

## PRODUCTION NOTES

By Tia Lessin and Carl Deal

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### Directors' Statement

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Two weeks after Katrina devastated the levees in New Orleans, in a Red Cross shelter in Alexandria, Louisiana, we were filming with our crew and encountered Kimberly and Scott Roberts several days after they had evacuated New Orleans. Their city was on its knees, but they were already back on their feet, and they drew us in immediately with a heart-stopping story of surviving not only failed levees and armed soldiers, but also their own pasts.

We had been home in New York City when Hurricane Katrina struck. We were stunned and horrified by the televised images of

elderly people laid out on baggage claim carousels at the airport, bloated bodies floating where streets of the city had been, people standing on their roofs. Where was the help? We wanted to know why New Orleans had not been evacuated before the storm, and why aid was so late in coming after the levees collapsed.

We set out for Louisiana, wanting to make sense of the disaster -- not by talking to experts or officials, but to people who were surviving it.

Because Katrina was so extensively covered by the broadcast media, we

were in search of stories that were not being widely reported: acts of bravery by residents, inmates locked in flooded jail cells, local guardsman returning from Baghdad. And because the scale of the tragedy was so immense, our goal was to tell an intimate character-driven story, bringing new voices to the screen. And to distill those stories into a fluid narrative, without recycling the images that had saturated the news.

In Kimberly and Scott Roberts, and their friend Brian Nobles, we encountered smart, funny, undefeated, indignant and determined survivors and by documenting their two and a half year journey to recreate their lives, we were able to put faces and voices to those left behind - the poor, the incarcerated, the elderly, the hospitalized.

We grounded "Trouble the Water" with approximately 15 minutes of the chilling home video that Kimberly had recorded in her

Ninth Ward neighborhood as the storm was brewing, and the morning it made landfall. Used as flashback to the drama we were also documenting in the present, in the immediate aftermath, that powerful footage brings home the terror of those first 24 hours. Unfortunately, Kimberly's camera battery died shortly after the levees failed, so in order to construct a complete account of the Roberts' four day odyssey to higher ground, we incorporated other amateur footage and audio recordings that approximated that point of view, and which enabled us to keep the story personal, and at ground zero.



Director Tia Lessin walks with subject Scott Roberts in New Orleans during the filming. Courtesy of Elsewhere Films.

As a result, rather than just describing an experience, we were able to give viewers the feeling they were going through it first-hand. Behind the camera, we worked to keep the film intimate, using a direct cinema style, avoiding sit-down interviews and narration, and directing our crew to shoot handheld, with available light, recording real life as it happened.

We struggled to get it right, as two white filmmakers from New York City, to be true to voices and experiences that were very different from our own. We never

depicted Kimberly, Scott, Brian and the others who appear in the film as helpless victims, or as we saw the broadcast media do with so many survivors, as criminals, or in the other extreme, as larger-than-life heroes. And while Kimberly and Scott identified themselves to us as "street hustlers," even dealing drugs up to the day the storm hit as is depicted in the film, we focused on the direction they were headed as they tried to turn crisis into opportunity and seize a chance for a new beginning. We were determined to avoid typecasting and portray them as they are – streetwise and resilient survivors, working to change their lives and their community for the better.

Although Trouble the Water documents a tragic event, we hope to have created, in the end, a life-affirming, inspirational, and hopeful story that celebrates the city of New Orleans and its resilient citizens.

## The Filmmaking Craft

*Trouble the Water* presents a portrait of a community that was abandoned well before Katrina made landfall. We committed to telling an emotional story about survival in the face of massive government failures, and not simply deliver facts and information. Behind the scenes, this required outstanding cinematography, editing, research, sound and music.

### Cinematography

Documentaries are full of surprises and production challenges. If you miss the action, you can never recreate it. The cinematography in *Trouble the Water* kept the audience in the moment, following the action in often difficult, usually unpredictable, situations.

The day before Katrina made landfall was the first time 24-year old Kimberly Roberts says she had ever picked up a video camera. With few supplies and no way to evacuate, she rolled tape with her Hi-8 camera, roaming the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward on bicycle and foot as the storm brewed, continuing the next morning as the levees failed and the floodwaters rose. The film incorporates this extraordinary footage into the opening, then follows Kimberly and her husband Scott in front of the camera on a two and a half-year odyssey—documenting the devastation of the failed levees, their escape from New Orleans, resettlement in Memphis and eventual return home—weaving a story of transformation, heroism and love.

Few people would drop everything and go into a disaster zone on 24 hours notice, so we were fortunate when Austin-based PJ Raval, and Bronx-based Nadia Hallgren signed on as cinematographers. PJ's haunting Super 16mm film images of an empty New Orleans in the days after Katrina emphasized the epic nature of this story, and for more than two years to follow, he and Nadia filmed. Each brought a combination of grit, modesty considerable talent, and the ability to be very present in the scene, yet almost invisible which allowed the subjects of the film to, as much as possible, ignore or forget about the camera and just be real. PJ and Nadia were responsive collaborators who achieved the visual style and effect we were looking for by shooting entirely handheld, with available light, and mostly verite. This style would help shape a more seamless visual narrative later when cut with the home video. Whether filming in the deserted 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, in a FEMA office, a construction worksite, a trailer with no electricity, a funeral, or a rally, the framing and composition, often from a lower angle, left the audience looking up at the film's subjects.

### Editing

In the edit room, we worked with Kimberly's tape, and also nearly 160 hours of verite footage shot in Super 16 mm film and 24p digital video, as well as over a hundred hours of archival footage culled from dozens of broadcast news sources, stock footage agencies, independent journalists, amateur videographers, government agencies, and private collections. Editor T. Woody Richman suggested a non-linear structure at the beginning of the film, establishing an insider's perspective with Kimberly's home video; his masterful eye, and use of music and sound transformed the technically imperfect footage into fluid drama. The home video scenes were then incorporated as flashback to the production footage shot in the present with dual narratives of the same story, two weeks apart, until they merge in the present day. Veteran doc editor Mary Lampson helped to refine this opening structure and explains why it works: "The key is that the transitions are emotional, not literal." She imposed a subtle visual language to increase dramatic tension and keep the viewer on the edge of their seat.



Director Carl Deal speaks with subject Kimberly Roberts in New Orleans during the filming of *Trouble the Water*. Courtesy Elsewhere Films.

Quick glimpses of local and national coverage of the government response to the disaster add context to the story throughout, reminding the audience of their own, usually "outsider," experience of the disaster, and other times provides an ironic counterpoint to the reality on the ground. Juxtaposing a news report against the personal story was a way of delivering necessary information, since there was no formal narration, and at other times an implicit critique of the theatrics of some traditional newsgathering techniques.

The story was also broadened out at points by incorporating other third party footage or audio approximating the experience of the Roberts group. In some cases, this was accomplished by editing other footage of the storm and its aftermath against the Roberts' voices; in others, it was accomplished by cutting audio to the Roberts video. For example, a series of devastating 911 emergency calls recorded in the days after the levees failed attached real voices to the tens of thousands of people who were stranded in their own homes. Woody cut several hours of these calls into a 90-second montage, scored beautifully by Neil Davidge and Robert Del Naja of Massive Attack, to create a devastating scene of not just abandonment, but also of a community rising in the absence of government to be their own, best, first responders.

### Research

Because Katrina and its immediate aftermath was so extensively covered by broadcast media, our challenge was also to tell a meaningful story visually, without recycling the all too familiar images that had saturated the airwaves. In addition to the production footage reported and shot over two and a half years, we worked with amateur home video from several sources, and photographs and footage from dozens of other sources.

Kimberly's intimate, jarring home video of Katrina created an opportunity to tell a riveting story from the inside out. But because her camera battery died shortly after the levees failed, we lacked the actual visual documentation of most of her group's four-day odyssey out of the flooded city. So to supplement the approximately 8 minutes of Kimberly's dramatic eyewitness storm footage used in the film, we searched in archives and personal collections for similar



POV-style video, finding *Filmmakers, crew and subjects pose outside the Roberts home during filming of Trouble the Water Courtesy Elsewhere Films.* that enabled us to fill in

the blanks and weave a gripping survival story and eyewitness account of the storm and its aftermath. Working with such a volume of footage from so many different sources was tedious, but essential to finding the perfect visuals to build a narrative in a way that was both intimate and also reflected a broader experience.

From the audio recordings of emergency 911 calls made during the storm that we unearthed, to the amateur footage shot from a truck of the thousands of desperate, stranded residents outside the Morial Convention Center which supplied the visual component to the vivid description of that experience by Kimberly and Scott and Brian. The home video also enabled us to precisely contrast the reality in New Orleans with what was happening in Washington the morning of the hurricane: as the Roberts and their neighbors huddle in an attic at 8 am, we see FEMA director Michael Brown telling the Early Show at 8:03 that FEMA is "preparing for the worst and hoping for the best." And at 10:09 am, President Bush gives a televised address at an Arizona resort, telling hurricane victims to "listen to the local authorities," while at 10:10, we are back in the Roberts attic, no electricity, peering out a window at a raging flood.

### Sound

The sound team, led by Supervising Sound Editor Glenfield

Payne, worked with multiple sources, beginning with sound recordist Chris Keyland's field sound. Chris managed multiple locations, usually outdoors, and often mixed three wireless lavaliers to a single channel while simultaneously booming each scene to the second. In addition to the clean production audio, the team worked with mpeg and streaming clips; recorded telephone calls; news sources in a variety of inconsistent formats, and the greatest challenge, approximately 15 minutes of mono sound recorded on

Kimberly's Hi-8 Handicam the day before and the morning of Katrina: some was recorded on a bicycle, some in the face of 125 miles per hour winds.

"The big challenge in doing a documentary - especially one like *Trouble* where there's a lot of action and outdoor scenes - is enhancing the film without pulling the audience out of the reality of the moment," says Payne. "It's a fine line between enhancing and destroying the moment. The trick is to add just enough special

effects to support the visual while remembering you're working on a documentary. You really need to feel that all of the sound you hear is authentic otherwise you don't believe the film to be so. That said, just cleaning up the recorded sound would leave us with a pretty flat film." Working primarily with excerpts from original source material, Payne layered sirens, vehicle drive-bys, wind and rain, to create a rich fullness and authenticity.

The toughest sound challenges fell to re-recording mixer Andy Kris, who showed great skill, and also restraint, in mixing the tracks. He used a lot of aggressive EQ and compression to dig out as much usable audio as possible from the hurricane scenes without destroying the quality of the original recordings.

Neil Davidge & Robert Del Naja of the pioneering trip-hop group Massive Attack brought a fusion of hip-hop, soul and hypnotic melodies to *Trouble the Water*, composing a musical score designed to enhance, but not overwhelm, the action. Their tracks resonate with the subtle intensity of a beating heart, giving way to blues, gospel, jazz and underground hip hop tracks by a variety of recording artists, including four wildly different versions of the traditional song, "Wade in the Water," from which the film derives its title.

### Community Impact

*[This film] is a powerful learning tool for those who do not connect fully with and comprehend the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina and the many social injustices that have exacerbated its impact...*

—Flozell Daniels Jr., President and CEO, Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation

*“My students found *Trouble the Water* a powerful educational experience, both academically and personally. For them it dispelled a number of media myths and cultural stereotypes while providing a riveting story of human survival in the midst of social injustice. The film will enrich any course on American politics and culture and is an example of independent documentary filmmaking at its finest.”*

—Dr. Gregory Jay, Director, Cultures and Communities Program, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

*The idea is that after people leave the theater they can get active. They can plug into a movement that can garner hope, economic and environmental sustainability and tell their stories about why both green jobs and this movie are so timely.*

—Alli Chagi-Starr, Green For All

*Trouble the Water re-orientes our perspective on Katrina and everything connected to it. It takes us from the satellite view right down to the ground, and shows us how heroes are made, exposing real problems while maintaining respect and dignity for everyone involved.*

—Majora Carter, The Majora Carter Group, founder of Sustainable South Bronx

“*Trouble the Water*” won Grand Jury Prizes at the Sundance Film Festival and the Full Frame Documentary Festival. It received a Gotham Independent Film Award, and was nominated for an Academy Award®, a Producers Guild Award and an NAACP Image Award. The film was released in over 300 theaters around the country, and HBO broadcast it in the Spring of 2009; National Geographic broadcast it in August 2010, on the fifth anniversary of Katrina.



*Sneak preview screening for religious and community leaders in Los Angeles.*

“*Trouble the Water*” has also screened publicly in hundreds of schools, houses of worship, community centers, museums, government agencies, and public policy conferences. Educators across the country are using the film, and its teaching and community screening guides, in their classrooms, and campus and faith groups have used “*Trouble the Water*” to raise money and recruit volunteers for Gulf Coast rebuilding projects. The film’s website, [www.troublethewaterfilm.com](http://www.troublethewaterfilm.com) is an online resource for Katrina-related news, information, and action, and in 2009 generated 25,000 letters to Congress demanding fairness in the federal rebuilding plans and legislation to create 100,000 green jobs for Gulf Coast residents.

Organizations at the forefront of Gulf Coast recovery, like the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, PolicyLink, UNITY New Orleans, and Amnesty International, are using “*Trouble the Water*” as a tool to bring attention to the underlying problems that remained after the floodwaters receded -- failing schools, record high incarceration, poverty and government accountability. Among the special screening events that have taken place: the Congressional Black Caucus legislative conference (with Cong. Maxine Waters and a panel of New Orleans community leaders); Hands on Atlanta’s celebration of volunteerism at the King Center on Martin Luther King, Jr. day; and at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions, where Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu declared it should be seen by all Americans.

“*Trouble the Water*” continues to create opportunities for dialogue and action, keeping the Gulf Coast in the public consciousness long after the headlines have faded.

The community efforts around *Trouble the Water* were generously supported by The Ford Foundation, The Sundance Institute Documentary Fund, The Fledgling Fund, The Katrina Women’s Response Fund, Working Films, David Alcaro, The 21st Century Foundation and Creative Capital

### Key Personnel

#### TIA LESSIN (Director/ Producer)

Tia Lessin produced and directed *Trouble the Water*, for which she received an Academy Award nomination, as well as nominations from the Producers Guild of America and the NAACP Image Awards. Among her other film credits, Tia was a producer of Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which won Palme d'Or at Cannes, the Academy Award®-winning *Bowling for Columbine*, line producer of Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan* and associate producer of Charles Guggenheim's Oscar-nominated film *Shadows of Hate*, part of the Southern Poverty Law Center's teaching tolerance curriculum.

Tia was awarded the Sidney Hillman Prize for Broadcast Journalism for the documentary short she directed and produced about labor trafficking in the U.S. garment industry, *Behind the Labels*. In television, Tia received two Emmy nominations for her work as producer of the satirical television series *The Awful Truth*. Tia was a labor organizer prior to working in film and is the daughter of a holocaust survivor.

#### CARL DEAL (Director/ Producer)

Carl Deal is director and producer of *Trouble the Water*, for which he received an Academy Award nomination. He co-produced *Capitalism: A Love Story* in 2009, was the Archival Producer for *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Bowling for Columbine*, and has contributed to many other documentary films. He previously worked as an international news producer and has reported from natural disasters and conflict zones throughout the U.S., Latin America, and in Iraq.

Carl graduated from Columbia University's School of Journalism, which awarded him the Sander Social Justice Prize. He has authored investigative reports for Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Public Citizen. He is a Sundance Institute Fellow and received the 2005 FOCAL International/Associated Press Library Award for best use of footage in a feature film.

#### T. WOODY RICHMAN (Editor & Co-producer)

T. Woody Richman edited *Capitalism: A Love Story* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. He also cut Sooni Taraporevala's first feature, *Little Zizou*, and several other independent features, including *Destination Unknown*, winner of the Hamptons Film Festival. Woody began his career working as an assistant editor in the cutting rooms of Nick Gomez, Spike Lee and Oliver Stone. He has served as an advisor at the Sundance Institute Documentary Edit Lab.

#### DANNY GLOVER (Executive Producer)

In addition to being one of the most acclaimed actors of our time, with a career spanning 30 years from *Places in the Heart*, The

Color Purple, the Lethal Weapon series and the award-winning *To Sleep with Anger*, Danny Glover has also produced, executive produced and financed numerous projects for film, television and theatre. Among these are *Good Fences*, *3 AM*, *Freedom Song*, *Get on the Bus*, *Deadly Voyage*, *Buffalo Soldiers*, *The Saint of Fort Washington* and *To Sleep with Anger*, as well as the series *Courage* and *America's Dream*. Since co-founding Louverture Films, Glover has executive produced *Bamako*, *Africa Unite*, *Trouble the Water* (for which he is nominated for an Emmy® Award), *Salt of This Sea*, *Soundtrack for a Revolution*, as well as the forthcoming *Dum Maro Dum* and *THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MCKINLEY NOLAN*. He has associate produced *THE TIME THAT REMAINS* and the 2010 Cannes Palme d'Or winner *UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES*.

The recipient of countless awards for his humanitarian and advocacy efforts on behalf of economic and social justice causes, Glover is a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and a recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from Amnesty International.

#### JOSLYN BARNES (Executive producer)

Joslyn Barnes is a screenwriter and Emmy® award nominated producer. She is the author or co-author of numerous commissioned screenplays for feature films including the upcoming epic *TOUSSAINT*, the upcoming Indian feature *THE COSMIC FOREST*, and the award-winning film *BÀTTU*, directed by Cheikh Oumar Sissoko (Mali), which she associate produced. Since co-founding Louverture Films, Barnes has executive produced or produced the award-winning features *BAMAKO* and *SALT OF THIS SEA*, the broadcast music documentary *AFRICA UNITE*, the Academy Award® and Emmy® Award nominated *TROUBLE THE WATER*, the Academy Award® shortlisted *SOUNDTRACK FOR A REVOLUTION*, as well as the forthcoming *DUM MARO DUM* and *THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MCKINLEY NOLAN*. She associate produced Elia Suleiman's *THE TIME THAT REMAINS*, and the 2010 Cannes Palme d'Or winner *UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES* by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Barnes also wrote and directed the short film *PRANA* for CinéTévé France as part of an internationally distributed series of 30 short films to promote awareness of environmental issues.

Barnes has also served as an expert consultant and programme officer at the United Nations. She has lived and travelled widely in Africa and Asia, and has written numerous articles covering trade and social development issues, as well as contributing to books on the establishment of electronic communications in developing countries, food security and production in Africa, and strategic advocacy for the inclusion of gender perspectives on the international development agenda.

KIMBERLY RIVERS ROBERTS (Director of Photography,  
principal subject)  
& SCOTT ROBERTS (principal subject)

Kimberly and her husband Scott were born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, and are featured in *Trouble the Water*. Just 24 hours before Hurricane Katrina flooded her city, Kimberly recorded a day in the life of her neighborhood on her hi-8 camcorder, and continued to tape through the storm until a lack of electrical power forced her to stop.

Before the storm, Kimberly was working on her music career in the 9th Ward and, using the MC name Black Kold Madina, had recorded an underground demo album called *Tryed and True*. She believed all her music was lost in the storm, until she discovered that one of her relatives in Memphis had the only existing copy.

Kimberly's husband, Scott Roberts, grew up streetwise in New Orleans and worked odd jobs through most of his adult life. He has overcome many of life's challenges and is now working in the construction industry, a profession he started post-Katrina.

Kimberly and Scott recently started an independent record company, Born Hustler Records: [www.bornhustlerrecords.com](http://www.bornhustlerrecords.com)  
PJ RAVAL (Director of photography)

PJ Raval's work has been showcased at both Sundance and Cannes and earned him the ASC Charles B. Lang Jr. Heritage Award and the Haskell Wexler Award for Best Cinematography. PJ has been featured in *American Cinematographer*; his other feature cinematography credits include the 2006 Independent Spirit Award nominated *Room*, the Los Angeles Film Festival Narrative Feature Award winner *Gretchen*, and the Burnt Orange produced *Cassidy Kids*. PJ co-directed *Trinidad*, a feature documentary about a small Wild West outpost town turned "sex change capital of the world."

MARY LAMPSON (Additional Editor)

Mary Lampson was co-editor of Barbara Kopple's Academy Award winning film *Harlan County, USA*. She was the co-producer and editor with Emile de Antonio and Haskell Wexler of *Underground* and edited several more de Antonio films. She recently edited Anne Makepeace's *Rain in a Dry Land* and Julia Reichart's Emmy nominated film *A Lion in the House*. Mary began her editing career with Ricky Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker as an associate editor on *Monterey Pop* and *One P.M.*, a film by Jean-Luc Godard.

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