

CONTACT

Tanya Leverault, ITVS
Adrianna Paidas415-356-8383
646-762-8704tanya.leverault@itvs.org
adrianna.paidas@beckmedia.comFor downloadable images, visit pbs.org/pressroom

“STORM LAKE,” DOCUMENTARY HIGHLIGHTING THE PLIGHT OF LOCAL JOURNALISM, TO PREMIERE ON PBS’S INDEPENDENT LENS ON NOVEMBER 15, 2021

Film Highlights Family-Run Newspaper The Storm Lake Times, and Its Declining Business Despite Its Critical Importance as Its Community Faces Existential Challenges



(San Francisco, CA) September 9, 2021—From filmmakers Jerry Risius and Beth Levison, “Storm Lake” highlights an acclaimed family-run paper in Iowa, struggling to keep the business alive and to keep citizens informed, as forces conspire to overwhelm their precarious small-town existence. The Hollywood Reporter describes the film as “fascinating subject matter for a portrait of American resilience and unity through fractious times.” “Storm Lake” will make its U.S. broadcast premiere on PBS’s INDEPENDENT LENS on November 15, 2021 at 10:00 p.m. ET ([check local listings](#)). The film will also be available on the PBS Video app.

“Storm Lake” paints a picture of an agricultural community being threatened with change—from corporate to political and environmental forces, all while facing a pandemic. Farmers spend their life savings on new equipment in the hopes of keeping

their livelihoods intact, while migrant workers flock to the town—welcome or not—to achieve the American Dream.

Leading the charge to keep the community informed is 63-year-old Art Cullen, an old-school journalist who has dedicated his life to his family’s biweekly newspaper The Storm Lake Times. In 2017, Art won a Pulitzer Prize for his story that challenged powerful corporate interests and local county officials about the pollution of local waterways. While he has the power to change minds and rally votes, his pugnacious voice makes waves. Disgruntled residents don’t always agree with his point of view and have been known to write him and his paper off entirely.

Nearly 2,000 local papers have shuttered in the last 20 years, a crisis accelerated by COVID-19. The stakes have been especially high for the Cullen family; they comprise half The Times’ 10-person team. Art’s 27-year-old son Tom is lead reporter, his wife Dolores the photographer and culture reporter, his older brother John the publisher, and John’s wife Mary the food

columnist. Against tight deadlines and slimmer margins, the Cullens doggedly report on their town, and wonder how the paper will survive as readers—with a preference for their social media feeds—cease to support journalism like they used to.

Risius and Levison had their cameras rolling throughout 2020, as the pandemic upended life as we knew it. In June 2020, Storm Lake became the COVID-19 epicenter of Iowa, making The Times' reporting even more vital. The public health catastrophe posed an existential crisis for the paper as ad revenue and newspaper sales suffered a serious blow. Despite the setbacks, the financial losses, and even quarantine, the film documents the Cullens as they continue to deliver the news.

“Answering the question ‘what do we lose when local journalism is gone?’ is an urgent issue with devastating consequences for communities across the country,” said filmmakers Jerry Risius and Beth Levison. “We wanted to show the high-stakes nature of what’s going on with media, through the prism of the Cullen family; dedicated, talented, outstanding journalists, who are committed to delivering the news to their town. Their reporting throughout the pandemic showed their resilience, and the critically important role that local journalists play during uncertain times.”

Director and producer Levison won the New York Women in Film & Television Filmmaker Award for “Storm Lake” at the Provincetown Film Festival, and the film won the Audience Award for best feature at AFI Docs. Both Levison and Risius won the Best Directors Award at the Duluth Superior Film Festival in August 2021, and the film was named Best Documentary Feature Runner Up at the 2021 Woods Hole Film Festival.

Visit the [“Storm Lake”](#) page on INDEPENDENT LENS for more information about the film.

About the Filmmakers:

Jerry Risius (Director & DP)

Iowa-born and raised, Risius brings over 25 years experience as a Director of Photography on such projects as the Anthony Bourdain series’ “Parts Unknown” (CNN) and “No Reservations” (Travel Channel), “The Kingmaker” (Showtime, 2019), “Generation Wealth” (Amazon Prime, 2018), and “Seeing Allred” (Netflix, 2018) to “Storm Lake,” his directorial debut.

Beth Levison (Director & Producer)

NYC-based, Levison’s recent producing credits include “Women in Blue” (INDEPENDENT LENS, 2020), Emmy-nominated “Made in Boise” (INDEPENDENT LENS, 2019), and “32 Pills” (HBO, 2017). “Storm Lake,” which she also produced, marks her return to directing. She is a co-founder of the Documentary Producers Alliance and an AMPAS member.

CREDITS

Directed by

Jerry Risius and Beth Levison

Produced by

Beth Levison



Edited by Rachel Shuman
Co-Edited by Leah Boatright
Original Score by Andrew Bird with Alan Hampton
Director of Photography Jerry Risius
In Association With Catapult Film Fund
Park Pictures
Executive Produced by Katy Drake Bettner
Sam Bisbee
Pamela Tanner Boll
Sally Jo Fifer
Lois Vossen
Jamie Wolf

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for over 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films and then airs them for free on PBS via our weekly series, INDEPENDENT LENS, as well as on other PBS series and through our digital platform, OVEE. **ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Wyncote Foundation.** For more information, visit itvs.org

###



1435 Folsom Street
San Francisco CA 94103
T. 415 356 8383
F. 415 356 8391
pbs.org/independentlens