Virginia
War

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ORIGINAL SONG "SET ME FREE" BY

ALOE BLACC

IN LOVING MEMORY OF

LORETTA KIRKENDOLL JONES

WILLIE ANTHONY JONES

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ALISA SWIDLER

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