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PAPER TIGERS

One high school's unlikely success story.



"Absolutely riveting, profoundly important."

- *New York Times* journalist and author, David Bornstein



Directed by JAMES REDFORD
Produced by KAREN PRITZKER & JAMES REDFORD
Executive Producers: KAREN PRITZKER & REGINA SKULLY

PAPER TIGERS PRESS CONTACT:

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PAPER TIGERS



LOGLINE

Paper Tigers follows a year in the life of an alternative high school that has radically changed its approach to disciplining its students, becoming a promising model for how to break the cycles of poverty, violence and disease that affect families.

SYNOPSIS

"Stressed brains can't learn."

That was the nugget of neuroscience that Jim Sporleder, principal of a high school riddled with violence, drugs and truancy, took away from an educational conference in 2010. Three years later, the number of fights at Lincoln Alternative High School had gone down by 75% and the graduation rate had increased five-fold. *Paper Tigers* is the story of how one school made such dramatic progress.

Following six students over the course of a school year, we see Lincoln's staff try a new approach to discipline: one based on understanding and treatment rather than judgment and suspension. Using a combination of vérité and revealing diary cam footage, *Paper Tigers* is a testament to what the latest developmental science is showing: that just one caring adult can help break the cycle of adversity in a young person's life.

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ABOUT THE FILM



"That's where the bad kids went."

Paper Tigers follows six troubled teens over the course of a year at Lincoln Alternative High School in rural Walla Walla, Washington. Considered a last chance before dropping out, many students come to Lincoln with a history of behavioral problems, truancy, and substance abuse. Then, in 2010, Principal Jim Sporleder learned about the science of what a rough childhood does to a developing brain. "Stressed brains can't learn" was what he took away from an educational conference. He returned to his school convinced that traditional punishments like suspension were only exacerbating the problems of the students there. Sporleder says: ***"I was hunting everywhere for the curriculum. It's not a curriculum. So it was trying to figure out, how do you take this theory and put it into practice?"***

Sporleder invited the staff, as well as the students, to learn about the landmark Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, which shows that stressful events during childhood—like divorce, domestic violence, or living with someone with a mental illness—massively increases the risk of problems in adulthood. Problems like addiction, suicide and even heart disease have their roots in childhood experience. Suspension became a last resort as the school formed an in-school suspension program, keeping the kids in contact with the staff and caught up with their homework. They also established a health center on campus so the students would have ready access to pediatricians and mental health counselors. The biggest challenge for the teachers was to consider the source of the kids' behavior. Science teacher Erik Gordon realizes: ***"The behavior isn't the kid. The behavior is a symptom of what's going on in their life."***

Told with intimate vérité and diary cam footage, *Paper Tigers* is a testament to what the latest developmental science is proving: that one caring adult can help break the cycle of adversity in a young person's life. We follow students like Aron, a senior who avoids eye contact and barely speaks in class; freshman Kelsey, who struggles with meth addiction and abusive relationships; and Steven, a senior who has been in and out of juvenile hall since junior high for fights and threatening teachers. As the teachers slowly gain their students' trust, they hear harrowing tales of physically abusive and negligent parents, homelessness, sexual abuse... The list goes on.

Despite the upheaval in their home lives, the students find the support they need at Lincoln to make academic progress, and find less destructive ways of coping. They also find hope for becoming healthy and productive adults as they go out into the world.

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PRESS MENTIONS



"Paper Tigers is emotional, but not sappy. The dedication and passion of the teachers and staff at Lincoln shines, and the school's vibrant personalities are captivating. The film illustrates the ACE concept, but shows students as humans, not statistics."

— Walker Orenstein, Seattle Times

"Paper Tigers is a moving and profoundly important film that offers critical insights into one of the most widespread educational and health challenges in American society. It should be mandatory viewing for teachers and principals across the country, and anyone who works with vulnerable youths."

*– David Bornstein, New York Times writer
and Co-Founder of The Solutions Journalism Network.*

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CHARACTERS



Steven age 18

Steven is a skater-punk smart aleck, who has landed in juvie many times for fighting and truancy. Realizing he doesn't want to turn out like his drug-addicted friends, he finally gets his act together academically. Three of his teachers even take him on a college tour road trip. But he threatens to sabotage all of that progress just before graduation, and tests the unconditional love of the teachers who have invested so much in him.



Dianna age 16

Loud and bubbly, Dianna also has a short fuse. She threw a chair at one of her teachers her freshman year, and was getting into fights every other week. This year at Lincoln, her abusive mother kicks her out of the house. With nowhere to go, she finds an unlikely foster home with a teacher at Lincoln.



Aron age 17

Aron could barely make eye contact with the staff or the students when he arrived freshman year. Little by little, his teachers chip away at his icy disengagement. He learns how to cope with his mother's mental illness, and finds his voice in art, music and drama at Lincoln.



Eternity age 18

Eternity was born with cerebral palsy, and was teased and bullied at every school she attended. Now at Lincoln, surrounded by other kids facing adversity, she finally fits in, becoming a star student with a bright future.

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CHARACTERS



Kelsey age 14

Kelsey's childhood has been filled with tragedy: living with a heroine-addicted mother, raped by a stranger at age 12, she starts the year at Lincoln hanging with a crowd of meth users. She finds love and sympathy in junior Gustavo, but when that relationship begins to look controlling and abusive, the school intervenes.



Gustavo age 16

Gustavo grew up in a trailer witnessing his father's frequent abuse of his mother before abandoning the family of six kids. He bonds with Kelsey over their troubled pasts. But the teachers worry about his obsessiveness and whether he might turn into a version of his father.



Jim Sporleder
Principal

Principal Sporleder was at the end of his rope trying to manage a high school riddled with violence and drugs. When he learns about the science of what stress does to a developing brain, he decides to completely overhaul the traditional model of discipline.



Brooke Bouchey
Intervention Specialist

When Brooke was a teenager, she experienced fights, homelessness, drug use and sexual abuse. Her harrowing past lets her connect to the struggling students at Lincoln, and she helps them discover for themselves what makes them tick and what they want their lives to look like.



Erik Gordon
Science Teacher

Mr. Gordon knows that unconditional love sounds hippie-dippy, but he also knows that it's the one thing that's going to help students like the ones at Lincoln become responsible adults. He holds them to high standards, and finds ways of not taking their behavior personally when they stumble along the way.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



Storytelling—it's how we make sense of the world. Our desire to create meaning in an often random and complex world resides deep within novelists, playwrights, journalists and screenwriters. To be human is to desire meaning, and storytellers are driven to provide that meaning—for themselves and for others.

Documentary filmmakers are no different. We see an issue and say, "People ought to know about this." We are compelled to share the stories and give a voice to those inspiring individuals working for justice who often go unheard. Documentary filmmaking is an arduous and lengthy process built upon the risky assumption that people need to hear the story. Ask any documentary filmmaker, however, and they will tell you that they know when a story is good: when it demands to be told.

I knew I wanted to make a film about the emerging science of adversity: how high "doses" of stress during childhood get into our bodies, change our brains, and lead to lifelong health and social problems—everything from domestic violence and substance abuse to heart disease and cancer. Scientists are beginning to understand the roots of these seemingly intractable problems, and many have novel ideas about how to break these cycles. I set out to tell the story of this science, and those with boots on the ground who are putting it into practice like pediatricians, teachers, and social workers.

When I visited Walla Walla and saw Lincoln Alternative High School, though, I knew there was an entire film's worth of stories in this one location. For this subject matter, the empathy fueled by getting to follow characters over time seemed both fitting and poignant. Especially with teenagers, who are simultaneously so fascinating and frustrating. I met student after student who had experienced enough upheaval in their lives to fill a Charles Dickens novel, and they had the self-destructive and aggressive behavior to show for it. However, they had landed in a school whose staff was enlightened to look past that behavior, love them unconditionally, and help them connect to their true potential. Their stories of resilience and the practices of the teachers at Lincoln are an inspiring model.

Paper Tigers has a companion film titled *Resilience: The Biology of Stress and the Science of Hope*, which delves into the neuroscience research and includes portraits of other practitioners putting that science into action.

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ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS



James Redford



James started his collaboration with Karen Pritzker on HBO's *The Big Picture: Rethinking Dyslexia*, a film that gave hope to millions of families around the world who have struggled to educate their dyslexic children. From there, they turned their story-telling eye on the hidden menace of adverse childhood experiences with two documentaries—*Paper Tigers* and *Resilience: The Biology of Stress and the Science of Hope*. *Paper Tigers*, currently on the festival and screening circuit, aired on PIVOT TV near the end of 2015. James also co-founded and is current Chair the Redford Center, a film production non-profit that translates complex environmental challenges into human stories that inspire. Recent honors include the 2014 WildCare Environmental Award, 2015 filmmaker envoy for USC/US State Department's American Film Showcase as well as serving the leadership circle for the UN's second annual Media for Social Impact Summit. James lives in Marin County and is married to Kyle Redford, a popular educational blogger for Edweek, Huffpost and Noodle.

Karen Pritzker



Karen is a film producer, editor and writer. She executive produced *Paper Tigers* as well as *The Big Picture: Rethinking Dyslexia*, a documentary that demystified dyslexia and generated widespread awareness of this misunderstood disability. *Resilience*, Pritzker's third documentary with James Redford, chronicles the dawn of a new movement led by trailblazers in pediatrics, education and social welfare who are using cutting-edge science and field-tested therapies to protect children from the insidious effects of toxic stress. In addition to her film credits, Pritzker co-founded the My Hero Project, an interactive website for kids that is devoted to telling the stories of ordinary people who have accomplished extraordinary things. She is also President of Seedlings Foundation.

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ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS



Dana Schwartz



Dana Schwartz is a filmmaker, social advocate and the Co-Producer of *Paper Tigers* and *Resilience*. Dana combines her passions for public health and documentary film to promote advocacy and widespread social awareness through a trauma-informed lens. She earned her Master's in Social Work from Columbia University, where she specialized in advanced clinical practice. As part of her degree, she worked for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society and NYU Langone Medical Center's Initiative for Women with Disabilities, where she gained a profound understanding of healthcare disparities and how to promote social equality for marginalized populations.

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CREDITS



Directed by
Produced by
Executive Producer
Executive Producer
Co-Producer
Edited by
Director of Photography
Music by
Line Producer
Supervising Producer
Additional Camera

Sound Recording
Additional Sound
Sound Designer and
Re-Recording Mixer
Post-Production
Sound Services by

James Redford
Karen Pritzker & James Redford
Karen Pritzker
Regina K. Scully
Dana Schwartz
Jen Bradwell
Tylor Norwood
Todd Boekelheide
Shannon Stirone Norwood
Brook Holston
Brian Gurnett
John Behrens
Sarah Koenigsberg
Aron
Dianna
Dylan Hurley
Seth Hahn & Elliot Holland
Bob Edwards
Skywalker Sound
a Lucasfilm Ltd. Company
Marin County, California

Eternity
Gustavo
Kelsey
Steven

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