



Participant presents  
In association with 371 Productions

# ***MESSWOOD***

*A film by*

*Emily Kuester and Brad Lichtenstein*

Running time: 95 minutes

**OFFICIAL SELECTION:**

DOC NYC 2021



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**Logline:**

Situated a mile apart along the same stretch of road, two Milwaukee high schools - one predominantly Black and the other largely white were both short players to field an entire football team. They joined as one and, decades later, against the backdrop of a nation's painful racial reckoning, unite under the leadership of a unique coach and ultimately learn what it truly means to come together as a team.

**Synopsis:**

Situated a mile apart, along the same stretch of road, two Milwaukee, WI, communities — and their anchoring high schools—may as well exist a world away. Shorewood High, a largely white campus, boasting the highest median income level in the state, contrasts starkly to the predominantly Black Messmer High School, which struggles to graduate its students. Nearly 20 years ago, when both schools needed more players to form a team, Shorewood's coaches sought to bridge these worlds, recruiting Messmer students to bolster their football program. The merged team, dubbed "Messwood," is praised as a model of racial harmony. For its Coach, Antoine Davis, football isn't simply a contest. He works to help each of his players become a well-rounded adult. **MESSWOOD** follows the team as they navigate a critical football season unlike any other. Set against the backdrop of a nation's racial reckoning, these teammates defy their circumstances, vividly exemplifying what it means to pull together to attain a common goal.

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

In 2018, director Brad Lichtenstein found himself deep in conversation with a close circle of filmmaking colleagues, considering the shifting landscape. Ten years after the historic, ceiling-shattering election of the United States' first Black President, Barack Obama, the nation was in turmoil. Instead of a stronger sense of unity, news headlines surged with gruesome incidents of race-motivated hate crimes, brutal episodes of police violence aimed at people of color. An election that was thought to be a bold step forward, revealed a nation's centuries-old, unaddressed wounds.

Meeting the moment, the streets lit up with activism. Protests, boycotts, and town hall meetings, staged across communities and within industries, pressed for new ways to actively combat the problems—both directly, and from within.

For documentary storytellers, Lichtenstein says, the question at the fore was: How do you help shape—and advance—a nuanced conversation about race? What can *we* do?

“I’m white. And I have, for a lot of years, made films that [deal] with different issues that have to do with social justice, and telling Black stories,” says Lichtenstein. “Now, we're at a moment of racial reckoning and there's a lot of conversation, of course, in our field about white privilege, representation and about *who* gets to tell stories.” Lichtenstein took note: “One of those conversations I’d been having with Black women filmmakers was: ‘You know, I think that *you*’—meaning *me, Brad*, as a white filmmaker—‘need to look for stories about white privilege.’ That was the context. Really from the very second of starting to conceive of this film I wanted to work with Emily. She's so empathic, she's young and can relate to teenagers who would see me as more of a parent figure, and she's a Black woman who would bring a different lens than me to this story, something indisputably necessary.”

It put the onus squarely on him. With his focus sharpened, it didn't take long for an opportunity to land, quite literally, at his feet. A bitter controversy erupted on Lichtenstein's home turf, at his own children's campus, Shorewood High School, located in a largely white suburb of Milwaukee, WI. Lichtenstein was serving on the school's diversity, equity and inclusion committee when a group of students and parents lodged a complaint about the school's production of “To Kill a Mockingbird,” based on Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize winning novel. The target of their ire: The use of the N-word in not just one, but several scenes. Parents, students and faculty took sides, and the local media took note. It was clear: this was a watershed moment. “I was attending a community meeting,” Lichtenstein recalls, “the meeting you see in the film, actually. And while I was sitting there, I texted [that] filmmaker friend, and said: ‘I think I found our white privilege film . . .’”

### ***Privilege: Pervasive Yet Elusive***

The community conflict exposed a set of raw and complex emotions around free speech and racial sensitivity in a community that saw itself as progressive. Lichtenstein knew precisely whose input he wanted as a co-director: Emily Kuester. “Emily is a young Black woman who had been working with us at 371 Productions for about five years at that point,” says Lichtenstein. “She was ready to direct.”

Hearing the basic contours of the dispute, Kuester didn’t hesitate: “I was excited to be able to dive into a story that talks about race and to step into this new role.” In her five years at 371 she’d moved up from intern to producer. “I was producing a couple of shorts when Brad approached me and said: “I want to do a film with you...” It would be her first directing credit.

Despite Kuester and Lichtenstein’s persistence and their best intentions, cameras and mics were not clearing a path into the crux of the “To Kill a Mockingbird” imbroglio. Eventually, the directors stumbled upon a deflection that didn’t lead to another dead-end, but one that opened up a potential new path.

At a community meeting, Lichtenstein recalls, someone suggested a point of Shorewood pride: “‘You should really look at the football team. It’s this model of racial harmony,’ they told us.” While Lichtenstein had been determined to untangle this specific, polarizing moment in Shorewood’s story, there was something hopeful about exploring an unusual approach to teamwork that appeared to be working. “Here was this combined team, made up of these two schools—one Black, one white—who had to learn to come together to play together. But what’s more, is that the coach is a Black man, who also does not think that race is an issue.” It was just enough of a sketch to be enticing, says Lichtenstein: “Emily and I saw a kind of opportunity for a story we haven’t quite seen.”

### ***In Proximity Blooms Possibility***

Twenty years ago, Shorewood High School strengthened their football program by recruiting players from the predominantly Black Messmer High School, a private Catholic school, just a mile away from the affluent Shorewood suburb. After almost 18 years of mostly dismal showings, their combined team won a conference title in 2018, due largely to Coach Antoine Davis’ steel, commitment and guidance.

In one sense, Coach Davis’ team—dubbed “Messwood”—was an optimistic experiment: It brought together boys from disparate backgrounds to work toward a common goal, while testing

their mettle and shaping their character. More precisely, however, the team was an emblem: A symbol of what proximity, trust and teamwork across lines of race and class might look like and what it might achieve. “Messwood” became a metaphor for the possibilities of coexistence, and how partnership might imprint, in the long term, on the youth who take part.

Though Coach Davis was Shorewood’s first Black coach, he was determined to keep his team out of the fray of the racial tensions growing on campus. More compellingly, he patently refused to call out race as a factor, certainly not on his field nor in his locker room—obstructing the path toward success.

He trained his young players to look for the places they came together, not where they veered apart and pulled their focus and energy toward being strong, accountable, and determined, Lichtenstein and Kuester were intrigued.

### ***Assembling the Team and the Story***

Around the time the filmmakers were struggling with access to classrooms, students and faculty, Lichtenstein reached out to award-winning filmmaker Steve James. James’ unscripted documentary series, *America to Me*, which explored the day-to-day lives of racially diverse students, families and faculty in an elite Chicago neighborhood, was a vivid example of the scope and depth they were attempting. “Brad and Emily had been doing all of this shooting and had a more expansive idea. But the more we talked about it, the more it seemed to me that focusing it around the football team itself, and in a season, would be a way to get at these larger issues of race and education, and the differences between these two communities,” says James, who eventually signed on as executive producer, and played a key role in the formative and editing stages.

James took one more significant step — bringing the project to the attention of the late Diane Weyermann, Participant Chief Content Officer. The premise alone presented rich possibilities, “Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the US and Lichtenstein and Kuester sought to answer the question: is a team like this a solution to the societal divide?” said the Participant documentary team. There are many layers, and the goal is to launch dialogue and keep the viewer engaged with the question.”

Centering Davis and his team presented Kuester and Lichtenstein with a compelling way to explore the intangibles of race and privilege, while assembling in-depth portraits of the players and their lives on and off campus, in real time. “What we started to realize as soon as we took the suggestion,” says Lichtenstein, “was that this became a little bit of a different story. Here they had

these two very different schools and this coach who is a Black man who does not think that race is an issue. It's about football. And the ideal—or goal is—to have a family. That's a *really* interesting premise."

The other persuasive piece," says James, "Is that this may be, according to Brad, the only school in the country that has these two separate schools married together into one football program. Whether that's true or not, it's highly unusual. So, it offered this unique opportunity to see the way race and class play out."

### ***Finding Family***

With Davis, the irascible yet big-hearted father figure, as a focal point, it set up a different way to frame a story about grit, survival and struggle. It resists old tropes and expectations. Because the coach is Black, this would not be a "white savior story," and because Kuester was making calls and part of the decision making, the lens would not hew to "white gaze" conventions. The story they now were set to tell was about a blended team and its strong-willed leader who was bent on making sure the boys built a strong "family" in a fraught moment on campus and their larger community. He was not just preparing them for the field, but for the world.

Next came selecting the boys and families who would flesh out this layered story: What did it mean precisely to be part of Coach Davis' family? What did commitment and coming together look like on a day-to-day basis? And, perhaps most provocatively, what if you, as one of the Black Messmer families, didn't ascribe to Coach Davis' belief that race "doesn't play a factor?" What were you, and your child, signing up for?

After being introduced to the team, it took the filmmakers a few months to find their footing and develop a plan, says Kuester. "That's really when we started doing all of our pre interviews and kind of found the story. By the fall of 2019, we were filming. Trying to capture the season."

They shot verité style, following each family closely, gathering footage that would eventually, they hoped, tell a full story through interactions in real time. That meant going in deep which began with developing trust. From six families, they narrowed the field to four main figures: Amarion, Max, Fred and Piarus: Three Black, one white; Two Shorewood, two Messmer.

### ***Trust Building: The Logistics of Intimacy***

Unquestionably, it's the boys, and their varying rites of passage, that are the heart of **MESSWOOD**. That trust was a key element that Lichtenstein and Kuester wanted to protect at all times, says

Kuester: “My priority was to make sure the students were OK before I thought about what I was going to ask on camera. Amarion was the toughest,” she explains, because I saw so much of myself in him—being a Black face in an all-white school and how that displaces you.” These were the invisible stressors: What is it like being heard or seen? How do you react to the pressure of having to be different versions of yourself? What are the difficult to articulate pressures and consequences that fall on students of color who find themselves desegregating predominately white spaces? All this, says Kuester, “I think fundamentally resonated with me and connected us.”

Keeping things small-scale also helped to develop and ensure intimacy. “We don't have a big entourage, says Lichtenstein. “A lot of the time it would just be me and Emily or me and the sound person. Maybe Emily and I would split up so that we could cover a lot of different things. Like game nights, we had four crews, and then when the game was over, we would pare down to two crews and I would go with the coaches and Emily would always go with a family.”

Also key to their production team’s arrangements, adds Kuester: “We were really careful to make sure we knew what D.P.s and what sound folks had the best connections with the boys. We really paid attention to who did the boys really run with — beyond just me and Brad — and built our teams that way.”

### ***Playing Fields***

**MESSWOOD** shrewdly illustrates the metaphorical “playing field” upon which these boys — Black and white — find themselves. While collectively they share a team alliance, their personal worlds, their pasts and presents, could not be more different. Their fields are far from “level.” Yet, Coach Davis works, both on and off the field, to bolster and connect them. He asks everything of them—and of their spirit—and expects nothing less. He knows they possess potential. The assumption that they do and are capable of achieving greatness is powerful: It's restorative to their sense of self.

“Coach Davis is not about just winning football games. He’s clearly very much aware of what plays out in America, in terms of race, from his own experience, as an adult Black man,” James underscores. “But on the other hand, he has this kind of willful determination that he wants to create an environment where race is not a defining issue, and he works very hard at that. It doesn't come from a place of naivete, it comes from a place of hope and knowledge.”

With this in mind, says Lichtenstein, “Emily and I tried to bring a lens to the season, to try to notice the ways in which the promise of the premise plays out positively or, where it kind of fails,” he reflects. “The premise being that Coach Davis has to create this family where race doesn't matter, nor does economic disparity. But in fact, it does matter in many ways and you see that play out.”

### ***The Messwood Message: Tough Love, Moral Courage***

While Lichtenstein and Kuester wanted to make visible instances of bias and inequity—large and small—that have historically divided us across race and class lines, they also wanted to touch on how it has marked this new generation. For young people, on the cusp of adulthood at this 21st century turning point, Coach Davis' efforts to both shield and focus his players creates an essential third space, Kuester believes. His domain—whether it's the practice field or the locker room—is an island for his players to just be themselves, a place where the end game is authenticity. Ultimately, says Kuester, "I think Coach Davis is effective. He's providing a safe place where the boys don't feel like they have to talk about race, because they need a break. They need to pause."

This doesn't mean, cautions Kuester, that these young men aren't sophisticated enough to see the differences in their lives, and how race and class informs that difference. This is where the shape of storytelling was essential: It was imperative to not draw either group as a monolith. From the outset, Kuester and Lichtenstein understood how important the specific delicate contours and weight of each individual story were, and that extended well beyond the initial shooting: "We spent a lot of time in the edit room, talking about how to handle some of the tragedies, for instance," explains Lichtenstein, "Like Fred's brother. We wanted to make sure that whatever we did had a context that justified its presence in the movie."

### ***Moving Targets: The World Changed Too [The Racial Reckoning]***

It was a given from the start, that they would be shadowing a moving target—tracing the arc of a challenging football season. But what the filmmakers could not have predicted was that the boys' world—our world, collectively—would tilt so dramatically. The "To Kill a Mockingbird" outcry was a harbinger, a mild foreshadowing of what was to come: a long year of Black Lives Matter activism leading into the explosion of country wide protests in response to the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by a white Minneapolis, MN police officer. In post-production, the team had candid conversations about addressing and incorporating news events—both Floyd's death, and the social justice issues surrounding the COVID pandemic. "Ultimately we decided to go back and film," says Kuester. "Because this is, obviously, under the umbrella of the conversation we're having. But," she underscores, "it had to be organic."

"Most of this happened right after we were done filming," says Lichtenstein, "but we made a very conscious decision, towards the end in the editing when we started the show the passage of time with COVID-19 and with racial reckoning, just so we know the context."



How much or little of that historical context would be included, in the end, the filmmakers knew the nation's racial reckoning was a confirmation: They'd landed on a particularly relevant story. It comes at a time when people are looking for not just solutions, but the basic language to address the rupture.

"This film brings up very tough concerns and doesn't pretend to have answers for all of them, said the Participant documentary team, "It's so important to us to continue to interrogate those issues as much as we can, particularly for the next generation."

The timing, the directors hope, will only help audiences to find both an entry point into the story and open up a path for further conversation.

What is clear, is that this moment demands a different sort of conversation: "We feel like the film does some work to sort of force you out of the over-prescribed conversation about race, to get you connected to these kids and these moms and the coach and just tries to get you to see these genuine relationships and maybe learn something about them."

There is a powerful take away in following a team that loses, picks itself up and presses forward, again and again. We learn there are different kinds of victories. "They did not have a great season, from a winning and losing standpoint. And it's hard to be on a losing team," James reflects. "It takes a toll. But I think one of the things that the film endeavors to show, which often times gets lost in a lot of sports films, that this is not about winning and losing football games. Whether they win or lose the game is not the measure of whether this program is truly working. "

To Kuester's mind, what's key is the shift in perspective, allowing a younger generation to find their place, and trust their own voice and experience—and lead the way. "We've reached a turning point," says Kuester, "I think it's the parents and adults who should now take the responsibility to learn from what the boys have done. Because I think the boys really live this authentic experience. I'm hoping people can watch them and set aside feelings of anger or anxiety and really take a look at how this set of boys have had to navigate—especially in a city like Milwaukee. I think that it just opens the door to have a very nuanced conversation about race that I think the country needs. At least guide people to pick up where the film left off. Process and digest and say: Here we are, and what these boys showed us is what forward looks like."

## **FILMMAKERS.**

### **Emily Kuester, Director**

Emily Kuester is a director, producer, and writer based in Atlanta, GA. She got her start at 371 Productions and has assisted in producing short and long form documentaries, virtual reality experiences (2019 Sundance VR experience, "Ashe 68"), podcasts, mobile apps, most recently, directed her first feature documentary, "*Messwood*", with 371 Productions and Participant. She is the co-creator of the fiction series "Black Girl Training", which won the first annual Keep It Colorful campaign with Seed and Spark and is now being executive produced by Mary Ann Marino.

### **Brad Lichtenstein, Director**

Brad Lichtenstein is an award-winning film, radio and VR maker and president of 371 Productions, a company that has long been committed to nurturing the careers of emerging women and BIPOC storytellers. He's been nominated for two Emmys®, won 2 Duponts and been nominated for a Peabody. His work has been exhibited at Sundance, Tribeca, DOC NYC and SXSW film festivals as well as distributed by Amazon, Discovery, PBS, the NY Times, the Intercept, HBO and Al Jazeera.

### **Suzanne Jurva, Producer**

Suzanne Jurva is a producer/director who works in scripted and documentary film with a commitment to stories that might not otherwise be told. She was a feature film development executive at DreamWorks-SKG, supervising many Academy Award®-nominated and winning films, including: "Saving Private Ryan," "Amistad," "Minority Report," "Gladiator," "Prince of Egypt," and "Lincoln." She is an award-winning filmmaker and has been part of over 50 film festivals. A few of her credits include "Pet Names" (SXSW 2018 premiere), "Yoopera!" (PBS), and "The Fabulous Ice Age" (Netflix). Jurva also dabbles in technology and co-founded a content aggregation company bringing Hollywood to the mobile phone.

### **Jeff Skoll, Executive Producer**

Jeff Skoll is a philanthropist and social entrepreneur, working to bring life to his vision of a sustainable world of peace and prosperity. The first full-time employee and president of eBay, Jeff developed the company's inaugural business plan and helped lead its successful initial public offering and the creation of the eBay Foundation. Since 1999, Jeff has created an innovative portfolio of philanthropic and commercial enterprises, each a distinctive social catalyst. Together, these organizations drive social impact by investing in a range of efforts that integrate powerful stories and data with entrepreneurial approaches. The Jeff Skoll Group supports his organizations, which include the [Skoll Foundation](#), the Capricorn Investment Group, the Skoll Global Threats Fund, and Participant Media, a company dedicated to entertainment that inspires and compels social change

### **Diane Weyermann, Executive Producer**

Diane Weyermann, Chief Content Officer at Participant, had long been the engine behind the company's documentary film and television slate. Her work at Participant has defined the company since it was founded in 2004 by Jeff Skoll. She championed and shaped Participant's history and breathed life into Jeff's vision that a good story, well told, can change the world.

Collectively, Weyermann's projects have earned 10 Academy Award nominations and four wins, eight Emmy nominations and three wins, three BAFTA nominations and one win, five Spirit Award nominations and three wins, highlighting issues spanning climate change to government surveillance, the plight of refugees to the dignity of work. But the care she took to bring the most urgent social issues to life extended beyond what was shown on the big screen.

Weyermann was a champion for female-led projects at Participant, including, "CITIZENFOUR," which won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature and was directed by Laura Poitras; "The Great Invisible," directed by Margaret Brown; "My Name Is Pauli Murray," directed by Julie Cohen and Betsy West; "Far From The Tree" by Rachel Dretzin and "John Lewis: Good Trouble," from director Dawn Porter.

She also led the company to co-acquire distribution rights to films, including the upcoming "Flee" directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen; Academy Award-nominated "RBG," from directors Julie Cohen and Betsy West, and Academy Award-nominated "Collective," directed by Alexander Nanau. In addition to Executive Producing 48 documentary features at Participant, she Executive Produced 7 TV series including Steve James' acclaimed "America To Me" and "City So Real."

Prior to joining Participant in 2005, Weyermann was the director of the Sundance Institute's Documentary Film Program. During her tenure at Sundance, she was responsible for the Sundance Documentary Fund and launched two annual documentary film labs, the Edit & Story Lab and the Documentary Composers Lab which she co-created with Peter Golub, both focused on the creative process.

Before her time at Sundance, she served as the director of the Open Society Institute New York's Arts and Culture Program where she launched the Soros Documentary Fund (which later became the Sundance Documentary Fund). Weyermann was a member of the Documentary Branch Executive Committee of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences from 2012-2018. She served on the Foreign Language Film Award and International Feature Film Award Executive Committees from 2016-2020 and co-chaired the committees from 2018-2020. She was also a member of the Television Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the European Film Academy.

*Weyermann passed away in October 2021*

### **David E. Simpson, Editor**

David E. Simpson is a documentary filmmaker with three decades of experience. Films he has produced, directed or edited have garnered three national Emmys®, a pair of Peabody awards, two DuPont-Columbia batons, an Oscar nomination and best in category at countless festivals. Simpson's feature-length directorial debut, "When Billy Broke His Head," won a Sundance jury award. David considers editing the core of documentary practice and has split his time between cutting and directing/producing. Recent editing credits include the Oscar-nominated "Abacus: Small Enough to Jail;" and "City So Real" a limited series by Steve James currently nominated for multiple awards

**Directed and Produced by**

Emily Kuester

Brad Lichtenstein

**Executive Producers**

Jeff Skoll

Diane Weyermann

Steve James

**Written and Edited by**

David E. Simpson

**Cinematography by**

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**Original Music Composed and Performed by**

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Nicholoas Henderson

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Erik Ljung

Stephen Spurlock

**Drone Camera Assistant**

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Alanna Schmelter

**Assistant Editors**

Daniela Cortés

Chelsea Merrow

**Additional Field Director**

Miela Fetaw

Rubin Whitmore II

**Demo and Trailer Editor**

Daniela Cortés

**Assistant Camera**

Jayce Kolinski

Tim Moder

Jalen Philips

Trayton White

**DIT**

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Vernon Jeffrey Smith - saxophones

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Performed by BLESSED

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**THANK YOU**

The 2019 Messwood Football Team and Coaches:

Casey Anderson

Sam Campbell Jr.

Johnathan Carson

Johnny Cerda

Taron Cooper

Gedeon Deak

Thomas Dotson

Monterion Durden

Tim Edwards Jr.

Tyman Edwards

Gereon Foster

Victor Franklin

Donovan Freeman

Gregory Flemming

Corey Gibson

Jerimiah Heard

Jerimiah Hill

Anthony Horton

DiAndre Jackson

Keven Jagiello

Andre Jennings

Amari Jolly

Nicholas Jones

Mateo Lipscomb

Jack Mackowski

Cameron Pair

Darius Pair

Will Philips

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Mark Sullivan

Illijah Taylor-Jordan

Kimonte Thomas

Ishmael Thompson

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Reginald Thompson

Andre Valentine

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Brat House - Shorewood

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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Shorewood City Market

Soldier Field

TMJ 4

WISN 12

The Woodland Football Conference

**Very Special Thanks**

Messmer High School

Shorewood High School

**Very Special Thanks For Sharing Your Stories**

Max Curro

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Rosyln Johnson

Travis Love

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