ACORN and the Firestorm Premieres on Independent Lens
Monday, May 21, 2018 on PBS

Online Streaming Begins May 22

Community Organizing Group ACORN, the Video Sting that Sought to Bring Them Down, and the Ensuing Media Firestorm

(San Francisco, CA) — For 40 years, the controversial community organizing group ACORN sought to empower marginalized communities. Its critics, though, believed ACORN exemplified everything wrong with liberal ideals, promoting government waste and ineffective activism. These competing perceptions exploded on the national stage in 2009, just as Barack Obama became president. Fueled by a YouTube video made by undercover journalists, ACORN’s very existence would be challenged. Produced and directed by Reuben Atlas and Sam Pollard, ACORN and the Firestorm goes beyond the 24-hour news cycle and cuts to the heart of the great political divide. The film premieres on Independent Lens Monday, May 21, 2018, 10:00-11:30 PM (check local listings) on PBS.

In 2008, with a 400,000 strong, grassroots membership in 38 states, ACORN stood at the height of its power, having won a lobbying campaign that led to an increase in the national minimum wage, saved thousands of people from foreclosure, and fought against predatory lending. ACORN also operated on a local level, helping clean up parks, put stoplights at dangerous intersections, and working to improve neighborhood schools.

Leading up to the 2008 election, ACORN helped to register 1.3 million voters, mostly low-income minorities in swing states. When some of those registration cards appeared fraudulent, conservative activists and politicians singled out ACORN as a conspiratorial criminal organization and strategists and pundits joined the chorus. Bertha Lewis, who became CEO just before Obama’s election, was confident that they could weather the attacks, and with an ally in the White House, she believed that actual systemic change might be possible. But nothing could have prepared her for what was to come.

When twenty-year-old journalism student Hannah Giles heard about ACORN in the news, she and James O’Keefe, a conservative political activist, orchestrated an investigation into the organization. Using a hidden camera and a fake prostitute, they created a series of YouTube videos which suggested that ACORN staffers were encouraging criminal activity. The videos and Giles became a media sensation.
ACORN and the Firestorm unfolds through the stories of Giles and Lewis, two women on opposite sides of the political spectrum, as well as through the eyes of ACORN staff, including founder Wade Rathke, members Travis Munnerlyn and Maude Hurd, and ACORN’s opposition, including Republican Congressman Steve King.

“Our constant thirst for new news in the age of the 24-hour news cycle leaves no time for the nuanced stories behind the headlines. Reuben and Sam lay out how one video smear campaign can lead to death by media,” said Lois Vossen, Independent Lens executive producer. “This film sheds relevant light on how we got to this age of alternative facts and fake news.”

Visit the ACORN and the Firestorm page on Independent Lens for more information about the film, which will be available for online viewing on the site beginning May 22.

About the Filmmakers

Reuben Atlas (Producer/Director) is an award-winning New York based producer, director, and former lawyer. His first film, the feature music documentary, Brothers Hypnotic, premiered at the SXSW Film Festival. A co-production with ITVS and NTR, the film broadcast internationally, premiered on Independent Lens on PBS, and is distributed by Factory 25. He recently co-directed with Jerry Rothwell the Netflix and Arte-funded wine fraud documentary, Sour Grapes, which premiered at Hotdocs and is distributed by Dogwoof and Gravitas. Previously, he worked at a maximum-security prison, a music law firm, and at Legal Aid.

Sam Pollard (Producer/Director) has made over 50 films, including the Academy Award®-nominated documentary Four Little Girls, with Spike Lee, as well as HBO’s When the Levees Broke. He recently edited Alex Gibney’s Sinatra: All or Nothing for HBO and directed Slavery by Another Name for PBS. His 40 years of filmmaking credits as a producer, director, and editor also include the seminal civil rights series Eyes on the Prize.

CREDITS

Directors Reuben Atlas, Sam Pollard
Producers Reuben Atlas, Sam Pollard
Cinematographers Frank Larson, Natalie Kingston, Spencer Chumbley, Naiti Gamez
Editors Francisco Bello, Paul Greenhouse
Composer Khari Mateen
Motion Graphics Brandon Sugiyama

About Independent Lens

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation: facebook.com/independentlens and on Twitter @IndependentLens.

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