

NTI Upstream Presents

RENAISSANCE VILLAGE

www.rvthefilm.com

Executive Producer Ira J. Chasnoff, MD

Written, Produced, and Edited by Gabe Chasnoff and Lou Karsen

Directed by Gabe Chasnoff

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TECH SPECS:

Running Time: 74 minutes

Aspect Ratio 16:9

Rating: Not Rated

FILM FESTIVAL PARTICIPATION AND AWARDS

- Hollywood Black Film Festival, 2009
- Langston Hughes African American Film Festival, 2009
- Bare Bones Film Festival, 2009. Nominated Best Documentary
- Big Muddy Film Festival, 2009. Nominated Social Issues Award
- Cine Noir Black Film Festival, 2009
- Hayti Heritage Film Festival, 2009
- San Diego Black Film Festival, 2009
- Texas Black Film Festival, 2009
- International Film Festival Egypt, 2009
- Winner, Award of Merit, The Indie Fest, 2008

CRITICAL PRAISE for RENAISSANCE VILLAGE

"*Renaissance Village* does what documentaries can be so good at: giving voice to people who have been denied a chance to speak. *Renaissance Village*'s strength lies in Chasnoff's willingness to pursue this story over an extended length of time so that we can share the frustration these people experienced as they tried to get more help or even just information. Chasnoff gives us individuals to identify with rather than statistics and that makes his film far more effective and meaningful."

- Beth Accomando, Film Critic and Co-host, Film Club of the Air

"*Renaissance Village* is a great insight into the clash between social issues of homelessness, hunger, and poverty, and the public policy issues of housing and disaster recovery...I highly recommend it to everyone."

- Michael Brown, Former Under Secretary of Homeland Security & Director of FEMA

"A chief virtue of *Renaissance Village* is that the filmmakers didn't need to be polemical; the facts were sufficient to make the case, and that's what Chasnoff and his crew rely on. That approach, along with the compelling cast of characters and a dramatic narrative of life lived in extremis, makes this an important addition to the socially conscious documentary."

- Gary Morris, *Bright Lights Film Journal*

"*Renaissance Village* is a remarkable accomplishment. It delivers intimate, gripping portraits of the lives and strivings of residents, and depicts with searing clarity the survival dilemmas they face on a daily basis. Yet, the movie never loses sight of the larger players, both government and corporate, who have wittingly and unwittingly allowed a natural disaster to become a human travesty."

- Omar M. McRoberts, Author, *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood* (University of Chicago Press).

"...*Renaissance Village* is recommended viewing, and achieves the considerable feat of being politically thought-provoking while retaining a notable measure of objectivity...The result is a solid documentary that manages to avoid many of the obvious pitfalls of the genre."

- Clark Douglas, *Cinema Verdict*

"Through the film's sensitive, multi-faceted portrayal, we get to really know a cross-section of displaced New Orleanians struggling to achieve our most basic human goal: a home...*Renaissance Village* is a compelling reminder that the story of Hurricane Katrina didn't end when the floodwaters receded."

- Josh Neufeld, writer/artist of *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* (Pantheon Graphic Novels, 2009)

"...viewers must be prepared for an account that delivers much more than the nightly news-oriented focus on tumult and crisis... *Renaissance Village* is not about the tragedy of the post-Hurricane Katrina recovery effort, but about the multiple ways in which the disempowered read and respond to crises, how personal, political, and social histories shape their choice to pursue certain actions, and how those factors also shape the ways they are responded to by those who are formally charged with addressing their needs."

- Alford A. Young, Jr. Department of Sociology and Center for Afroamerican and African Studies, University of Michigan

RENAISSANCE VILLAGE

**First there was the storm. Then there was the Renaissance.
Take an intimate look inside FEMA's largest post-Katrina trailer park and
meet the residents left forgotten.**

SYNOPSIS (Short)

Renaissance Village is the untold story of the largest FEMA trailer park set up after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast. In the wake of the storms, with more than 120,000 families left homeless, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) built emergency group trailer sites throughout the Gulf Coast. Their largest site, Renaissance Village, lay in shadows of the rural city of Baker, Louisiana, 91 miles north of New Orleans. Eighteen months after the storms, with federal assistance set to expire, 1700 of the original 3000 evacuees still lived in Renaissance Village with nowhere to go. After one resident died and many others began to get sick, allegations of formaldehyde poisoning in the FEMA travel trailers spread through the park like wildfire and drew national attention. With mounting pressure from Congress and the media, FEMA began closing its parks, including Renaissance Village, though many of the residents had nowhere else to go. Poetic and un-romanticized, this film follows the personal struggle of five characters to reclaim their lives after nearly three years in the park.

Produced by a small crew from Chicago, IL, *Renaissance Village* takes a gritty and uncompromising look at the delicate relationship between government and citizen in the wake of disaster. Acclaimed New Orleans' native Wendell Pierce narrates the documentary with an original score from low country blues musicians throughout the Gulf Coast.

SYNOPSIS (Extended)

Exiled from their homes in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, three thousand gulf coast residents take refuge in a FEMA trailer park and must summon the courage to move on. In *Renaissance Village*, acclaimed New Orleans native Wendell Pierce narrates the frank, un-romanticized story of five displaced individuals whose struggle to find a home after a formaldehyde scare brings to light the delicate relationship between government and citizen in the wake of disaster.

Shortly after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast in August of 2005, FEMA established more than 200 group trailer sites throughout Louisiana and Mississippi to house storm victims with nowhere else to go. The largest site, known as Renaissance Village, was built in the rural city of Baker, Louisiana, just outside of Baton Rouge and 91 miles from New Orleans. Federal guidelines outlined in the Stafford Act mandate that these group sites must close after 18 months. Yet by the summer of 2007, with housing assistance set to expire, 1700 of the original 3000 people still lived in Renaissance Village. The large majority of these residents are African American and come from the poorest parts of New Orleans.

Early on, the film follows these residents as they go about the course of their daily lives. Some fix cars or sell candy out of their trailers to make ends meet. Others spend their time searching for employment or housing in the Baker area. Though each individual or family is responsible for him or herself, the residents all share an evident sense of frustration, as they wait for FEMA and Catholic Charities to come through with financial assistance and opportunities for more permanent sources of housing. Invoking a common legacy of racism and disenfranchisement, many of the residents express feeling wronged by the government, wronged by FEMA, and captive victims of a government deaf to their plight.

Yet unlike some films, which sanctify the state of victimhood in America, Renaissance Village strikes a decidedly different chord in refusing to cast judgment on governmental indifference. Instead, the film adopts a highly-personalized and intimate approach, letting the characters reveal themselves as individuals. When Paul, an auto-mechanic from New Orleans who lost everything in the storm, directs his grievances toward the camera, “Why do we put this all on the government?” and answers quickly, “Because there’s no one else to put it on,” we are left feeling somewhat skeptical. Are the easy ideological lines drawn between villain and victim, powerless individual and tyrannical state, as clear-cut and superficial as they are often portrayed in discussions of race and class? Rather than providing easy answers, the film remains organically objective, avoiding moral intrusion, while letting the viewer come to their own conclusions.

Residents like Thelma, a woman charming in her indelible convictions and pride, insists that she is ready to leave and move on, yet time and again balks in the face of obstacles. To be fair, some of these obstacles are pragmatic: the very real challenges of navigating a governmental bureaucracy and locating low income housing in New Orleans, much of which has been demolished in the name of urban renewal. Yet even more interesting, from a cinematic perspective, are the psychological barriers associated with leaving a place, which has become like a home for many residents of Renaissance Village. Intimate scenes of Thelma and her friend Gwendolyn cooking soul food, while recalling a shared culinary history of smoked sausage, ham hocks, pig tails, chitlins, and hog maws, accentuate the compassionate bonds of friendship that make leaving a supportive community difficult.

And while exchanges such as these communicate genuine tenderness, they also evoke a chilling vision of Civil Rights era violence and racial condescension in the deep south. For residents like Gwendolyn, injustices of the past are indissolubly linked to present racial consciousness. “Today we can talk white and black,” she says in a moment of raw sincerity. “Back then you had to say, yes sir, yes ma’am.” Moments later, when Thelma recollects the lynching of her uncle, a traumatic subject she politely refrains from talking about before the camera, the film’s historical gravity becomes clear.

Many residents of Renaissance Village have grown up in a climate of deeply entrenched racism, where codified prejudices, barbaric injustice, and humiliating obligations of courtesy, present legitimate obstacles in the path to self-sufficiency. When considered together with long camera shots of the sixty-two acre cow pasture, where swaying grasses

and solitary cows compose a strangely serene picture of the countryside, this uncomfortable truth casts doubt on many residents' expressed desire to leave the village. When Thelma says, "It [leaving] might sound simple to you but it's not," she speaks of escape not only from Renaissance Village, but also from mental persecution in the broader historical sense of racial- and class-consciousness.

Ultimately, leaving Renaissance Village becomes as much a matter of necessity as a matter of choice. When allegations of formaldehyde poisoning in government-issued trailers sweep through the park, residents grow scared for their health. One woman, whose cervical cancer has been in remission, now has difficulty breathing and dies. FEMA becomes harder to reach and misses scheduled appointments at the village. It is in this period of uncertainty that Wilbert Ross, president of Renaissance Village, rises to an almost mythical role in the film and in the lives of other residents. Wilbert speaks with prophetic urgency and conviction, bearing the cross for a people in search of a home. "We are a people forgotten simply because we are not loud enough to be heard—black or poor - either one means the same to your government; you can't help them and they're not interested in helping you."

But what will become of Wilbert and the four other characters, Thelma, Paul, Herbert, and Tyrone, when FEMA closes the gates on Renaissance Village? Who is responsible for rebuilding the lives of disaster victims? How does history determine who shall prosper and who shall perish?

PRODUCTION NOTES

Renaissance Village was shot over the course of thirteen months beginning in May of 2007. The film is the result of many hours waiting, watching, and listening while on location in the park. Until the break of the formaldehyde story, life inside Renaissance Village was anything but eventful. In the 115-degree heat, it was hard for many residents and those of us on the film crew to muster the strength to go outside. Even now, looking back on those hot summer days, I still cannot comprehend how the residents of the park were able to survive in those tiny, tin, box-like trailers. Most people do not know that FEMA's recommendation to residents for ventilating their trailers of formaldehyde fumes was to open all of the doors and windows. Though this may sound like a plausible solution for venting poisonous air, it also means that people were unable to keep the cold air from the air conditioning inside their trailers. Walking around the park that summer, I noticed many closed doors. I guess the residents were willing to take their chances with formaldehyde poisoning rather than compete with the stifling heat and humidity.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Eighteen months after Hurricane's Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast, producer Lou Karsen and I traveled to Louisiana to shoot a documentary on the state of the post-Katrina healthcare situation. We had heard that the coastal region was in dire straits before the storm and now, post-Katrina, it was in shambles.

Coming from the Midwest we had no idea what to expect. Our knowledge about the storm and its aftermath was based upon what we had seen on the news and read in the papers. But even the best news footage could not convey what we experienced upon our arrival: the stench of rotting sewage, the over-powering humidity, the absolute desperation that seemed to exist in everyone we met. We couldn't believe that after nearly a year and a half, parts of New Orleans had still not been cleared of debris and repaired so that people could return to their homes.

Our production schedule began in Baton Rouge, ninety-one miles north of New Orleans. Upon arrival we linked up with the Children's Health Fund based out of New York. They had established and funded a mobile medical unit through Louisiana State University, fondly known by the locals as the Blue Bus. We traveled with the Blue Bus' team of doctors and social workers, documenting their work in what felt like a war zone. It wasn't until we happened to visit Renaissance Village that I knew our story had to change – for here lived 1700 storm victims crammed together in the largest FEMA trailer park established after the storm.

After scouting the grounds and speaking with some of the residents, most notably Wilbert Ross, president of Renaissance Village, we returned to Chicago to make preparations for an extended stay in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Two weeks later, we were hunkered down just fifteen-minutes outside of the trailer park, ready to spend the remainder of the summer in Renaissance Village. It would be the hottest summer of my life.

I wanted this film to be as objective as possible. The news media had already chosen its heroes and villains in this on-going saga. It was not my job, as I saw it, to perpetuate these characterizations. In fact FEMA was not all-bad and the residents of Renaissance Village were not all-good. The politics of disasters are rife with people trying to exploit the situation on both sides of the coin. From the onset of the making of the film, I wanted the viewer to be an active participant and independent judge. I, to the best of my ability, would simply present the facts.

The events that take place in Renaissance Village are tragic by any standards. In addition to the news of excessive levels of formaldehyde in the trailers and the revelation of the attempted federal cover-up, the characters in the film are flawed. They are all, in their own way, unable to take the initiative to leave the park, despite FEMA's assistance. Their lack of faith in the government, compounded by a history of neglect and mistrust, creates a paralyzing lethargy, which prevents these residents from taking control of their lives, thus rendering them powerless.

It was truly a joy to make this film. The residents of Renaissance Village welcomed us with open arms and an unbridled enthusiasm to share their stories. They reminded us that Hurricane Katrina, FEMA trailer parks, and formaldehyde poisoning, are more than just catch-phrases on the ten o'clock news. They are stories that involve the lives of ordinary people who are struggling to reclaim some semblance of a normal life.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

GABE CHASNOFF (Director/Producer/Writer/Editor) spent the entire summer and good portions of the fall and winter of 2007 and the Spring of 2008 in Baker, Louisiana filming *Renaissance Village*. He and his team were the only crew to ever spend such a vast amount of time with the residents of Renaissance Village. Chasnoff has written, produced, and directed numerous independent productions for the healthcare industry on subjects ranging from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome to Public Service Announcements geared towards the prevention of substance abuse during pregnancy. For his next documentary project, Chasnoff is adapting the memoirs of a pediatric surgeon who served two tours in Iraq during the second Gulf War.

Chasnoff is the Vice President of NTI Upstream, an educational multimedia production and publishing company. He is a graduate of the University of Southern California School of Cinema/Television. He currently lives in Chicago.

LOU KARSEN (Producer/Writer/Editor) studied filmmaking at Boston University, where he graduated with a B.S. in Communications. During his time abroad in London, Karsen gained invaluable experience working under pioneer producer Norma Heyman on her film *Mrs. Henderson Presents*. On returning to Boston, Karsen joined Yellow Jersey Films, an independent producer of PBS's *American Experience* television series. In 2006 Karsen returned home to Chicago to work as a freelance camera operator and editor on several local productions including celebrity chef Rick Bayless's TV show *Mexico: One Plate at a Time*. Karsen joined NTI Upstream at the onset of *Renaissance Village*, which is his first feature length film.

IRA J. CHASNOFF, MD (Executive Producer) is President of the Children's Research Triangle and a Professor of Clinical Pediatrics at the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Chicago. He is one of the nation's leading researchers in the field of maternal drug use during pregnancy and the effects such drug use has on the newborn infant and child. His research projects include a study of the long-term cognitive, behavioral and educational developmental effects of prenatal exposure to alcohol, cocaine, and other drugs; the effects on birth outcome of prenatal treatment and counseling for pregnant drug abusers; and the effectiveness of both outpatient and residential treatment programs for pregnant drug abusers. Dr. Chasnoff and the team at CRT opened and operated a laboratory preschool classroom to develop specific interventions for children prenatally exposed to alcohol and other drugs. As part of this outreach program, the team developed a model Head Start Family Service Center for children and their families at risk from drugs and the drug seeking environment. In addition, Dr. Chasnoff and the CRT research team was one of five national medical organizations conducting research into the integration of behavioral health interventions into primary health care services for high-risk children and their families. The project studied the impact of concurrent planning on permanency placement for children in the foster care system. In 2002, Children's Research Triangle under Dr. Chasnoff's leadership was selected by the Centers for Disease Control as one of five national centers for research into innovative treatment for children with Fetal Alcohol syndrome. Dr. Chasnoff's current work focuses on

community approaches to the integration of behavioral health services into primary health care for women and children.

Dr. Chasnoff received his medical degree from the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and served a pediatric residency at Children's Memorial Hospital, Chicago. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics and a member of the Society for Pediatric Research and the Society for Research in Child Development. He is the author of five books and numerous articles on the effects of drug use on pregnancy and on the long-term cognitive, behavioral, and learning outcomes of prenatally exposed children. Dr. Chasnoff's first book, *Drug Use in Pregnancy: Mother and Child*, was published in 1986 by MTP Press. His second book, *Drugs, Alcohol, Pregnancy, and Parenting* received the Book of the Year Award from the *American Journal of Nursing*. His fourth book, *Understanding the Drug-Exposed Child: Approaches to Behavior and Learning*, has been cited as an important addition to the literature on helping children at risk of educational failure. Dr. Chasnoff's most recent book, *The Nature of Nurture: Biology, Environment, and the Drug-Exposed Child*, explores the biological and environmental factors that impact the development of alcohol- and drug-exposed children, while presenting practical strategies for helping children reach their full potential at home and in the classroom.

The recipient of several awards for his work with high risk women, children, and families, Dr. Chasnoff for several years has been selected by a poll of physicians across the nation for listing in *America's Best Doctors* based on his ability to translate complex medical and psychosocial issues into relevant policy that guides the delivery of quality services. Dr. Chasnoff has been active in establishing comprehensive family intervention programs for children in Australia, Denmark, Portugal, and the former Soviet Union and across the United States and has lectured on this topic around the world.

JERRY LOUSTEAU (Associate Producer) has worked in radio broadcasting for 30 years as a radio personality, operations manager, and director of music and promotions for leading broadcast networks. He has worked on several feature film shot in the Gulf Coast including *A Time to Kill* (1996), *My Dog Skip* (1999), *Benji Off the Leash* (2004) and *Ballast* (2008), to name a few. Lousteau is a native of New Orleans and currently lives in Canton, MS where he owns and manages the WMGO radio station. *Renaissance Village* is his first experience working on a documentary production.

ABOUT NTI UPSTREAM

NTI Upstream is an educational multimedia production company and community solutions training center. It focuses on providing resources aimed at the healthy development of children and their families. NTI Upstream's materials and community solutions training focus on the prevention and treatment of substance abuse during pregnancy by addressing the early intervention and treatment needs of children affected by prenatal exposure to alcohol and other drugs. NTI Upstream specializes in translating information and knowledge developed through research and clinical care into educational

programs and materials for professional and public use. All of the materials produced by NTI Upstream are research-based and include the most accurate and up-to-date, clinically-based information available. NTI Upstream produces books, brochures, videos, software, learning materials for the classroom setting, and training curricula for community outreach programs. NTI Upstream works directly with parents, teachers, healthcare professionals, adoption and foster care workers, and the legal community – anyone who works with children.

CREDITS

NTI Upstream
Presents

RENAISSANCE VILLAGE

Directed by
GABE CHASNOFF

Written, Produced, and Edited by
GABE CHASNOFF AND LOU KARSEN

Executive Producer
IRA J. CHASNOFF

Narrated by
WENDELL PIERCE

Associate Producer
JERRY LOUSTEAU

Director of Photography
LOU KARSEN

Original Music by
FRAZIER RIDDELL
LARRY GRISHAM
TOMMY STILLWELL
REVEREND EUGENE RIVERS
PROPHET WILLIAM MOHABIER

Featuring the Song
“Please Remember Me”
Written and Performed by CHARLIE MUSSELWHITE
Under license from MUSSELWHITE MUSIC/BMI and HENRIETTA RECORDS

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Location Sound | Jonathan Parham Jordan Bundy |
| Music Supervisor | Jerry Lousteau |
| Additional Camera | Kim Peeler |
| Post Production Finishing | Joe Langenfeld, Punkvision |
| Post Production Sound | John Lawrence, Wicker Audio Room |
| Sound Design | John Lawrence |
| Director of Marketing | Steve Corush |
| Narration Editor | Jeff Link |
| Production Accountants | Jim Kiel Kevin Winters |

Narration Recorded at
Chicago Recording Company

Sound Mixed at
Wicker Audio Room

Post Production Finishing
Punkvision

Legal services provided by
Julie Katz of Husch, Blackwell, Welsh and Katz

Stephanie Furgang Adwar of Furgang and Adwar, LLP

Still Photographs Courtesy of
Associated Press
Dallas Morning News
St. Petersburg Times

Archival Footage Courtesy of
CBS News Archives
BBC Worldwide
NBC News Archives
CNN Image Source
FEMA

Thought Equity
Why Not News
HDNET
The Office of Congressman Henry Waxman

Music Recorded at
Small Town Music, Canton, MS

Special Thanks to
Canton, Mississippi Film Bureau

PARTICIPANTS

Glenn Minyard
Manual Broussard
Gary Leeper
Charlotte McGhee

Mayor Harold Rideau
Wilbert Lionel Ross
Thelma Howard
Gwendolyn Allen
Paul Thomas

Van Fortune
Tyronne Creecy
Kenny
James Waller
Lydia Ball-Arthur

Herbert Nicholson
Prophet William Mohabier
Johnny Steel
Arsinea Crayton
Tony Buzbee

Peter Taffe
Greg Jones
Justin Nicholson
Thomas Garrett

“Please Remember Me”
Written and Performed by Charlie Musselwhite
Under license from Musselwhite Music and Henrietta Records

“This Song”
Written and Performed by Frazier Riddell
Under License from Frazier Riddell

“Katrina Dream”
Written and Performed by Prophet William Mohabier
Under License from Canton Square Music

“When You’re Down and Out”
Written and Performed by Reverend Eugene Rivers
Under License from Canton Square Tunes

“Opening Credits”
Written and Performed by Larry Grisham/Tommy Stillwell

“Wade in the Water”
Performed by Myrtle Otto, Tammie Van Buren, and Christina W. Lee
Traditional Song

“Shelter Song”
Written and Performed by Larry Grisham

“Wilbert’s Song”
Written and Performed by Larry Grisham/Tommy Stillwell

“Amazing Grace”
Performed by Tommy Stillwell
Traditional Song

“Because He Lives”
Performed by Reverend Eugene Rivers
Traditional Song

“Funeral March”
Written and Performed by Frazier Riddell

“Going to Mississippi”
Written and Performed by Tommy Stillwell

“The Streets of New Orleans”
Written and Performed by Frazier Riddell

“Another Number”

Written and Performed by Frazier Riddell

“The Breakdown”

Written and Performed by Larry Grisham/Tommy Stillwell

“Brick Wall”

Written and Performed by Tommy Stillwell

“CDC Meeting”

Written and Performed by Tommy Stillwell

Special thanks to the residents of Renaissance Village who welcomed us with open arms and honored us by sharing their stories.

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