

# PAHOKEE



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## LOGLINE

In an impoverished town in rural Florida, four teens experience the joys and heartbreaks of their last year in high school.

## SYNOPSIS

Ivete Lucas and Patrick Bresnan paint a detailed and astonishing portrait of Pahokee, a rural village in the Everglades, Florida. Very close-knit, its inhabitants fight to face fragile financial situations and an uncertain future. Through a precise observational approach, the film captures the daily life of this city restoring a rich palette of nuances. From sporting events to beauty contests at school, the filmmakers explore social and community rituals, and how gender and identity are portrayed as new stories are created. Going well beyond the teaching of Wiseman, which Lucas and Bresnan have perfectly integrated, the film seems to bathe in the singular atmosphere of a song of Gil Scott Heron, with lingering hints of rural blues tinged with urban echoes. A complex multi-faceted work that recalls both the raw social realism of the new American cinema and the neorealist style. *Pahokee* is the powerful portrait of a forgotten America, absent from the current political discourse.

- Giona A. Nazzaro

## SOCIAL MEDIA

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### How did this film come about? How did this particular idea originate?

Patrick's family has lived in Palm Beach County for 20 years. Pahokee is in the Eastern side of the county, right on the shores of Lake Okeechobee. Patrick is a photographer with a degree in sustainability, and he had been documenting the Glades for many years and developing relationships with the residents. Ivete had moved to the US in 2009 from Mexico to study film at the University of Texas, where Patrick also studied. We started working together immediately after we met and got married three years later. We were both interested in rituals, cultural expression, the environment, and the stories of people who live outside of mainstream America.

Patrick first photographed the prom in 2014 and made a book that he gave to the teenagers and their families. We were so inspired by how much work, creativity, and community support went into this rite of passage, and how much pride there was for the teenagers in Pahokee that in 2015, we made a short film called *The Send Off*. Our main protagonists in that film were Chris Burgess and Tiana Crawford. After we finished shooting, Chris invited us to see how he made extra cash for prom. He took us rabbit hunting in the flaming sugarcane fields. We made another short film following him and his family called *The Rabbit Hunt*. Both of these short films premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, and we fundraised to bring our protagonists from Pahokee with us to Park City. It was a wonderful experience to show the film and have in-depth discussions with audiences and our subjects.

We focused for two years on making short films in the community and with Pahokee High School. We recorded seven short films with the hope of receiving a grant to develop a series with the work and learned that it was too difficult to secure funding for an extended short film project. With the help of an Austin Film Society grant, we were able to finish one additional film, *Skip Day*, which premiered at Cannes and won the Best Short Film Jury Prize at the Directors Fortnight. *Skip Day* allowed us to earn the trust of families, community leaders and especially the high school staff. By 2016, we felt ready to attempt recording a feature film based on the short films that would encompass senior year and go much deeper into the lives of students as they worked to transition into college.

What inspires us the most about the people in Pahokee is their resilience in the face adversity and the drive that we share as humans to fight for a better life. In rural communities like Pahokee that have limited employment options and underfunded schools and are still dealing with the effects of segregation, senior year of high school is the year that will define their children's futures. So, we decided to capture that school year through the eyes of the students themselves. We moved to Pahokee in August of 2016 and worked seven days a week with the students through graduation day.

Chris, who was in all of our shorts, had graduated and gone off to college, but his girlfriend Na'Kerria was starting her senior year. We knew Na'Kerria well and she was getting ready to run for Miss Pahokee High, so we started filming her. We looked for other kids through our friends, teachers, and coaches in the community. We had met Big Show, the football game announcer, a few years ago and when we realized his son BJ was a football team captain playing the center position, we were drawn to that father/son relationship. Big Show was very invested in his son's future and BJ was a natural leader, so they carried the football story. We had met Junior and his little girl while filming *Skip Day* when she was just a baby. Now, it was time for Junior to graduate. He was balancing school with parenthood and being the head drummer of the school band. We met Jocabed Martinez through one of her teachers. She was working hard to graduate at the top of her class and gain a scholarship to college. She was heavily involved in school, after school activities, and helping her parents with their taco shop. They were all dedicated kids with great personalities and goals for their futures, and they were all willing to collaborate on the film by recording their own personal videos and video journals.

### **Why did you make this film?**

By the time we decided to make the feature film we had very close friends in Pahokee and people wanted us to tell their story. We had witnessed the two previous classes go through the last year of high school and graduate. We were inspired by how everyone in the community understood the importance of getting these kids to walk on graduation day and the push to get them into college. Everyone was involved: the school, the teachers, the coaches, the churches and the families. They knew the opportunities were slim for those who stayed back, and they did everything they could to get the kids to get an education and better themselves.

Ivete knows personally the impact that a college education can have on a family. Ivete's mother was the first person in her family to go past second grade of elementary school. Her grandmother grew up in a coffee farm with 13 siblings picking coffee, one of which died of exhaustion after picking in the summer heat. She had a loving family, but they valued more hands in the field rather than an education. As soon as the children learned to read and count, they were pulled out of school and pushed into the farm. Her grandparents married when her grandmother was 16 and had her mom at age 17. They were about to pull her mother out of school in second grade when a teacher advocated for her to stay. She went on to earn three master's degrees and become the principal of a school. She is the reason Ivete was able to get an education and become a filmmaker.

Patrick has been working in rural communities as a volunteer coordinator for relief agencies for over fifteen years. After completing long term service projects rebuilding houses destroyed by hurricanes in Louisiana, he returned to graduate school to get a master's degree in Sustainable Design. His studies focused on how documentary filming can be used to create new understanding of how we design for at risk communities.

After graduate school he wanted to go back to work in a rural town and record vernacular traditions and daily life. He returned home to Palm Beach County Florida to work with Ivete in the western part of the county. The stories here were of great importance because Pahokee, once the heart of the Everglades, had been transformed by agriculture. There was a deep conflict between the need to provide jobs for people through farming and the deterioration of the Everglades because of fertilizers and other byproducts of agriculture.



By filming in Pahokee, one of the goals was to present the complexities that we face as a society in how employment for a community can be in conflict with the survival of the natural environment. Although our personal backgrounds provided the seeds to make this film, the real inspiration came from the town itself. It came from the beauty of the northern Everglades, even the man-made agricultural area with its canals and alligators, the many birds that still inhabit the sugarcane fields, Lake Okeechobee and its epic skies. It came from the strong, hardworking, talented and creative people, whose economic limitations do not get in the way of playing great football, creating music beats, achieving in school and having the most spectacular prom for their kids. Most importantly, there would be no movie without our friends in the community, who took us in, liked the work we did and actively collaborated with us in making this film. We wanted to make a film that made them proud while staying true to their everyday struggles.

Our purpose as filmmakers is to bring people together. We do not narrate our films because we want audiences to have an experience with people they have never met, and we hope that experience will deepen our understanding of each other. We also want teenagers and adults of similar backgrounds to see people like themselves represented on screen.

### **Share a story about filming; anything that you found interesting along the way?**

The most interesting part of the filming was knowing when not to film. Each of the students we worked with had several points in the year when they felt all was lost. In these moments, we had to abandon the film and be present as friends and support. For example, Na'Kerria had an incredibly difficult year. Her boyfriend had returned to Pahokee after being expelled from college. Her mom married a woman she did not like. Her mentor - the cheerleading coach - resigned. She then stopped cheerleading (which had meant everything to her). Also, she did not have a stable place to live, and the college of her dreams lost her ACT scores. There were so many obstacles in her way, and the burden of being filmed seemed like another undue hardship. We had to take all pressure off of her and put the film on the back burner and make sure she had the support she needed to get to graduation day. We knew she was the most important person in our film, but we stepped back for three months. We just talked to her on a daily basis as friends and did not film until she started to feel healthy and until she invited us to record again.



### **Did the film change from your original idea as you were filming or in post?**

To be very honest, we thought we would record a regular senior year, with all the ups and downs that happen in each of our characters' lives. But it was really an extraordinary year. The football team went undefeated and won the state championship, and that brought the community together on a rollercoaster of emotions that came with the title and its aftermath. The stories of each of these kids and the trials of the football team and how they affected the community became a movie that was more important than we had imagined and much larger than our original vision. It was so serendipitous for us to be there filming the year that all of this happened. After recording such a complex and emotional year we felt a huge responsibility to honor these stories in the editing room and a strong sense of purpose to get this film out into the world as best as we could.

### **What were the challenges in making this film?**

The main challenge in making the film was to stay present in each of the students' lives. Each of the students we followed had a particularly rough year, and it could have been very easy for them to not continue with the filming. We had to balance creating space for filming and being available for the protagonists outside of the film production. We felt a strong sense of responsibility as adults in their lives who were not their parents but could still provide support and guidance. It was always very clear to us that their lives and their futures were more important than the film. The filming was a nine-month process and most sports or programs in high school are only a few months long. The students were growing on a daily basis, and it was a lot of work to sustain their interest in a film that would take years to finish.

### **What were the successes that you had in making this film?**

The biggest success for us is being able to use the unique position we were in to make a positive impact on the kids' lives and the community. We want the films to create a dialogue between Pahokee and communities on the coast where much of the resources are. As Pahokee gained exposure through our previous short films, we were able to fundraise to start an arts and technology scholarship to help students acquire laptops and tools make their art and play music. We also received a grant from the Knight Foundation, which helped us bring the subjects of the film to screenings and festivals. This is especially

exciting to us because the film is meant to spark dialogue. The dialogue is much richer when the people in the film can be there to represent their community and to respond directly and personally.

It was a wonderful experience to relive those high school years from a different perspective. High school is so exciting and confusing at the same time. As adults revisiting that year, we could experience things with more clarity. On a personal level, we are just so happy to have made so many friends in Pahokee. Because we moved there, we could dedicate our time to be there for the kids in the film, and some of the kids who were not in the film as well. Our friends in Pahokee have enriched the way we view the world with their different perspectives and have truly changed our lives. This is what we are most grateful for: the real human relationships that we formed when making this film.

### **What do you want audiences to take away from this film?**

We want to paint a broader picture of American lives. These are lives that are rarely experienced in the media. It was important to us for this film to be a story that is followed, but not told. We want audiences to connect with people they might never have a chance to meet in real life, and we want that experience to inspire and change them.

We also want the film to feel like a yearbook for the students. They are our primary audience. We want the Pahokee community to feel like this is their film, their story, and to be proud of it. When audiences leave the theater, we want them to feel like they connected with someone they thought was different from them or that they saw someone that was very much like them, but they still learned something about themselves as they watched our subjects' lives unfold. Hopefully, they will feel inspired to overcome challenges in their own lives. And hopefully, they'll feel like they understand the lives of rural teenagers of color better.

The climate of politics worldwide is one of instigating fear, anger, and division. It's good to sit down and realize that we are all just trying to lead better lives and that there are many things we have in common. We also hope that people who don't often see real stories about people like themselves in a hopeful light can watch this film and feel proud of who they are.



## Was there anything special technically that you utilized in making this film?

We don't use interviews or voice overs, just the actions filmed in present tense. The film is edited poetically, but also follows a story in a way that we are used to experiencing in fiction films. There is no music score or soundtrack. The film is supposed to make the audience stop and feel every moment, observe the details, and the natural sounds around them. In a world where every media outlet is screaming for our attention, we create an environment where audiences can stop, relax, and activate their senses to experience the world from a different perspective.

What is really special in this feature, and different from our shorts, is that we asked the kids to make videos of their lives with their phones, so they could contribute their own voices to the story. The videos were completely up to them. We didn't tell them what to record or ask them specific questions. It was whatever they wanted to share. Na'Kerria was the most consistent with her videos, and they are so powerful that they have become a narration to the film. The mixture of their phone videos and our direct cinema approach make this a unique film.

With this film, we want to do something that feels deeply personal. We do not want to be flies on the wall, yet we want the audience to have a direct, present tense experience with our protagonists. We have deep personal relationships with each of the teenagers and rather than directing them not to look at the camera, we tried to make sure they were so comfortable with our presence that they could ignore us. This is also why we asked the kids to collaborate with their personal videos. We felt that it was not enough to experience this community as an observer. We want the audience to have access to the teens' deep thoughts and perspectives, but we don't like the form of the interview because it can feel staged, stiff, and premeditated. It is important to us that the kids felt free and that their videos flowed with them at the same pace as their lives unfolded, so we gave them free range to film whatever they wanted and share it with us.



## THE SUBJECTS



**NA'KERRIA** is an enthusiastic cheerleader, whose dream since middle school was to become Miss PHS in her senior year of high school. She balances her extracurricular commitments with homework and a job at a fried fish restaurant. Campaigning, cheerleading, and the success of the Blue Devils football team carries her through a turbulent final year of high school.



**JOCABED**, the youngest daughter of Mexican immigrants, is determined to graduate at the top of her class and earn enough scholarships so she can afford to attend her dream school, University of Florida. Her packed schedule of AP and honors classes, after school activities, writing applications, and working in her family taco shop leaves Jocabed feeling stressed for much of the year.



**JUNIOR**, the father of a one-year-old baby girl, struggles to balance schoolwork and leading the marching band drum line with the demands of parenthood. Though Junior shares childcare duties with E'Miya's mother, the time and energy required to be the devoted dad that he is makes it impossible to keep up with his studies.



**BJ** is the football team co-captain who leads his teammates by example both on and off the field. The son of college-educated parents who met at an HBCU in Jacksonville, BJ and his family hope that his success on the football field will lead to offers to attend NCAA Division 1 schools out of state.

# THE FILMMAKERS

## **IVETE LUCAS** | DIRECTOR / PRODUCER / EDITOR

Ivete is a director, producer, and editor living and working in the American South. She was born in Brazil and grew up in Mexico. For the past 10 years, she has been co-directing documentaries with her partner Patrick Bresnan. Their short films have premiered at Sundance, Berlin, Toronto and Cannes. Her short film *Skip Day* won the Short Film Prize at The Directors Fortnight at Cannes and was distributed by the Guardian. *Pahokee*, her feature-length debut, premiered in the documentary competition at Sundance and has played over 50 festivals worldwide. It received a theatrical release in both France and will be coming out in the US.

## **PATRICK BRESNAN** | DIRECTOR / PRODUCER / CINEMATOGRAPHER

Patrick shot and directed *The Rabbit Hunt* which won over 20 festival prizes was nominated for the IDA Award and won the Cinema Eye Honor for short film. His collection of short films have received distribution from ARTE, The Atlantic, Topic and The Guardian. He co-directed, produced and photographed the 2019 feature *Pahokee*. He was a cinematographer on *Boys State*, which won the Grand Jury Prize at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival.

## **MAIDA LYNN** | PRODUCER

Maida is the founder of Genuine Article Pictures, a production company that supports non-fiction filmmakers with unique visions who push the form into new directions, with potential to create works that stand the test of time. She executive produced *The Send-Off* (Sundance '16, SFIFF, SXSW, AFI Fest), and co-produced *The Rabbit Hunt* (Sundance '17 and Berlinale) and *Roadside Attraction* (TIFF, SXSW). Maida is the producer of the short film *Skip Day*, which premiered at the Directors' Fortnight and was released by The Guardian. Her credits as Executive Producer include Sam Green's live documentary, *A Thousand Thoughts* (Sundance 2017) and *The Hottest August* (dir. Brett Story). The feature documentary Maida produced, *Pahokee*, premiered at Sundance 2019.

## **PJ RAVAL** | CO-PRODUCER

PJ, one of Out Magazine's "Out 100" and Filmmaker Magazine's "25 New Faces of Independent Film," is an award-winning filmmaker and producer. His credits include *Trinidad* (Showtime) and *Before You Know It* (PBS). He was awarded the National Gay and Lesbian Journalist Association Excellence in Documentary Award 2016. PJ shot the Academy Award-nominated Best Documentary *Trouble The Water*, and is a 2015 Guggenheim fellow. His new film *Call Her Ganda* received grants from the Ford Foundation, the Sundance Institute, and a Guggenheim Award. It premiered to critical acclaim at the 2018 Tribeca Film Festival.

## **LAURENCE REYMOND** | CO-PRODUCER

Laurence is a Paris-based producer with Providences Film. From 2003 to 2011, she worked in film distribution as a booking agent at Ad Vitam and then in acquisitions and international coproduction at Le Pacte. From 2012 until 2018, Laurence was the shorts film programmer for the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes. In addition, she is a programming coordinator for the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma in Montréal and as a consultant for the Festival de cinéma de la ville de Québec-FCVQ.

## **MONIQUE WALTON** | CONSULTING PRODUCER

Monique Walton has produced and directed short films and documentaries since 2004. She produced the short film *Skunk* (directed by Annie Silverstein), which won the First Prize at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival - Cinefondation section and has continued to win awards and screen at festivals around the world. Her work includes short documentaries For Doing Innovation commissioned by the MacArthur Foundation and Fitness Films for the Fit Cycle and the American Heart Association. In 2015, Monique was a Berlinale Talents Participant and received an Austin Film Society travel grant.

