

DIRECTOR NOTES

My interest as a filmmaker is to explore stories of personal transformation: moments when individuals transcend their everyday lives in service of a higher truth or calling, often at great personal cost.

In the case of *Breaking Ranks*, I focus on the provocative issue of American soldiers refusing deployment to Iraq and coming to Canada for sanctuary. To some, these are simply cases of cowardly desertion. For the four soldiers featured, their actions manifest the painful transformation of character that comes when one follows their conscience and stands up in the face of adversity for what they believe is right.

My own journey to this film began in 2003, three weeks after the invasion of Iraq, when I was touring my first film through the United States. *The Friendship Village* recounts the story of a U.S. Army veteran's journey from war hero to peace activist, and the reconciliation project/medical center he created by working with the Vietnamese general responsible for killing his entire platoon.

After a screening in California, I was invited to make a speech at Veterans of Foreign Wars post before a room full of former American and Vietnamese soldiers. Rising before two hundred former combatants, I stated that as a Canadian I was grateful that my country had provided a safe-haven for people who didn't want to fight in Vietnam. The whole room stood up and began cheering. It was a very moving experience.

A year later, I decided to make a film about those Americans who had followed their consciences to the Canadian border thirty years earlier, and how their contributions had impacted my country. Within weeks of beginning research, I read in the *Globe & Mail* that a Conscientious Objector named Jeremy Hinzman had deserted the U.S. military and was seeking refuge in Canada from the war in Iraq. History had just come full circle.

By the time I met Jeremy and his lawyer Jeffrey House in Toronto several weeks later, a second soldier, Brandon Hughey, had also arrived in Canada. They agreed to participate in a film about their experiences as the first American soldiers to seek refugee status in Canada. In the months that followed, more soldiers arrived, many hiding out underground as they waited for an outcome in Jeremy's case, some coming forward to submit refugee claims. Among them were Joshua Key and Kyle Snyder.

As I began filming and listening to the stories of these four soldiers and many others, I learned about the ideals that had led them to join the military in the first place – aspirations of achieving the “American dream,” both in terms of service to their country at a time of national crisis and the achievement of comfortable middle-class lifestyles.

For some, those ideals had been subverted shortly after signing their contracts as a result of questionable and sometimes fraudulent recruiting practices. The realities of the so-called “poverty draft,” where recruiters entice young, poor Americans to sign on the bottom line with promises of otherwise inaccessible education and healthcare, began to call into question the notion of an “all-volunteer military.”

As each faced deployment to Iraq, the realities of service presented challenging questions about their personal role in the war: what is the right thing to do when it seems the cause they are to fight for isn't the one to which they signed up? Does their responsibility lie with the signature on the enlistment contract, or the ideals they were raised to value? In a war condemned as “illegal” by the international community, what is the meaning of duty?

As these cases make their way through the Canadian Immigration & Refugee Board and courts, the burden of these questions falls at the feet of Canadians as well. A soldier's right to freedom of conscience is a human right guaranteed under the Nuremberg Code and the UN charter, but through the cases of these "war resisters" it has become clear that carrying out international law is a matter of political will. Jeremy Hinzman has been recognized by Amnesty International as a bona fide Conscientious Objector, yet such claims are routinely rejected by the U.S. Army, with little legal recourse. As a result, more and more soldiers like him are arriving in Canada. Will the political tides grant them asylum in Canada, or return them to military prison in the U.S.?

When I first set out to make this film, I thought it would have a happy ending: the war resisters would be granted sanctuary in Canada – the Canada I was born into in 1968. A Canada that opened its doors to American refugees fleeing another unjust war. At the time, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau stated, "Canada should be a refuge from militarism."

In the face of rising militarism in the world and here at home, will this legacy continue? That question remains unanswered. The soldiers have already made their choice. They have followed their consciences at the cost of possible incarceration, family ties, and their ideals about what it means to be a "good" American. It remains to audiences to decide: should the individual conscience or the greater economic good of a society prevail, and if so, at what cost?

- Michelle Mason, Writer/Director

Michelle Mason is an award-winning independent documentary filmmaker from Vancouver, BC. Her first film, *The Friendship Village* is a tragic and inspiring documentary about our ability to transcend war. Through the moving story of a Vietnam veteran's hawk-to-dove transformation, Mason weaves together a powerful film about the potential for reconciliation and redemption through one man's journey to heal the wounds of war (www.cypress-park.ca). *The Friendship Village* has won six international awards.

Before becoming a filmmaker, Michelle worked in international television news production for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in London and Washington, D.C. She received a Masters Degree in International Journalism from London's City University after writing a thesis on the decline of investigative journalism in Britain.

In 1998, Michelle left journalism to become an independent filmmaker, and moved to Berlin where she began work on *The Friendship Village*. She returned to her hometown Vancouver in 2000 and founded Cypress Park Productions, where she is currently at work on several documentary and dramatic films about stories of transformation.