

PRESS KIT



NEAR NORMAL Man

Directed by Charlene Stern

ONE SENTENCE SUMMARY

Ben Stern, a Holocaust survivor for whom the past is never past and whose courage, kindness and faith remain intact, is tested once again, in a fiercely public battle against the Nazis in Skokie, Illinois.



SYNOPSIS

"Near Normal Man" is a half-hour documentary film, told in a first-hand account by Ben Stern, a Polish Jew, who survives 2 ghettos, 9 concentration camps and 2 death marches. The Nazis identify him as one of the dangerous Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto. He emerges alive, only to face the Nazis again - 30 years later, this time in Skokie, Illinois. Ben decides he will not let them march in his adopted hometown and confronts his rabbi who tells the survivors to "stay home, close the shades and let them pass." Leading with a small group of survivors, Ben wages a fiercely public battle against the Nazis, ACLU and Chicago Jewish leadership. When the Nazis learn that 60,000 Jews and Christians plan to show up to the march and counter-demonstrate, the mayor of Skokie tells the Nazis he can't guarantee their safety even with the Illinois National Guard and police from neighboring states. The Nazis cancel the march and never return to Skokie.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



I am most interested in intersections. The space between human beings, between past and present, between living testimony and taught history, the space between a 94-year old man and 18-24 year olds, the space between being Jewish and the rest of humanity. Most especially, I live the intersection between learning and doing.

Growing up in Skokie was a beautiful, comfortable nest that held my parents' palpable and mostly unspoken pain. Everything came first, in silence and the shadows of absent, extended family. As my father filled in the details over 30 years, I learned that the limitless evil that exists in humankind is less critical than our response to it. My parents' courage, kindness and faith were the foundation stones for who I am and all I do.

I am a child of survivors and believe that millions of young people everywhere are also children of survivors; whether descendants of slaves, illegal immigrants or confronting severe circumstances of history that can limit their right to live as free human beings.

Near Normal Man informs, strengthens and compels viewers to face and take on the circumstances of their own life. Ben is not the first or only person to suffer, nor will he be the last. The mystery and wonder of his response is at the heart of this film. Only young people can change the future of our world. This film gives them clarity, provides the tools and inspires commitment to moral action, so desperately needed in our world today.

– Charlene Stern

SUMMARY OF THE FILM



Meet Ben Stern. Ben survived Hitler's ghettos, nine of his concentration camps, and two death marches. After that horror, Ben and his bride Helen boarded the "Marine Flasher" and rode steerage to America. Thirty years later against all odds, he faced the Nazis again in Skokie, Illinois. It was 1977 and the National Socialist Party of America announced plans for a march through the Chicago suburb. This time, Ben was ready. Here is what happened:

- Ben stood up to the rabbis who told him to be quiet, back down and let things pass;
- He rented an office, hired volunteers, and organized. He collected 750,000 signatures, took on the American Civil Liberties Union, the Chicago Jewish Leadership, and campaigned day and night against Frank Collin's plans to lead his band of neo-Nazis through town;
- He received death threats and bought a gun, just in case. He didn't use it; he didn't have to.
- Because in the end, Ben Stern won.

**HOW DOES A YOUNG PERSON MAINTAIN RESILIENCE
AND HUMANITY IN THE FACE OF VICIOUS RACISM,
UNSPEAKABLE VIOLENCE, AND UNFOLDING GENOCIDE?**

This is the story of Holocaust Survivor Ben Stern, as he explores the question that haunts: how did he emerge from overwhelming physical pain and psychological terror, determined to reject violence and remain dedicated to a life of courage, kindness, and hope?

After two ghettos, nine concentration camps, and two death marches in Nazi Europe, Ben builds a new life in the U.S., only to face American Nazis and their plan to march in his adopted hometown of Skokie, Illinois, 30 years later. Ben stands up, speaks out, and sparks a fierce public battle over Hate Speech. Despite repeated death threats, and even buying a gun, Ben rejects vengeance. He defies many who said, "Stay home" and builds huge national support. In the end Ben won - the Nazi march was cancelled.

The mystery and wonder of Ben's life and story, an astounding and cautionary tale, ignite conversation and inspire commitment to action for social justice - today. *And a new generation gets it.*

This film is much more than one man's story. It is purposefully created for young people between the ages of 18 to 24 who are coming of age in a world still plagued by prejudice and malicious extremism from Ferguson to Paris, from city streets to college campuses, from election campaigns to European borders. Ben Stern's example demands that we provide the tools to do what he did when the time comes to act against hatred. *Near Normal Man* does that.



“I am most interested in intersections. The space between human beings, between past and present, between living testimony and taught history, the gap between a 94-year-old man and 18 to 24-year-olds, the space between being Jewish and the rest of humanity. Most especially, I live in the intersection between learning and doing.”

– Charlene Stern, Producer/Director

Featuring unique archival material, composed music and original art, this film examines the lessons the Holocaust teaches about confronting evil at its most personal level and how to prevail over hate not with more violence, but with wisdom, courage, kindness and reason. This is a personal journey of one man and a universal story in the power of resilience of the human spirit.

INTERVIEW WITH PRODUCER/ DIRECTOR CHARLENE Y. STERN



What is this film about?

Near Normal Man, is a documentary film about Ben Stern, one man, who survives with integrity against the forces that threaten to destroy him. How he survived could have been the end of the story and a worthy film. Instead liberation is just the beginning. Ben lives beyond the terror and is unbelievably tested again. This time he defeats the forces when they come to his hometown a second time – in Skokie, Illinois.

Why this film title?

Ben always refers to himself as “near normal”, because he says, “anyone who comes out of Auschwitz cannot be normal. I cannot be near normal.”

Is this just another Holocaust film?

No it isn't – it's that and a lot more. Unfortunately, the Holocaust is more relevant today than ever before. In our world, with increasing anger, hatred and rage, Ben's life provides inspiration and the tools to overcome the forces that can threaten to destroy us, whoever we may be.

Why is there a need for you make this film?

Ben Stern, Holocaust survivor, is a story of the capacity for one human being to overcome forces that tried to destroy him more than once. Relevant to young people more than ever - Ben chooses to speak out and act against the Nazis 30 years later, in Skokie, Illinois. His voice resounds universally, to stand up to hate speech, racism and bigotry today.

How is this film different from all other Holocaust films?

It's a story of Ben Stern resilience against forces that threaten to destroy him throughout his life. His story doesn't end with the War. Ben, who survives, leads the way to fight the Nazis 30 years later, this time in America.

How did he stop the Nazis?



Ben acted when people who identify themselves as Nazis, spew hate speech and threaten to take your life and complete the job Hitler started. Ben wrote letters to the editor of the Chicago Tribune, then, received repeated death threats. He went out and mobilized survivors and people across the

country. He wrote to churches and synagogues, and got 750,000 signatures of support. Ben became a lightning rod. He and small group of survivors led the effort. As he mobilized America and world support in this fight, Ben took on the ACLU that this was not a fight against the 1st Amendment, but against hate speech.

So what happened on the day of the march?

The JDL flew in from New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. 60,000 thousand people planned to show up in support. The National Guard of Illinois came to keep the peace. There are different accounts on why the Nazis didn't march. Some say heard the plan and canceled. Another account says they came down the highway to Skokie, saw the defiant crowd and to save face and their skin, turned around and went instead to Marquette Park in Chicago to march.

What made you think you could do this film?

Chutzpah! Or, I am my parents' daughter. I brought my experience of a successful career in business, both at two major corporations, and building my own business with national and international clients. For every challenge, I gathered the best talent I could find, created teams and led them to achieve great results. In this case, having never made a documentary film, I did the same - teaming with Vivian Kleiman, Peabody Award winner and 2016 Oscar-nominated for best documentary of the year to be my creative producer. Wendy Slick, our film editor, brings her edgy, creative set of consummate skills to the editing room. Every team member is skilled, experienced and passionate about this documentary film. Now, I am so eager for audiences to view and respond.

You said you screen-tested it among 18-24 year olds. What was their response?

I showed it to a full range of young people from multiple ethnic and racial groups from Oakland to Minnesota. Their response was very positive. They were both inspired and motivated by this film. One young woman told us after viewing the film that "I am the product of the foster care system and Ben's story has given me hope that I can go on to accomplish my goals and live the life I want." Blacks

related to Ben and the overwhelming terror he experienced, his courage to face and fight evil and remain human. They were inspired by Ben and what he then did to stop the Nazis, this time in America.

“Being a black person I know what it means to be oppressed. To hear Ben speak and see the strength of people who can come out and create a new life made me feel like I was with him. He talked directly to me.”

– Marcela - 18-years old, African American, junior college student, California Foster Care system survivor

“Captivating! Motivating! Wow! That’s not what you hear in history class. Ben didn’t hide anything – he showed his emotion. Ben managed to make a life, and he wasn’t for violence. A gun is not the answer. Now I know I am going to have a life after the nightmare I went through. If Ben could overcome, so can I.”

– Lynette - 20 years old, Hispanic American, junior college student, rape survivor

“Yes, I care about Ben’s story because it is an important lesson to my generation . . . Racial hatred is bad. Racial hatred is ‘other’ (i.e.: not my problem). Make our ‘complicity’ with white supremacy and police brutality ‘our’ problem!”

– Adam - 26-years old, Midwest college student

“Ben’s story is amazing . . . we must protect ourselves by keeping our minds sharp. Only we can keep authority in check, and that doesn’t mean violent uprisings. It’s one of those films we need to see at this part of our lives.”

– Daniel - 21 years old, African American, university student

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NEAR NORMAL
Man

What was it like interviewing your Father for the film?



Those who know Ben know he is not a patient man. Making a film meant lots of retakes and hours of set preparation. On the last day of filming, we kept trying to get him to narrow his focus and make an important

point with emotional emphasis. I said to him: “Dad, just keep it simple.” He stopped, gave me a stern look and said: “Char, this is not simple!”

Did you learn anything surprising that didn't make it into the film?

I was told that my heart would be broken as we made decisions as to what would be in the film and what would be out of the film. I learned to let go of some things that are so dear to me . . . The great news is that today, film footage is never gone, we're planning a film website to include great outtakes and stories.

What's been your biggest challenge to date?

The hardest thing was deciding the essence of this film. That and impacting 18-24 year olds, with a story told by a 94 year old man.

FILM TEAM

This film also stands out among the crowd of Holocaust survivors' portraits because of the high-level of professionalism of the film team, among them Peabody Award-winning Creative Producer Vivian Kleiman and award-winning editor Wendy Slick.

CHARLENE Y. STERN, PRODUCER/DIRECTOR

Charlene is an accomplished businesswoman. After successful careers at Levi Strauss & Co. and Wells Fargo Bank, she founded her own company. For over 15 years, she led multiple strategy and creative teams for hundreds of business clients worldwide, to achieve extraordinary business results. As a child of Holocaust survivors, Charlene is deeply committed to individuals and organizations preparing the next generation everywhere for a life of personal commitment and responsibility.

Charlene committed herself long ago to being a lifelong student. Making this film with the help of award-winning experts, she has earned her second advanced degree, now in filmmaking, through this humbling and powerful experience.

VIVIAN KLEIMAN, CREATIVE PRODUCER

Vivian Kleiman is a veteran documentary filmmaker known for tackling challenging subjects and filmic approaches. Her work received the George Foster Peabody Award, Organization of American Historians' Erik Barnouw Award, International Documentary Association's Outstanding Achievement Award, and National Emmy Award Nomination for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Research. She holds the distinctive record as producer or executive producer of eight co-productions with



the Independent Television Service (ITVS), created by the U.S. Congress to produce programs by independent filmmakers for national public television. For nine years, Kleiman taught at Stanford University's Graduate Program in Documentary Film Production. Vivian was executive producer for "Last Day of Freedom", nominated for an Oscar in 2016.

WENDY SLICK, EDITOR

Wendy is an experienced film director, producer and editor. Wendy's creative visual style and comfort with "riding the edge" was featured in "Ripe for Change," a PBS program in the "California Dreaming" series. As a documentary filmmaker, Wendy's keen eye and insatiable curiosity are the driving force in all her filmmaking work. Her commitment to finding the truth that lurks beneath the surface—to help real people tell their true stories—has inspired exceptionally crafted work. She brings enormous creativity; an edgier approach and a fresh new look into the editing room.



DREW ECKMANN, CINEMATOGRAPHER



Drew brings more than 15 years of experience in film production, including work with camera, sound and as crew in commercials, short subjects TV and film. His credits include Nova PBS, National Geographic and Discovery Channel, Frontline, Fox sports documentary division, HBO Real Sports and HBO documentary, The Big Picture.

ENDORSEMENTS

TROY DUSTER

Chancellor's Professor of Sociology Emeritus
University of California, Berkeley
Grandson of Ida B. Wells, Civil Rights Activist

"Near Normal Man is an extraordinary film – at one level, it is a searing autobiographical account of the personal endurance, perseverance and courage of a Holocaust Survivor. It lasts only a half-hour, but once experienced, at another level you will never forget how it seamlessly pivots from the depths of evil that humans can inflict and endure – to rays of sun that highlight indomitable spirited resilience.

When shown to students in courses across a wide swath of the social sciences and humanities, the film is guaranteed to generate thought-provoking dialog about the human condition, not just "where were the Good Germans?" – but what connections can we draw to illuminate our own responses to what is happening across the globe – from the refugee crisis engulfing Europe to the Rwanda genocide and beyond."

ENDORSEMENTS

IRA GLASSER

Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union 1978-2001

"I have seen many similar films, but found this one especially moving, largely because of Ben Stern's extraordinary articulation, from beginning to end. As soon as I saw that he had resettled in Skokie, I knew where this was going... Early on in that dispute, despite being a leading defender of the ACLU's decision to take the case, I resolved never to lecture those who had endured, and still endure, incalculable pain and anguish, on why the First Amendment compelled the result it did.

I thought this wonderful film handled the Skokie matter superbly, and that Stern's narrative about it was marvelous, and his remedy – a massive counter demonstration, a response of speech to speech– exactly right."

RUTH W. MESSINGER

Founder & Global Ambassador American Jewish World Service

"This is a must-see video that tells the grim story of one survivor, shares his powerful memory of his Holocaust experience and of his decision 30 years later to stand against a Nazi march in Skokie. It is emotionally wrenching to live with Ben through his camp and death march travails and powerful to learn of his determined commitment to stand against a hate demonstration in America. Needs to be seen and discussed by young people today to help them understand the world and become aware of the dangers of hate speech and the importance of standing up for their beliefs."

ENDORSEMENTS

BILL JERSEY

Producer/Director/Writer
Documentary Films

“A Gem’ while accurate is a too small description. This is no ordinary Holocaust story. This story is about the capacity to endure- to remain human-in the presence of unspeakable horrors.

We are left with a profound feeling of the ugliness- the meanness- the brutality of humanity. But we are also left with an example of the power of faith- of a commitment to life and, if we choose to employ it, the human capacity to be “as wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

JERRY W. SANDERS, PH.D.

Visiting Faculty, United Nations University for Peace
Former Chair, Peace and Conflict Studies
University of California, Berkeley

“Near Normal Man reminds us that our common humanity is never a fixed given, but a fragile virtue that rests upon the determined actions of ordinary persons acting extraordinarily in the face of hatred and brutality.

This film documents the courageous life of Ben Stern—Holocaust survivor, truth-teller, and finally, anti-neoNazi activist. In so doing, it recounts the history of an implacable evil that must never be forgotten. At the same time, it is a tale of timeless strength and wisdom, replete with critical lessons for combating intolerance in our own troubled times. As such, ‘Near Normal Man’ serves as an invaluable addition to higher education curricula in peace and conflict studies, and other related fields of the social sciences and humanities.”

ENDORSEMENTS

NANCY ISSERMAN, MSW, PHD

Director, Operation Home and Healing:
Services for Veterans and Families
Co-Director, Transcending Trauma Project

“We found that the reconstruction of a life after trauma may be aided by invoking memories of lost loved ones, by calling on the values and positive messages that were imparted to the survivors by the people closest to them prior to the war, and by remembering their own strength, courage, and self-efficacy.

Mr. Ben Stern through the vehicle of the well-crafted documentary, Near Normal Man, illustrates how all these factors played a role in his resilience and courage. We are privileged to bear witness to his story and grateful that he has shared with us his thoughts on the struggles he faced and the strength and resilience he evidenced during the Holocaust and after. His story will hopefully inspire the young adults who view it and motivate them to work to heal suffering and fight injustice—whether it is domestic violence and sexual abuse within individual homes inside our own country or ongoing ethnic conflicts and genocides in far-flung regions of the globe.”

DR. DEBORAH LIPSTADT

American Historian and Author
Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish History and Holocaust Studies
Emory University
Portrayed in the feature film “Denial”, based upon her book, Denying The Holocaust

“I just watched Near Normal Man and was deeply moved by how full of life Ben is. I am glad to have had the opportunity to get to know him even if only through a 30-minute film.”

ENDORSEMENTS

MENACHEM CREDITOR

Chair, Rabbis Against Gun Violence
Trustee, American Jewish World Service
Rabbi, Congregation Netivot Shalom

“There are no answers in the face of the unspeakable evil of the Holocaust, but the hard-earned wisdom of this most human of humans, a survivor named Ben Stern, is a lesson young people need more than ever: Live! The unimaginable path of this extraordinary man's life, exquisitely communicated through this film, reminds us all that life itself is the most profound of answers. Live passionately, hold fiercely to hope, and counter every nightmare by building a loving future.”

CYNTHIA GORNEY

Contributing Writer, National Geographic Magazine
Professor, UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism

“This film gives young viewers a chance to listen directly to an articulate Holocaust survivor with an extraordinary story – one that places him directly into some of the century's most brutal concentration camps and forced marches, and then culminates three decades later in his leadership of resistance to the attempted Nazi march through Skokie. It's a powerful account, an intimate thirty minutes with a witness to history, with extensive archival footage to make it even more vivid.”