

The AFI DOCS Interview: FOR AHKEEM Director Landon Van Soest

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Behind the headlines of Ferguson, MO, is 17-year-old Daje “Boonie” Shelton, a young woman from nearby North St. Louis struggling to make it to graduation, a goal further complicated by an unexpected pregnancy. Intimate and affecting, [FOR AHKEEM](#) is a delicately told coming-of-age story that underscores the complexities of race and class in America.

Co-directed by Jeremy S. Levine and Landon Van Soest, FOR AHKEEM [screens at AFI DOCS](#) on Thursday, June 15, and Friday, June 16. AFI spoke with Van Soest about the film.

AFI: What led you to pursue documentary filmmaking?

LVS: A passion for cinema and personal storytelling, paired with a desire to expose systemic injustice. Documentary has a unique ability to immerse viewers in another person’s reality and humanize stories that are otherwise relatively cold headlines.

AFI: What inspired you to tell this story?

LVS: Really it was meeting an incredible, resilient young woman named Daje, or Boonie, who was battling for her future against challenges that impact so many young people in our country. We’ve been working with a few education non-profits in New York for years, and recognizing all of the forces contributing to the “School-to-Prison Pipeline” in our country was infuriating. We set out to tell a deeply personal story about what it means to live your life when so many social systems have set you up to fail, and to develop a cinematic experience that would resonate with audiences on an emotional level.

AFI: How did you find the subjects in your film?

LVS: Our executive producer Jeff Truesdell has a longstanding relationship with the school and its founder Judge Jimmy Edwards. We were immediately taken by this amazing, grassroots effort to break a well-entrenched cycle of under-education and incarceration, and amazed by the heroic effort of the faculty and staff. We knew that we wanted to tell the story from the students’ viewpoint, to explore the pressures on people actively confronting the system. We interviewed 30 or 40 students at the school and started filming with a handful of them, when Boonie literally walked into our frame and sort of stole the show. She jumped out to us immediately through her candor, humor, heart and a clear desire for self-expression that was vital to us. As outsiders to the community, we knew from the outset that we would need a strong partner to tell the story, and Boonie proved to be all we could hope for.

[For Ahkeem Trailer](#) from [Weissman Studio](#) on [Vimeo](#).

AFI: What was a particular obstacle you faced while making the film?

LVS: We were dealing with delicate circumstances among a group of young people who fundamentally distrust outside authorities. So whatever success we have had in portraying intimate moments in the lives of our characters was earned through years of trust-building and support. While the film can appear to be observational, we were anything but flies on the wall. We were actually deeply involved in Boonie's life and she became a huge part of ours. The production really turned a corner when Boonie trusted us enough to open her personal writing and journal entries and we began actively working together to craft the narration. Having her as a true collaborator was central to our process. Her writing really became the heart and soul of the movie.

AFI: How do you want audiences to walk away from the film?

LVS: First and foremost, we hope audiences connect with Boonie. We want people to experience all of the ups and downs of teen love, the loss of close friends, the joy of motherhood, academic struggles, etc., as she grows into the incredible, resilient young woman she is today. We hope her story illustrates the incredible challenges imposed on young black kids like Boonie to navigate marginalized neighborhoods, failing schools, biased criminal justice policies and economic devastation that have set up so many black youth in America to fail. We hope viewers are inspired to confront the immense challenges we face as a nation and join the fight to create a more equitable society.

AFI: Why is DC a valuable location to screen FOR AHKEEM?

LVS: Legislation at the national and state level is needed urgently to address problems in our schools and justice centers that disproportionally affect the lives of black youth in marginalized neighborhoods. Washington, DC, is ground zero for activism to reform zero-tolerance policies in schools, minimum sentencing policies in courts, the age of juvenile offenders in adult courts and the overcrowding of our prison system that all of these policies contribute to. We hope the film can find an audience with people in government who can take direct action to right these wrongs, including the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice, but also organizations already advocating for these changes such as The Sentencing Project, Campaign for Youth Justice and the Coalition for Juvenile Justice to name a few.

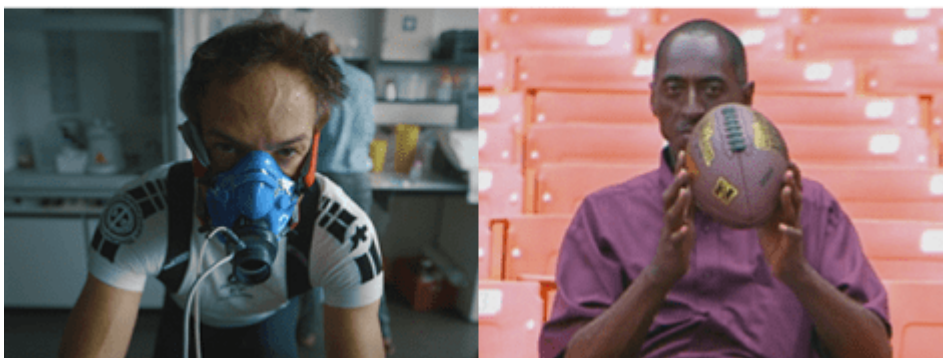


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About AFI DOCS

AFI DOCS is the nation's documentary film festival known for showcasing the best in documentary filmmaking from the US and around the world.

AFI DOCS is also the only film festival in the United States that offers the unique opportunity to connect film audiences with national opinion leaders, filmmakers and intriguing film subjects. With conversations and experiences you won't experience at any other film festival, AFI DOCS harnesses the power of this important art form and its potential to inspire change.

Screenings during this annual five-day event take place in landmark venues in Washington, DC and the world-class AFI Silver Theatre, the independent film hub of the metropolitan region.

Throughout the year the [AFI DOCS FILM SERIES](#) brings audiences in the nation's capital the best in nonfiction filmmaking.

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