

# UNSCHOOLED

SXSW EDU | March 9th, 2020 | Opening Night

What happens when children have the power to decide what and how they learn?



# ABOUT

## **SXSW EDU SCREENINGS:**

March 9, 2020 – 7:00 PM at the Alamo Ritz \*\*OPENING NIGHT\*\*

March 11, 2020 – 12:00 PM at the Convention Center Exhibit Hall, 13 A/B, 4th floor \*\*ENCORE SCREENING\*\*

## **UNSCHOOLED THE MOVEMENT:**

On March 11th, the film's impact campaign will host a full day of programming, including an encore screening, to do a deeper dive into the film's themes, including conversations centered on self-directed education and how we can create a pathway to equity and accessibility for all. [View media advisory](#) for details.

**Production Company:** Wavelength Productions

**Executive Produced by:** Leonard C. Haas, Jenifer Westphal and Jeffrey Westphal

**Directed by:** Rachel Beth Anderson and Timothy Grucza

**Produced by:** Jenifer Westphal, Joe Plummer and Bobby Reed

**Co-Executive Produced by:** Steven Cantor and Brenda Robinson

**Associate Produced by:** Bridget Deely and Taylor Wildenhaus

**Edited by:** Ben Gold

**Music by:** Jon Eckhaus

**Music Supervised by:** Liz Gallacher

**Cinematography by:** Rachel Beth Anderson and Timothy Grucza

**Cast:** Peter Bergson, Miles, Marie, Amani, Amanda, Jaya, Willie, Starr and Mikail

**Runtime:** 90 Minutes

**Rating:** NR

**Genre:** Documentary

**Press Materials:** <https://bit.ly/2ARtgSi>

**Website:** <https://unschooledthemovement.com>

**Facebook:** [@unschooled.movement](https://www.facebook.com/unschooled.movement)

**Instagram:** [@unschooled](https://www.instagram.com/unschooled)

**Twitter:** [@unschooled](https://twitter.com/unschooled)

# SYNOPSIS

*Unschooled* is a documentary film and campaign focused on a world where children have the power to decide what and how they learn. The film follows the stories of three teens – Amani, Miles and Jaya – and their families in the Philadelphia neighborhood of Germantown as they transition from their local public school to the newly-opened Natural Creativity Center (NCC). NCC's leaders set out to prove that there is a more effective way to educate children through self-directed education – where young people are viewed holistically, and their social, emotional, physical, intellectual well-being and innate desire to learn are embraced. By entrusting children and their families to direct their own education, favoring dialogue, discovery and self-discipline, NCC believes their charges are better able to achieve a life of purpose and fulfillment. We follow Amani, Miles and Jaya's journey at NCC as these radical ideas are put to the test.

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

What started out as a film about a revolutionary alternative to traditional school quickly morphed into a story conveying the nuanced relationships within a community when race and wealth can no longer be ignored. A small view into the larger issues within the United States as a whole and the educational systems that are offered to today's youth, the film follows one headstrong albeit naive educator from the suburbs and a group of brave families who, out of desperation with the Philadelphia public school system, decide to join forces for a social "experiment" that we document over the course of 3 years. When we learned that 73 year old Peter – a rebel veteran educator who believes that formalized education is the problem not the solution – was taking his form of "unschooling" to Philadelphia, we were intrigued to document the journey. Peter espouses a radical methodology that empowers students to direct their own educations, favoring dialogue, discovery and self-discipline over tests, teachers and timelines. Having already run the successful Open Connections center in the bucolic, wealthy and predominantly white Philadelphia suburbs, he figures, "I'm not getting any younger, it's now or never" and opens the doors in 2016 to a new location in North Philadelphia called Natural Creativity Center (NCC). At the start of this journey, we met many local Philadelphia families who were on the brink with the school system and trying to decide what was the best option for their children. We follow the artistic 14 year old Miles, whose fierce mother Marie fears he is getting swept up into the pipeline to the prison system. We meet 13 year old curious Amani, who was relentlessly bullied at school, punched in the face, and whose mother Amanda is concerned for her safety and ability to thrive. Finally we meet ultra-cool Jaya, who at the age of 16 barely has the capacity to read or do basic math, and her father Willie who is desperate to find a solution for his daughter. We capture the first meeting between Peter and these characters and their disbelief that his wacky ideas will work. They are hesitant but seeing no other option take a huge chance, going against the grain to enroll their children for the inaugural year of NCC. Not everyone agrees with Peter's philosophy. He is confronted by vocal lawyers, educational advocates, and local educators – namely Mikail, who becomes the instigator pushing Peter to his limits. Mikail is deeply skeptical of Peter and his methods, certain that "unschooling" is just another naive pipedream, a feel-good remedy cooked up by people who don't understand the dynamics of the world they are trying to help. He believes this is a waste of these students' time, that it will leave the at-risk youth in his community in even worse shape than before. Does this alternative education hold the key to their success, or will it leave them no better off than before? Will their gamble pay off? Only time will tell.

- Rachel Beth Anderson and Timothy Grucza, Directors of UNSCHOOLED

# UNSCHOOLED THE MOVEMENT

What happens when children have the power to decide what and how they learn?

We enter this world curious and inquisitive, fascinated and engaged. **We are born to learn.** But rather than nurture that curiosity, many schools end up quashing it. It's heartbreaking to watch that spark slowly but surely leave children's eyes.

What if there was a better way? UNSCHOOLED invites us to reimagine what learning can be, highlighting the promise of self-directed education. Self-directed education, is focused on creating learner-centered environments where young people are valued as unique individuals, their agency and passions are cultivated, and their curiosity is nurtured.

The power of the stories in UNSCHOOLED is just the beginning. UNSCHOOLED THE MOVEMENT, the film's impact campaign, seeks to ignite interest and conversation around the promise, opportunities and success stories of self-directed education while underscoring the importance of fostering equity to deepen an understanding of what is possible. Through national, regional and grassroots partnerships, screenings are being organized across the country to create space for discussion, truth and possibility.

We're on a journey, together with parents, young people, educators, and funders, to ignite a movement in support of self-directed education and ensure we're creating experiences that position ALL our students for success.

It's time to bring back that spark. Join us.

# THE CAST



## PETER BERGSON

Peter and his now deceased wife, Susan, co-founded and led Open Connections, a highly successful “unschooling” program in the wealthy suburbs for over 30 years. Now the founder of Natural Creativity, Peter has staked his reputation on his new school’s success, determined to demonstrate that his methods can transcend the boundaries of poverty and race.



## MIKAIL

Mikail is the director of a free after-school program and a longtime resident and activist in Philadelphia. The vast majority of children attending his program have one or more family members in jail. Mikail is certain that Peter’s efforts will ultimately prove futile because he doesn’t understand the dynamics of the urban neighborhood.



## MILES

Miles is a creative 14-year-old boy who bounced from school to school. He was suspended from his public school for sexual assault allegations that proved false. His single mother, Marie, is at her wits end and hopes that Natural Creativity can offer a safe haven and academically engaging environment for Miles.



## JAYA

Jaya is a strong-willed 16-year-old girl whose popularity with students and teachers alike enables her to pass classes without learning. Her dad, Willie, can’t afford to place her in a private school and is worried that Jaya won’t graduate with skills if she stays in the public school system.



## AMANI

Amani is a warm and curious 13-year-old animal lover who was violently bullied at a tough charter school. She attends Mikail’s after school program and is desperate to attend Natural Creativity. Her mother, Amanda, is skeptical but after much debate, Amani convinces them to let her try.

# ABOUT THE PRODUCTION COMPANY



# WAVELENGTH PRODUCTIONS

## PRODUCTION COMPANY

Jenifer Westphal founded Wavelength Productions in 2015 with a mission to develop, fund, and produce films that tell great f\*\*king stories. With an 80% female staff, Wavelength is committed to cultivating a diverse team of creators and filmmakers in all stages of production to create stories celebrate the human condition.

This year, Wavelength premiered award-winning documentaries WHERE'S MY ROY COHN?, MAYBE NEXT YEAR, and UNSCHOOLED, the Independent Spirit Award nominated narrative COLEWELL, and the short documentary LAZARUS which debuted on The New Yorker website. In 2020, the company has four world premieres at the Sundance Film Festival: FAREWELL AMOR by writer-director Ekwa Msangi, FEELS GOOD MAN by director Arthur Jones, SPACESHIP EARTH by director Matt Wolf, and SOFTIE by director Sam Soko. Other notable Wavelength films include Morgan Neville's WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?; Rachel Lear's KNOCK DOWN THE HOUSE; and other Sundance 2019 titles including THE INFILTRATORS and SELAH AND THE SPADES.

With the production of 17 films directed by women under their belt, Wavelength Productions takes a special interest in granting to female filmmakers. Recent projects the company has granted to include Sarah Menzie's documentary AFGHAN CYCLES, Paula Eiselt's 93QUEEN, Assia Boundaoui's THE FEELING OF BEING WATCHED and the Amazon Original documentary ONE CHILD NATION by Nanfu Wang and Jialing Zhang, which won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance 2019.



# ABOUT THE CREW



# RACHEL BETH ANDERSON

## CO-DIRECTOR/CO-CINEMATOGRAPHER

Rachel Beth Anderson, a Sundance award winning cinematographer, began her career filming in hostile environments including Libya, Syria, South Sudan, and Afghanistan for PBS Frontline, CNN, Human Rights Watch, and independent feature documentaries FIRST TO FALL, E-TEAM, and THEO, WHO LIVED. During the 2011 Egyptian uprising, Anderson began to work as a cinematographer and field producer for the journalism documentary series PBS Frontline. Anderson's directorial debut, FIRST TO FALL, was a Gucci Tribeca Documentary Fund grantee (2012) and had its world premiere screening at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) in late 2013. After screening in festivals across a dozen countries the film won two jury awards at the investigative journalism festival FIGRA in France, the Grand Prix Jury Award at IRFF in Poland, was featured at the Bayeux-Calvados award for war correspondents, and was awarded the Best of Fest prize at the Columbus International Film Festival.



# TIM GRUCZA

## CO-DIRECTOR/CO-CINEMATOGRAPHER

Tim Grucza is an Emmy award winning cinematographer and filmmaker. Before focusing on US domestic issues, he specialized in conflict reporting-having covered wars in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan through to the Egyptian and Libyan uprisings and slaughter in Central Africa. For the past 15 years, he has shot and co-produced dozens of films for PBS' investigative documentary program Frontline. As a director/DP his awards range from a shared Peabody in 2012 for work with CNN to the 2006 Banff International Television award for his first feature length documentary, WHITE PLATOON. Most recently, FIRST TO FALL, garnered two co-director awards at 2014 Figra Investigative film festival. He is currently based in Brooklyn, but was born and raised in Australia.



# JENIFER WESTPHAL

## EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Jenifer Westphal founded Wavelength Productions in 2015 with a mission to develop, fund, and produce films that tell great f\*\*king stories. In her role as President and Executive Producer, Jenifer breaks barriers by taking a special interest in fostering female talent both on set and in the studio. Through Wavelength, she works tirelessly to find and support talented filmmakers in all stages of production on projects that resonate with broad audiences. Jenifer is also a benefactor of Chicago Media Project, where she currently sits on the board. Additionally, she recently served as a panelist on the Sundance Catalyst Round Table and is a member of the Women of Sundance Leadership Council.

Outside of her work in film, Jenifer serves as an advisory board member and grantor for the Good Work Foundation, an organization with the mission to lead a digitally-empowered education model for rural Africa and the world. She is also a trustee of Clarke University in Dubuque, Iowa.



# JOE PLUMMER

## PRODUCER

Joe Plummer is currently the Producer for Wavelength Productions and oversees all in-house production, development, investment and co-production of their films. Joe has been with Wavelength since its inception in 2015 and has worked closely with Jenifer on all of the company's titles.

Joe started his career in the theater space, producing Shakespeare for his award-winning company Poor Tom Productions and The Williamstown Theater Festival. In 2005, he transitioned to network television where he produced and directed shows for TRUTV, Court TV, The Food Network and HGTV. In 2012, Joe started a digital ad agency and full-service production company, Gotta Kid To Feed Productions (GKTF), and made a splash with his Webby-nominated viral series "Real Actors Read Yelp." At GKTF, Joe created, produced and directed original digital content for brands and networks including ESPN, Nickelodeon, NICK Jr., The Food Network, Cooking Channel, HGTV, Travel Channel and more. In 2015, he released his first short film Love Life; a comedy about online dating gone awry.



# BRENDA ROBINSON

## CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Brenda Robinson is a Co-Founder of Gamechanger Films. Brenda is an entertainment attorney whose law practice focuses on entertainment matters on behalf of clients in the music, film and television industries. An active philanthropist in the arts and entertainment community, Brenda is a member of The Recording Academy and Film Independent and sits on the boards of the Grammy Music Education Coalition, The Representation Project, Chicken & Egg Pictures and the International Documentary Association. She is actively involved in the Sundance Institute as a member of the Women at Sundance Leadership Council, is an advisor to The Redford Center and a founding advisory board member of the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. Brenda is a graduate of the University of Michigan and obtained a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania Law School and a certificate in Business and Public Policy from the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School. Brenda was most recently an equity investor on the Academy Award winning documentary ICARUS as well as WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR and is currently an executive producer on numerous projects including UNITED SKATES alongside executive producer John Legend, THE GREAT AMERICAN LIE by director Jennifer Siebel Newsom, JUMP SHOT: THE KENNY SAILORS STORY alongside executive producer Steph Curry and CLARKSTON: THE MOST DIVERSE SQUARE MILE IN AMERICA alongside executive producer Katie Couric.

# BOBBY REED

## PRODUCER

With 17 years of broadcast and film experience, Bobby Reed began working in live & post production as a professional for Fox Sports Midwest in St. Louis. He later moved into the Pre & Post game producer role for FS Kansas City, producing 280 shows for the Kansas City Royals. Over the past 5 years he's moved on to become a national editor at Versus and NBC Sports, as well as working live events for such clients as FOX, NBC, ESPN and CBS—highlighted by Super Bowl LI, The 2018 Winter Olympics, 2010 World Series and 2011 Stanley cup final. He founded his own production company, Loaded Pixel, in 2012, producing content for NBC Sports and Wawa. He first produced a short film, ELEVEN PAST TEN, in 2014 which screened at local film festivals. In 2013 he ventured into documentary film co-producing UNSCHOOLED. Currently, he's in pre-production for his first narrative feature, a coming of age story based in Philadelphia.

He is also working on documentary stories about a single father poet who has devoted his life to kids with disabilities in the inner city, as well as the life of a recovering opioid addict that's challenging current users to get help.



# STEVEN CANTOR

## CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Steven Cantor is the founder of New York City-based Stick Figure Productions. In 2017, Steven produced STEP, which premiered at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival where it won a Special Jury Prize. The film was acquired by Fox Searchlight in a record-setting deal and won numerous awards after its worldwide theatrical release. Prior to that, Steven produced and directed DANCER, which tells the story of the controversial ballet star, Sergei Polunin. A BBC Film, it was theatrically released in 35 countries and won Audience Awards at both the Warsaw and Amsterdam Film Festivals as well as a nomination for a 2017 PGA award for Best Documentary. Steven received an Oscar nomination for his first film, BLOOD TIES: THE LIFE AND WORK OF SALLY MANN, about the notorious photographer. He also received an Emmy Award nomination for the HBO/Channel 4 UK DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND, about the rebellious tendencies of Amish teens and two nominations for the HBO/BBC film WHAT REMAINS, which revisited Sally Mann to follow the creation of a body of work on the nature of decay. Steven won an Emmy award for his PBS American Masters film WILLIE NELSON: STILL IS STILL MOVING and was nominated for an Emmy for producing and directing the ESPN film CUTTHROAT, about injured NHL goalie, Clint Malarchuk.

In addition, Stick Figure has an ongoing partnership with Paul Allen's Vulcan Productions and Executive Producer, Elisabeth Moss to create films and series on the classical arts, in particular, ballet. Their first feature, BALLET NOW, which Steven produced and directed, follows NYCB superstar, Tiler Peck, as she curates and stars in a show at LA's Music Center.

# BEN GOLD

## EDITOR

Ben Gold is a New York based editor who has worked extensively in the documentary field. He has worked on numerous episodes of FRONTLINE on PBS, including the DuPont Award winning UNITED STATES OF SECRETS and TRUTH, WAR AND CONSEQUENCES, and the Emmy winning MONEY, POWER AND WALL STREET. He also worked with director Kristi Jacobson on her Emmy winning SOLITARY, and the documentary features REVERSING ROE and FAR FROM THE TREE (based on the book by Andrew Solomon).



**CLICK HERE FOR FULL CREDIT CRAWL**



# UNSCHOOLED

---

## PRESS CONTACT:

McPherson Strategies

Susan McPherson, [unschooled@mcpstrategies.com](mailto:unschooled@mcpstrategies.com), (917) 859-2291

## SALES CONTACT:

Endeavor Content

Liesl Copland, [lcopland@endeavorcontent.com](mailto:lcopland@endeavorcontent.com), (310) 246-3383

## IMPACT CAMPAIGN CONTACT:

Bonnie Benjamin-Phariss, [bonniebp@gmail.com](mailto:bonniebp@gmail.com), (206) 465-3022