

(Risking Everything: A Story of Niagara's Freedom-Seekers)

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Risking Everything: A Story of Niagara's Freedom-Seekers

The main character in the documentary, *Risking Everything: A Story of Niagara's Freedom-Seekers* is the river – the Niagara River – according to Mary G. Roseberry, co-director and co-producer of the film with her husband, Isadore “Izzy” Bleckman. Bleckman is the retired Emmy-winning photographer of *CBS Sunday Morning* and *On the Road with Charles Kuralt*.

The couple's 34-minute film was released in February 2019. *Risking Everything* will be showcased during the Niagara Falls International Film Festival in Niagara Falls, NY, Sept. 18-21, 2019

Bleckman's river images are central to this story of enslaved Americans of African descent who fled north from the southern states throughout the 1800s. Bleckman also captures the visual story with his images of renowned sculptor Susan Geissler at work on the five figures of the “Freedom Crossing” monument that now stands at river's edge in Lewiston, NY. In the film, residents of Lewiston recount the town's role helping the fugitives cross the river, while Canadian descendants of freedom-seekers tell of farmers and city leaders who finally, after months, even years of danger, built a life as soon as they were free to do so. The film also features The Jim Hill High School Choir of 2011 from Jackson, Mississippi, who celebrate in song the fierce and deep longing for a decent life that drove thousands to risk their lives to escape a lifetime of abuse.

In 2009, Bleckman and his wife, a professor at Niagara County Community College, learned that Geissler had been commissioned to build a monument commemorating Lewiston's role helping desperate men and women to cross the dangerous Lower Niagara River to safety in Canada, where they would be free. Bleckman, who has filmed CBS News stories across the U.S. and the world, filmed each stage of Geissler's sculpting process for more than a year. After the monument was installed in the fall of 2019, Bleckman and Roseberry interviewed people on both sides of the river in the course of another two years, and found the acclaimed Jim Hill Choir, which had recently won top honors in a Toronto international choral competition under Director James M. Hawkins. Working between other jobs and responsibilities, and with the technical expertise of their daughter, web developer and first-time film editor Sheera Bleckman, who was also the second camera, the couple completed the 34 minute documentary.

“This is a story of people who struggled desperately against daily violence and degradation,” says Roseberry. “When they fled north, they endured months of new dangers as they made their uncertain way to states where slave-holding was illegal, often with the help of others. Then in 1850, the U.S. Fugitive Slave Act forced thousands more to flee to Canada, even from free states. The lakes and rivers between the U.S. and Canada posed terrible danger, but also meant a new life. Here in Western New York, safety was, in some places, only a few hundred yards away.”

The Niagara River was the final obstacle -- and the final pathway -- for those who survived the journey through central New York State. Those who found refuge in Lewiston now faced the treacherous Lower Niagara River, with its powerful current, whirlpools, rocks, and months-long ice floes. The river is narrow there, but deadly. In places, landing along the Canadian shore was impossible. If they could get across that river, they could have a life.

Estimates are that between ten thousand and thirty thousand people of African descent found refuge in Canada during the years before the horror of slavery was brought to an end in the U.S. by President Abraham Lincoln. The Niagara River represents all the danger and all the promise that lay before them.

Risking Everything is available for teachers and community leaders. Please contact the filmmakers at 716 428 3711.