

PRESS MATERIAL

News Release January 21, 2020

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Kuralt Photographer's Documentary to Air on PBS

The documentary *Risking Everything: A Story of Niagara's Freedom-Seekers*, filmed by acclaimed cameraman Isadore ("Izzy") Bleckman, will air on PBS channel WNED-TV in Western New York and Southern Ontario, on Saturday, February 9 at 4 pm.

Bleckman is also co-director and co-producer of the film with his wife, Mary G. Roseberry, and his daughter, Sheera Bleckman. He is the retired Emmy-winning photographer of *CBS Sunday Morning* and *On the Road with Charles Kuralt*.

The 32-minute film was released in February 2019 and was showcased at the Niagara Falls International Film Festival in Niagara Falls, NY, in the fall of 2019. It has drawn enthusiastic response from audiences in Buffalo and Lewiston, NY, and Jackson MS. and in St. Catharines, Welland and Niagara Falls, Ontario.

Bleckman's images of the powerful, unpredictable river are central to the story of enslaved Americans who fled towards Canada from the southern states throughout the 1800s.

Bleckman also captures the face of desperation and hope in the monument designed and built by renowned sculptor Susan Geissler of Youngstown, NY. The monument stands at river's edge in Lewiston, NY.

In the film, current residents of Lewiston recount the town's role helping fugitives cross the river, while Canadian descendants tell stories of the refugees who became farmers and city leaders throughout Canada. The film also features The Jim Hill High School Choir of 2011 from Jackson, Mississippi, whose songs celebrate the fierce longing for a decent life that drove thousands to risk their lives.

In 2009, Bleckman and his wife, then a professor of writing and literature at Niagara County Community College, learned that Geissler had been commissioned to build a monument commemorating Lewiston's role helping people to cross the dangerous Lower Niagara River to safety in Canada. Bleckman, who filmed CBS *On the Road* and *Sunday Morning* stories across the U.S. and the world from 1966-2002, filmed each stage of Geissler's sculpting process for more than a year.

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After the monument was installed at the Lewiston site in the fall of 2009, Bleckman and Roseberry interviewed people on both sides of the river. They also engaged the acclaimed Jim Hill High School Choir of Jackson, MS, 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 designer and first-time film editor Sheera Bleckman, who also operated the second camera, the team completed the 32 minute documentary.

“This is a story – perhaps a poem - about people who struggle desperately against violence and degradation,” says Roseberry. “When fugitives from U.S. slavery fled north, they faced new dangers even in states where trafficking in people was illegal.” In 1850, the U.S. Fugitive Slave Act forced thousands more to flee to Canada. The lakes and rivers between the U.S. and Canada posed terrible danger, but also meant a new life, 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 long, frightening 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 the danger and promise that lay before them.

Risking Everything will air on Public Broadcasting WNED-TV in Western New York and Southern Ontario on Saturday, Feb.9, 2020 at 5 pm. It will also be shown at the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library (1 Lafayette Square in Buffalo) on Sunday, Feb. 23 at 2 pm. All are welcome.