



WORLD PREMIERE – 2022 SXSW FILM – DOCUMENTARY COMPETITION

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Logline

Spread across the country but connected through private Facebook groups, over 30,000 mothers in America—many from conservative, Christian backgrounds—fully accept their LGBTQ+ children. And they call themselves "mama bears" because while their love is warm and fuzzy, they fight ferociously to make the world kinder and safer for all LGBTQ+ people. MAMA BEARS explores the journeys of two mama bears and a young lesbian whose struggle for self-acceptance exemplifies why the mama bears movement is vitally important.

Synopsis

MAMA BEARS is an intimate, thought-provoking exploration of the journeys taken by **Sara Cunningham** and **Kimberly Shappley**, two “mama bears”—conservative, Christian mothers whose profound love for their LGBTQ+ children has turned them into fierce advocates for the entire queer community—and **Tammi Terrell Morris**, a young African American lesbian whose struggle for self-acceptance perfectly exemplifies why the mama bears are so vitally important. MAMA BEARS is the story of women who have allowed nearly every aspect of their lives to be completely reshaped by love. Although they may have grown up as fundamentalist Christians, these two mama bears are willing to risk losing friends, family, and faith communities to keep their children safe—even if it challenges their belief systems and rips their worlds apart.

Once Kimberly accepted her transgender daughter, **Kai**, she quickly transformed from a Tea Party Republican to an award-winning “LGBTQ Activist of the Year” as she joined forces with the ACLU and Equality Texas to battle the anti-trans bathroom bill that would prevent her child from using the girls’ bathroom in their small Texas hometown. Sara went from repeatedly forcing her gay son, **Parker**, to deny his sexuality to not only embracing him, but founding Free Mom Hugs, a national movement of mothers offering love, acceptance, and hugs to the LGBTQ+ community. With the support of the mama bears, founded by **Liz Dyer**, Tammi—who knew she was gay as a little girl—went from marrying a man to “earn the promise of heaven” to learning to live her truth as a proud lesbian.

Shot in a poetic, deeply intimate style, MAMA BEARS uses social media posts, home movies, photographs, personal journals, blogs, interviews, and cinema verité footage to explore the complex intersections of politics, religion, faith, and true, unconditional love.

More About MAMA BEARS

Website: mamabearsdoc.com

Social Media: @MamaBearsDoc on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), + [Twitter](#)

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Daresha Kyi is an Emmy Award–winning director who also writes and produces film and television in Spanish and English. She most recently directed a short documentary for Time Studios and the SpringHill Company called GEORGIA GOING BLUE about the Georgia-based grassroots organizations working to fight voter suppression in Georgia and throughout the country. She is currently in post-production on BLACK VOTERS MATTER, a feature documentary which chronicles Clif and April Albright’s and LaTosha Brown’s rise from aspiring acolytes to game changing civil rights leaders and the critical role they played in helping Georgia flip from red to blue in 2020 and 2021.

In 2018 Daresha was commissioned by the ACLU to direct TRANS IN AMERICA: TEXAS STRONG which garnered over 3.5 million views online, premiered at SXSW and went on to win the News & Documentary Emmy Award for Outstanding Short Documentary as well as two Webby Awards.

In 2017 she co-directed and co-produced CHAVELA a multiple award-winning Spanish language documentary about iconic, lesbian ranchera singer Chavela Vargas ranked the “Number One Latin American Documentary of the Decade” by CineArte magazine and produced DISPATCHES FROM CLEVELAND.

Daresha’s films have been funded by IDA, ITVS, NEA, NYSCA, and numerous others. A former fellow in the Firelight Media Documentary, Chicken & Egg Eggcelerator, Creative Capital, and A Blade of Grass programs, Daresha has an extensive background producing content for FX, WE, AMC, Telemundo, and FUSE, among other networks.

ABOUT THE PRODUCER

Laura Tatham is a creative producer committed to telling stories that highlight urgent social justice issues. She is currently producing the feature-length documentaries MAMA BEARS (2022 SXSW, ITVS) and WHAT WE CARRY and the short documentary BLACK BEAUTY. In the past six years she’s worked on numerous award-winning films—as associate producer on the feature-length documentaries CHAVELA (2017 Berlinale) and DISPATCHES FROM CLEVELAND (2017 CIFF) and as the NYC production office manager for AMERICA, a series of silent, narrative shorts (2019 Sundance). She was a 2020 Film Independent Documentary Lab and WIF/Sundance Institute Financing Intensive fellow.

Originally hailing from the world of book publishing, Laura has spent over a decade in both the corporate (Simon & Schuster) and nonprofit (Feminist Press) publishing sectors, working on

countless New York Times bestsellers, as well as Lambda Literary and Pulitzer Prize–winning works. Laura holds a master’s degree in American Literature from Drew University. She happily resides in Jersey City with her loving partner and their cat.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Amy Bench is a cinematographer and filmmaker whose work spans documentary and fiction films. As a cinematographer her credits include TRANS IN AMERICA (Emmy, 2019), UPROOTED (HBO Max, NAACP Image Award nomination, 2022), BAD AT DANCING (Silver Bear, Berlinale, 2015), HOLY HELL (Sundance, 2016) and RUNNING WITH BETO (SXSW, 2019). Her camera work has won an Emmy, 2 Webby awards, and has screened at festivals including Berlin, SXSW, Sundance, The New York Film Festival, and at MOMA/PS1. She is the Director of Photography on three features premiering at SXSW in March: Mama Bears (dir Daresha Kyi- Chavela), Lover Beloved (dir Michael Tully- Ping Pong Summer), and Shouting Down Midnight (dir Gretchen Stoeltje-Bionic Beauty Salon).

Additionally, Amy directed the short documentary MORE THAN I REMEMBER, which received the IDA Enterprise Fund from the International Documentary Association and is premiering at SXSW in March 2022. Her 2019 film A LINE BIRDS CANNOT SEE won awards at SXSW, Cleveland, Oak Cliff Film Festival, Bend Film Festival, and IndieGrits, and is currently featured online on THE NEW YORKER.

She is a member of the International Collective of Female Cinematographers (ICFC), Documentary Cinematographers Alliance (DCA), and the ICOSA Collective.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

As a queer, politically progressive African American woman, I never imagined I'd have much in common with conservative, white, Christian women. The stances many took on social issues near and dear to my heart were often anathema to me and, to be honest, I considered such women my political adversaries — until I learned about the mama bears. I'm deeply intrigued by the journeys these women have taken from living as comfortable members of the not-so-silent-majority to becoming not just minorities, but even social outcasts. In the face of religious, familial, and social judgment and condemnation, they opt to do the hard, often painful work of learning to view the world through fresh eyes. It's an amazing, heroic journey into the depths of the "dark night of the soul." But man! When they emerge into the light, many become fierce warriors who fight tooth and nail for the rights of the very communities they once abhorred.

When we began filming in 2017, there were a little over 2,000 members in the mama bears' private Facebook groups. Now they are over 30,000 strong! So many mothers have become such ferocious advocates for people they once scorned as unnatural "abominations" that you have to wonder what could possibly cause such radical transformation? *Only love*. Love for their LGBTQ+ children forces these mothers to challenge, dissect, and dismantle their core beliefs and even abandon their churches in search of deeper, more meaningful truths. Love shatters their illusions, expands their hearts, and leads them to embrace not only their own offspring and the entire LGBTQ+ community, but all marginalized people.

I believe I was chosen to tell this story not only because I am a versatile storyteller with numerous awards for my narrative and documentary films and television programs, but because I am a true believer in the all-encompassing power of love. In fact, I consider myself a "Warrior of Love" who believes it is my responsibility to do everything within my power to shift the balance in our world away from death, destruction, and hatred and toward stronger, deeper love. It is my deepest hope that MAMA BEARS will inspire viewers to greater acceptance through the examples set by these humble but powerful women and their all-consuming, soul shaking LOVE. It is a profound honor to use my art to amplify their message of love and inclusion and help spread the mama bears' movement.

– Daresha Kyi, February 2022

CREDITS

Director

Daresha Kyi

Producers

Laura Tatham

Daresha Kyi

Executive Producers

Sally Jo Fifer

Lois Vossen

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Scotch Ellis Loring

Chris Panizzon

Kathryn M. Moseley

Tiffany Boyle

Elsa Ramo

Supervising Producer

Michael Ehrenzweig

Director of Photography

Amy Bench

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Hajer S. I. Salem

Kelly Creedon

Co-Editor

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Original Music by

Gil Talmi

Associate Producers

Lois Saint-Jacques

Artemis Fannin

Featuring (in alphabetical order)

Parker Cunningham

Sara Cunningham

Liz Dyer

Tenita Lewis Artry

Shadae Miles

Terrell Morris

Timothy "TJ" Morris

Esther Kai Shappley

Kaleb Shappley

Kimberly Shappley
Tammi Terrell Morris

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Maximina Juson

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