
for
ahkeem
a documentary film
67 Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin
Forum
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2017
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hotDOCS
2017
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AFI DOCS
OFFICIAL SELECTION
2017



RogerEbert.com
“As close as documentaries come to putting us inside
the mind of someone who society easily overlooks”

Huffington Post
"Masterful...shows us the undeniable power of cinema.”

Toronto Film Scene
“One of the most powerful documentaries ever crafted
about the current nature of race relations in America.”

Los Angeles Times
"A bracing story of grit in a world of social injustice”

Jet
"For Ahkeem is THE millennial documentary on Black girlhood"

IndieWire
“Compelling…a vivid example of the incontrovertible fact that Black lives matter”

The Hollywood Reporter
“A quietly impactful documentary with the texture of a narrative feature.”

People Magazine
“Powerful…the deeply personal tale of one young student
as she experiences loss, love and dreams that never fade.”

The Playlist
“Intimate and touching”

Paste Magazine
"Incredibly moving”

The Knockturnal
“A remarkable experience”

DIRECTORS STATEMENT

For us, **For Ahkeem** is about an extraordinary young girl who never gives up. We capture Daje's personality and experiences with astonishing intimacy—with all of her positive attributes, flaws, choices good and bad laid bare with artful nuance that resembles a fiction film. But Daje is neither Malala (the exception) nor Precious (the victim); she is one of the millions of Black women and girls who are somewhere in between, doing their very best to keep their heads above water, to not slip even though the weight of the world is on their backs.

Daje exemplifies the awareness and insight many Black teenagers bring to the unique challenges of their lives; how they are in constant dialogue about how to process, survive, and transcend the violence and other systemic obstructions put in their paths. Through Daje's inner world and day-to-day experiences, **For Ahkeem** provides an important window into the complexities of growing up with this trauma, and aims to highlight the urgent, devastating consequences of being a Black teenager in America today.

For Ahkeem is helmed by Emmy award-winning filmmakers Jeremy S. Levine and Landon Van Soest. It is slated for release in 2017.

Website
forahkeemfilm.com

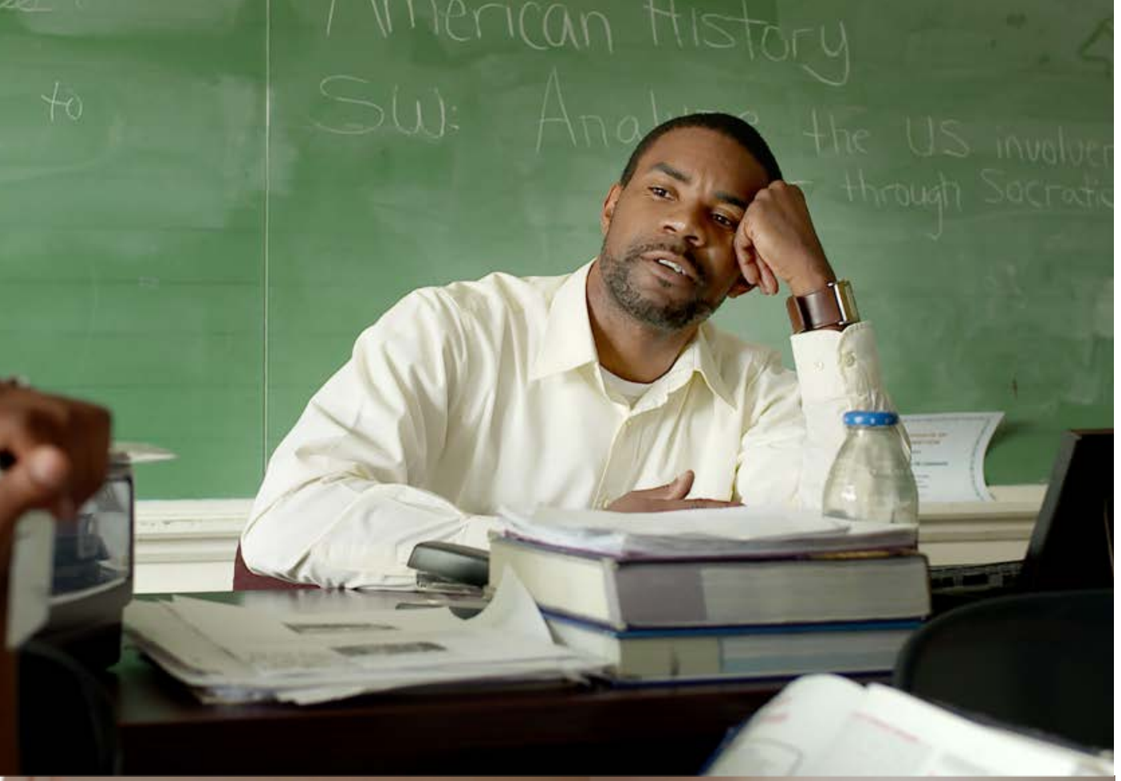
Trailer
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SYNOPSIS

"People been labeling me a bad kid all my life. You don't have to really do nothing, people just expect it. So you start to expect it of yourself." - Daje Shelton

Synopsis

Beginning one year before the fatal police shooting of a Black teenager in nearby Ferguson, Missouri, **For Ahkeem** is the coming-of-age story of Daje Shelton, a Black 17-year-old girl in North St. Louis. She fights for her future as she is placed in an alternative high school and navigates the marginalized neighborhoods, biased criminal justice policies and economic devastation that have set up many Black youth like her to fail.

After she is expelled from her public high school, a juvenile court judge sends Daje to the court-supervised Innovative Concept Academy, which offers her one last chance to earn a diploma. Over two years we watch as Daje struggles to maintain focus in school, attends the funerals of friends killed around her, falls in love with a classmate named Antonio, and navigates a loving-but-tumultuous relationship with her mother.

As Antonio is drawn into the criminal justice system and events in Ferguson just four miles from her home seize the national spotlight, Daje learns she is pregnant and must contend with the reality of raising a young Black boy.

Through Daje's intimate story, **For Ahkeem** illuminates challenges that many Black teenagers face in America today, and witnesses the strength, resilience, and determination it takes to survive.

Accolades

- World Premiere, Berlin Film Festival, Nominated for Glashütte Original Documentary Award
- Official Selection, Tribeca Film Festival
- Winner, Grand Jury Prize, Independent Film Festival Boston
- Official Selection, Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival
- Official Selection, Sheffield Doc/Fest
- Winner, Special Jury Mention, Doc Edge International Documentary Film Festival
- Winner, Best Feature Documentary, Tacoma Film Festival
- Winner, Best Feature Documentary, International Black Film Festival
- Winner, Best Feature Documentary, Santa Fe Independent Film Festival
- Winner, Outstanding Documentary Feature, Tallgrass Film Festival
- Official Selection of 50 film festivals
- Daje Shelton named on the Cinema Eye Honors List of "Unforgettables" in 2017, subjects that "helped to define documentary cinema in 2017" —IndieWire
- Top 10 List in *Entertainment Weekly* ("Must List") and *People Magazine* ("People Pick")

FILMMAKERS

Jeremy S. Levine & Landon Van Soest | Directors
Jeremy S. Levine and Landon Van Soest are an Emmy award-winning documentary filmmaking team whose work explores social commentary through rich characters and cinematic stories. Their latest feature documentary, *Good Fortune*, about two Kenyans battling major foreign aid efforts that bring them more harm than benefit, was broadcast to millions of viewers in prime time on the PBS series POV. *Good Fortune* received a National Emmy Award in addition to awards for international reporting and promoting social justice from the Overseas Press Club, Fledgling Fund, and Witness. Landon and Jeremy co-founded Transient Pictures in 2005, a full service production company that produces independent films as well as original content for organizations like Facebook, UNICEF, Toyota, and Lincoln Center. The team also co-founded the Brooklyn Filmmakers Collective, a tight-knit community of professional filmmakers in Brooklyn, NY who are dedicated to innovative approaches to filmmaking.

Nicholas Weissman | Producer | Director of Photography
Nicholas Weissman is an award-winning documentary filmmaker based in Los Angeles. As a contract video producer he has worked for a variety of media outlets including The New Yorker, The New York Times, PBS, HBO, and the National Geographic Channel. His first independent film, *The Minutemen*, about vigilantes along the U.S.-Mexico border, won the Silver Hugo Award at the Chicago International Film Festival and both Best Documentary and Grand Jury Prize at the Brooklyn International Film Festival. Among his camera credits are contributions to *Capitalism: A Love Story*, *Exporting Raymond*, and *The Accidental Anarchist*. Between feature projects, he regularly produces short documentaries on current issues ranging from gun violence to same sex marriage legislation. In 2013, he received an Emmy for *A Boy Helps a Town Heal*, a Sports Illustrated feature story about the Newtown, CT shooting and in 2014, he produced *Am I Next*, a short about a teenager navigating protests on the streets of Ferguson for Time.

Iyabo Boyd | Producer
Iyabo Boyd is an independent film producer, writer/director, entrepreneur, and a 2016 Impact Partners Creative Producers Fellow. She previously held positions at filmmaker support institutions Chicken & Egg Pictures, Tribeca Film Institute, Hamptons Film Festival, and IFP. She has served on juries for DOC NYC, the IDA Awards, Cinema Eye Honors, and SXSW. Iyabo previously produced the fiction feature film *Sun Belt Express* which had its international premiere at the Champs-Elysée Film Festival in 2014. In 2015, Iyabo founded Feedback Loop, a documentary consulting organization, and started Brown Girls Doc Mafia, a collective of women filmmakers of color working in documentary. Iyabo graduated from NYU's Tisch School with a BA in Film & Television in 2006.

Jeff Truesdell | Executive Produce
Jeff Truesdell is a staff writer for People Magazine. His 2011 article, "School of Last Resort," for which he spent a year reporting inside Innovative Concept Academy to produce a four-page feature in the magazine's "Heroes Among Us" series, inspired *For Ahkeem*. Since 2000 he's covered a human-interest/breaking news beat that has taken him from coast to coast and to seven countries, reporting on stories that included Hurricane Katrina, the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster, the Terri Schiavo right-to-die debate, and the mystery of the missing Natalee Holloway. His feature on the homeless-to-Harvard foster child Alex Chivescu inspired the 2011 Hallmark Family Channel movie Finding A Family. He taught journalism at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and as a reporter and editor previously worked for The Miami Herald, St. Louis Sun, Columbia (Missouri) Daily Tribune, and was a founding editor of Orlando Weekly. He is based in his St. Louis hometown.

Lily Henderson | Editor
Lily Henderson is a director and editor of independent films. Last year she was named one of Filmmaker Magazine's "25 New Faces of Independent Film" after screening her documentary Lessons for the Living at festivals around the world. She is currently writing and directing *About a Mountain*, a documentary-narrative hybrid film set in the fantasy land of Las Vegas. She has been a curator of film screenings at UnionDocs, a community center for art and documentary in Brooklyn, NY, and has served as an organizer of the Brooklyn Filmmakers Collective for more than six years. Lily has also directed and edited commercial work for Ogilvy, Nationwide, and IBM.

Brad Rayford | Field Producer
Brad Rayford is an independent photographer, video journalist, and human rights activist based in St. Louis. His work has been featured on CBS, NBC, MSNBC, Al Jazeera America, and the Los Angeles Times and has won two awards from the National Association of Black Journalists in its Digital Media category. He has been at the forefront of the Ferguson story, capturing historic moments seen around the world. Brad currently has a fellowship at MSNBC in New York.









Directed by
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LANDON VAN SOEST

Executive Producer
JEFF TRUESDELL

Producer
NICHOLAS WEISSMAN

Producer
IYABO BOYD

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QUINTON JACKSON
ANTONIO SHUMPERT
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SUNDANCE INSTITUTE MUSIC AND SOUND DESIGN LABS AT SKYWALKER SOUND

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CONTEXT

For Ahkeem explores the complex web between juvenile justice, education, and institutional racism through Daje's vital but rarely heard perspective as a teenage girl, and the mother of a little black boy. We want our audiences to experience these failed policies personally, feeling each triumph and setback on Daje's tumultuous journey toward a high school diploma. We hope this intimate, nuanced approach will put a human face on the larger issues and inspire others to move beyond the problems and promote solution-based discussions.

"School to Prison Pipeline"

Daje was first suspended in kindergarten after accidentally spelling a curse word. From then on she felt labeled as a "bad kid," culminating in her expulsion from her public high school for fighting. Her struggles in **For Ahkeem** are not uncommon.

Driven by the rise of zero-tolerance policies, children—disproportionately minorities—have been pushed for decades in ever-larger numbers out of school settings and toward the criminal justice system, a phenomenon known as the "school-to-prison pipeline." According to the report "Breaking Schools' Rules," use of out-of-school suspensions almost doubled between 1974 and 2006 in the United States. These harsh disciplinary policies reveal a racial divide; according to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Black students are three times more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled.

Such suspensions drastically increase the likelihood of future incarceration, with studies from the U.S. Department of Education finding that school dropouts are eight times more likely to wind up in prison. The United States now incarcerates youth at the highest rate of any industrialized nation, with 130,000 juveniles locked away every year. According to a study by the National Women's Law Center and the National Crittenton Foundation, young Black girls like Daje are the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice system today.

Gun Violence & Brutality

Daje has lost numerous friends and family members to gun violence—some related to drug and gang violence, others at the hands of police—and has survived gunshot wounds on two occasions. Unfortunately, her experiences are not unique. Gun related homicides are on the rise in many large American cities.

The New York Times reported a 33% rise in gun homicides in St. Louis in 2015, with the highest concentration of violence in Daje's and Antonio's neighborhoods. Nationally, young people are also far more likely to be killed. According to a Los Angeles Times study, two children under the age of 18 are shot and killed in the United States every day. The deep personal impact on Daje is evident by the names of slain friends that cover her school notebook. Daje presents a unique perspective on these issues as the mother of a Black boy and a victim of gun violence.

CONTEXT

Marginalized Neighborhoods

Many cities in the country are sharply segregated, but St. Louis is amongst the most pronounced. A singular road, Delmar Boulevard, divides the city between north and south, poor and rich, Black and white. According to the U.S. Census, neighborhoods north of Delmar are 98% Black, neighborhoods south are 70% white.

Homes north of the line are worth an average of four times less than homes on the south side.

This geographic, racial, and economic divide is the result of decades of segregation by government-sanctioned loans, redevelopment, and private discrimination. After a segregation bill that designated white and Black neighborhoods in St. Louis was successfully challenged in court, many landowners in white neighborhoods began signing racial covenants to prevent the sale of houses to Black people.

These real estate covenants were in use in St. Louis until 1948, when they were deemed unconstitutional. In the 20 years after the racial covenants fell, white residents began fleeing the city to the surrounding suburbs in record numbers; according to ProPublica, nearly 60% of the white residents moved away during this time, hollowing out the tax base in the city.

With drastic cuts to government services, the continued loss of industry, and the destabilizing effects of the War on Drugs, Black families with means also left for the suburbs to the north—including the town of Ferguson—leaving the half-abandoned North St. Louis that remains today. According toThe New York Times, the median household income in Daje's neighborhood has plummeted to the low $20,000's. In Antonio's nearby neighborhood, over a third of the houses are abandoned. The concentration of poverty, lack of basic economic security, and scarcity of opportunities in Daje's neighborhood create major impediments to realizing her potential.

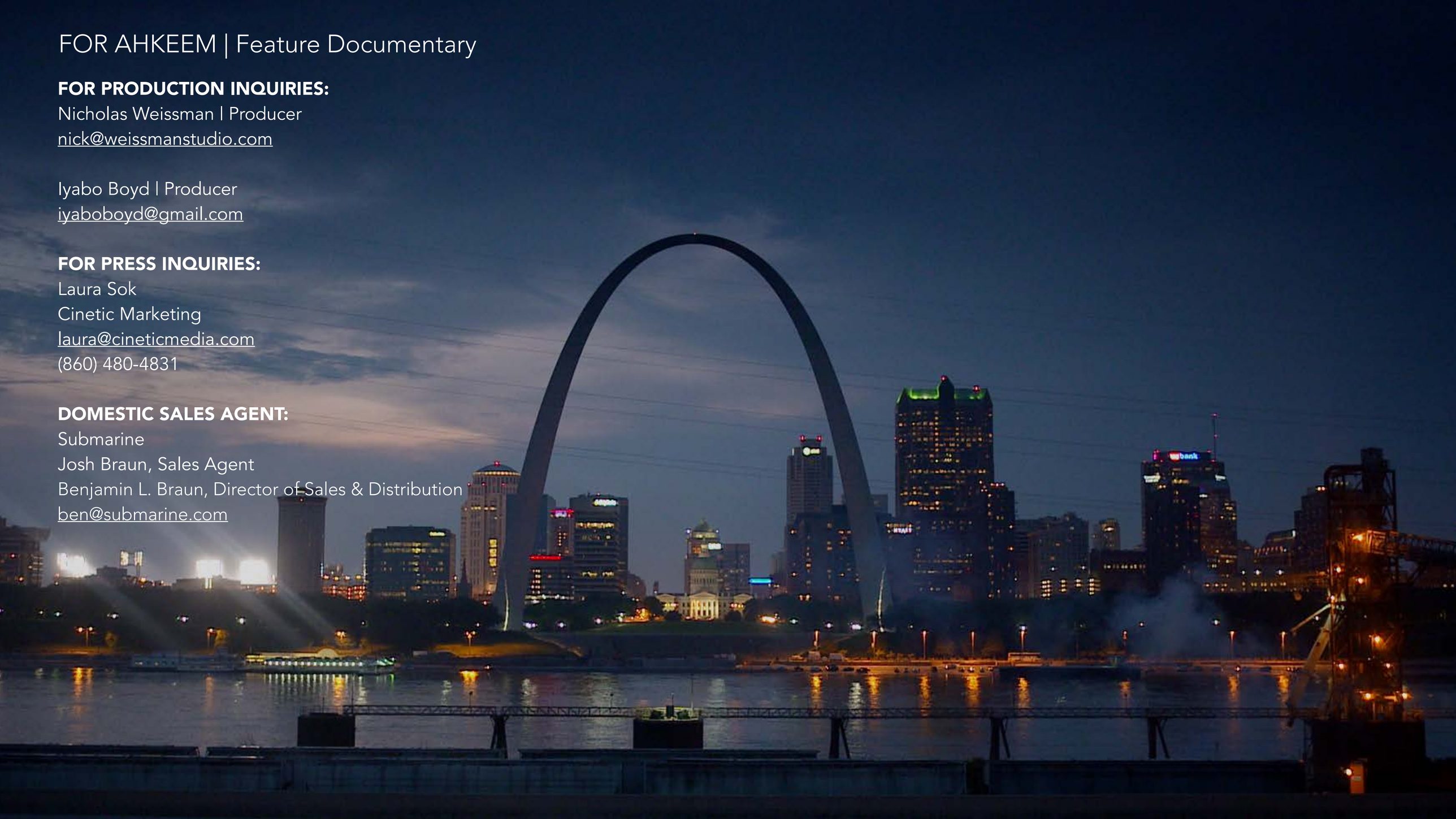
Teen Pregnancy

The lack of proper sex education in Missouri affects the rise of teen pregnancies. More than 16 percent of births in St. Louis are to teen mothers—over 50 percent higher than the national average. This puts a tremendous burden on girls like Daje, who already face overwhelming obstacles to achieve their dreams.





FOR AHKEEM | Feature Documentary



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