

THE NEW YORKER
DOCUMENTARY

PUBLIC DEFENDER

Restoring
humanity, one
relationship at
a time.

A FILM BY
ANDREA KALIN

Produced
in partnership
with the
Pulitzer Center



EDITOR Thomas Niles • DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Ethan Oser • SENIOR PRODUCER Kate Woodsome • MUSIC Mike Sayre
PRODUCTION MANAGER James Mirabello • MOTION GRAPHICS Luis Portillo • SOUND EDITOR & MIXER Cheryl Ottenritter, Rick Rush
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER Richard Schiff • PRODUCED BY Ethan Oser • DIRECTED, WRITTEN & PRODUCED BY Andrea Kalin

WWW.PUBLICDEFENDERFILM.COM

SPARK MEDIA Stone Soup

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Logline (26 words):

PUBLIC DEFENDER uncovers the surprising power of connection and offers a timely, unflinching look at how humanity can endure — even in the most fractured of times.

Short Synopsis (72 words):

Justice isn't easy. Empathy is even harder.

For over 45 years, Heather Shaner has fought for justice, defending those who can't afford a lawyer and earning the trust of countless clients. But when she's assigned to represent January 6th rioters, her unwavering empathy and commitment to second chances face the ultimate test. As the country grapples with that day's lasting impact, Heather works to bridge deep political divides—one client at a time.



Long Synopsis (361 words):

Meet Heather Shaner, a feisty, blue-haired public defender in Washington, D.C., who's spent over 45 years fighting for those who can't afford a lawyer. Known for her compassion and fierce advocacy, Heather has helped thousands of clients steady their lives and move forward. But when the events of January 6th shake the country, her gift for empathy faces one of its greatest tests.

At first, Heather wants nothing to do with those charged in the riot. Yet when the Federal Defenders Office asks her to take on several of the cases, she reluctantly agrees, driven by a curiosity about how ordinary people can be drawn into misinformation and fear.

She's assigned to represent Jack Griffith, a charismatic young content creator, and Annie Howell, a single mother and painter. Both arrive in Heather's orbit grappling with their own inner stories, believing at the time that they were acting to protect democracy, only to learn the consequences were far more complicated.

As Heather gets to know them, her initial judgments begin to shift. She discovers that Annie, overwhelmed by worry for her son and her future, became swept up in narratives that made her feel under threat. Jack, an aspiring musician and game developer, shared provocative views online but reveals a gentler, more layered side in person. Heather challenges each of them to reflect more deeply, encouraging them to engage with new ideas and perspectives along the way.

Their journeys diverge. Annie works to rebuild her life and confronts her involvement with growing clarity and regret. Jack's path is less certain, he expresses remorse in court but later drifts back toward the online circles that shaped him.

Heather herself faces criticism from multiple angles: some question why she would defend people whose actions they condemn; others challenge her attempts to broaden her clients' horizons. She stands in the middle, committed to the belief that everyone deserves representation and that accountability and understanding are not opposites. With humanity and unexpected moments of lightness, Public Defender explores what it takes to rebuild trust one relationship at a time. At its heart, it is a story about listening, learning, and rebuilding trust in unexpected places.



DATA SHEET

Executive Producer: **Richard Schiff**

Directed and Written by: **Andrea Kalin**

Country of Production: **United States**

World Premiere: **Mountainfilm (May 2024)**

Genre: **Documentary**

Film Specs: **51 minutes & 40 minutes / 16:9 / 5.1 or Stereo / Color**

Language: **English**

Production Company: **Spark Media**

Produced by: **Andrea Kalin, p.g.a. and Ethan Oser**

Editor: **Thomas Niles**

Director of Photography: **Ethan Oser**

Senior Producer: **Kate Woodsome**

Original Music by: **Mike Sayre**

“The Red and the Blue”

Written and Performed by: **Jordan Hart**



Produced in partnership with the Pulitzer Center



Public Defender: EPK

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I'm Andrea Kalin, Director of **Public Defender**.

I'm thrilled to share our new documentary with you. The film follows Heather Shaner, a longtime Washington, D.C. public defender who represents several January 6 defendants, people whose beliefs and experiences often sit worlds apart from her own. What emerges isn't a political story as much as a human one: about responsibility, justice, and what it takes to talk and listen across profound divides.

What we've seen at festival and community screenings is that audiences lean in. They want to understand how we get past the polarization that saturates our country. They want space to reflect, discuss and connect. And this documentary opens that door.

Thank you for everything you're doing to bring independent voices to your communities.

Andrea Kalin
Director / Producer / Writer
December 2025

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

I'm Richard Schiff, Executive Producer of **Public Defender**, and I'm honored to share this story because it speaks to something we urgently need right now: a path back to one another. The film follows public defender Heather Shaner as she represents January 6th defendants, people whose beliefs stand in stark contrast to her own, and yet they still manage to find trust and humanity anyway. In a moment when so much feels divided, **Public Defender** offers something rare: a space for compassion, dialogue, and the willingness to step outside our comfort zones to uncover understanding in places most of us would never expect.

With appreciation,

Richard Schiff
Executive Producer
December 2025

FILMMAKER BIOS

RICHARD SCHIFF (Executive Producer)

Richard Schiff is an award winning actor and director and published writer. Awards include an Emmy along with three Emmy nominations; two SAG awards and an Ovation Award and two Backstage Awards for theater work. He is best known for his role of Toby Ziegler on the acclaimed WEST WING and for Dr. Glassman on the mega hit THE GOOD DOCTOR as well as BALLERS, COUNTERPART, MANHATTAN and dozens of others. He has starred or appeared in WAKANDA FOREVER, THE LOST WORLD JURASSIC PARK, CLEMENCY, MAN OF STEEL and RAY among more than 50 films. He's starred on both Broadway and The West End in London among many theater credits. He founded and was Artistic Director of Manhattan Repertory Theater in New York City. He is active in politics and social causes and is on the board of The Creative Coalition and Counsel for a Liveable World and an active fundraiser for the ACLU and Public Counsel. He has written columns for The Independent and Huffington Post and his first published poetry will be out this summer.

ANDREA KALIN (Producer / Director / Writer)

Andrea Kalin is an award-winning filmmaker and founder of Spark Media, a production company dedicated to programs with a social conscience. Kalin's storytelling has earned her over 100 awards and honors, including a Primetime Emmy, two Gracies, a CHRIS Award, and Golden Globe and WGA nominations. Her work has been shown theatrically and at film festivals around the world, including Hot Docs, Woodstock Film Festival, and Human Rights Watch Film Festival, and is distributed by global broadcasters and streaming platforms such as Smithsonian, MTV, HBO, PBS's WORLD Channel, Amazon, Apple TV, Tubi and Deutsche Welle. Her latest film, SCATTERING CJ, premiered at the Camden International Film Festival and aired on PBS in September 2022. She has produced 12 feature documentaries and scores of advocacy shorts. Kalin's debut documentary, PARTNERS OF THE HEART, aired on PBS's "American Experience," won the Erik Barnouw Award for Best History Doc, and is part of the NEH50, a list of the most culturally significant projects funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Kalin seeks unexpected, gripping human stories that shape who we are and how we see our world. Her spirited storytelling inspires audiences and sparks imagination.

Filmography:

Public Defender (2024), *Scattering CJ* (2019), *First Lady of the Revolution* (2016), *Red Lines* (2014), *No Evidence of Disease* (2013), *Worlds of Sound* (2009), *Soul of a People* (2009), *Allah Made Me Funny* (2008), *Prince Among Slaves* (2007), *The Pact* (2006), *Partners of the Heart* (2003)

ETHAN OSER (Director of Photography / Producer)

Ethan Oser is a nimble filmmaker with a decade of experience telling perspective-shifting stories. With Spark Media since 2013, he's helped bring many of the company's award-winning documentary films to life. Most recently, he was the director of photography, associate producer, and assistant editor on SCATTERING CJ. He was also an assistant director of photography and editor on FIRST LADY OF THE REVOLUTION and provided photography and assistant editing on RED LINES. Oser's work has screened at international festivals and been broadcast and streamed worldwide on PBS, HBO, Amazon, Apple TV, National Geographic, Tubi and FreeSpeech TV. Oser has a BA in Journalism and Mass Communication

Public Defender: EPK

from George Washington University and combines fact-checking with empathy to embody compassion and integrity in his work.

THOMAS NILES (Editor)

Thomas Niles uses his craft to draw a deeper, more personal, and intimate side out of the films he edits. He came to prominence with the kinetic Baltimore dirt bike documentary *12 O'CLOCK BOYS*, which premiered at the 2013 SXSW Film Festival, won Best Emerging Artist at Hot Docs 2013, and was featured on Paste Magazine's 100 Best Documentaries of All Time. Niles also edited the Sundance Award-winning nonfiction short *GHOSTS OF SUGAR LAND*. Produced by Field of Vision, it went on to be distributed by Netflix, a Cinema Eye Honor winner, and a part of the 2020 Oscars shortlist. Niles's first narrative feature, *HARKA*, about an illegal gas-selling merchant in Tunisia, premiered at Cannes 2022, winning the award for best performance for its lead actor, Adam Bessa.

His latest film, *THE BODY POLITIC*, was funded through an ITVS grant by PBS and premiered in competition at the 2023 Sheffield Film Festival. Niles is the editor of *NIGHT SCHOOL*, directed by Emmy Award-winning director Andrew Cohen, which premiered at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival and went on to win the Grand Prize and Audience Choice Award at the 2016 Heartland Film Festival. Other documentary projects include *KAREN DALTON: IN MY OWN TIME*, executive produced by Wim Wenders, and *PHANTOM COWBOYS*, which premiered in competition at the 2018 Tribeca Film Festival and won best Documentary Feature at the 2018 Lighthouse International Film Festival, 2018 Sidewalk Film Festival, and 2018 New Hampshire Film Festival.

KATE WOODSOME (Senior Producer)

Kate Woodsome is an award-winning journalist studying the relationship between mental health and democracy. As a writer, filmmaker and media reformer, she is exposing the social and political forces — and narratives — that keep people isolated and unwell.

While at *The Washington Post*, Woodsome won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service with colleagues covering the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, pioneered a mental health column and managed a short documentary unit. Her work has been honored with the Ben Bradlee Award for Courage in Journalism, an Edward R. Murrow Award and honors from the White House News Photographers Association.

Woodsome left *The Post* in Dec. 2023, no longer willing to normalize the burnout, trauma and moral injury pervasive in the industry. She founded the Invisible Threads Project, dedicated to the belief that a more educated, empathetic electorate can create the conditions for collective wellbeing. She pursues this mission through trauma-informed storytelling workshops for personal and systemic change, educational initiatives and the [Invisible Threads](#) Substack exposing the ties between personal and political health. Woodsome is also a fellow at Georgetown University, dedicated to efforts to transform cycles of intergenerational trauma into cycles of intergenerational wellbeing. This chapter deepens work that Woodsome has done for more than two decades — from reporting on an authoritarian regime in post-genocide Cambodia, to the decline of democracy in Hong Kong, to the 2021 U.S. insurrection.

MIKE SAYRE (Composer)

Mike Sayre is a composer and performer based in New York's Hudson Valley. A lifelong fascination with the world of sound led him to film scoring, sound art, ambient music and performing. He strives to fuse a classical musician's training and nuance with a modern technological approach, drawing inspiration from old and new. Sayre was selected as the EtM/ConEd Composer-in-Residence at the Queens Museum for 2018, and has worked on multiple independent film and web productions in the New York area. His work has also been featured on WNYC's New Sounds. Before striking out as a freelancer, he worked as a music technician for programs on Showtime and CBS. He also creates music for nonprofit and corporate clients, including Sesame Workshop, Equinox Fitness, Grace Institute, and Waitlist Zero. Sayre holds a Bachelor of Music and Media from Ball State University and a Master of Music from Rutgers University.

JORDAN HART (Singer / Songwriter, *The Red and the Blue*)

Jordan Hart is a Gold-certified producer/singer-songwriter living in Toronto, Canada. His sound is often categorized as Contemporary/Roots with influences of Soul. Featured on YouTube performance platforms Mahogany and Alex Rainbird's 'Best of Folk' series, as well as on Canadian mainstream television channels CTV, ETalk, Breakfast TV and Entertainment Tonight, Hart's critically acclaimed debut EP 'Only Pieces of the Truth' struck a chord amongst tastemaker, and now has over 10 million streams across platforms. The emotive cinematic soundscapes of his EP made their way from studio to screen. His single, 'Whole,' was featured on Grey's Anatomy, and 'Freedom' was featured on the award-winning animated short, 'Free Bird,' which doubles as the song's music video.

DOCUMENTARY PARTICIPANTS

HEATHER SHANER

Washington, DC

Heather Shaner is well known within the Washington, DC legal community as the septuagenarian who wears blue bangs, hugs prosecutors, and babysits for her clients. She is deeply empathetic, but being asked to defend Americans who joined the Jan. 6 Capitol attack forced Shaner to reckon with her own anger and hurt over the 2021 insurrection in her hometown. She is passionate about inspiring her clients to be curious and learn about history, not just to influence their verdict in court but to open their hearts and minds long after their legal trials are over.

JACK JESSE GRIFFITH

Gallatin, TN

Charismatic and eccentric, Jack Jesse Griffith is an aspiring musician, video game developer and social media influencer who goes by the pseudonym “Liberty Dragon.” Decorated with red and blue-dyed hair, large hanging dragon earrings and a colorful wardrobe, Griffith stands out in a crowd. After being sentenced to three months of home confinement, followed by three years of probation, he still believes the 2020 election was stolen from former President Donald Trump and hopes to seize on his January 6 notoriety to market a Trump shooter video game he’s producing.

ANNIE HOWELL

Wilkes-Barre, PA

A whip-smart Pennsylvanian with a knack for politicking, Annie Howell's world fell apart when she joined the Jan. 6 Capitol attack. She lost her job and home after serving 60 days in jail for her role in the insurrection. She divides her time between a motel room and the library, fighting for custody of her son and trying to rebuild her life. In the months leading up to January 6, 2021, Howell says she was driven by fear. Between right-wing media and friends and family, she says she was convinced that America was becoming a socialist dystopia. Emerging from the political trance is painful but rewarding as Howell sheds old relationships and makes new ones, including with herself.

DISTRIBUTION

THE NEW YORKER (Streaming)

October 2024

SCRIPPS NETWORKS (Broadcast)

November 2024

ROXIE THEATER (San Francisco, CA Theatrical)

September 6-12, 2024

WETA / PBS (Washington, DC Regional Broadcast)

January 6, 2025

NETA / PBS / WORLD CHANNEL (National Broadcast)

January 2026

FESTIVAL SCREENINGS

Community Stories Film Festival

Washington, DC

Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival

Hot Springs, AR

Sofia International Film Festival

Sofia, Bulgaria

Dialogues Documentary Festival

Milwaukee, WI

Winter Park Film Festival

Winter Park, CO

Rhode Island International Film Festival

Providence, RI

MOM Film Fest

New York, NY

Best Short Documentary

Indy Shorts International Film Festival

Indianapolis, IN

Liberty Films Festival

Athens, Greece

Bend Film Festival

Bend, OR

WomenCARE Virtual FilmFest

Soquel, CA

Global Peace Film Festival

Orlando, FL

SPE Media Fest

Reno, NN

Sidewalk Film Festival

Birmingham, AL

Life + Liberty Award

Frozen River Film Festival

Winona, MN

Best Mid-Length Documentary

San Francisco Jewish Film Festival

San Francisco, CA

La Femme International Film Festival

Los Angeles, CA

DC/DOX

Washington, DC

Rocky Mountain Women's Film Festival

Colorado Springs, CO

Mountainfilm

Telluride, CO

Moving Mountains Award

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

"I can't think of a better example of public service than Heather... [Her] story speaks directly to the heart of our community."

– Devin Karambelas, President of TV Programming & Operations at WETA-TV

"Amazing film! Public Defender is all about actually listening to the story of somebody who you feel judgemental about and even sometimes even feel hate based on what they've done or said, but listening regardless."

– Cheryl Strayed, New York Times #1 Bestselling Author, Podcast Host

"In this day and age... we are all so quick to go to black and white or feel like it has to be on either extreme. This film for me is expanding this gray space... It's really given me more tolerance to have these conversations that I definitely would not have pursued nor had the tolerance to sit through before. I feel so grateful for that because these relationships are important to me. My community is important to me. I just want to be a more tolerant person & this film has not only inspired me to be but renewed my faith in myself that I can be."

– Becca, Screening Attendee, Bozeman, MT

"Public Defender humanizes some of those who were arrested for their involvement on January 6th in nuanced ways without minimizing the violence or impact of those events. It also challenges viewers (especially liberal ones) who embrace a 'restorative justice' approach to apply that same framework to some of the January 6th participants."

– Ann Reidy, Bridging Entertainment Labs

"Healing our nation's deepest divides starts with building relationships across differences, rooted in trust. Public Defender provides a powerful example of how to foster meaningful connections, even with those we may condemn, while staying committed to accountability. This film has the potential to spark thoughtful and impactful dialogue among faith communities, many of which have been strained by today's polarized political climate."

– Rollie Olson, Interfaith America Program Manager - Democracy & Bridgebuilding

"It's a complicated film and it makes you feel uncomfortable in all the right ways and I think that's really a testament to the filmmakers."

– Ron Steslow, Creator & Host of *Politology*

BOOK DRIVE IMPACT CAMPAIGN

Taking impact into action, and harnessing Heather's belief in the power of education, we launched a film-inspired book drive to bring positive change and cultivate empathy and unity. This project aims to create a ripple effect across communities, fostering meaningful conversations and deeper understanding.

In the spirit of "turn pages, open minds", the *Public Defender* book drive has collected thousands of lightly-used paperback books at each public screening of the documentary. Donations to date have benefitted:

Colorado State Library

DC Books to Prisons

Free Minds

Friends of San Quentin Prison Library

UC Books to Prisoners

Providence Books Through Bars

Books to Prisons (Alabama)

Burdock Book Collective

Florida Coalition for Higher Education in Prison

Wisconsin Books to Prisoners

PARTNERS

Pulitzer Center

www.pulitzercenter.org

The Pulitzer Center has a bold vision: to be the venue for the world's most innovative and consequential reporting, with journalism as the key element for mobilizing society through audience engagement strategies.

Founded in 2006, the Center is an essential source of support for enterprise reporting in the United States and across the globe. The thousands of journalists and educators who are part of our networks span more than 80 countries. Our work reaches tens of millions of people each year through our news-media partners and an audience-centered strategy of global and regional engagement.

We believe that people and communities who actively engage with systemic challenges will find solutions together. By supporting journalists as they conduct in-depth investigations, produce compelling stories, and engage diverse audiences, we create a ripple effect of world-changing impact. The result? Policy reforms, public awareness, and community empowerment.

Interfaith America

www.interfaithamerica.org

Religious diversity is a foundational American strength. Interfaith America is building a nation that achieves that promise for the common good. IA's mission is to inspire, equip, and connect leaders and institutions to unlock the potential of America's religious diversity.

Interfaith America was founded in 2002 based on the idea that religious difference should serve as a bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division. Since that time, Interfaith America has evolved from a small Chicago-based nonprofit to the nation's premier interfaith organization.

Utilizing a research-backed approach, Interfaith America works across higher education, racial equity, health, workplace, bridge building, democracy, and technology. IA provides consultation, training, curricula, and resources to positively engage religious diversity. IA values collaboration, developing robust institutional partnerships to leverage interfaith cooperation as a proven approach to solving challenges.

Living Room Conversations
livingroomconversations.org

Living Room Conversations (LRC) connects people within communities and across differences through dialogue to build trust and understanding.

LRC believes belonging starts with conversation and is committed to designing the resources and opportunities that allow everyone to feel seen and heard while celebrating the differences that make us unique.

LRC hopes for a world in which people who have fundamental differences of opinion and backgrounds learn to work together with respect – and even joy – to realize the vibrant future we all desire for ourselves and our families.

The Media & Peacebuilding Project
mediapeaceproject.smpa.gwu.edu

While the rapid growth of global media and communication should ideally increase understanding amongst diverse groups, research suggests that the opposite may be happening. In the United States, news is increasingly shared inside partisan information bubbles that fuel division and political fragmentation. In conflict-fragile countries, the rapid uptake of mobile devices and social media has led to measured increases in political violence. Everywhere, the news media's focus on sensationalism has heightened public fears and exacerbated the demonization of rival groups.

Today's information environment poses a new set of challenges that were unforeseen even a decade ago. At the same time, unprecedented opportunities to reach the masses of humanity instantaneously have emerged over these same networks. The Media and Peacebuilding Project seeks to understand the constantly developing communication landscape and the unique challenges for human security and peace that have emerged as a result. Instead of just focusing on the problems, however, we primarily seek to work with researchers and practitioners to find solutions that lead to just and peaceful outcomes.

Program on Extremism at George Washington University
extremism.gwu.edu

Founded in 2015, the Program on Extremism at George Washington University has quickly become a leading research center on all forms of extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work and developing pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. Its partnerships with some of the world's most prominent universities, think tanks, media outlets and governmental agencies are a testament of the Program's research quality, independence and innovative approach.

In keeping with their tradition of providing primary source documents to the research community and the public at large, The Program on Extremism has launched a project to create a central database of court records related to the events of January 6th, 2021. This page will be updated as additional individuals are charged with criminal activities and new records are introduced into the criminal justice system.

SOCIAL MEDIA HANDLES

PUBLIC DEFENDER

Instagram: @publicdefenderfilm

Facebook: @publicdefenderfilm

Twitter: @PDdocumentary

ANDREA KALIN / SPARK MEDIA

Instagram: @sparkmediadc

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