



# EXTRAORDINARY

# PEOPLE

DOCMAKERS SARA BERNSTEIN, LISA ERSPAMER  
AND TONYA LEWIS LEE HELP SHINE THE LIGHT  
ON EVERYDAY HEROISM AS A GALVANIZING  
FORCE AGAINST SOCIAL INJUSTICE.

WRITTEN BY STEVE CHAGOLLAN

**T**here's a scene in Ron Howard's documentary *We Feed People*—about José Andrés' disaster-relief heroics with his organization World Central Kitchen—when Andrés loses his temper with one of his volunteer workers and later apologizes for his “grumpiness.” As selfless as this world-renowned chef has proven to be, even in the face of personal danger, these moments in the film point to the fact that humanitarian stems from the word “human,” in all its imperfections.

“I think for Ron, and certainly for the team and for Nat Geo, you could easily just make José a hero and almost deify him,” says Sara Bernstein, a producer on the project. “But I think it was important for people to see he has struggles like anyone else.”

*We Feed People* is one of three recent documentaries that shines a light on heroes in different ways. These include *Aftershock*, about the high maternal mortality rate suffered by Black women in the U.S. and a trio of surviving family members determined to effect change; and *Gabby Giffords Won't Back Down*, about the Arizona congresswoman who was shot in the head by an assailant in 2011 and her subsequent efforts to encourage safer gun legislation despite aphasia and paralysis.



These films point to societal problems that can't be easily solved, like food inequity, systemic racism and gun violence—issues that have divided Americans for centuries. But by focusing on inspiring individuals who have turned tragedy into activism, and whose resilience in the face of adversity can't help but move the viewer, these films tug at the heartstrings while pressing their case for reform. In other words, it's not just politics; it's personal.

"You've got to tell the human story before you tell the story of the statistics," says Tonya Lewis Lee, codirector/producer of *Aftershock* with Paula Eiselt. The two decided to center their film on two surviving spouses and one crusading

mother to examine how neglect stemming from racism played a role in the preventable deaths of two Black women while giving birth.

"Our health and wellness is the crux of everything," says Lee, who's been involved in women's health advocacy since 2017. "If you focus on the most vulnerable in our communities, then you make it better for everybody."

But when a film is issue-driven like *Aftershock*, whom you train the camera on is just as important as the message. In Shawnee Benton-Gibson, the mother of Shamony Gibson—whose death we first encounter in *Aftershock*—the filmmakers found a galvanizing and empathetic force.

YUBY HERNANDEZ / COURTESY OF AFTERSHOCK



Clockwise from above: *Aftershock* codirectors/producers Tonya Lewis Lee and Paula Eiselt; Shawnee Benton-Gibson and Omari Maynard bond over their shared loss; Benton-Gibson and Bruce McIntyre demand change.



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"Shawnee is so awesome when she speaks," says Lee. "She's a clinician. She's a healer; she's a therapist. And she speaks from such passion and straightforwardness."

"To have people who are able to communicate their experience so clearly and authentically in a way people really feel it, and put themselves in their place, (is important). And then you can see these women (who died) in the film. They were alive. They're not a number. They're not data. They're real people."

In Giffords, the filmmakers Julie Cohen and Betsy West benefited from a protagonist whose gregariousness and optimism are undimmed by a condition that leaves her unable to speak the words that are in her head. As producer Lisa Erspamer points out, this is as much a love story and portrait of perseverance as

it is about the issue that defines Gifford—responsible gun legislation. That Giffords' husband, former astronaut and current Arizona Senator Mark Kelly, supplied footage of Gifford's recovery—including her early struggles with physical therapists and speech therapists—went a long way in illustrating the consequences of gun violence not just on families of victims, but on survivors.

"I get choked up when I'm around her because I'm so moved by her and the effort she puts into every day of her life and work," says Erspamer, who first encountered Giffords in the wake of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in 2012, and eventually introduced Giffords to Cohen and West. "I don't know anybody who has that level of endurance," adds Erspamer, "and I've been around pretty extraordinary

people in my life."

The filmmakers behind *We Feed People* also benefited from footage they didn't plan on tapping into to the extent that they did, says Bernstein, who heads Imagine Documentaries with Justin Wilkes, her fellow producer on the film.

"Originally, the idea of the film would be to embed with World Central Kitchen and to follow them, very much verité style—a trajectory of an activation from start to finish," says Bernstein. "And then the world shut down due to COVID, but the World Central Kitchen did not shut down. It really forced us and forced Ron and our wonderful editor Andrew Morreale to think about the archive and the wealth of footage (1,000 hours' worth) that we had been sitting on that fortunately the organization had filmed over the



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years, and to think about the project in a different way.”

Two of those who followed WCK around, with the idea of filming their activities, ended up joining the organization: Nate Mook and Sam Bloch rose to CEO and director of emergency response, respectively. “There were moments when our team put down their cameras and started helping World Central Kitchen,” says Bernstein. “For Ron, that was the point of making the film. The mission of World Central Kitchen is truly infectious. We really shined a light on the importance of volunteerism. And the idea of one plate, one meal—even by one person—can actually make a difference.”

Enlightenment and passion about an issue is one thing, but signing petitions and posting on social media only go so far.

Lee, who points out *Aftershock* is about institutions *and* individuals, asks rhetorically: “Where do you fit in in this? What’s the call to action? I mean, for us, we made a film. For some, it’s about protesting on the street.

Everybody has a role to play. We are saying that the system is flawed but the system needs to fix itself and so how do we do that? Person by person, right?”

At the very least, Lee hopes *Aftershock* can start a conversation, “so that those within the system can examine their practices and really think about how they can be better.”

That motivating effect documentaries can have on a viewer cannot be taken for granted. In *Gabby Giffords Won’t Back Down*, Giffords comes across as the poster gal for the audacity of hope, Barack Obama notwithstanding (it’s no coincidence that the filmmakers scored an interview with the former president). But Giffords proves that hope itself is insufficient; it must be bolstered by hard work. “She really makes me want to do better and try harder,” says Erspamer about her subject. “When I think about Gabby, I never want to complain, because she never, ever complains. Her optimism is unmatched.”

The hero who leads by example has become a through line for Howard, Bernstein and the people at Imagine, whether it’s the astronauts in *Apollo 13* (1995), the first responders in *Backdraft* (1991) and *Rebuilding Paradise* (2020), or the rescuers who came to the aid of the teenagers who were trapped in a Thai cave in the upcoming feature *Thirteen Lives*.

“There was always such an emphasis on human stories and people overcoming insurmountable odds,” says Bernstein about Imagine’s track record in both scripted and nonfiction. “I think it’s inspiring to think about that as we embark on documentary projects. *Rebuilding Paradise* was a turning point (for Howard) because it was the first time he was embedded in the verité documentary process and following ordinary people, and he wasn’t really sure where that was going to go. It’s all part of a common thread that looks at human stories that can be inspiring; real

Far left, World Central Kitchen’s CEO Nate Mook and founder José Andrés in *We Feed People*; center, director of emergency response Sam Bloch in the film; right, an Indonesian beneficiary of WCK’s relief efforts.



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people making a difference.”

It’s a form of advocacy journalism that preaches to the choir. Who doesn’t feel that federal disaster relief programs could better meet the needs of victims in need? More than two-thirds of Americans support stricter gun control laws. Who would argue with the numbers that suggest the U.S. has the highest maternal mortality rate in the industrialized world? Or that Black women are three times more likely to die in childbirth than white women in this country, and we need to do something about it?

The lives of the victims in *Aftershock* slipped away in hospitals due to negligence. But these institutions are not confronted, nor pressed to defend themselves. “There were other people in hospitals that we did interview that we just couldn’t add into the film,” explains Lee. “There just wasn’t enough room for that. We tried to be balanced. But as much as we at one point thought we would have a broader story, it really came down to telling the story of these women and the experts, whether Dr. Neel Shah or the midwife Helena Grant; they sort of were filling in some of the



Top: Gabby Giffords and husband, Arizona Senator Mark Kelly; the filmmakers Julie Cohen and Betsy West.

information for us.”

For the makers of *Gabby Giffords Won’t Back Down*, it was enough to show clips of NRA statements on gun policy. Getting countervailing opinions on gun control was beside the point. (Between the time the film was finished and its July 13 release in theaters, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which includes background checks, was signed into law.)

“I think what’s kind of amazing about

Gabby is she’s really good at when she speaks about the issue,” says Erspamer. “Ninety percent of Americans want background checks, as the Giffords organization talks about a lot. But obviously politics gets in the way. I do think she’s good at bridging that gap because she is a gun owner, as she talks about in the movie. This film was intended to be about Gabby and her story, so that’s what we leaned into.” ■