

ATOMIC HOMEFRONT

COMING SOON TO HBO

RT: 96 Minutes

Press Contacts:

HBO
Lana Iny
Lana.Iny@hbo.com
Office: 212.512.1462
Veronica Van Pelt
Veronica.VanPelt@hbo.com
Office: 212.512.7313
Cell: 323.326.6931

Dish Communications
Ashley Mariner
ashleym@dishcommunications.com
Office: 818-508-1000
Cell: 818-468-8605
Amy Grey
amyg@dishcommunications.com
Office: 818-508-1000
Cell: 818-216-7880

SHORT SYNOPSIS

ATOMIC HOMEFRONT reveals St. Louis, Missouri's past as a uranium processing center for the atomic bomb and the governmental and corporate negligence that led to the illegal dumping of Manhattan Project radioactive waste throughout North County neighborhoods. The film is a case study of how citizens are confronting state and federal agencies to uncover the truth about the extent of the contamination and are fighting to keep their families safe.

LONG SYNOPSIS

The City of St. Louis has a little-known nuclear past as a uranium-processing center for the atomic bomb. Government and corporate negligence led to the dumping of Manhattan Project uranium, thorium, and radium, thus contaminating North St. Louis suburbs, specifically in two communities: those nestled along Coldwater Creek and in Bridgeton, Missouri, adjacent to the West Lake-Bridgeton landfill.

In the Coldwater Creek area, residual radioactive waste was left outside in piles along Latty Avenue, a street very close to the creek. St. Louis is a flood plain, so when it rained, dangerous radionuclides flooded into the creek, and inundated homes, gardens, public parks, and businesses. For decades, children played in or alongside the radioactively-contaminated creek. Residents have now documented their illnesses, including high rates of very rare cancers, birth defects, and various autoimmune disorders. These illnesses are potentially linked to ionizing radiation poisoning.

Another tragic and bizarre occurrence has been unfolding in Bridgeton, Missouri. In 1973, approximately 47,000 tons of the same legacy radioactive waste was moved from Latty Avenue and was illegally dumped into the West Lake neighborhood landfill, which became an EPA Superfund site in 1990. For the last seven years, an uncontrolled subsurface fire has been moving towards an area where the radioactive waste was buried. The community's fear is that fire will reach the radioactive particles, which will then attach to smoldering vapors and become airborne, migrating off-site and contaminating communities miles away.

Remarkably, Republic Services, the company that owns and operates the landfill continues to state that the landfill is in a "safe and managed state." The company also states that the underground fire is contained and not approaching the radiation.

In March 2016, the EPA re-mapped a radiation storage area and found that radiologically-impacted materials had migrated farther south, closer to the subsurface fire. In August 2016, the EPA admitted that the radiation was less than 700 feet from the fire.

Although the EPA acknowledges the presence of the radiation, they refuse to order an emergency action to take over and relocate families closest to the landfill.

Residents are outraged by this bureaucratic nightmare, and the situation has created an “us versus them” dynamic that is fueling community advocacy. The common view is that the EPA’s Superfund laws are failing to protect them.

Just Moms STL, a strong group of moms-turned-advocates, believes their communities are being poisoned. Just Moms states that it will not stop fighting until the EPA either fully removes the waste or permanently relocates residents living nearest the landfill. At the same time, the grassroots organization, Coldwater Creek-Just the Facts Please, is working to educate the community, educate healthcare professionals, and for community inclusion in the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.

ATOMIC HOMEFRONT spotlights those citizen advocates, mostly women, who have mobilized to get answers, created a powerful coalition and continue to fight for environmental justice.

St. Louis, Missouri is an illustrative case study for the way legacy radioactive sites can be significantly mismanaged and mishandled by the very governmental and private agencies and entities charged with overseeing them.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

For many residents of North St. Louis County, World War II has not ended.

In March of 2014, I spoke with an environmental geologist who is a member of a firm that was contracted by the State of Missouri to conduct air monitoring on the Bridgeton side of the landfill in North St. Louis County. He mentioned that I should be aware of a story that received little attention by local press: growing concerns about the spread of a subsurface fire at the West Lake Landfill, moving towards a radiological site on the same property. After that disconcerting conversation, producer Jim Freyberg and I were dumbfounded by what we learned about the landfill's history and the recent events that were unfolding. We then both decided this was a film we had to make.

At the same time, people who were raised along Coldwater Creek, a radioactively contaminated suburban waterway, were experiencing rare cancers and illnesses historically linked to the same radiation at West Lake. Why were these radioactive calamities unfolding in America's heartland, yet no major news outlet was investigating them?

This "small town" story has huge national significance. The Wall Street Journal's *Wastelands* web page has reported that "517 facilities [are being] considered for radioactive cleanup by the Department of Energy" in communities across the United States. As filmmakers, our questions were: How are these sites being managed? Are adjacent residents still being exposed and harmed? Is the EPA Superfund program, responsible for many of these sites, properly managing them? Is the EPA bureaucracy now primarily concerned with agency liability that negatively affects the timeline for cleanups, and thereby mismanaging the way sites are managed throughout the country?

Upon arriving to St. Louis, we knew no one, yet first responders and residents alike gave us immediate access to what they were experiencing. We met with potential subjects who were searching for the truth about what was plaguing their communities and were hoping for validation. For the residents adjacent to the West Lake-Bridgeton Landfill, their fears were that if the fire reached the radioactive waste, particles could become airborne via the subsurface fire, spreading contamination miles away. Many also believed that their homes and properties were contaminated.

We met with a terminally ill, 16-year-old boy who was in hospice and not expected to survive the weekend. His mother believed that she was contaminated by radiation, then passed it on to her son. We were humbled that this young man wanted "to help others" by

allowing us to film him. We knew we had to repay that intimacy and trust by documenting these people suffering an unbelievable reality. This openness was in sharp contrast to corporations, government agencies and elected officials who would not agree to speak with us or answer questions on camera.

While we remained skeptical about the fears these communities had, as time went on, many of their fears have become realized. For years, Republic Services, owner of the landfill, and the EPA continually told the public that there was no cause for alarm. Much later, the EPA admitted that radionuclides had migrated outside the West Lake Landfill perimeter and radioactive particles had become airborne and blew off-site, although it still maintains that the levels are within acceptable limits. In November 2016, high levels of radiation were found inside homes a half-mile away from the landfill. In the Coldwater Creek communities, the Army Corps of Engineers' FUSRAP program found radiation in public parks and had to remediate. Radiation has also been found inside homes along the creek.

I used to believe that our laws and oversight protected the public. I used to believe that federal regulators would step in to right wrongs when corporations were abusing public trust. I now believe that many agencies created to protect us are really only concerned about liability. How could the U.S. government and private corporations be involved in dumping dangerous radionuclides into the great flood plain that is St. Louis, Missouri and not work to correct the situation?

It was beyond humbling to document the transformation of vulnerable citizens into savvy activists who realized that they had to get educated and act as their own environmental protection agency.

We want this film to motivate the highest levels of the U.S. government to protect its citizens. For the public at large, we hope to educate them about this very important environmental issue. For those who reside in areas impacted by legacy radioactive waste, we hope this film will give them some direction in how to self-educate, mobilize and then require action from the authorities on their behalf.

- Rebecca Cammisa, June 2017

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Rebecca Cammisa (Director/Producer)

Director, producer, and shooter Rebecca Cammisa's first feature documentary film, *Sister Helen*, aired on HBO, and went on to win the 2002 Sundance Film Festival's Documentary Directing Award. *Sister Helen* also received an Emmy® Award for Outstanding Cultural and Artistic Programming and an Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary Film Award nomination by the Directors Guild of America.

In 2003, Rebecca Cammisa founded Documentress Films, teamed up with Mr. Mudd Productions, and began developing the 2010 Oscar®-nominated documentary, *Which Way Home* for which she received a Fulbright Fellowship for Filmmaking.

Which Way Home was nominated for a 2010 Independent Spirit Award for Best Documentary, and received four Emmy® nominations. It went on to win a News & Documentary Emmy® Award for Outstanding Informational Programming and the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards Grand Prize.

Rebecca was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship for Filmmaking, and in 2011, she directed and produced the HBO documentary *God is the Bigger Elvis*, which received an Oscar® nomination for Best Documentary Short Subject. Rebecca's newest film, *Atomic Homefront*, has received numerous grants, including a Sundance Documentary Fund Production grant and a MacArthur Foundation Media grant. The film will premiere at AFI Docs Film Festival this June in Washington, D.C.

James B. Freydberg (Producer)

ATOMIC HOMEFRONT is Mr. Freydberg's third collaboration with documentarian Rebecca Cammisa, a two-time Academy Award® nominee in Documentary Films.

Prior to this partnership, he specialized in producing and developing new original works for the New York stage. He has produced over sixty productions on Broadway, Off-Broadway and in regional theaters combined. His Broadway productions have received over 48 Tony nominations, and in 1999 the smash hit *Fool Moon*, in its third Broadway turn, won a Special Tony Award.

Mr. Freydberg's productions have received many awards, including the Tony, Obie, Drama Desk, New York Drama Critics Circle, Helen Hayes, and Outer Critics. He has produced in London, Vienna, Munich, Canada, Frankfurt, and throughout the USA.

In film, he produced the award-winning *The Trial of Bernhard Goetz* for PBS, *Mr. Bigscreen* for IMAX, and the award-winning *Zooman* for Showtime. He was a co-creator and co-producer of *NBC Theater* (films written by playwrights.)

Mr. Freyberg was the consultant to the Disney Company in the formation of Disney Theatricals, taught graduate courses on commercial producing at Columbia University, and has served as an advisor to the National Endowments Opera & Musical Theater Development Program. He created the American Playwrights Program with Jujamcyn Theaters, and served for many years as a member of the Tony Administration Committee.

Larissa Bills (Producer)

Larissa Bills is a New York City-based documentary producer, shooter and writer. Her experience in the field has taken her from maximum-security prisons to Hollywood movie sets, from the White House to the streets of New Delhi.

Since 2006, Ms. Bills has produced a number of documentary features and series for HBO, including the award-winning *One Nation Under Dog*. In addition, Bills has produced, shot, and written for The Discovery Channel, MTV, Lifetime and A&E Networks. She also wrote and produced a weekly Sirius Radio program with *CBS Sunday Morning* correspondent Mo Rocca, and contributed features to WNYC public radio.

In 2013, Larissa travelled to India for The New York Times to film five women of different social means as they traveled on public transport in the wake of a violent assault on a young woman riding a public bus. The resulting video piece, *A Sense of Insecurity*, received an unprecedented number of viewings for The New York Times website.

Her recent credits include the HBO documentary *Warning: This Drug May Kill You*, which premiered at the 2017 Tribeca Film Festival.

Madeleine Gavin (Editor)

Madeleine Gavin works in both narrative and documentary film. She is currently editing Reed Morano's *I Think We're Alone*, starring Peter Dinklage and Elle Fanning. Madeleine was nominated for an Emmy® for her work on Rebecca Cammisa's Academy Award®-nominated documentary, *Which Way Home*, and recently completed Cammisa's new documentary, *Atomic Homefront*, about radioactive waste in downtown St. Louis, which will air on HBO in 2017.

Madeleine has edited many Sundance- and Independent Spirit Award-winning films. Her recent narrative and documentary credits include Katherine Dieckmann's *Strange Weather*, starring Holly Hunter; Reed Morano's *Meadowland*; Participant Media's *A Place At The Table*, directed by Kristi Jacobson and Lori Silverbush; Abby Epstein's *The Business of Being Born*; Scott McGehee and David Siegel's *What Maisie Knew*, starring Julianne Moore; Miranda July's *The Future*; and Jacob Aaron Estes' *Mean Creek*, among others.

Madeleine has taught in the writing program at NYU Tisch School of the Arts and in the Graduate Film Program at Columbia University. She recently directed her first documentary, *City of Joy*, which is currently playing the festival circuit and has been awarded several Best Feature Documentary awards.

END CREDITS

Directed and Produced by
REBECCA CAMMISA

Produced by
JAMES B. FREYDBERG

Produced by
LARISSA BILLS

Executive Producer
UNSEEN HAND

Executive Producers
BILL BENENSON • LAURIE BENENSON

Executive Producers
ROSE VILLASEÑOR • ADILIA AGUILAR
MARY RECINE
OLIVIA NEGRÓN

Executive Producer for HBO
SHEILA NEVINS

Senior Producer for HBO
SARA BERNSTEIN

Edited By
MADELEINE GAVIN

Director of Photography
CLAUDIA RASCHKE

Music Composed and Orchestrated by
ROBERT MILLER

Cinematographers
KIRSTEN JOHNSON
TOM NEWCOMB
RYAN DORIS
REBECCA CAMMISA

Additional Camera
LARISSA BILLS
CARSON MINOW
DAVE RUTHERFORD
DUSTIN WEISKOPF

Jib Operator
MARK LUTHER

Digital Download Technicians
DUSTIN WEISKOPF
CARSON MINNOW
KAT CORY TOUSCHNER

Sound
CHRISTOPHER DAY
TIM DONSBACH
MATT GETTEMEIER
JUDY KARP
MARK MALOOF
MICHAEL SILVESTRI

Additional Sound
GUS GOMEZ

BRYAN KWESKIN

CARLOS ZUNIGA

Aerial Director of Photography

AERIAL FILMWORKS

RON CHAPPLE

Helicopter Services

FOSTAIRE HELICOPTERS

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

Pilot

ERIC KAYSINGER

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Stills Photographer

PETER NEWCOMB

Production Coordinator

KELSEY RIGHTNOWAR

Field Producer

ANNIE WONG

Production Assistants

BRITTANY VANNOY WYNN

TOM SIMON

Consultant

JEFF TOMICH

TOM CLEMENT

CANDACE MORAN

Associate Editor

J. SCOTT DAVIS

Additional Editing

DON KLESZY

MIKI MILMORE

AMANDA ZINOMAN

JIM ETTORE

Assistant Editors

SIMONA FERRARI

ALEX PIRRONE

MICHAEL WOOLDRIDGE

Animations

THE MOLECULE

CHRIS HAYES, CHAD SIKORA, MELISSA PERALTA

BJORN AHLSTEDT, CHRIS BRUFFEE

Title Design and Additional Graphics

TODD RUFF

Post Producer

KATE BARRY

Post Production Supervisor

DAN KUVALAKIS

Production Associate

JESSICA GALENTE

Archival Producer

NINA KRSTIC

Archival Clearances

CHRISTINE FALL

Archivists

JOY CONLEY, MEDIA RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

KELSEY RIGHTNOWAR

RENA ZAGER

Transcribers

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JANESCRPTION
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JON FORDHAM

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RICK BROAT

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JEFF SEELYE

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Geof Bartz

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Susan Benaroya

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Kristin Feeley	Cara Mertes	Sharia Walker
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NICK GREEN

Violins and Viola
JONATHAN DINKLAGE

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We would like to honor the memory of those who have passed

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