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This World: Surviving Sandy Hook, BBC2

4 March, 2015 | By Jezza Neumann



Revisiting a tragedy that befell a community increasingly sceptical of media intrusion made gaining access tough, reveals Jezza Neumann

THIS WORLD: SURVIVING SANDY HOOK

Production company True Vision
Commissioners Sam Bagnall; Sarah Waldron
Length 1 x 60 minutes
TX 9pm, Wednesday 4 March, BBC2
Producer/director/editor Jezza Neumann
Producer Sarah Foudy
Executive producers Brian Woods; Sam Bagnall
Series producer Sarah Waldron

Jezza Neumann
Producer/director/editor

When the Sandy Hook massacre happened in December 2012, everyone thought that finally something would change in America.



With 20 children slaughtered, surely this was the tipping point to spark a fundamental shift to keep events like this from happening again. But time wore on, news of yet more school shootings kept happening, and nothing seemed to change.

In July 2013, Sam Bagnall and Sarah Waldron, the commissioners of BBC strand This World, asked Brian Woods and I to meet to discuss making a film commemorating the first anniversary of the shooting.

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What was important was that if I was going to direct a film about an event that had oversaturated news cycles for months, it needed to have lasting value, and go deeper than simply rehashing the worst day in the lives of the families who lost children, which would have no value added for the contributors nor for our audience.

Instead, we set out to make a film that delved behind the scenes, with intimate access into the lives of families that had survived, seeking to understand just what had changed from their perspective since the shooting.

Making a film about an event so prominent in the news presented its own unique challenges, not least access. In the days, weeks, and months after the shooting, domestic and international news trucks were camped out in town, choking local commerce and clogging traffic.

Everyone in this small, quaint New England town has a horror story to share about reporters crawling in through windows, or posing as "an old high school friend" delivering flowers to gain entry into the home of a grieving family. From the perspective of the locals, the press had stormed their once-sleepy town, exploited their grief, and then left just as quickly as they came - leaving the community feeling forgotten and used. Understandably, when the film's producer Sarah Foudy arrived in town, no-one - and I mean *no-one* - would talk to her.



Right away, we knew that the only way we could make this film from a practical perspective, or *should* approach the film from a moral perspective, was to do the opposite of what our press colleagues had done before us. We needed to build trust, real relationships based on mutual respect, and make sure that the contributors got something out of the exchange as well.

For some families, participating in this project would not have been beneficial. But for others, the opportunity to tell their story could be a kind of cathartic release that could help them understand themselves better. These were the contributors whom Sarah set out to find.

With time and patience, we made inroads, and found families who wanted to work with us to tell a story that was different from any the world had yet heard from the survivors of Sandy Hook.

A day that will always stand out in my mind on this production is the anniversary of the shooting itself. As the day drew near, things got intense in Sandy Hook. The mayor had asked all press to stay away, signs reading 'no press' were posted everywhere, and cop cars patrolled the streets looking for media.

As we had been on the ground filming with Scarlett Lewis and other contributors for months, we were in a unique position.

Scarlett asked us to join her alongside her close friends and family for a private ceremony at her son Jesse's grave that morning. It was a beautiful snowy day, and the guests arrived to the grave in sombre silence in the early morning.

After a brief ceremony, balloons were released into the stormy sky, one for each person who died in the shooting -included balloons for killer and his mother, in an act of empathy we'd come to expect from Scarlett.

We put down cameras, joined Scarlett's family back at the house, and then took Scarlett's son JT and his friends bowling for the afternoon to get their minds off the day.

We continued to follow the families through to the autumn of 2014. Each had their own journey, and their own sense of how to measure progress, and none has lost hope that change will come.

On a final and sombre note: While there have been additional resources allocated for mental health issues, it's still easier for many Americans to access a gun than to access quality mental health services. And as of today, there have now been at least 94 school shootings in America since Sandy Hook, a number that will continue to rise.

» **This World: Surviving Sandy Hook** airs tonight at 9pm on BBC2