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ITVS'S INDEPENDENT LENS TO PREMIERE RIVETING SUNDANCE-WINNING DOCUMENTARY "BEYOND UTOPIA"

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Filmmaker Madeleine Gavin Follows a Courageous Pastor as He Guides Individuals Across Borders while Attempting to Flee North Korea

(San Francisco, CA) December 1, 2023— INDEPENDENT LENS is set to premiere the winner of the U.S. Documentary Audience Award at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, "Beyond Utopia." Madeleine Gavin's heralded and harrowing feature documentary is a suspenseful depiction of a long and dangerous journey to freedom, following a courageous pastor who has saved over a thousand defectors as he works tirelessly to guide families attempting to flee oppression in North Korea.

"Beyond Utopia" will make its PBS and [PBS App](#) debut on INDEPENDENT LENS on Monday, January 8, 2024, at 10 p.m. (check local listings).

A riveting portrait of the lengths people will go to gain freedom, "Beyond Utopia" follows several individuals as they attempt to flee North Korea, one of the most oppressive places on Earth, a land they grew up believing was a paradise due to pervasive propaganda. At the film's core is a courageous pastor helping a mother reunite with the child she was forced to leave behind, and a family of five—including small children and an elderly grandmother—embarking on a treacherous journey into the hostile Changbai Mountains of China and through Southeast Asia.

Leaving their homeland is fraught with unimaginable danger, including imprisonment if caught in China—yet the hope of a better life compels these individuals to take the risk. As they pass through the mountains, China is not the refuge that escapees seek, often leading to capture, torture, trafficking, and extradition while the impenetrable jungles of Vietnam and Laos present additional challenges on their road to freedom.

Madeleine Gavin's award-winning film embeds the viewer with the families as they attempt their perilous escape, palpably conveying life-or-death stakes as they document their journey on cell phone cameras. After months of

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building trust with Gavin, the refugees and brokers secretly shot most of the footage themselves, on the ground along their perilous journey.

The result is a singular, heart-pounding, and unforgettable experience with access to the refugee journeys never seen before. Gripping, thrilling, and never more timely, this film shifts the focus beyond the nuclear headlines coming out of North Korea onto some of the last-known escapees before the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Embarking on the journey of making this film was eye-opening and often maddening, realizing that while North Korea is prominently covered in world news, nobody is talking about North Koreans themselves,” said director Madeleine Gavin. “For the people of North Korea, this reality is deeper than any film could explore, but through our partnership with INDEPENDENT LENS we can bring this story to more audiences, and continue to educate viewers about the atrocities they experience and the complexities of seeking asylum from this repressive regime.”

"Making this film has been the most challenging and meaningful experience of my career. Early on, as I was researching, I came to realize that despite how often North Korea is in the news, the actual 26 million people who live within the walls of that country are missing from the conversation. That absence, which so completely negates the humanity of an entire nation of people, is what compelled me to make this film. I am deeply grateful to INDEPENDENT LENS for giving it a platform so that audiences can come to feel the heartbeat of the North Korean people in the same way that I have, as well as to educate viewers about the on-going human rights atrocities and the realities of the monumental courage it takes to attempt to find freedom from the most repressive regime on earth."

About the Filmmakers

Madeleine Gavin, Director/Editor

Madeleine Gavin has edited award-winning narrative and documentary films that have premiered at Sundance, Toronto, Berlinale, and Cannes, among others. Madeleine directed and edited the Netflix Original Documentary, “City of Joy,” and she is a member of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Jana Edelbaum, Producer

Emmy® Award-winning producer Jana Edelbaum founded the production company Ideal Partners. Her productions include “House of Z,” “Waiting for Hockney,” “Strange Weather,” “The Inevitable Defeat of Mister & Pete,” and “Idina Menzel: Which Way To The Stage.” Current projects include Kim Snyder’s “The Librarians” and Barry Jenkin’s biopic about Alvin Ailey.

Rachel Cohen, Producer

Rachel Cohen is a film producer and head of production at Ideal Partners. Projects include Kim Snyder’s “The Librarians” and Barry Jenkin’s biopic about Alvin Ailey. Prior to Ideal, Rachel was SVP of development and production at Tribeca Productions, and spent seven years at Artisan Entertainment as SVP of development and acquisitions.

Sue Mi Terry, Producer

Dr. Sue Mi Terry is a leading expert on the Korean Peninsula and East Asia. She served as a senior analyst at the CIA, director of Korea, Japan, and Oceanic Affairs at the National Security Council under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, and National Intelligence Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

CREDITS**Director**

Madeleine Gavin

ProducersJana Edelbaum
Rachel Cohen
Sue Mi Terry**Executive Producers**Sally Jo Fifer
Lois Vossen
Sharon Chang
Michael Y. Chow
Sue Turley
Randy Gebhardt & Chris Gebhardt
Thor Halvorsen
Hyeonsoo Lee

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

INDEPENDENT LENS is an Emmy® Award-winning PBS documentary series. With founding executive producer Lois Vossen, the series has been honored with 10 Academy Award nominations and features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, INDEPENDENT LENS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts. Stream anytime on the PBS App. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens.

ABOUT ITVS

Independent Television Services (ITVS) is the largest co-producer of independent documentaries in the United States. For more than 30 years, the San Francisco nonprofit has funded and partnered with documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning titles and premieres them on our Emmy Award-winning PBS series, INDEPENDENT LENS. ITVS titles appear on PBS, WORLD, NETA, and can be streamed on various digital platforms including the PBS App. 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.

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