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Awards/Honors:

- New Orleans Film Festival, *Audience Award for Documentary Feature*
- Sundance Institute Documentary Editing and Story Lab Fellowship
- BAVC Producers Institute for New Media Technologies Fellowship
- Good Pitch

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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 ordeals that include 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 not just the drama of a small creek in Mississippi — 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 2014 in partnership with the Independent Television Service and Mississippi Public Broadcasting.

“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*

Outreach and audience engagement for the film is fueled by an enormous 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. The Sierra Club’s efforts to broaden its base have been well publicized, but a grassroots movement is building its own momentum outside of the large, mainstream environmental organizations, and is pressing them to change. Key leadership from both realms – the grassroots and the mainstream – have embraced *Come Hell or High Water* as a tool for sparking dialogue and building bridges.

In a recent annual address to his members, Rand Wentworth, head of the national Land Trust Alliance, focused his comments on Turkey Creek as emblematic of this shift in the conservation movement, describing the powerful change that can happen when diverse communities feel a common connection to the land. He described Derrick Evans as “one of the most effective conservation leaders I have ever met ... a catalyst-instigator-impresario pulling together a three-ring circus of environmental activists.”

Companion resources, including a 5-minute documentary commissioned by ITVS about environmental justice issues in Turkey Creek, will be promoted by ITVS and featured on a *Come Hell or High Water* website. In addition, partner websites including BRIDGE THE GULF and Reel Power provide resources and tools for using the film.

“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

Bridge the Gulf

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.

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 the design is currently being updated for re-launch with funds from ITVS. 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. BRIDGE THE GULF partners, including the Gulf Coast Fund, are planning a series of screenings of *Come Hell or High Water* at regional and national convenings focused on environmental justice, human rights and sustainable development.

"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" on her show

Reel Power

Come Hell or High Water has been invited by Working Films to be included, along with *Gasland* and other high-impact documentaries, in the Reel Power collaborative, which brings together documentary filmmakers and organizers who are "fueling the energy revolution." In October 2013 Reel Power hosted a sneak preview of *Come Hell or High Water* at Power Shift, a gathering of 8,000 youth leaders.

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

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Richard Chisolm
Mika Ferris
Paula Gonzalez
ReMale James
Lily Keber
Sara Nesson
Andy Schocken
Aaron Walker

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Jane Greenberg
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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

ARTICLES

Come Hell or High Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek

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- "Reel Power at Power Shift," Working Films
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Bridge the Gulf

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Turkey Creek

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