

Conversations Between Shifts

a film by **Ben Basem**

featuring **Jeanette Alvarez-Basem**



CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN SHIFTS



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LOGLINE

Conversations Between Shifts follows Jeanette Alvarez-Basem's life through the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic as she grapples with the human challenges of her work as a nurse, parenting her two youngest children into early adulthood and grappling loss of her mother.

SYNOPSIS

When the COVID-19 pandemic sent Ben Basem back home to Schererville, Indiana, he spent a year witnessing his mother, Jeanette Alvarez-Basem, returning from work emotionally terrorized by the inability to save her patients' lives. In her private life, away from perilous twelve-hour shifts, Jeanette questioned her profession and her faith, reconnected with her Puerto-Rican heritage, lost her mother to COVID, and galvanized her nurses union to take action. *Conversations Between Shifts* reveals an intimate family time capsule of Jeanette's home life, only one out of the millions of health care professionals that continue to suffer and persevere during the pandemic.



THE CHARACTERS



Jeanette Alvarez-Basem

A veteran nurse of 35 years, the mother of the director Ben Basem and three other sons, and the daughter of Carmen Escobar. Having aspirations of becoming a nurse since high school, it was her mother who encouraged Jeanette to pursue her goal through a nursing program in Tennessee. While Jeanette got her education, she was forced to move out of New York and would never live near her beloved mother again. Through their constant contact Jeanette and her mother continued a bond that lasted throughout the decades of separation as Jeanette raised her own family in the midwest.

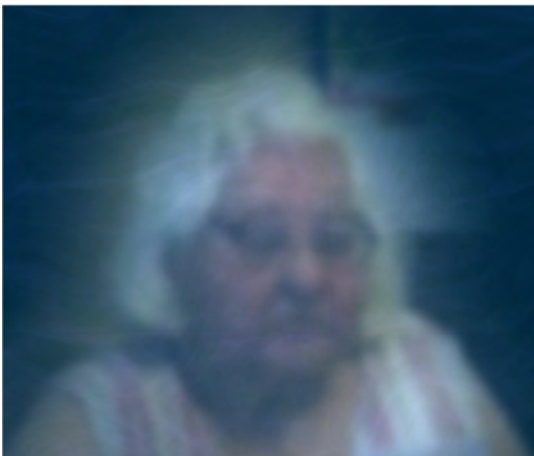
Ben Basem

The director of *Conversations Between Shifts* and Jeanette's son. Sent home from school in March of 2020, he recorded the details of his mother's work in the ICU throughout the pandemic until he was finally called back to school in February 2021. The collection of sounds and images taken throughout the year make up the content of *Conversations Between Shifts* and forms a portrait of Ben's mother, rural Indiana, and the city of Chicago.



Carmen Lydia "Giga" Escobar

Jeanette's mother and Ben's grandmother. Born in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, she moved to the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the wave of Puerto Rican immigration in the 1960s. Giga's aspirations to become a schoolteacher were immediately halted as she became very involved in the lives of her seven children. She stayed in contact with Jeanette through the daily phone calls in her later years and was a loving mother, grandmother, and stalwart in her community. Her radiant goodness was a light in the lives of those who knew her.



THIS FILM'S PERSPECTIVE

Conversations Between Shifts follows the story of Jeanette Alvarez-Basem, a Puerto Rican ICU night nurse working in Chicago during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the lens of her son Ben Basem, Jeanette breathes life into the untold stories of health-care professionals working through a global pandemic.

The film's in-your-face view of Jeanette's nursing career could only be told through the collaborative effort between herself and Ben. Intimate detail is given to Jeanette's personal struggles after treating the first COVID patient in the ICU, protesting for proper Personal Protective Equipment, and grieving the loss of her own mother to the virus. The relationship between mother and mother and then mother and son is one that provides the core of the narrative. Jeanette's faith, family, and rich experience of her Puerto Rican heritage allows her to channel the strength and resolve to endure the pandemic's harshest conditions.

From Jeanette's perspective in *Conversations Between Shifts* we are exposed to the complexity of each individual and gain perspective on healthcare workers through the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a unique portrait that emphasizes humanity in the face of mass crisis and is a testament to hope in the face of fear.





ARTIST STATEMENT

The story of *Conversations Between Shifts* unfolded in real time. Every word and image breathed significance, both in my mother's life and the environment of my hometown. I accumulated over six hundred hours of visuals, voice memos, and field recordings. These artifacts formed an ebb and flow of eyewitness accounts and artful tone poems; the empathy and care my mother exuded juxtaposed an apathetic and immutable world.

My time spent quartered away at home during the pandemic informed my approach to telling my mother's story. With nothing to do but shoot and watch films, the documentary became a self-reflexive piece both about my mother's experiences and my experience learning how to tell that story. My inspirations grew with the filmmakers I would slowly discover and love with time. I was heavily influenced by films like RaMell Ross's *Hale County*, Josh Kriegman's campaign doc *Weiner*, Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation*, Caveh Zahedi's *In the Bathtub of the World*, and the hand-painted animated shorts of Stan Brakhage.

Conversations Between Shifts articulates the emotions of Jeanette and first responders around the globe. It unveils my mother's spiritual truths and emotional realities during this historic moment. Upon returning to this piece, future generations will experience a glimpse of what it was like laboring and living through this crisis.



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COURTESY OF BEN BASEM

“People say some weird things when they’re in pain,” Jeanette Alvarez-Basem said. “They say awkward things when they’re in pain. But they say very truthful things when they’re in pain . . . So when I realized there was truth coming out [in the documentary] I was comfortable with it. I really didn’t care who was going to hear it later on!”

DIRECTOR Q&A

After seeing the film we know what your mother went through, what did you go through as a filmmaker?

The camera, and what you see in the film, has the effect of obfuscating me. We do our best in the film to remind viewers that there's a person behind the camera. And not just any cameraperson, but the son of the character whose heart we see break so many times. I felt everything my mother projected towards the lens, but I was not experiencing those feelings my mother had, I was more or less taking them on. I had to remain composed while doing my work, because if my mother at any point felt I could not handle what she was telling me or showing me, then she would shut down and I could not show people what her and nurses all over the world were going through. There are times where my demeanor breaks, specifically during the couch scene after the dream my mother had about Grandma Giga. There's all these shakes and camera bumping sounds, and those are the result of me crying upon hearing the same news my mother is crying about on the couch. It's a tough task, saving face while your own mother crumbles in front of you. All you can really do is the best you can.

Why do you think your mother agreed to participate in this documentary?

Before the pandemic, my mother and I were very close. She always supported my filmmaking up until that point, but there were plenty of moments in production of this documentary where she did not agree to participate. There were times where she covered the lens with her hand and bemoaned a day of shooting. But as we went on, and she saw more of what I was documenting of her, she became more open to documenting this pain and perseverance, and we started a real working documentary partnership as a result of this personal growth in sharing. We became partners on this film, and tied ourselves closer together than any point in my adolescence.

What led you to combine vertie techniques and abstract visual sequences?

It was definitely due to what I watched during the pandemic. I got really into sensory ethnographic filmmaking, but at the same time I discovered a lot of decades-old experimental animated shorts. I learned about Jordan Belson and Stan Brakhage, but also studied work from RaMell Ross and the films out of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab. These two distinct approaches spoke to me, and in a way where I did not find them mutually exclusive. Jordan Belson was a pioneer of visual music, and I felt a rhythm to my mother's experiences and emotions, which became a music I could pair abstract visuals with. I think there are great sound artists that do work in that kind of style, like Claire Rousay and her live performances.

What aspects for your mother's life do you wish you had captured and have not?

My mother is a night nurse, and because of that she sleeps all day to recharge for the next shift. I wish I focused on this a little more, to give audiences more of a sense of really just how little time she has for anything other than working in the hospital. I also wish I brought my father's story into this film. He is a day-shift nurse, and the work schedules the couple has make it so one is always home resting while one is at work. This puts a lot of stress on the family, and family time is really cherished and appreciated since there is not very much of it. It is in this sense where I could have made a more family-focused short. Another relationship is my mother and her grandson, Ethan. She shares custody over Ethan with her ex-husband. Raising a grandkid during the pandemic while being an ICU nurse led to moments that revealed more of my mother's character and a reflection of her own mother that would make Grandma Giga's story even stronger. I hope to go into more depth and detail these relationships in a feature film adaptation of this documentary short.

MEET THE CREW

Ben Basem

Director, Producer, Cinematographer, Location Sound Mixer

Ben Basem is a documentary filmmaker, sound recordist, piano technician, and Hoosier. Basem's films seek to identify who people are by burying real events within their sensory experiences, leaning towards subjective perception rather than objective truth. *Conversations Between Shifts* is his first short film.



Eden Strachan

Producer

Eden Strachan is a national award-winning journalist and filmmaker whose work has been published by CNN and NPR alike. Strachan's goal is to use the medium of film to capture humanity, expose injustice, and inspire action. Because giving back is an important principle in her life, Strachan also teaches film through her organization, Filmmakers for the Future, a non-profit designed to provide systematically disadvantaged communities access to film education.

Yeshim Kayim-Yanko

Associate Producer, Editor

Yeshim Kayim-Yanko is a half-Turkish Cypriot filmmaker, film editor, director, and photographer from Minneapolis, Minnesota. She is a recent graduate of Ithaca College. She also worked on projects for several nonprofit organizations with social justice missions across Minneapolis through her work in the youth program Media Active, previously run by Intermedia Arts.



Gracie Neagoy

Sound Supervisor, Sound Editor, Sound Mixer

Gracie Neagoy is a sound recordist and editor at Ithaca College. They are graduating in December 2021 with a degree in Television-Radio with a concentration in Audio Production. Gracie is a long time collaborator with director Ben Basem and the first person to join the *Conversations Between Shifts* team, cataloging audio files for the film while producing their mom's EP over the course of the pandemic. They are currently working at Electric Wilburland Studio in Newfield, NY and plan on pursuing location sound for documentary post graduation.



Tommy Gonzalez

Editor

Tommy Gonzalez is a filmmaker based in Flemington, New Jersey and is one of the co-editors of *Conversations Between Shifts*. A Cinema and Photography graduate of Ithaca College he has interest in all ends of the filmmaking process, particularly film editing. While at Ithaca College he also minored in history and interned at the Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival as well as the Ithaca Pan Asian American Film Festival.

Jack Liden

Sound Editor, Sound Mixer, Graphic Designer

Jack is a multidisciplinary artist based in Brooklyn, NY who specializes in sound for film and video. As a member of the sound team, Jack helped edit and mix for *Conversations Between Shifts*, along with cataloging the audio library. He is also the lead graphic designer for the film, guiding the aesthetics for the film's fonts, posters and promotional materials.



CREDITS

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Ben Basem
Carmen Lydia "Giga" Escobar

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EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
Ben Basem

PRODUCER
Eden Strachan

CINEMATOGRAPHER
Ben Basem

LOCATION SOUND MIXER
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