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## Film Festival's Competitive Documentaries Cover a Wide Range of Subjects

Kids, Griots, Sherpas and Wolves Among Topics Investigated

May 20, 2021

By Rick Mellerup



**UNDER WING:** Directed by Kirsten D'Andrea Hollander and Nikiea Redmond, 'Anatomy of Wings' documents a diverse group of young women as they build a community to rise above the challenges of poverty, violence and inequity. (Supplied Photo)

There are just two weeks before the 2021 Lighthouse International Film Festival, which kicks off this year on June 3.

There is a lot to tell readers about the festival's lineup. So much to do, so little time!

Last week this newspaper told you about the festival's competition narrative films. This week the topic of discussion is the competition documentaries, of which there are seven.

A comedian performing at SurfFlight Theatre a couple of years ago had a bit about driving along a highway and seeing something he hadn't seen for years: "a child playing outside alone!" It has indeed become a rare sight in these days of "helicopter parenting." Older people can remember playing outside until after dark when they were kids, with the only drawback being they may have had to eat leftovers when they finally got home. Times certainly have changed, driven by well-publicized child abductions and parents thinking their kids have to have a hundred formal extracurricular activities – even at the elementary school level – to qualify for admittance to a top college.

Co-director Wurmfeld will attend the film's LIFF screening.

"**Chasing Childhood**," directed by Munzer Loeb and Eden Wurmfeld, explores that issue. "American children," reads a publicity blurb for the film, "are burdened by the weight of well-meaning parents. Free play and unstructured playtime has disappeared. This thoughtful documentary follows education professionals and reformed helicopter parents who seek and offer solutions for developing more confident, independent young people, while restoring some joy and freedom to childhood."

"**Anatomy of Wings**," directed by Kirsten D'Andrea Hollander and Nikiea Redmond, also deals with kids. Well, they're kids at the beginning of the documentary, but young women by its end.

"Join the journey of 10 middle school students as they attempt to 'find their wings,'" says the film's PR release. "This coming-of-age documentary tells their story. Black and white, young and old, a group of women risk their identities to build a supportive community across the inequities of their Baltimore City neighborhoods. Over the course of the film, we watch the teens grow into womanhood, meeting the challenge of their teenage years, against a backdrop of poverty, violence, and systemic inequity."

Wolves! You love 'em if you're an environmentalist and hate 'em if you're a rancher.

Rod Coronado is definitely an eco-activist. "**Operation Wolf Patrol**," directed by Joe Brown, follows Coronado as he attempts to end wolf hunting in the United States. When Coronado's "Wolf Patrol" is met with a tightening of "hunter harassment" laws that prohibit photography on public lands, he has to decide if he is willing to go back to prison to fight a law that some are calling unconstitutional. Brown's investigation uncovers shocking new information never reported before.

"**Sapelo**," directed by Nick Brandestini, was filmed on Sapelo, a barrier island in Georgia that is accessible only by aircraft or boat. It tells the story of a matriarchal griot, Cornelia Walker Bailey.

Some explanations are in order. A griot, a.k.a. a jali or jeli, is a West African historian, storyteller, praise singer, poet and/or musician. Put simply, a griot is a repository of oral tradition. Sapelo is inhabited by the Gullah, African Americans who live on Georgia's Sea Islands as well as that state's coastal plain. Their culture has more than a little African influence.

"As Sapelo's storyteller and elder matriarch, she (Bailey) works to preserve the history, traditions, and way of life of her ancestors," reads a short description of the film. "As her adopted sons are coming of age, that way of life is being tested as the outside world encroaches."

Two Ryans, Ryan Welch and Ryan Rossman, directed "**United We Heal**," which is billed as "a story of post-traumatic growth and hope."

It follows a group of American veterans as they navigate the trauma of PTSD and choose to overcome it with an attitude of growth, instead of stigma. "This film is a salute to our veterans, their families, and the communities that support them."

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Last week it was pointed out that many of the competition narrative films were directed by foreign filmmakers. The only foreign film in the documentary competition is “**Wall of Shadows**,” directed by Polish filmmaker Eliza Kubarska. But the documentary doesn’t deal with an issue in Poland but rather tells a story from Nepal.

“Determined to save their son from the degrading work of a Himalayan porter, a Sherpa family breaks a sacred taboo by agreeing to lead climbers up the Kumbhakarna Mountain, so they can earn money for their son’s school,” reads the film’s description. “Facing fear, superstition and the unrelenting elements, the climb begins. Will the gods forgive or punish them?”

Now it is time to discuss another Ryan. But this time it is a filmmaker’s last name, not the first.

Scott Ryan directed “**We Want The Airwaves**,” a documentary that follows the story of a group of first-time television creators as they embark on a journey to challenge network television and create a platform for change, all while developing the first modern television series, “Manifesto!” It is a chronicle of the work of activists.

The film follows the making of the series, all while exposing the harsh realities of the ethically challenged, unscripted television world.

Next week we’ll take a fairly in-depth look at the festival’s opening and closing night films and talk about two special guests who will be making an appearance. But if you can’t wait, you can visit the LIFF website at [lighthousefilmfestival.org](http://lighthousefilmfestival.org) to check out the complete program for this 2021 festival. You can also find show times and the venues where the films will be screened on the website and purchase either individual tickets or festival passes.

— Rick Mellerup

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