



WOUNDED PEOPLE

VETERAN DOCUMENTARY PRODUCERS
TALK ABOUT THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE
OF ENSURING THE SAFETY OF THEIR FILMS'
SUBJECTS—MANY OF WHOM MAY BE RISKING
THEIR LIVES TO HAVE THEIR STORIES TOLD.

WRITTEN BY PAULA BERNSTEIN

From violent cults and drug cartels to repressive regimes, serial killers, and political persecution, the most sensitive topics often make the most compelling documentaries. They can also be potentially dangerous for documentary subjects (also referred to as participants), who could be facing jail time, physical threats, exile from their communities, or worse just for sharing their stories.

Veteran documentary producers and PGA members Cassidy Arkin, Tracy Droz Tragos, Howard Gertler and Geralyn Dreyfous have all navigated these treacherous waters and have invaluable advice to share. They all agree that the risks posed to documentary subjects need to be taken seriously.

"On one film I worked on, there was a subject who had numerous assassination attempts against his life. Another time, a subject needed protection from Homeland Security," says Dreyfous, producer and cofounder of Impact Partners. Her credits include *The Hunting Ground*, *Navalny*, *The Square*, and more recently, *Beyond Utopia*, the story of several families struggling to flee oppression in North Korea.

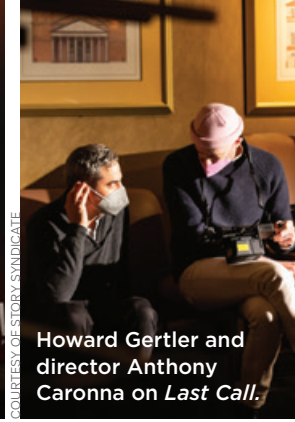
At the beginning of *Beyond Utopia*, which recently premiered on PBS's Independent Lens, the titles advise viewers: "Some details pertaining to the escapees have been disguised to protect those involved." The film features the daring escape of some of the last known defectors from North Korea aided by an "underground railroad" type network, with footage shot by the subjects who, using smuggled flip phones, furtively chronicled their 6,000-mile trip to South Korea through China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand.

"Sometimes we can't even meet our subjects because it's too dangerous. There have been cases where our production has been approached by government agencies saying this is a person of interest and we think they need more protection," says Dreyfous. "I've learned to really trust when somebody says this person's security is at risk. You've got to take that very seriously."

COURTESY OF GERALYN DREYFOUS



Geralyn Dreyfous (far right) with fellow producers and directors of *The Vow*.



Howard Gertler and director Anthony Caronna on *Last Call*.

PRODUCING AND PROTECTING



A still from Tracy Droz Tragos' film *Rich Hill*.



Center left to right: Tragos with DP Kamau Bilal during production on *Abortion: Stories Women Tell*. A still from the same film. Don Droz—Tracy Droz Tragos' late father—holding Tracy in *Be Good, Smile Pretty*.

Right: The Roh family listens to their guide's final instructions for their journey in *Beyond Utopia*.



When protecting sources can mean life or death, what do documentary producers need to know in order to keep their film subjects safe? It's not only a question of physical safety in dangerous situations, but also emotional security for anyone sharing their story. How do producers ensure their film subjects' safety throughout the production and beyond?

ESTABLISHING PROTOCOLS

Producers must communicate potential risks to subjects early on and be proactive about safety and security.

"There are a lot of standard security protocols that have to be es-

tablished and negotiated with the subjects and the film team. The film team has to adjust as circumstances change," says Dreyfous.

The catch is that every geopolitical situation is different. And even a strong-willed producer is helpless against a brutal dictator or a revolutionary army, for example. Crossing into war zones or even borders can pose risks that need to be considered. The truth is that there are some situations in which the safety of documentary subjects cannot be guaranteed. In those cases, they should know exactly what they're facing even before the cameras start rolling.

Even less far-flung, dramatic situations can be potentially treacherous, and producers need to keep the inherent risk to their

subjects in mind. “When you’re entering someone’s home and they’re revealing things that could put them at risk or retraumatize them, expectations with the team need to be set in advance,” says Tragos.

When Tragos set out to document the work of abortion activists and providers who mail abortion pills in her film *Plan C*, Roe v. Wade was still in place. Still, she knew that given the hot-button topic the project would be a risky endeavor. That possibility became even stronger during production when Roe v. Wade was overturned in June 2022, and reproductive rights across the United States became increasingly criminalized.

Tragos, whose credits include the Sundance-winning *Rich Hill* and the Independent Lens documentary *Be Good, Smile Pretty*, was clear with subjects about the potential risks. “Early on, I had conversations with participants about where the film might end up, who might see it and how it might be received,” says Tragos. “Nobody said, ‘Oh, never mind, I can’t be in this film. Don’t include me.’”

It helped that the filmmaker had already negotiated similarly sensitive issues on previous projects, including *Abortion: Stories Women Tell*, which she directed and produced for HBO in 2017.

“It was something that we navigated together, but there was a lot of trust built into the fact that I was not going to reveal something that would jeopardize the work (of the activists). I only did things that were aligned with what the activists who appeared in the film wanted,” says Tragos, who made sure to obscure all locations in the film.

DIGITAL SECURITY

Given that the activists themselves were potentially risking jail time, Tragos prioritized their safety and security. When producing a film under threat of prosecution or other potentially dangerous situations, Tragos says it’s a must to communicate via an encrypted messaging service such as Signal.

The *Plan C* website lists other digital security tips, such as using an encrypted email provider (like Proton Mail), a privacy-enabled search engine (like DuckDuckGo) and a virtual private network (VPN) that will hide your device’s IP address even if you’re using public or shared Wi-Fi.

Some safety and security precautions are as simple as turning off location services on your phone to avoid sharing your physical location, or turning off your phone entirely. “Sometimes we would only say things when we were in person as opposed to emailing or calling,” says Tragos. Keeping the production footprint small also helps. Fewer people means fewer chances of a leak.

MENTAL HEALTH

There’s digital security and then there’s emotional security. How can producers ensure that they don’t retraumatize sub-

jects who have been through an ordeal?

Dreyfous’ production company has taken on a number of documentaries involving sexual assault and rape in the military and on college campuses, such as *The Hunting Ground* and *The Invisible War*. “It is retriggering,” says Dreyfous, who is also executive producer of *The Vow*, the HBO documentary series about the NXIVM cult. For that series, “We had to have a deprogramming therapist on board. They knew to look for signs that we did not know about as filmmakers, questions that could be triggering,” she explains.

As co-creator-showrunner-executive producer of HBO’s 2023 four-part docuseries *Last Call: When a Serial Killer Stalked Queer New York*, Gertler knew he didn’t want to retraumatize the queer community or any of the film’s participants, which included the victims’ loved ones.

“We had two broad parameters that we established with our incredible partners at HBO Documentaries: to tell the story in a way that wouldn’t retraumatize the victims’ loved ones, and in a way that wouldn’t traumatize the LGBTQ+ community largely,” says Gertler. “This meant using restraint around images of violence related to the killer’s crimes. We also did not want to flinch from the difficult but meaningful conversations in the show around the nature of anti-queer violence and the activist and community response, so it was a complicated needle to thread.”

It helped, says Gertler, that Story Syndicate, the production company behind *Last Call*, had already developed best practices to reassure subjects that they would be treated with respect and sensitivity. These were devised for their six-part 2020 HBO documentary series, *I’ll Be Gone in the Dark*, about the late author Michelle McNamara’s search for the Golden State Killer.

Gertler explains, “For all subjects whom we approached for interviews, we were clear with our intentions with the show. For those who elected to participate, we discussed the topics that we would cover in the interviews in advance, and let them know that they would be empowered in these filmed conversations to pass on a question, to circle back to a question, and so on.”

Unlike on a typical production where producers are focused on what they “need” from the interview subjects, in the case of *Last Call*, Gertler says, “We approached these interviews from the perspective of what the subjects needed from the process, and found that it created an atmosphere of both safety and candor that generated substantive, dynamic moments.

“When subjects are sharing painful or traumatic events from their lives on camera or in audio, they are exposing that part of themselves not only to a wide audience, but also to family, friends and colleagues with whom they may not have shared that part of their lives before,” says Gertler, whose credits include the documentaries *How to Survive a Plague*, *Crip Camp*, and *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*. “So I think

we owe it to those subjects to bear in mind what the impact of their participation might be at every step of the way.”

THE OPT-OUT OPTION

Even though documentary participants sign release forms consenting to participate in the film, consent isn’t a one-time decision. If a subject feels unsafe or unable to continue, they should feel free to withdraw their consent at any time. Similarly, participants should have the option to stay anonymous through production and after the film is released.

“From the beginning of production, we continued to navigate these issues together,” says Tragos. “If we filmed someone full-faced and by the time the film was ready to come out, they changed their mind, we would figure out a way to work that out. We would blur their faces, destroy the footage,

whatever we had to do to allow people who share their stories to feel safe.”

Similarly, Dreyfous says that she’s worked on projects where subjects, out of fear for their own safety or mental health, have decided they don’t want to participate. “Even if they already signed a life rights contract, you don’t want someone to live with intimidation or humiliation or to participate against their will. In some cases, like in the case of sexual assault on campus or in the military, people could lose their jobs or have to move out of town or worse. These are real things, and I think any good filmmaker should put that first.”

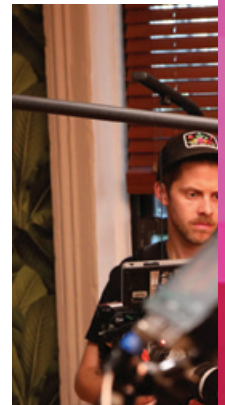
Tragos made sure in *Plan C* that no one’s tattoos were visible, which could make the individual more identifiable. If someone’s eyes were shown on screen, the filmmakers wouldn’t show the bottom of their face, or they would disguise their voice. But Tragos notes that since

the film has been released, “People who were anonymous are feeling like they don’t need to be as anonymous, and they are now able to be more out there about their work, especially if they’re in a state that has a shield law.”

In the case of *Beyond Utopia*, getting consent was impossible until the film’s subjects escaped North Korea and were safe. Because the producers didn’t know how the story would end, nor if the subjects would consent, they edited two versions of the film. The production gave subjects the opportunity to change their minds at any time—right until the movie was released.

THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Cassidy Arkin, executive producer and co-creator of the four-part Paramount+ docuseries *Born in Synanon*, which premiered in December 2023, was in



This page, clockwise from above: Cassidy Arkin and her mother, Sandra Rogers-Hare, in 1980. Two-year-old Arkin (left, red shirt) in Synanon school in 1974; author-musician Mikel Jollett stands behind her. Arkin, Jalen Davidson, Rogers-Hare, Christalyn Hampton and Geeta Gandbhir during the production of *Born in Synanon*.

COURTESY OF CASSIDY ARKIN

the unusual situation of being both behind the camera and in front of it. The docuseries was inspired by the book, *Little Brown Girl*, co-authored by Arkin and her mother, Sandra Rogers-Hare, also an executive producer of *Born in Synanon*. The docuseries delves into the history of Synanon, an intentional community that started in 1958 as a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center and devolved into a dangerous cult. Rogers-Hare was a member, and Arkin was born in Synanon. They left in 1980.

Arkin interviewed former Synanon members, many of whom are still dealing with the aftermath of their involvement in the cult. Many of the most shocking details hadn't been publicly shared until now. It was an emotional experience for Arkin, Rogers-Hare and the former members of Synanon to grapple with some of the revelations.

"Sometimes I was just really worried about Cassidy," says Rogers-Hare. "She's in interviewing mode, yet she's also a subject in the film and she's emotionally connected to the person she's interviewing."

As an experienced producer who had been developing the project for over 20 years, Arkin says she had a lot of time to build the right team to bring *Born in Synanon* to the screen. "My thing was very much about aligning myself with a production team that had integrity and morals and character. I knew that when I put my story into their hands I wouldn't have to worry," says Arkin, whose producing credits include the award-winning TV One docuseries *Unsung*, *VH1 Hip Hop Honors*, and CBS News' *Tulsa 1921: An American Tragedy*.

"As a producer, your loyalty is your currency. We have to always protect our characters. We have to be the per-

son who will lose our job in order to tell the right story."

Arkin adds that anyone who shared their story for *Born in Synanon* was offered therapy, including Arkin and her mother. "There were a couple of times where it was so intense for me that I thought I was going to go crazy. You can see it in the series," Arkin says. Ultimately, having the right team in place—as well as a line-item in the budget for therapy—helped to keep Arkin and other participants steady.

Arkin has come to protect those who appear in her documentaries as if they were friends and family. "When they put their story in my hands, it's not just for the lifetime of the production. It's forever."

For participants who put their lives on the line to tell their story, their commitment to the project—and the risks involved—never ends. ■



From left: DP Vas Sfinarolakis, Sandra Rogers-Hare and Cassidy Arkin during production of *Born in Synanon*.