

**Automat Pictures
Presents**

COMMITMENT TO LIFE

A Film by Jeffrey Schwarz

USA / 115 min. / 2023

OFFICIAL SELECTION

Santa Barbara International Film Festival (World Premiere)

www.commitmenttolife.com

“...intensely moving and inspiring...”
Film Threat

“...an affecting, emotional oral history...”
Bay Area Reporter

“...a reminder that the struggle is not over...”
Eye for Film

“...a brilliant and bracing account...”
GED Magazine

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LOGLINE

Against a rich Hollywood backdrop, “Commitment to Life” documents the true story of the fight against HIV/AIDS in Los Angeles — and how an intrepid group of people living with HIV/AIDS, doctors, movie stars, studio moguls and activists changed the course of the epidemic.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

In the early 1980s, a young doctor at UCLA reports a strange immune disorder among gay men — the world’s first warning sign of the epidemic to come. In the decades that followed, Los Angeles would play a critical role in the battle against HIV/AIDS as people with AIDS, doctors, movie stars, studio moguls and activists came together to change the path of the epidemic and how the world saw it. “Commitment to Life” documents this incredible drama — Rock Hudson and Easy-E, Elizabeth Taylor and David Geffen, the Red Ribbon and “Philadelphia,” ACT UP and AIDS Project Los Angeles — through the stories of those who lived through it. Using first-person interviews, rare archival and activist footage, and scenes from star-studded Hollywood fundraisers, “Commitment to Life” resurrects one of the epidemic’s most compelling histories — in order that we never repeat it.

LONG SYNOPSIS

In the early 1980s, a young doctor at UCLA reported a strange immune disorder among gay men — the world’s first warning sign of the epidemic to come. In the decades that followed, AIDS would ravage the city and kill nearly forty million people globally. Within Los Angeles, it would trigger a fight for survival and propel disenfranchised communities to demand — and secure — political power. While the history of HIV/AIDS in cities like New York and San Francisco may be more familiar, no city responded quite like Los Angeles.

“Commitment to Life” documents the story of Los Angeles’s central — and oft-unsung — role in fighting a global epidemic. As HIV/AIDS began to devastate Los Angeles, an intrepid group of people living with HIV/AIDS, doctors, movie stars, studio moguls and activists came together to change the path of the epidemic and how the world saw it. When New York activists took to the streets, Los Angeles took to the screens. The city responded to the epidemic by crafting a human element, and changing the culture the best way it knows how — through story. L.A. helped provide vital information, give a face to the disease, and craft a narrative that would resonate far from the coast.

And in the center of the storm was AIDS Project Los Angeles, a committed group of activists who helped care for the sick and dying, while at the same time lobbied those in Hollywood to contribute to the fight. APLA brought together A-list stars like Elizabeth Taylor and people with AIDS to provide resources for care, research and activism. APLA’s star-studded Commitment to Life gala, the first major fundraiser for AIDS, was instrumental in focusing Hollywood’s energy on defeating not only the disease but the stigma surrounding it. AIDS Walk Los Angeles, the first of its kind, brought thousands of people into the streets in a public display of support for people living with AIDS.

Using newly filmed interviews, never-before-seen clips from APLA's gala fundraising events, rare archival footage, and long-forgotten PSAs, "Commitment to Life" reconstructs the virus' devastating march and the city that rose up to fight it. Like the virus itself, the story winds through gated communities and neighborhoods of color, government offices and university labs, hospital suites and studio soundstages to tell a story of courage and sacrifice — as well as one of discrimination and unequal treatment.

Today, Los Angeles is a model for the nation — a pioneer in rights and protections, a leader in identification and treatment, a sprawling, multilingual, community-specific, intersectional network of care. "Commitment to Life" shows the world how it was done, and the important work still to come.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Jeffrey Schwarz

When I came out to my mom in the early 1990s, the first thing she said to me was, "Please don't get sick." At that time, the AIDS epidemic was raging, and tens of thousands of people around the world had already been lost. AIDS was still a death sentence, and individuals with HIV/AIDS faced rampant discrimination, isolation, and stigma. For me, the thrill of coming out was intertwined with fear and anxiety about the virus.

After moving to Los Angeles in 1995, I attended my first AIDS Walk. I saw thousands of people marching to support those living with HIV as well as honor loved ones taken too soon. I learned about AIDS Project Los Angeles and the critical role this organization played from the earliest days of the epidemic. Seeing how the Los Angeles community rose to meet the challenge of HIV/AIDS was empowering and filled me with pride about how far we've come. It was around this time that advances in treatment made it possible for those infected with HIV to lead healthy, productive lives. The tide was beginning to turn, and no city responded to the crisis quite like Los Angeles did.

As a filmmaker, I have told stories about the LGBTQ+ community through the lives of some of its trailblazers. But no story has the epic sweep, heart wrenching drama, and galvanizing emotion as that of the AIDS crisis in Los Angeles. It's a story of how people from all walks of life came together to show love to the sick and the dying when our own government turned its back on them. It's a story of how we organized and built critical infrastructure to take care of and protect each other. It's about how BIPOC communities who were disproportionately affected demanded to be seen and created their own institutions. It's about how members of the Hollywood community used their privilege and access to power to raise money and fight the stigma associated with AIDS. And most of all, it's about how the LGBTQ+ community found its voice and showed the world the best of who we are as a people.

It's a story that has yet to be fully told, and it's a film that demanded to be made. "Commitment to Life" is that film.

"Commitment to Life" profiles some of the courageous individuals who stepped forward in a fight for survival. People like Nancy Cole, one of the founders of AIDS Project Los Angeles, who helped provide vital services in those dark early days and was one of the first women in LA to go public about having AIDS. Or Phill Wilson, who, when he and his partner Chris Brownlie were faced with their own HIV diagnosis, became full time activists and helped defeat the notorious Prop 64, which would have placed people with HIV in internment camps. There's Brenda Frieberg, who when both of her sons were diagnosed with AIDS, traveled to Washington to lobby for access to drugs that could save their lives. Or Jewel Thais-Williams, owner of Catch One disco, who helped start the Minority AIDS Project to address the needs of the African-American community. And there was Elizabeth Taylor, who used her celebrity to advocate for people with AIDS and inspired the Hollywood community to do the same.

Forty years after the start of the epidemic, there is still no cure for HIV. Our young people are vulnerable to infection, and we are still facing stigma and silence around HIV. “Commitment to Life” will help to energize and engage a new generation by bringing our history to life. It will show them how anyone can make a difference and inspire them to get into the fight, because AIDS is not over.

CREDITS

Director – Jeffrey Schwarz
Producer - Aimée Flaherty, p.g.a.
Producer- Jeffrey Schwarz, p.g.a.
Executive Producer – Ron Sylvester
Co-Executive Producer – Robert James Wood II
Co-Producer- Taki Oldham
Associate Producer – Michael Stabile
Composer – Allyson Newman
(with the participation of Gay Men’s Chorus of Los Angeles)
Cinematographer – Adam Jason Finmann
Editor - Jeffrey Schwarz
Supervising Producer for APLA Health – Craig Bowers
Executive Producer for APLA Health – Craig E. Thompson

KEY INTERVIEWEES

Jewel Thais-Williams - Co-founder, Minority AIDS Project
Phill Wilson - HIV/AIDS Activist
Dr. Michael Gottlieb - Physician and Former APLA Board Member
Rev. Steve Pieters – Retired Minister, Metropolitan Community Church
Karamo Brown - *Queer Eye* Cast Member & HIV/AIDS Educator
Bruce Vilanch - Writer and Comedian
Stephen Bennett - Former Executive Director, APLA
Bill Misenhimer - Former Executive Director, APLA
Jeffrey Katzenberg – Studio Executive and Former APLA Board Member
Robert Contreras - Co-Founder, Bienestar
Torie Osborn - Former Executive Director, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
Bamby Salcedo - President, TransLatin Coalition

FILMMAKER BIOS

JEFFREY SCHWARZ – Producer / Director / Editor

Jeffrey Schwarz is an Emmy Award-winning producer, director and editor based in Los Angeles. His previous documentaries include the “Boulevard! A Hollywood Story,” which premiered at Outfest Los Angeles in 2021, “The Fabulous Allan Carr,” “Tab Hunter Confidential,” the Emmy Award-winning HBO Documentary Films’ “Vito,” “I Am Divine,” “Wrangler: Anatomy of an Icon,” and the 2007 AFI Fest Documentary Audience Award winner “Spine Tingler! The William Castle Story.” He is also a producer of studio Blu-ray and DVD content, and original television programming through his company, Automat Pictures. Hailed as an “EPK samurai” by Variety, he has produced content on major studio releases for directors such as Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, Jonathan Demme, John Waters, Wes Craven, Rob Reiner, Barry Sonnenfeld, Paul Verhoeven, Chris Columbus, and the Coen Brothers. Schwarz appeared in The Advocate’s “Out 100” in 2013, and was the recipient of the 2015 Frameline Award, which honors those who have made a major contribution to LGBT representation in film, television, and the media arts.

AIMÉE FLAHERTY – Producer

Aimée Flaherty is a highly experienced and accomplished freelance film producer known for her exceptional leadership and communication skills, as well as her ability to handle every aspect of film production, from story development to post-production management. Aimée has produced a wide range of documentary and narrative feature films, both domestically and internationally. She has worked on such films as “Moulin Rouge,” “Killing the Colorado,” “Street Gang,” “Light Girls,” “Tabloid,” and “This Is It.” Having received her education from Emerson College and FAMU in the Czech Republic, Aimée's passion for filmmaking began in her early 20s, and she has dedicated her career to the industry ever since.

RON SYLVESTER – Executive Producer

For over 35 years Ron has been producing and directing a wide range of video and film projects through his production and publicity company RS/tv, Inc. The core of the RS/tv business is entertainment publicity and he has worked with every major film studio on theatrical and digital campaigns. Ron also has produced and directed online entertainment content for IMDb.com at major events like Comic Con, Sundance, and Toronto International Film Festival, and has directed many live online streaming events. In addition, Ron and his team have managed the media logistic of the Primetime Emmy’s Red carpet and backstage press center for the last 6 year. He has a long history of nonprofit work in the community, most notably as the President and Chairman of the Board of the LGBTQ Center of Long Beach from 2009 – 2016, the Executive Producer of the Long Beach LGBTQ Film Festival (QFilms) for 8 years and served on the Board of Directors for APLA Health from 2017 – 2022.

TAKI OLDHAM - Co-Producer

Taki Oldham worked as a documentary film producer and director in Australia before coming to the US in 2013 to co-produce Robert Kenner’s “Merchants of Doubt.” Since then, he has worked on projects including Jeffrey Schwarz’s “Boulevard! A Hollywood Story” (2021), “The Fabulous Allan Carr” (2017), the Academy Award short-listed “Command and Control,” (2016),

and the Emmy Award-nominated “Bing Crosby Rediscovered” (2014). Taki was Executive Producer and co-director of the Netflix Original “The Confession Killer,” which premiered in 2019.

ALLYSON NEWMAN - Composer

Allyson Newman gained her Masters degree in composition from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Her first feature film “Watermark” screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 2003 after which she then moved to LA to study film scoring at USC. Allyson has been awarded both an Australia Council for the Arts Grant and an Australian Guild of Screen Composers Award for her work in film music. Allyson scored the multi award winning documentary feature “Limited Partnership” that premiered on PBS Independent Lens in 2015. Allyson then went on to score the Emmy nominated (2016) media series “Her Story,” and in 2017 participated in the BMI Conducting Workshop. Following this Allyson scored “Kusama-Infinity” which premiered at Sundance 2018 and was released theatrically around the world. In 2019 Allyson collaborated with Oscar Winning directors Jeffrey Friedman and Rob Epstein to score “State of Pride” which opened the SXSW Film Festival. Also that year, Allyson scored “A Woman’s Work: The NFL’s Cheerleader Problem” which had its premiere at Tribeca Film Festival, as well as “Making Waves: The Art of Cinematic Sound” which premiered at Cannes Film Festival. Currently you can hear Allyson’s work on “The L Word Generation Q” which plays on Showtime, “First Day” on HULU and “Partner Track” on Netflix. Allyson is also a proud board member and part of the leadership team for the Alliance for Woman Film Composers.

GAY MEN’S CHORUS OF LOS ANGELES - Choir

Under the leadership of Executive Director & Producer Lou Spisto and Music Director & Conductor Ernest H. Harrison, Gay Men’s Chorus of Los Angeles has continued to garner acclaim for artistic excellence while remaining deeply rooted in service to the Los Angeles community and beyond by promoting civil rights, tolerance and acceptance through music. Founded in 1979 during the emergence of the gay rights movement, GMCLA has spread its message of love and acceptance with concerts across the globe and has raised its collective voice in the struggle for equality, social justice, the fight against the AIDS crisis, the fight for marriage equality and all those seeking to find their own voice. In addition to a series of concerts at Alex Theater and Walt Disney Concert Hall, GMCLA has performed at Carnegie Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, the Oscars, the Film Independent Spirit Awards with more than 7 million online views. The Chorus has toured internationally, and through its YouTube channel and streaming concerts has reached tens of thousands of fans all over the world. Critics have proclaimed the Chorus “inspired” and “expressive, innovative and utterly moving,” and hailed GMCLA for presenting “meaningful entertainment.” GMCLA is deeply honored to participate in this film which honors and celebrates our past as we continue to lift our voices toward a vibrant future.