

34lukefilms presents

BURIED ABOVE GROUND

A new documentary film by Ben Selkow

Buried Above Ground documents the harrowing stories of Americans living with the burdens of

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

“WAR” “DISASTER” “VIOLATION”

FISCAL SPONSORSHIP:

501(c)3 status with the
International Documentary Association (IDA)

RIGHTS:

Worldwide Available
(Work-in-Progress Screeners Available)

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS:

Documentary Work-in-Progress
High-Definition (HD)
Aspect Ratio: 16:9
Language: English, USA
Running Time: TBD
-Feature Length Film
-Television Hour Available

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[Logline & Synopsis]

logline

Buried Above Ground documents the harrowing stories of three Americans living with the burdens of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) through three interwoven chapters: “War,” “Disaster,” and “Violation.”

synopsis

Buried Above Ground follows a soldier returning from Iraq, a Hurricane Katrina survivor, and a rape/domestic violence survivor of child abuse. The film builds on our growing cultural knowledge of PTSD in public theaters of trauma (war and natural disaster) to help better understand the similarly devastating private theaters of trauma (domestic abuse/rape and community violence) and their aftermaths.

[Project Summary]

Buried Above Ground is a feature-length documentary that interweaves three stories of individuals battling to overcome the paralyzing symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a devastating anxiety disorder that develops after exposure to a serious traumatic event such as a rape, kidnapping, domestic assault, shooting, car accident, plane crash, terrorist attack, bombing, or natural disaster. Approximately 8% of people in the United States (450 million globally) will develop PTSD, while the lifetime prevalence of the disorder amongst combat veterans and rape victims is even higher, ranging from 10% to as high as 30%. *Buried Above Ground* documents the harrowing stories of Americans living with these burdens--a soldier returning from service in the Middle East, a survivor of Hurricane Katrina, and a rape/domestic violence survivor of child abuse. With these stories, *Buried Above Ground* will take the realities of living with PTSD out of the shadows and allow audiences to witness the emotional, medical, and financial costs of this growing mental health epidemic.

The film will augment the depiction of the characters' trauma, symptoms and recovery with interviews of complex post-traumatic stress disorder specialist Dr. Judith Herman (author of *Trauma and Recovery*), combat stress expert Dr. Jonathan Shay (author of *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*), and healing specialist Dr. Peter Levine (founder of Foundation for Human Enrichment). [All Participation TBD]

While the film will show each subject in a different stage of dealing with their PTSD, they are all battling to overcome the disorder's devastating symptoms.

The interwoven chapters are: "WAR," "DISASTER," and "VIOLATION."

“WAR” sets up our understanding of PTSD with the story of Luis, a veteran with a Purple Heart and two Bronze Stars who served two combat tours in Iraq. Luis is the film’s gateway to understanding trauma, PTSD and healing. After incurring grave war wounds, Luis departed the military in 2007. Due to his psychological conditions, he faces a failed marriage, past alcohol abuse issues, and the side effects of the 20 different daily medications. With footage Luis shot in Iraq and full access to his therapy sessions, we intimately see his battle to balance his private feelings of isolation, depression and anger with his public work as a Veterans advocate.



“DISASTER” looks at the struggles of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina through the eyes of one of the city’s citizens. Ashley is a fifth-generation New Orleanian who evacuated before the storm hit but immediately returned to help with the search and rescue of stranded residents. She witnessed carnage, martial law, looting, and her own house destroyed. Even though she suspects she might have PTSD, Ashley has decided not to seek treatment. This stoic refusal is a view shared by many in New Orleans who feel that the need to rebuild the city trumps their own need for treatment. The film follows Ashley as she rebuilds her home and beloved city in an attempt to heal her own trauma, a reflection of New Orleans.



“VIOLATION” is the film’s recovery storyline. Erundina is a 44-year old survivor of three private theaters of trauma - child abuse, domestic violence and rape. After experiencing devastating trauma, Erundina developed PTSD and became addicted to alcohol. But after years of battling the symptoms of PTSD, she celebrated her four-year anniversary of sobriety and becoming the first in her family to graduate from college. Although she has come so far, she is still trying to avoid the triggers of her haunted past. Erundina's story is one of courage, inspiration and self-discovery.



[Project Team]

BEN SELKOW, Director/Producer/Cinematographer Ben Selkow is the director, producer and director of photography of *Buried Above Ground*. The documentary film explores the harrowing stories of Americans living with PTSD—a combat-wounded Army Captain returning from Iraq with a Purple Heart, a native New Orleanian survivor of Hurricane Katrina, and a rape/domestic violence survivor of child abuse. With these stories, *Buried Above Ground* takes the realities of living with PTSD out of the shadows and allows audiences to experience the emotional, medical, and financial costs of this growing mental health epidemic.

Recently, Ben was selected as a Fellow for The Carter Center’s 2010-2011 Rosalynn Carter Fellowships for Mental Health Journalism. The fellowship program is part of the Carter Center's Mental Health Program, which works around the world to reduce stigma and discrimination against people with mental illnesses and to decrease incorrect and stereotypical information. The program also seeks to increase access to mental health services and inform mental health public policy. Ben also was selected to participate in The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma’s 2010 conference entitled “When Veterans Come Home: A Workshop for Working Journalists” at The Carter Center in Atlanta, GA. The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, is dedicated to informed, effective and ethical news reporting on violence, conflict and tragedy.

In addition to *Buried Above Ground*, Ben is producing a feature-length documentary entitled *The Carrier* for director Maggie Betts about the emotional and psychological reckoning of HIV+ mothers trying to have HIV- babies in rural and urban Africa. The film looks at maternal health issues and the prevention of mother to child HIV transmission by following Zambia women through pregnancy and testing of their infants.

Previously, Ben was the director/producer/director of photography/writer of *A Summer in the Cage*, a feature-length documentary about bipolar disorder that premiered on Sundance Channel in October 2007 and is being distributed for home video by Indiepix Films, for educational by 7th Art Releasing and for digital content by Cinetic Rights Management (CRM). *A Summer in the Cage* won the 2009 Mental Health America Media Award in the Documentary Category. The film also received an honorable mention at the 2009 Voice Awards and was nominated for a 2008 Prism Award for Bipolar Disorder Depiction by the Entertainment Industries Council. *A Summer in the Cage* has screened internationally in film festivals and partnered with mental health groups to bring awareness and community to those patients and family members coping with mood disorders. (www.cagethemovie.com)

In 2007, Ben was honored as one of 50 Non-Fiction Filmmakers at the Current TV/Fader Films Symposium “A Day of Dialogue and the Future of Non-Fiction Film,” featuring former Vice President Nobel Prize honoree, Academy Award winner and Current TV founder Al Gore, as well as Barbara Kopple, Albert Maysles, Alex Gibney, and Marc Levin.

In 2003, Ben was a participant in the highly selective Sundance Producer’s Conference at the Sundance Institute.

Ben is a member of the Independent Feature Project (IFP) and the International Documentary Association (IDA). Selkow graduated from Wesleyan University’s Film Studies Program with Honors and the African-American Studies Program with Honors.

FLÁVIA DE SOUZA, Co-Editor Flàvia has worked as an editor in New York City for the last ten years on several documentary films and television programs. Currently, she is also editing *The Carrier*, a documentary about prevention of mother to child HIV transmission for director Maggie Betts. She recently co-edited *In 500 Words or Less*, a film about four high-school seniors as they navigate the college admissions process, which premiered at the Austin Film Festival in 2009. Flàvia also edited *Adopted*, a documentary film that examines trans-racial adoption through two stories and *When the Spirits Dance Mambo*, a film about the impact of African religious practices in Cuban culture, which premiered at the Havana International Film Festival in 2003. Flàvia's works for television include, *Getting In: Kindergarten* (The Learning Channel, 2007) and *World Wedding* (Discovery, 2003). Previously, she had been an associate editor with Susanne Rostock on *Stealing the Fire*, which follows an unbroken chain of events and personalities connecting Hitler's atomic bomb program, Nazi gold, and today's nuclear weapons black market, and premiered at the 2002 Human Rights Film Festival in New York. Before becoming an editor, Flàvia worked as photographer in her native Brazil. She holds a bachelors degree in Industrial and Graphic Design from Rio de Janeiro's State University (UERJ) and a MFA in Photography and Related Media from the School of Visual Arts.

DANIEL LAWREN, Co-Editor Previously, Daniel was an editor for Esther Podemski's *The Peasant and the Priest*, a documentary dealing with issues of globalization and their effect on the Italian landscape; namely Human Trafficking and Agri-business. The film was sponsored by the New York Foundation for the Arts. Daniel also has been an editor for *Consuelo Mack Wealthtrack*, a financial news program for PBS. He edited a feature-length documentary on the epidemic of HIV within teen communities of color entitled *America's Shadows*, directed and produced by social activist Tchaiko Omawale. More editing credits come from his work at Bad Boy Films, where he worked on the *Citizen Change* voter registration drive for Sean "Diddy" Combs, as well as a documentary on the world of mix-tape DJ's. Daniel's other post-production work includes Assistant Editor positions on two films which were official selections at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival: *The Lost Son of Havana* for Hock Films, which won Best Film at the 2009 Baseball Film Festival, and then aired on ESPN, as well as Joshua Zeman and Barbara Brancaccio's *Cropsey* for Ghost Robot Films. Daniel graduated from Wesleyan University in 1999.

JOHN MIMS, Co-Editor Along with being the Senior Editor at UNICEF Television, John Mims edited the documentary entitled *32 hours, 7 minutes*, directed by Cory Gravid that depicts the legacy of the underground high-speed cross-country race called the U.S. Express. The film follows Alex Roy, one of the best outlaw drivers, as he sets out to break the long-held speed record on the final running of the race known as the "Cannonball Run." Mims was the Editor and Co-Writer for Selkow's *A Summer in the Cage*. He graduated with a degree in Fine Arts from the University of California at Berkeley.

JOEDAN OKUN, Co-Producer Joedan Okun is the Co-Producer for *Buried Above Ground*. Joedan has worked in different capacities on a variety of documentaries, including the Academy-Award nominated feature documentary, *Sound & Fury*, the Academy-Award nominated documentary short *Why Can't We Be A Family Again?* and the 2003 American Experience historical documentary *The Pill*. He most recently worked as the Associate Producer on *A Summer in the Cage*, a feature documentary that aired on Sundance Channel in October, 2007 and is being distributed by Indiepix Films for home video. Okun also is currently working on *The Carrier*, a documentary about prevention of mother to child HIV transmission for director Maggie Betts. Joedan graduated with Honors from Wesleyan University.

[Filmmaker's Statement]

I decided to make *Buried Above Ground* because I think there is an overwhelming cultural stigma towards mental illness. This stigma creates a huge barrier that prevents people suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from coming forward to seek professional help. This problem is most well documented and highly prevalent amongst veteran populations. Recently, President Obama addressed the systemic shortcomings of the Veterans' Administration (VA) and has pledged renewed help with veterans from previous wars and the hundreds of thousands returning from service in the Middle East and Afghanistan. This need was loudly echoed by the recent "fragging" incident at Camp Liberty in Baghdad where Sgt. Russell, who was suffering from PTSD, shot and killed five fellow U.S. service members. But the blight of PTSD extends much further than just veterans. Today's news cycles are filled with stories of shocking violence in other public and private theaters including inner-city violence, school shootings, domestic violence, and natural disasters. This film hopes to take our understanding of trauma, as the result of war, and apply it to other kinds of traumatic incidents. Millions of natural disaster survivors, battered women, abused children, rape survivors, and kids growing up in violent environments also experience the devastating symptoms of PTSD. They go through their own wars, but because their suffering happens in private, their conditions too often go unnoticed and underserved.

By following Americans suffering from this disorder, I hope *Buried Above Ground* will promote awareness, understanding, and compassion about PTSD amongst the general American public. Only then can we begin to undo the prevailing forces of silence - guilt, shame and stigma - that engulf people struggling to overcome this debilitating and misunderstood disorder. The film will incorporate cinema verité footage, unfettered access, therapy sessions, stirring archival footage and an emotional score to poignantly, honestly and humanely depict the real emotional and physical costs of PTSD. I believe this realistic documentary approach can uniquely promote awareness about the true nature of PTSD while inspiring a public discourse on what we, as individuals, communities and a government, need to do to help combat this destructive illness. By fostering public compassion and empathy towards those with PTSD, I hope *Buried Above Ground* can continue the dialog about our nation's approach to mental illness.

Buried Above Ground is a mental health film, a human rights film and a testimonial of courage that will be a tool of awareness for the American public. The film's themes speak to a wide and diverse audience. First, it will speak to people living with PTSD. Interest in *Buried Above Ground* will also extend to anyone in the ever-widening circle of people affected by PTSD, including family members and friends of those with PTSD, as well as mental health experts who have dedicated their lives to treating people with mental disorders. In addition, the film's verité style, sympathetic characters and dramatic arc will help promote interest from a general documentary film viewing audience. I plan to maximize the film's exposure by partnering with mental health, disaster relief, children, women, and veterans' advocacy groups and distributing the film through grassroots screenings, the digital portals on the Internet, television, film festivals, and home video releases.

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