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Distribution:

- ITVS –U.S public TV; America Reframed (PBS WORLD) premiered April 29, 2014
- Bullfrog Films –U.S. and Canada consumer, educational, non-theatrical, semi-theatrical

Production Funding: W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Independent Television Service (ITVS), Sundance Institute Documentary Fund, Chicken and Egg Pictures, Fledgling Fund, Berkeley Film Foundation, Just Media Fund, Winograd-Hutner Family Fund, Nu Lambda Trust, LEF Moving Image Fund, Fleishhacker Foundation, individual donors

Awards/Honors:

- American Film Showcase, *Official Selection*
- Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital, *Official Selection*
- Good Pitch, *Official Selection*
- Mississippi Heritage Trust, *Heritage Award*
- New Orleans Film Festival, *Audience Award for Documentary Feature*
- San Francisco Green Film Festival, *Green Tenacity Award*
- Sundance Institute Documentary Editing and Story Lab, *Fellowship*

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(Download media kit and photos)

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LOGLINE

When the graves of former slaves are bulldozed in Mississippi, a native son returns to protect the community they settled – a place now threatened by urban sprawl, hurricanes and an unprecedented manmade disaster.



Photo by Spencer Weiner 2005

SYNOPSIS (150 words)

Come Hell or High Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek follows the painful but inspiring journey of Derrick Evans, a Boston teacher who returns to his native coastal Mississippi when the graves of his ancestors are bulldozed to make way for the sprawling city of Gulfport. Derrick is consumed by the effort to protect the community his great grandfather's grandfather settled as a former slave. He is on the verge of a breakthrough when Hurricane Katrina strikes the Gulf Coast. After years of restoration work to bring Turkey Creek back from the brink of death, the community gains significant federal support for cultural and ecological preservation. Derrick plans to return to Boston to rebuild the life he abandoned, but another disaster seals his fate as a reluctant activist. On the day Turkey Creek is featured in USA Today for the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, the Deepwater Horizon rig explodes.

SYNOPSIS (450 words)

Come Hell or High Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek follows the painful but inspiring journey of Derrick Evans, a Boston teacher who moves home to coastal Mississippi when the graves of his ancestors are bulldozed to make way for the sprawling city of Gulfport. Over the course of a decade, Derrick and his neighbors stand up to powerful corporate interests and politicians and face Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil disaster in their struggle for self-determination and environmental justice.

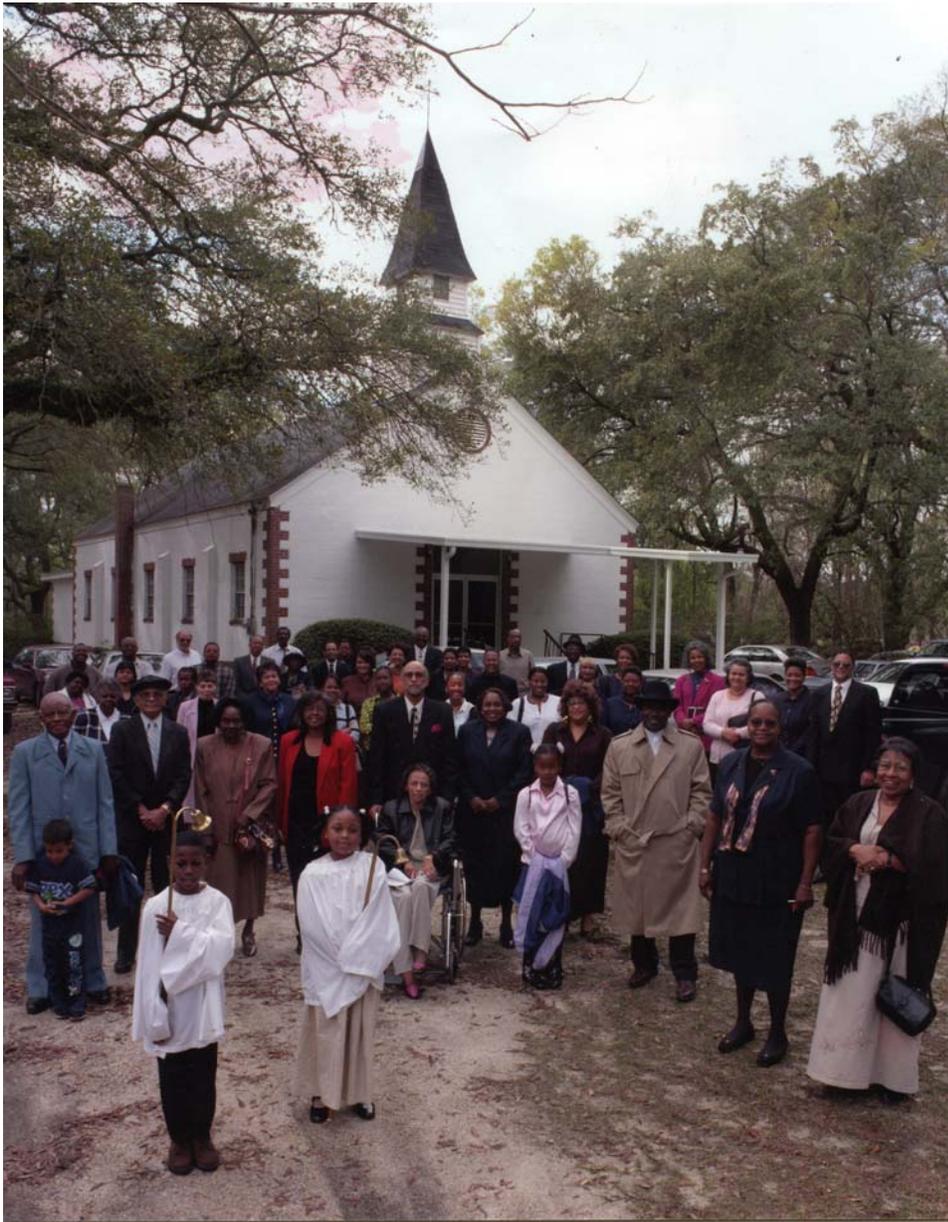


Photo by Chip Bowman/Mississippi Heritage Trust 2001

Turkey Creek residents are descendants of former slaves who settled on the Gulf Coast in the 1860s. They have been stewards of the creek's rich wetland habitat for generations, and have farmed, fished, hunted and been baptized along its banks. Today, Turkey Creek is surrounded by an airport, big-box stores, highways and an industrial canal that threaten the community and its fragile wetlands.

Filmed in an intimate verité style, the story begins when Derrick returns to Mississippi for the holidays in December 2001. He and filmmaker Leah Mahan, a friend from Boston, have made the trip to record oral history. But a visit to the community cemetery with Eva Skinner, an elder in her 90s, changes the course of Derrick's life. Eva buried her 2-year-old son there in the 1930s and his grave was marked, like the others there, with a small wooden sign. The sign marked "Daniel" is gone and only a few marble headstones are left standing, surrounded by a manicured lawn and apartment complex. When Derrick asks Eva how this could have happened she replies, "People can do anything they want if nobody don't try to do nothing about it."

Derrick resolves to do what he can to help protect Turkey Creek. He moves home to Mississippi to join residents as they attempt to stop a development that would fill hundreds of acres in the watershed. The mayor of Gulfport responds by calling the protestors “dumb bastards” for standing in the way of progress. Turkey Creek residents and allies succeed in halting the development, only to see their victory unravel after Hurricane Katrina. Taking the fight to a larger arena, Derrick testifies before Congress and travels cross-country in a FEMA trailer to advocate for a sustainable future for the Gulf Coast.

Derrick is consumed by his advocacy work, and the stable life he built as a teacher is in jeopardy. His work begins to pay off when Turkey Creek is added to the National Register of Historic Places and the federal government moves to support a 1,600-acre natural preserve. But on the day these milestones are celebrated on the front page of USA Today, BP oil begins spilling into the Gulf, threatening Turkey Creek’s tidal estuary and the entire Gulf Coast.

OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

"This intimate film tells a gigantic story — about race, about power, about so-called development. But it is also a saga of community, resilience, resistance, and hope. It's about everything that matters in our society."

— Bill Bigelow, *Rethinking Schools*



Reel Power brought *Come Hell or High Water* and *Bridge The Gulf* to Power Shift. Photo by Working Films 2013

A network of Gulf Coast community leaders and national environmental and civil rights organizations are partners in an outreach and engagement campaign that puts the film in the hands of frontline communities, educators and policymakers. This campaign dovetails with the promotion of the film to the general public through a festival strategy – which began at the

New Orleans Film Festival – and public television broadcast on America Reframed (PBS World) in partnership with the Independent Television Service and Mississippi Public Broadcasting.

Outreach and audience engagement for the film is fueled by a shift happening in the environmental movement, with leaders from communities most affected by ecological destruction and disaster – predominantly low-income communities of color – raising their voices and challenging mainstream environmental groups to follow their lead.

“Turkey Creek is emblematic of so much of what is going on in the world right now ... These communities were not supposed to survive, but they’ve survived. And the solutions that they’re coming up with are the solutions that we all really need to pay attention to and lift up.”

— Leslie Fields, Director of Environmental Justice and Community Partnerships, Sierra Club

Companion resources, including a 5-minute documentary commissioned by ITVS titled “Toxic Legacy,” about the creosote factory in Turkey Creek, are featured on the ITVS, *Come Hell or High Water* and Bridge The Gulf websites. In addition, partner websites including Bridge The Gulf and Reel Power provide resources and tools for using the film. A Watch Party guide encourages viewers to gather family, neighbors and colleagues to watch and discuss the film. Green for All, Sierra Club, River Network and other national organizations helped promote a Spring 2014 Watch Party campaign when the documentary premiered on America ReFramed.

“The language of power and oppression is omnipresent in Come Hell or High Water, and it doesn’t get any better as Katrina pounds Gulfport in 2005. Still no better when the BP oil disaster happens five years after that. The documentary captures Turkey Creek’s responses to all of these tragedies — and a few remarkable victories against the powers that be.”

— Brentin Mock, *Grist*

Communities confronting challenges similar to those in Turkey Creek have been holding *Come Hell or High Water* events to inspire dialogue and draw attention to local issues. In April, events in Alabama, California and Texas were hosted by coastal communities struggling with the adverse impacts of urban growth, industrial pollution and transportation infrastructure on their neighborhoods. Derrick Evans joined other Gulf Coast community leaders for a screening at the Justice Leadership Summit in Mobile and a screening in Houston at Texas Southern University hosted by Dr. Robert Bullard. Filmmaker Leah Mahan attended the screening hosted by East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice in Long Beach, where the conversation focused on the impact of the Los Angeles 710 freeway corridor on the communities in its path (see KCET article “From Mississippi to California, Communities Interlink with ‘Come Hell or High Water’”).

“This powerful documentary illustrates a classic case of environmental injustice and exposes raw in-your-face Mississippi racial politics. Come Hell or High Water is a perfect lesson that we are not living in a post-racial era.”

— Dr. Robert Bullard, “father of environmental justice,” Dean of the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University

“After many of the living descendants, community members and I viewed Come Hell or High Water, we were moved to tears. You see, Africatown, much like Turkey Creek, was established by freed slaves, and the stories were eerily similar in so many ways. For us it was a painful reminder, but it was validation, it was hope. We need tangible evidence to show the community why it is so important to not give up, no matter what.”

— Teresa Bettis, Center for Fair Housing, Mobile, Alabama

In June 2014, staff from the Smithsonian Anacostia Museum who attended the D.C. premiere of *Come Hell or High Water* at the Environmental Film Festival in the Nation’s Capital visited Turkey Creek to gather lessons learned for an ongoing research project on urban waterways which “examines the consequences of the abuse of waterways worldwide and the efforts by communities to restore them.”

Bridge the Gulf

“Their coalition of voices is part oral history, part journalism and part environmental activism, which gives many Gulf Coast foot soldiers the platform to speak for themselves.”

— Melissa Harris-Perry, MSNBC, who nominated Bridge The Gulf as a “Foot Soldier of the Week”

Filmmaker Leah Mahan worked with Derrick Evans and other Gulf Coast community leaders to create Bridge The Gulf (www.bridgethegulfproject.org), a community journalism and storytelling resource created in collaboration with the Gulf Coast Fund for Community Renewal and Ecological Health that launched in 2010 as the BP disaster was unfolding. The project provides a platform for endangered Gulf Coast communities to tell their stories and places the Turkey Creek story in a broader context. Project staff and advisors with deep roots in diverse communities have built an active and growing network of blog contributors and partners.

“(Bridge The Gulf) provides a space for residents of Gulf Coast neighborhoods to upload their own videos, photos, and written stories about everything from the BP oil spill to community development projects. Residents have stories to tell and also possess the basic tools to tell them; by providing a public forum, Bridge The Gulf weaves those stories together into a larger, crowdsourced narrative that’s more powerful than the sum of its parts.”

— Kristin Moe, *Yes! Magazine*

In addition to ongoing features on urgent social and environmental issues reported directly from frontline communities, special projects have been produced with partners including StoryCorps, the Institute for Southern Studies and Land of Opportunity. The beta website was developed at the BAVC Producers Institute for New Media Technologies and a redesign with funds from ITVS launched on March 30, 2014. Bridge The Gulf was featured at Good Pitch San Francisco and presented at the Media That Matters conference and has drawn the attention of MSNBC, the BBC and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

Reel Power

Come Hell or High Water is part of Reel Power, a project of Working Films that brings together documentary filmmakers and organizers who are “fueling the energy revolution.” In 2013 Reel Power hosted a sneak preview of *Come Hell or High Water* at Power Shift, a gathering of 8,000 youth leaders. The film is being used in statewide campaigns in North Carolina and Texas.

American Film Showcase

In 2014, *Come Hell or High Water* will travel to more than 30 countries with the American Film Showcase, a partnership between the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and USC's School of Cinematic Arts. The cultural diplomacy program "highlights the value of film in fostering understanding and cooperation, dialogue and debate."

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Leah Mahan is an independent documentary filmmaker whose work has been nominated by the Directors Guild of America for Outstanding Directorial Achievement. She has been a fellow at the Sundance Institute Documentary Editing and Story Lab and the Producers Institute for New Media Technologies.

Leah's film *Sweet Old Song* (2002) was featured on the PBS series *P.O.V.* and was selected by film critic Roger Ebert to be screened at his Overlooked Film Festival ("Ebertfest"). The film tells the story of Howard "Louie Bluie" Armstrong, an old-time string band musician who undertakes a bittersweet journey with the woman he loves. In 2013 she completed *Come Hell or High Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek*, about a group of determined Mississippians who struggle to save their endangered Gulf Coast community in the face of rampant development, industrial pollution and disaster. She worked with Gulf Coast NGOs to develop a related community journalism project titled Bridge The Gulf. Leah began her career as a research assistant for filmmaker Henry Hampton on the groundbreaking PBS series on the civil rights movement *Eyes on the Prize*. A sequel to her first film, *Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street* (1996), was completed in 2013. The films tell the story of a vibrant community organization that transforms a devastated Boston neighborhood through grassroots organizing.

Leah's work has been supported by the Sundance Institute Documentary Fund, Independent Television Service, Ford Foundation and W.K. Kellogg Foundation. She holds a BA in anthropology from Cornell University and an MFA in Cinema from San Francisco State University. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and their two children.

PRODUCER & EDITOR'S BIO

Jane Greenberg co-produced *Butte, America*, the saga of a hard rock mining town, which aired on Independent Lens and *Fenceline: A Company Town Divided* which aired on P.O.V. In addition, she has associate produced numerous public television shows including the American Masters special *Orozco: Man of Fire*; *Discovering Dominga* and the Emmy Award winning *School Prayer*, which both aired on P.O.V.; and *Children of the Amazon*. Jane continues to freelance and work on her own documentary projects including *Standards of Decency: The Howard Neal Story*, which received a Sundance Documentary Fund grant.



Photo by Lolita Parker Jr. 2006

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The main character in my film, Derrick Evans, often recites a warning that his mother gave him when he began fighting to protect his community of Turkey Creek: "There might not be any bottom to this." A dozen years later, her words hold special meaning for both of us. My film documents what seems like an unrelenting assault on this historic African American community on Mississippi's Gulf Coast, and it continues to this day. When I began filming in 2001, the precious place of Derrick's childhood memories and family oral history was being overrun by urban sprawl, and then came Hurricane Katrina, and then the BP oil disaster.

Derrick and I had been friends in Boston before we took our first trip together to Turkey Creek, and both our lives changed course on that visit. Over the years we each had moments when we felt our efforts were futile. But both of us have been driven by the feeling that regardless of the outcome, the story of Turkey Creek holds powerful lessons, and the weight of responsibility we felt to see things through grew with each challenge the community faced.

Neither Derrick nor I imagined we would be significant voices in the film. But as the scope of the film was widened by our nation's largest natural and manmade disasters, his personal journey and my perspective as a narrator became important, in order to ground the story with a central narrative and point of view.

The title, *Come Hell or High Water*, describes not only the strength and perseverance of the Turkey Creek community since the days of Reconstruction, but Derrick's determination to bear the weight of his responsibility as a native son and my commitment to tell the story.

DERRICK EVANS' BIO

Derrick Christopher Evans is a sixth-generation native of coastal Mississippi's historic African-American community of Turkey Creek, founded in 1866. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Boston College, where he taught civil rights history as an adjunct professor from 1992 to 2005. Evans also taught middle-school American history and social studies in the Boston public school system from 1991 to 2001 and taught history and African-American studies at Roxbury Community College. In 1997, Evans co-founded Epiphany School, a full-service and tuition-free independent middle school for low-income children and families from Boston neighborhoods.

Evans is the co-founder of the Gulf Coast Fund for Community Renewal and Ecological Health, which directs financial, technical and collegial support to grassroots community groups addressing the region's challenges of poverty, racism, gender inequality and environmental destruction. He is also the co-founder of Turkey Creek Community Initiatives, which works to conserve and restore the culture and ecology of the Turkey Creek community and watershed.

In 2010, Evans worked with filmmaker Leah Mahan and the Gulf Coast Fund to launch Bridge The Gulf, an interactive Web-based platform for community advocates, journalists and storytellers. Evans' efforts to protect Turkey Creek are told in Mahan's documentary *Come Hell or High Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek*.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Producer, Director, Cinematographer

Leah Mahan

Producer and Editor

Jane Greenberg

Co-Editors

William A. Anderson

Dawn Logsdon

Composer

Derrick Hodge

Additional Editing

Sari Gilman

Ken Schneider

Additional Camera

Jason Longo

Additional Camera/Field Producer

William A. Anderson

Richard Chisolm

Mika Ferris

Paula Gonzalez

ReMale James

Lily Keber

Sara Nesson

Andy Schocken

Aaron Walker

Sound Recordists

G. John Garrett

Jane Greenberg

George Ingmire

London Parker McWhorter

Assistant Editors

Dan Fabelo

Kyung Lee

Pallavi Somusetty

Rosanna Zuckerman

Creative Advisors

Kate Amend

Joe Bini

Nathaniel Dorsky

Carol Dysinger

Lewis Erskine

Mary Lampson

Robb Moss

Bill Nichols

Jean Tsien

REVIEWS

“THIS INTIMATE FILM TELLS A GIGANTIC STORY ... It’s about everything that matters in our society.”

- Bill Bigelow, RETHINKING SCHOOLS

“A POWERFUL FILM for all those interested in social and environmental justice.”

- Stephen L. Hupp, LIBRARY JOURNAL

“WE HIGHLY RECOMMEND this documentary film about a middle school teacher who leads an environmental justice battle in a historic African American community in Mississippi.”

- Deborah Menkart, TEACHING FOR CHANGE

“VIEWERS WILL BE TOUCHED by Evans’ courage and self-sacrifice and gain insight into the region’s historical, environmental, and racial issues.”

- Candance Smith, BOOKLIST

“EXPOSES RAW IN-YOUR-FACE Mississippi politics ... a perfect lesson that we are not living in a post-racial era.”

- Dr. Robert Bullard, Dean, School of Public Affairs, TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

“A POWERFUL STORY of one man’s good fight.”

- C. Cassady, VIDEO LIBRARIAN

ARTICLES

Come Hell or High Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek

- *“From Mississippi to California, communities Interlink with ‘Come Hell or High Water,’” KCET*
- *Conversation with Derrick Evans and Leah Mahan, Radio Valencia’s Lemme Ask You a Question*
- *“Good green: Lessons from the 4th annual SF Green Film Festival,” San Francisco Bay Guardian*
- *“Southern survival: On the Gulf Coast, a community fights for its life,” Grist*
- *“Documentary captures Turkey Creek community’s preservation battle in Gulfport,” Sun Herald*
- *“South Mississippi people, places honored by heritage awards” Sun Herald*
- *“Reel Power at Power Shift,” Working Films*
- *“‘Turkey Creek’ Bridges the Gulf,” SF360: San Francisco Film Society*

Bridge The Gulf

- *“Why the Smartphone Became the Lightsaber of the Environmental Justice Movement,” Yes! Magazine*
- *“Foot Soldier: Bridge the Gulf,” Melissa Harris-Perry, MSNBC*
- *“Documenting Disaster and Renewal,” What’s Possible: The Tides Foundation*
- *“Bridge the Gulf Gives Residents A Voice,” State of the Re:Union*

Turkey Creek

- *“A Time of Change and Innovation,” Saving Land*
- *“Looking for Justice at Turkey Creek,” Rethinking Schools*
- *“After Hurricane, Eyes on Historic Area,” Los Angeles Times*
- *“For Them, Earth Day Was Late In Coming,” USA Today*