

BEACHSIDE FILMS

Presents

17 BLOCKS

A film by Davy Rothbart

95 min. | USA | 2019

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

In 1999, nine-year-old Emmanuel Sanford-Durant and his family began filming their daily lives in America's most dangerous neighborhood — just 17 blocks behind the U.S. Capitol. They've been filming ever since. Made in a unique collaboration with filmmaker and journalist Davy Rothbart, and spanning two decades, 17 BLOCKS illuminates a nation's ongoing crisis through one family's raw, stirring, and deeply personal saga.

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In 1999, nine-year-old Emmanuel Sanford-Durant and his Washington, D.C. family began to film their daily lives in America's most dangerous neighborhood — just 17 blocks behind the U.S. Capitol building. They've been filming ever since.

Made in a unique collaboration with filmmaker and journalist Davy Rothbart, the film focuses on four generations of the Sanford Family, including Emmanuel, a promising student, his brother Smurf, a local drug dealer, his sister Denice, an aspiring cop, and his mother Cheryl, who must conquer her own demons for her family to prosper.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In 1999, playing basketball near my apartment in Southeast Washington, D.C., I became friends with a teenager named Smurf, who was 15, and his little brother Emmanuel, who was 9. As our friendship grew, and I got to know their mom, Cheryl Sanford, and their 12-year-old sister Denice, Emmanuel expressed an interest in filmmaking. I taught him how to use my small, handheld video camera, and started leaving it with him overnight and on weekends. Emmanuel shared the footage that he and his siblings began to collect — absorbingly raw and intimate family moments, and intriguing glimpses of characters from around the neighborhood. Sometimes I turned the camera around and interviewed Emmanuel; sometimes he turned it back around to interview me.

I had my own loving parents and siblings, but they were hundreds of miles away, and Cheryl likes to say that her family “adopted” me. We became a daily part of each other’s lives. We hunkered down together to ride out the Y2K “apocalypse”; we spent birthdays and Thanksgivings together. Bright, hilarious, and endlessly curious, Emmanuel became a kid brother to me. We roamed the neighborhood, filming together, and talking about life. As I grew close to Cheryl, Smurf, and Denice, they began to share their struggles, hopes, and dreams with me, too, often on camera.

Even after I moved out of D.C., I remained close with the Sanford Family. I’d often visit them for Thanksgiving and other holidays, and over the years we continued to film from time to time. It was always a thrill for us to be reunited, and an added blessing when Smurf and Denice had their first kids. In 2009, ten years after we’d first met, to see Emmanuel graduate high school, get engaged to his high school sweetheart, and begin training as a firefighter filled me with joy.

Then, on New Year’s Eve, tragedy struck the Sanford Family. Gun violence, always a constant in their neighborhood, thrust itself into their lives with horrendous, heartbreaking consequences. I flew to D.C. the next day to help in any way I could, and Cheryl greeted me with a question: *Where’s your video camera?* “So many people are killed by guns in our neighborhood,” she told me, “but none have had their entire lives documented as thoroughly as my family.” Somehow, even in the midst of her pain, Cheryl had the wisdom and perspective to understand the value and importance that her family’s story might one day hold.

Even as the Sanfords waded through devastating loss, we all continued to film, tracking each moment in all of its lacerating sadness. Since this kind of tragedy was new to me personally, I’d had no idea, for example, that a shop down the street existed purely to print memorial T-shirts for friends and loved ones who’d been shot and killed. As the family mourned, I was struck by not only the intensity of their pain, but also by how common their experience seemed to be within their neighborhood, and the ordinariness with which an extraordinary event was treated, as the community’s machinery of grief rumbled to life to process yet another victim. As wounded as I felt at the loss of someone I’d grown so close to, I felt equally crushed, angered, and disturbed by the massacre that was playing out in slow motion in many D.C. neighborhoods, and in cities across the country, largely invisible to the masses. Cheryl told me that it was her deepest wish that sharing her family’s story might spark wider interest in

combating the ubiquity of guns in her city, and diminish the chances that others might have to endure the pain that she was experiencing.

But the family's story wasn't over, and in the years that followed, we continued to film together, for nearly another entire decade. Eventually, Cheryl's grandchildren Justin, Faith, Akil, and Takel reached the age that her children had been when I'd first met them, and at last it felt as though our journey had come full circle. Through long conversations with the Sanford Family — and with help from a team of devoted, talented editors and producers — we worked together to shape their story into a feature documentary called 17 BLOCKS. (When I first met the Sanfords, they lived in a neighborhood — known as one of the most dangerous in America — just 17 blocks behind the U.S. Capitol Building.) Now that the film is complete, we're all deeply proud of the results, eager to share it with audiences, and hopeful about its potential for impact.

The Sanfords' story, to me, though, is not only an urgent cry for change, but also a powerful, inspiring tale of love, loss, struggle, courage, resilience, and redemption. More than anything, 17 BLOCKS is a love story — a family soldiering on through ultimate heartbreak to discover the bonds that unite them. I had no idea when I met Smurf and Emmanuel on the basketball court and first brought my video camera over that it would spark a 20-year journey, a journey that has become the most meaningful journey of my life. But I'm grateful to the accidents of fate that brought my "other" family into my life, and led to so many unexpected outcomes.

In honor of their slain family member, in 2010 the Sanfords and I started an organization called Washington To Washington (WashingtonToWashington.org), bringing groups of kids from their D.C. neighborhood on a week-long camping trip each summer to visit some of America's most beautiful National Parks and Forests. We hike, swim, canoe, ride horses, play games, build campfires, make S'mores, and trade ghost stories. These trips can't cure all of the challenges many of these kids face, but offer a chance for them to broaden their perspectives, experience the joys of nature, and discover worlds beyond the block they live on. In recent years, we've added groups from Detroit and New Orleans, and over the past 9 years we've brought over 500 kids to explore the Great Outdoors; this summer, we'll celebrate our 10th Annual Trip. The idea of something positive coming out of tragedy has been heartening to us all.

As for 17 BLOCKS, our hope is that anyone who watches the film will feel a call to make the world a better place for our country's most vulnerable citizens — by fighting to make our most dangerous communities safer, and by looking for ways to engage with the people who live there — cultivating connections, forging friendships, discovering a shared sense of purpose, and sparking creativity and a sense of wonder. If we want a changed world, it's up to us to make it happen.

—DAVY ROTHBART

FILMMAKER BIOS

DAVY ROTHBART – DIRECTOR

Davy Rothbart is an Emmy Award-winning filmmaker, bestselling author and journalist, frequent contributor to public radio's *This American Life*, and the creator of *Found Magazine*.

Rothbart's film MEDORA, about a resilient high-school basketball team in a dwindling Indiana town, based on the *New York Times* story by Pulitzer Prize winner John Branch, was Executive Produced by Steve Buscemi and Stanley Tucci, and premiered at the 2013 SXSW Film Festival. MEDORA later aired on the acclaimed PBS series Independent Lens and won an Emmy Award.

Rothbart previously directed two documentaries about the activist band Rise Against, which became best-selling DVDs in the U.S., Canada, Germany, and Sweden. A separate short film featuring Rise Against's song "Make It Stop" was created for Dan Savage's ItGetsBetter project and later won an MTV Music Video Award.

Rothbart's radio stories featured on *This American Life* have reached more than 20 million listeners, and his books *FOUND* and *My Heart Is An Idiot* have debuted on *The New York Times* Bestseller List. He has made multiple appearances on *The Late Show With David Letterman*, been featured on ABC's *20/20*, *Last Call with Carson Daly*, MSNBC, and NPR's *All Things Considered*, and been profiled in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*. A native of Ann Arbor, Michigan, Rothbart now lives in Los Angeles, California.

RACHEL DENGIZ – PRODUCER

Rachel Dengiz is a two time Emmy Award winning producer. She began her career working for independent filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, where she worked on both *COFFEE & CIGARETTES* and *BROKEN FLOWERS*. Her recent films include the documentaries *BOOM FOR REAL: The Late Teenage Years of Jean-Michel Basquiat*, directed by Sara Driver; *THE PUNK SINGER*, directed by Sini Anderson; the Emmy Award winning *MEDORA*, directed by Davy Rothbart and Andrew Cohn; the Emmy Award winning web series *PARK BENCH WITH STEVE BUSCEMI*, directed by and starring Steve Buscemi; the pilot *CHOPPED LIVER*, directed by and starring Shannon Plumb, produced with Derek Cianfrance; and the documentary television series *ELVIS GOES THERE*, with host Elvis Mitchell, directed by Toby Oppenheimer, produced by Zero Point Zero Productions.

MARC TURTLETAUB – PRODUCER

Marc Turteltaub co-founded Big Beach in 2004. He recently directed and produced the Sundance Selects-released film *PUZZLE* starring Kelly MacDonald. He has produced many feature films over the past 14 years including Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris' *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE*, Jeff Nichols' *LOVING*, Colin Trevorrow's *SAFETY NOT GUARANTEED*, and Sam Mendes' *AWAY WE GO*.

BEACHSIDE FILMS

Beachside is an independent film production company and the west coast affiliate of Big Beach Films (LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE, OUR IDIOT BROTHER, SAFETY NOT GUARANTEED, LOVING). In 2013, they produced the Emmy Award winning documentary MEDORA, about a small-town high school basketball team in Indiana. Their second documentary, TIG, premiered at Sundance in 2015 along with their first feature, Jim Strouse's PEOPLE PLACES THINGS starring Jemaine Clement, Regina Hall and Jessica Williams. Beachside premiered LOUDER THAN BOMBS at Cannes 2015, released later that year by The Orchard. In 2016, A24 released MORRIS FROM AMERICA, which had premiered earlier that year at Sundance. The Orchard then released Julia Hart's MISS STEVENS, for which Lily Rabe won the Grand Jury prize for acting at SXSW 2016. Beachside then produced Adam Leon's TRAMPS, which premiered at Toronto Film Festival and was acquired by Netflix as an Original. After premiering at Sundance in 2017, their second project with Jim Strouse entitled THE INCREDIBLE JESSICA JAMES was also acquired as an Original. STRANGERS, an episodic series, premiered at Sundance 2017 in partnership with Refinery29 and was one of the first scripted series on Facebook WATCH. MR. ROOSEVELT by Noël Wells premiered at SXSW 2017 where it won the Audience Award and was acquired by Netflix. THE MISEDUCATION OF CAMERON POST by Desiree Akhavan premiered at Sundance 2018 and won the US Dramatic Grand Jury prize. It was released by FilmRise in the US and by Elle Driver internationally. MAINE by Matthew Brown also premiered in 2018 at Tribeca and was acquired by MGM's Orion for a theatrical release. THE SUNLIT NIGHT, starring Jenny Slate, Zach Galifianakis and Alex Sharp, premiered at Sundance in 2019.

JENNIFER TIEXIERA – EDITOR, WRITER, AND EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Jennifer Tiexiera is a documentary filmmaker who is currently in post production on her directorial debut, P.S. BURN THIS LETTER PLEASE, a film that begins with the discovery of a box of letters that date back to the early 1950's and reveal an untold and secret history of New York's LGBT community. Last year, she produced and edited ZIKR: A SUFI REVIVAL and THE DAY THE WORLD CHANGED, official selections of the 2018 Sundance Film Festival and 2018 Tribeca Film Festival respectively. In 2017, Tiexiera both produced and edited the documentaries A SUITABLE GIRL, winner of the Albert Maysles Award at the Tribeca Film Festival, and WAITING FOR HASSANA, official selection of the Sundance, SXSW, and Toronto Film Festivals. She edited THE LAST GOODBYE, which made its debut at the 2017 Tribeca Film Festival, internationally at the 2017 Venice International Film Festival, and won the 2018 Lumiere Award for Best VR Documentary. Her previous work also includes the documentary SALAM NEIGHBOR, the drama ROAD TO PALOMA and the 2011 SXSW Documentary Grand Jury Winner, DRAGONSLAYER. Some of her television credits include documentaries, OPRAH BUILDS A NETWORK and BIGGIE: THE NOTORIOUS LIFE OF B.I.G., the Emmy-nominated 30-for-30 ESPN film THE MARINOVICH PROJECT, and the short film WOINSHET, directed by Marisa Tomei and Lisa Leone for PBS.

ZACHARY SHIELDS – DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Zachary Shields is a Director of Photography whose most recent projects include the Sundance Grand Jury Award Winning Documentary, *THE PRICE OF FREE*; a 6-part documentary series for STARZ entitled *WARRIORS OF LIBERTY CITY*; and *XY CHELSEA*, which is set to premiere at the 2019 Tribeca Film Festival. Previously, Shields shot and produced *NIGHT SCHOOL*, which premiered at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival. Currently, Shields is the DP on a documentary entitled, *PS BURN THIS LETTER PLEASE*, which tells the story of 1950s New York City drag queens and explores how government-sanctioned discrimination and the forces of oppression shaped their lives.

NICK URATA - COMPOSER

As a composer, Nick Urata—front man of the internationally acclaimed band DeVotchKa—has scored the multi-Oscar winning film *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE* and co-scored the hit romantic comedy *CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE* starring Steve Carell and Ryan Gosling. His scores include *FLING*, *I LOVE YOU PHILLIP MORRIS*, *THE JONESES*, *WAITING FOR FOREVER*, *FATHER OF INVENTION*, and Dustin Lance Black's *VIRGINIA*, starring Jennifer Connelly and Ed Harris. Other notable work includes the score for *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE* directors Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris' *RUBY SPARKS*; *ARTHUR NEWMAN*, starring Colin Firth and Emily Blunt for director Dante Ariola; *WHAT MAISIE KNEW*, starring Julianne Moore; Stephen Gyllenhaal's *GRASSROOTS*; *A.C.O.D.*, starring Adam Scott, Amy Poehler and Catherine O'Hara; *PREMATURE* for director Dan Beers; *WHISKEY TANGO FOXTROT*, starring Tina Fey and Margot Robbie; Thomas McCarthy's *THE COBBLER*, starring Adam Sandler and Dustin Hoffman; *PADDINGTON*, starring Nicole Kidman and voiced by Ben Whishaw; *FOCUS*, directed by Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, starring Will Smith and Margot Robbie; *LOVE THE COOPERS*, starring Olivia Wilde, John Goodman, and Diane Keaton; and Stephen Gyllenhaal's *SO B. IT* starring Cloris Leachman. Upcoming is the feature drama *THE TRUE ADVENTURES OF WOLFBOY*, directed by Martin Krejčí and starring Eve Hewson and John Turturro.

CREDITS

A film by Davy Rothbart

In collaboration with The Sanford-Durant Family

Cheryl
Smurf
Denice
Emmanuel
Justin

Written and Edited by

Jennifer Tiexiera

Produced by

Alex Turtletaub
Michael B. Clark
Marc Turtletaub
Rachel Dengiz

Directed & Produced by

Davy Rothbart

Director of Photography

Zachary Shields

Original Score by

Nick Urata

Story Consultant

Mark Monroe

Executive Producers

Cheryl Sanford
Jennifer Tiexiera

Impact Producers

Krystal Tingle
Heidi Nel
Kenneth Ebie
Broderick Johnson

Associate Producers

Jason Orfanon
Dan Amorello
Paul & Annette Smith

Featuring (In order of appearance)

Cheryl Sanford

Chris Feddersen

Emmanuel Sanford-Durant, Jr.

Denice Sanford-Durant

Akil "Smurf" Sanford

Neville "Joe" Rankin

Anthony Plater

St. James Cashwell

Justin Sanford

Carmen Payne

Faith Sanford

Akil "Lil' Smurf" Sanford, Jr.

Takel Sanford

Eric Mitchell

A.J. Mitchell

Jamail "Woo" Belton

Ardell Payne

Reverend Graylan Hagler

Michael Williamson

Celina Payne

Nathan Hagood

Pat Cresta-Savage