

Inside Scoop: 'Uprooting Addiction,' and understanding it

By Debra A. Aleksina

CORNWALL — Tory Estern Jadow has found a passion and purpose for her filmmaking.

"I love stories, especially ones that explore the human condition," said Jadow, a 20-year veteran of the New York City film industry who now lives in West Cornwall, where she spent much of her childhood.

She is a staunch advocate for people and for causes that she believes in.

During a recent interview at the Mountainside Café in Falls Village, the filmmaker, who works as a director, cinematographer and editor, reflected on how, at a young age, she felt at home behind the camera's lens. In those early years she absorbed as much knowledge about the industry as possible.

"I got to work with a lot of famous directors as a fly on the wall, on movies, TV shows, commercials, music videos, every genre you can think of. It was a great experience," she recalled.

"I rose through the ranks of the lighting department and became a gaffer [chief lighting technician], which was a terrific vantage point from which to observe."

Jadow's career as a gaffer took her to "Saturday Night Live," "Sesame Street" and many other shows as well as independent films throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 1986, she co-founded Brooklyn-based Northern Lights Lighting & Grip, Inc. After moving to Connecticut, she founded the Indian Mountain School film program in Lakeville (she served as the department chair from 2006 to 2014), regularly producing and shooting videos for the school's website.

Film business in her DNA

Artistic influence surrounded her as a youngster growing up in New York's Brooklyn Heights. Her father, Neil Estern, who died in July at age 93, was a renowned sculptor who had created monumental works, largely in bronze, for sites in Washington, D.C., Manhattan and Prospect Park, among other locales.

The filmmaker credits her father's work ethic as an inspiration.

"I often think back, when I start getting frustrated, about how he went to work every day, clocked in and did his work. It wasn't an option to just stand around and wait until something inspired him."

Her mother defied the gender norms of the day and worked full-time for CBS as a production designer. Her brother Evan, also in "the business," is an accomplished cinematographer (her other brother is a retired lawyer).

Jadow and Evan often collaborate on projects, and are currently working together on an impact piece for Women's Support Services in Sharon.

"The film business is in our family's DNA," Jadow said.

Since moving to the Northwest Corner, the filmmaker has immersed herself in a variety of local projects including a music video for the Harlem Line Band, a documentary for the Salisbury Historical Association, and a documentary she is currently editing for Hussey-Cotton Films about the artist Roy Lichtenstein.

Jadow, who earned a BA from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., eventually went back to school and got an MFA in creative writing from Bennington College in Vermont, moved to Litchfield County and started a family.

"I was doing a lot of writing at



PHOTO BY JOHN GRUEN

Cornwall documentary filmmaker Tory Jadow's new film takes an innovative look at the struggles of addicts.

that time but I missed the visual aspect of filmmaking."

She kept busy doing portrait photography to fill that void, and that soon turned into a business. As her two children got older, she started teaching film classes at Indian Mountain, which they attended. But she was eager to return to her original creative goal, which was "to make a film that mattered and resonated with me. Serendipitously, right around that time, I met Hope Payson."

Filmmaker, social worker

Jadow had been yearning to sink her teeth into a meaningful project. She collected notes on potential ideas, met with a host of people and followed leads, but "nothing felt quite right" — until Payson, a Winsted social worker, popped onto her radar.

Payson had reached out via email looking for a videographer to help create media for her presentations on trauma and addiction.

"I met with her and realized how passionate and committed she was," recalled Jadow. "She knew the subject inside out, not only as a trauma survivor who had struggled with her own addictions, but as a clinical therapist who had been working in the mental health and addiction field for decades."

Payton, said Jadow, had a burning desire to change the system, change attitudes, remove the stigma, make things better, "and her convictions were contagious."

'Uprooting Addiction'

The resulting film, "Uprooting Addiction," focuses on the unresolved trauma that often co-exists with physical addiction to drugs and alcohol. "We didn't want to portray active users; that film had already been made a few times."

Several of the six people from various walks of life who appear in the film are clients of Payson's who volunteered to talk about their experiences in recovery. Almost immediately, said Jadow, "I wanted to help her spread this different kind of message; that was the genesis of our collaboration."

Three years in the making, the documentary is now complete, and is being shown in commu-

nity screenings. The filmmaker also applied for inclusion of "Uprooting Addiction" at several national film festivals in the spring of 2020.

The scourge of addiction

Before embarking on the project, Jadow said she "didn't know how much I didn't know" about addiction. "My education on the topic kind of began with that first meeting with Hope in the spring of 2016. It was still a relatively quiet epidemic in America at that point."

Payson, on the other hand, was all too aware of the death and destruction that was raging through small communities across the country. Connecticut's Northwest Corner was no exception.

Fast forward to today, and the entire country is struggling with a drug overdose rate that has decreased life expectancy for the first time in decades. Overdoses, according to the film's directors, now kill more people than gun homicides and car crashes combined.

"[Payson] was experiencing losses first hand and was desperate to do something about it. We agreed that by using the medium of film we could reach more people, and hopefully make a difference. Our thinking was if we just save one life, or one family from the pain and heartbreak of an overdose, it will all be worth it."

The experience, said Jadow, has been an eye-opener. "From behind the camera, I was deeply moved by the stories of trauma and addiction. It was intense and heartbreaking, and yet there was a beautiful resilience, too, a willingness to work through the painful experiences and not let a rocky past define one's present."

Jadow said the film couldn't have been made without support from area nonprofits who helped fund it, but also from her core team including co-producer Payson, executive producer Edie Dao Schechter of Salisbury, her cinematographer Evan Estern and line producer Marina Kotchoubey.

"They were amazing and I'm so grateful to them for their passion, integrity and expertise," said Jadow. "We really went on a journey together and it's been quite a rewarding one."