



FREEHELD

A DOCUMENTARY BY CYNTHIA WADE

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ACADEMY AWARD® WINNER
BEST DOCUMENTARY SHORT SUBJECT

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“An extraordinary film...it has the potential to change the hearts of Americans everywhere.”

- CAMRYN MANHEIM, ACTRESS

“*Freeheld* is a quietly understated work of art that packs a punch you will feel for days.”

- ARMISTEAD MAUPIN, AUTHOR

“Staggering & Unforgettable.”

- CYNTHIA NIXON, ACTRESS

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Running Time **38 minutes**

World Premiere **Sundance Film Festival**
January 19, 2007

Formats Available **35mm, HD, Digital Beta, Beta SP, DVCAM, DVD**

SYNOPSIS

Detective Lieutenant Laurel Hester spent 25 years investigating tough cases in Ocean County, New Jersey, protecting the rights of victims and putting her life on the line. She had no reason to expect that in the last year of her life, after she was diagnosed with terminal cancer, that her final battle for justice would be for the woman she loved.

The documentary film **FREEHELD** chronicles Laurel's struggle to transfer her earned pension to her domestic partner, Stacie Andree. With less than six months to live, Laurel refuses to back down when her elected officials — the Ocean County Freeholders — deny her request to leave her pension to Stacie, an automatic option for heterosexual married couples. The film is structured chronologically, following both the escalation of Laurel's battle with the Freeholders and the decline of her health as cancer spreads to her brain.

As Laurel's plight intensifies, it spurs a media frenzy and a passionate advocacy campaign. At the same time, **FREEHELD** captures a quieter, personal story: that of the deep love between Laurel and Stacie as they face the reality of losing each other. Alternating from packed public demonstrations at the county courthouse to quiet, tender moments of Laurel and Stacie at home, **FREEHELD** combines tension-filled political drama with personal detail, creating a nuanced study of a grassroots fight for justice.

Since winning the Special Jury Prize at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, **FREEHELD** has screened in over 75 film festivals in 26 states and 9 countries, garnering thirteen additional film awards. The film also had an eight city theatrical release during the summer of 2007 in conjunction with LGBT PRIDE events across the country.

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LT. LAUREL HESTER SPEAKS ABOUT WHAT FREEHELD MEANS TO HER



“I think this film is one of the most important things that has ever happened to me. For someone to even...contemplate wanting to tell my story is profoundly humbling, and at the same time I do think I have a story to tell.

I feel like this film is my opportunity to put it all together and explain who I am, what I am, and what I’m about. And more than anything, I want to get at the truth.

I hope this film will inspire someone...I hope it gives them courage to deal with homosexuality, if that’s what they’re dealing with. I hope it gives them courage if they’re dealing with discrimination, as I have. I hope if they have a terminal disease that they somehow get hope from listening to my story.

I can’t tell you how many people have come up to me or said on the phone, ‘I’m so inspired by your courage.’ I want to make a difference and I want people to be affected by the things that I’ve said and what I’ve done, and I want them to realize that they can do it too. There’s nothing extraordinary about me. I’m not a super person...I just went about doing things the way I think they should be done.

This is to me an opportunity which I had very much wanted to do on my own, in the form of writing a book...Because I felt I had so many different experiences in life...as a woman, as a gay woman, as a police officer, as a gay police officer...So I’m very grateful for this opportunity because once I got my diagnosis I realized that I wasn’t going to be able to write my book...So I’m really honored that someone...is pursuing this with such ambition.”

Laurel Hester
December 28, 2005

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FILMMAKERS



CYNTHIA WADE

Director / Producer / Camera

Cynthia Wade is an Academy Award Winning NYC-based Documentary Filmmaker. Her documentary **FREEHELD** won an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject in 2008. It also won a Special Jury Prize at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, as well as thirteen other awards worldwide. Her award-winning HBO documentary **SHELTER DOGS** was broadcast in seven countries. Wade directed the 1999 Cinemax Reel Life documentary **GRIST FOR THE MILL**, which The Hollywood Reporter called “a delight... full of quirky moments and clever humor” and Variety called “a jewel... extremely comical.” She was co-producer and principal verite cinematographer for the 1998 PBS documentary **TAKEN IN: THE LIVES OF AMERICA’S FOSTER CHILDREN**, which won a duPont-Columbia Award for Excellence in Journalism. Wade has been a Director of Photography for PBS, HBO/Cinemax, Bravo, AMC, MTV, A&E,

Discovery, TNT, Oxygen, LOGO and The History Channel. She received a BA cum laude from Smith College and an MA in Documentary Film Production from Stanford University. Wade runs a video production company and teaches advanced digital cinematography at the New School. She lives in New York City with her husband and two children.



VANESSA ROTH

Producer

Vanessa Roth is an Academy Award Winning Producer. She produced and directed the 2006 award-winning documentary **THE THIRD MONDAY IN OCTOBER** and co-produced and co-directed the award-winning 2004 PBS documentary **AGING OUT**, which is the center of a multi-million-dollar foster care outreach campaign sponsored by the Annie Casey Foundation. Roth’s 2002 award-winning film **CLOSE TO HOME** premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and aired as a prime-time special on the Discovery Health Channel. Her 1998 PBS film **TAKEN IN: THE LIVES OF AMERICA’S FOSTER CHILDREN** won the coveted duPont-Columbia Award for Excellence in Journalism. Ms. Roth recently produced and directed the A&E Special 9/11’s Toxic Dust, and is currently working with Dave Eggers on a feature documentary about teachers.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I have always been drawn to polarizing and emotional social topics. My 1999 Cinemax documentary **GRIST FOR THE MILL** navigated through the craggy landscape of a failed marriage, while my 2004 HBO documentary **SHELTER DOGS** took an unexpected and controversial look at euthanasia.

FREEHELD is a natural continuation of this work.

Like **SHELTER DOGS**, **FREEHELD** unflinchingly faces risk and death, and chronicles a personal story with larger social implications. Like **GRIST FOR THE MILL**, the main character navigates both hope and loss as we move seamlessly between past and present.

In **FREEHELD**, a tough, hard-working policewoman races to protect the person she loves before death separates them, and in doing so, she unleashes a landmark legal battle in Ocean County, New Jersey, a struggle watched across the nation. **FREEHELD** is a triumphal story that reminds all of us that giant changes occur when ordinary individuals take small, unyielding steps against injustice.

I did not set out to make a film about Laurel Hester. I had given birth to my second child just four months prior, and was busy directing and shooting other projects as well as teaching film at the New School. But I read an article about Laurel in a local paper, and when I read that her partner Stacie was an auto mechanic poised to lose their house, I immediately understood the great risk they faced. I decided to attend a community meeting where Laurel planned to speak to her county officials, the Freeholders. I brought my camera. From that initial meeting, during which I introduced myself to Laurel and Stacie, I rapidly fell into their story, struggle, and lives.

I moved quickly from being filmmaker to friend. Laurel wrote me into her will as the only person allowed to film her memorial service. On the day of her funeral, as per Laurel's request, only my crew was inside the church, despite many other media people wanting access. The result is a deeply intimate and fearless story that I believe only a woman filmmaker could have captured; perhaps it is a film that only I could have captured.

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REVIEWS

“Cynthia Wade presents perhaps the single best, most coherent argument for GLBT equality.”

- *Out & About Nashville*

“*Freeheld* is simply an amazing documentary, a true piece of unscripted reality, with all its blemishes and beauty intact. It is a documentary that pays fitting tribute to a true hero, a woman who refused to compromise and who ultimately helped to secure for all of us a little bit more of the equality we all richly deserve. A+”

- *Edge Boston*

“OUTSTANDING...An absolutely amazing film, it demonstrates again what we learned here in Washington this past legislative session - showing the injustice of discrimination faced by same sex couples by personalizing it with real human faces and stories is the most effective tool for changing public opinion.”

- *Seattle Gay News*

“A heart-stopping documentary.”

- *Philadelphia Gay News*

“*Freeheld*...offers an up-close look at the tangible results of what can often seem an abstract debate.”

- *The Valley Advocate*

“*Freeheld* is the kind of documentary that incites audiences to sob and then take to the streets in protest A galvanizing experience.”

- *Windy City Times*

“Intimate and unflinching...sure to have a long lasting hold on viewers.”

- *Chicago Free Press*

“If ever there was a rallying cry for the full rights of marriage, it’s this excellent and truly heart-breaking film.”

- *Washington Blade*

“Hester’s story needs to be told because she’s an American hero. But it also needs to be told because most Americans, gay and straight, need to understand that what happened to Hester isn’t an aberration: it’s the norm and it’s legal.”

- *Q Salt Lake*