

VISION PORTRAITS
DIRECTOR/PRODUCER: RODNEY EVANS
RT: 78 MINUTES

LOGLINE

Vision Portraits is a feature-length documentary that chronicles the creative paths of blind and visually impaired artists including a photographer (John Dugdale), dancer (Kayla Hamilton), writer (Ryan Knighton) and the film's director, Rodney Evans.

SYNOPSIS

Vision Portraits is my personal story of going on a scientific and artistic journey to better understand the ramifications of my deteriorating vision. My aim is to come to a deeper sense of knowledge through illuminating portraits of three artists: a photographer, a dancer and a writer. The film specifically focuses on the ways each artist was impacted by the loss of their vision and the ways in which their creative process thrives in spite of their blindness. It consists of four chapters which profile each artist and also follows a medical procedure centered on the restoration of my lost vision through the use of cutting edge technology at the Center for Vision Restoration in Berlin, Germany. This section incorporates the latest scientific research and conversations with retinal specialists and neuro-ophthalmologists. They describe current ongoing developments for combating these illnesses and preserving and/or restoring vision in the future.

John Dugdale slowly loses his vision at thirty-two in St. Vincent's Hospital at the height of the AIDS epidemic due to CMV retinitis and continues to take photos with the sliver of sight that remains in one eye. Ryan Knighton, a punk rock teenager, is diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa on his 18th birthday and finds writing as his salvation through the process of going blind. Kayla Hamilton was born with no vision in one eye and has very minimal peripheral and night vision in the other due to glaucoma and iritis. She incorporates her unique perspective on the world and embodies resilience and empowerment in her solo dance piece *Nearly Sighted*. All of the characters are deeply influenced and motivated by the power of art to heal and transform. As I participate in a medical procedure the film follows the evolution of the changes in my vision throughout the process from an insider's perspective and gives the viewer access to all of the emotions (positive and negative) that this entails.

The film is told from my perspective as a filmmaker who was diagnosed with a rare genetic eye condition in early 1997 called retinitis pigmentosa resulting in the loss of my peripheral vision and much of my night vision. As a filmmaker with only twenty percent of my visual field remaining, I am forced to work in new, more collaborative ways while also being part of a long tradition of artists seeing in highly idiosyncratic ways. My personal story is interwoven throughout the documentary and is the connective thread that unifies the different story elements. We experience my emotional, artistic and physical journey as I engage deeply with each artist and experience changes in my vision throughout the medical procedure that I am undergoing. <https://www.restore-vision.com/testimonial/retinitis-pigmentosa-success-story>

The film offers a deep dive into the work of each artist and incorporates their art (photography, dance, literature and filmmaking) as the viewer gets to experience how they

“see” the world through these unique perspectives. It utilizes a wide array of cinematic tools including sound design, visual text, macro cinematography and subjective camera positions to chronicle the experience of each artist. It also utilizes visual strategies that incorporate scientific imaging so that the viewer can experience the process and procedures as my treatment in Berlin progresses.

We include in-depth conversations with Dr. Anton Federov at the Center for Vision Restoration in Berlin, Germany. He is the co-developer of therapeutic electrical stimulation, an interdisciplinary approach involving neuro-ophthalmology, neuro-physiology and neurology being used for patients with Retinitis Pigmentosa and Glaucoma. Through these interviews the viewer understands new research that is being done and potential breakthroughs that could have dramatic future impact on the lives of people like Dugdale, Knighton, Hamilton and thousands of others. Scientific imaging, retinal photography and computer graphics are incorporated to visualize the changes that I experience as my treatment progresses.

TOPIC SUMMARY

People with disabilities make up the largest minority in America constituting nearly 20% of the population though only 15 % of those were born with the disability and about a third are over the age of sixty-five. As a visually impaired filmmaker, film is a way of reaching out but also reaching within and grappling with the confusion over my loss of vision through storytelling that allows others to enter into a very personal experience for myself as a filmmaker and the other artists profiled in the project as well as the scientists pushing at the frontiers of knowledge through the use of cutting edge technology.

ARTISTIC APPROACH

Vision Portraits profiles all four groundbreaking artists (John Dugdale, Kayla Hamilton, Ryan Knighton and Rodney Evans) through a mixture of in-depth interviews, verite footage of their daily lives and also in their creative process and exhibition/performance. The idea being to give the viewer an up close and personal look into the wide spectrum of emotions that each artist goes through from idea development through completion and exhibition/performance. There is some use of experimental POV footage to visualize some of the remnants of sight that remain for each character. This involves use of overexposure, roll outs, flares and cropping to mirror the subjective experience of these artists similar to the ways in which films like *THE DIVING BELL AND THE BUTTERFLY* and *NOSTALGIA FOR THE LIGHT* and filmmakers like Stan Brakhage and Leslie Thornton use abstract, subjective viewpoints to immerse the viewer deeper into the emotional experience of their central characters. We also incorporate impressionistic cinematography and still photographs to visualize some of the stories of the past that each character tells in order to keep the viewer immersed in the events as much as possible. We utilize rich and evocative sound design and detailed audio description channels specifically created for the visually impaired and blind community so that they have the ability to access the film.

From John Dugdale developing CMV retinitis after a stroke due to AIDS-related complications at the age of 32 to Kayla Hamilton being born with sight in only her right eye and later developing glaucoma in her left eye to Ryan Knighton being diagnosed with the degenerative eye condition, retinitis pigmentosa, at the age of 18 and losing the majority of

his vision over the course of five years, there are common traits of resilience, determination and perseverance which are unifying themes tying the portraits together.

There is a specific focus on medical research, scientific imaging and the latest international treatments that may have the capacity to impact each of the main characters in the future.

AUDIENCE AND DISTRIBUTION STRATEGIES

We will target top tier festivals where previous films of mine have screened (Sundance, Berlin, Tribeca, SXSW) to launch the film and generate interest. Potential distributors and broadcast outlets that we could partner with include PBS (Independent Lens, POV), Arte, ZDF, HBO, Magnolia Pictures, Sony Pictures Classics, The Cinema Guild, The Orchard, Kino Lorber, Grasshopper Film, Netflix, Amazon, Hulu or Sundance Selects/IFC.

A primary audience for the project is the disabled community. These are stories of inspiration that will be a real galvanizing force for those of us that struggle with the day-to-day realities of living with a disability. I am also an artist who continues to make work in spite of obvious challenges and am in a unique position of understanding the relevant issues from the inside and thus able to illuminate them in unique and insightful ways. Each of the artists brings their own audience to the project. John Dugdale has had over twenty-five solo exhibitions of his work throughout the world. Ryan Knighton is the author of a bestselling memoir, *Cockeyed*, about his severe vision loss as a teenager from retinitis pigmentosa which he adapted into a screenplay, participating in the Sundance Screenwriting Lab and now being produced by Anne Carey (*The Savages, 20th Century Women*). Kayla Hamilton has been a dancer for several decades but has now embarked on her first project, *Nearly Sighted*, which grapples with her condition as a visually impaired artist and conveying this experience through the choreography of five African-American women that she commissioned to contribute to the piece. She is planning a national tour with the project over the next two years which will include colleges and universities, community centers, museums and non-profit arts organizations. The tour began with performances at BAAD! in the Bronx where Kayla lives. These are included in the film and Kayla continued with performances at Rabbit Hole in North Carolina. For current tour information: <https://www.khamiltonprojects.com>

Thus, each of the artists profiled has a built in audience of museum visitors, readers, dance enthusiasts and college/university students which we can tap into along with the core audience of members of the disabled community. We also plan to partner with organizations like the Doheny Eye Institute, the Foundation Fighting Blindness, Lighthouse International and the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology, to reach the core audience by screening at health clinics and co-hosting events and grassroots community screenings to get the word out and generate dialogue before the theatrical release, television broadcast and digital distribution.

Worldwide, 550 million people are disabled including one in five Americans and yet this is one of the most underrepresented communities in terms of mainstream film, television and digital programming. The feature-length documentary aims to bring greater awareness and honest portrayals of members of the disabled community to large audiences through digital, broadcast and theatrical distribution.

KEY CREATIVE PERSONNEL

DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/EDITOR

Rodney Evans is the writer/director/producer of the feature film ***Brother To Brother*** which won the Special Jury Prize in Drama at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. The film had its European premiere at The Berlin International Film Festival and garnered four Independent Spirit Award nominations including Best First Film, Best First Screenplay, Best Debut Performance for Anthony Mackie and Best Supporting Male Performance for Roger Robinson. Evans has received funding from The John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, The Ford Foundation's JustFilms Program, The Creative Capital Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, The NY State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), The Independent Television Service (ITVS) and Black Public Media (BPM). His second narrative feature, ***The Happy Sad***, has played at over thirty film festivals throughout the world and had its U.S. theatrical premiere in August 2013 at the IFC Center in NYC and the Sundance Sunset Cinema in Los Angeles. Evans has taught at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, Princeton and Swarthmore. His latest documentary short ***Persistence of Vision*** screened at BAMcinemaFest and Frameline: The San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival in June 2016. It recently won the Jury Prize at the Ann Arbor International Film Festival in 2017.

For More Info: rodneyevansfilm@gmail.com or www.rodneyevansfilm.com

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Joseph Lovett, President, Lovett Stories and Strategies, is an award winning filmmaker, whose films inform, engage and inspire people into action. As a top producer at ABC's 20/20, Joe produced the first in-depth AIDS investigations on national television. In 2001, Joe won the George Foster Peabody Award and received an Emmy nomination for writing, producing and directing HBO's ***Cancer: Evolution to Revolution***. This film launched a national conversation about coping, treating and learning to live with the realities of cancer.

Joe's film, ***Going Blind***, and its Outreach Campaign, ***Going Blind and Going Forward***, have ignited a global movement of individuals, grassroots organizations and medical professionals sponsoring screenings to raise awareness and to improve access to vision enhancement services. (See www.goingblindmovie.com)

Other broadcast films Joe has directed and/or produced include ***State of Denial*** (PBS), a film on the AIDS crisis in South Africa funded by the Ford Foundation; ***Too Hot Not to Handle*** (HBO) on climate change, ***Blood Detectives*** (PBS and Discovery Channel) produced for the American Society of Hematology, ***Gay Sex in the 70s*** (Sundance Channel), ***Three Sisters Searching for a Cure***, a film on ALS for HBO.

PRODUCER

H. Robert Wunder is a producer of fiction and documentary film projects. His credits include two short fiction films directed by Mark Tumas. ***Sweepstakes*** (Tribeca 2014) and ***Wander*** (2016). He also produced the fiction feature debut ***Ironwood*** directed by Shahin Izadi (Black Star Film Festival 2017).

EDITOR

Hannah Buck is the editor of the feature documentaries **Chef Flynn** (Sundance 2018 Documentary Competition) directed by Cameron Yates, **Memories of a Penitent Heart** (Tribeca, POV 2017) directed by Cecilia Aldarondo, **An Oversimplification of Her Beauty** (Sundance 2013) and **Triptych** both directed by Terence Nance and **Black Memorabilia** (MoMA's Documentary Fortnight) directed by Chico Colvard. In 2015 she was a fellow of the Sundance Edit and Story Lab and the IFP Independent Filmmaker Lab. Hannah's work has been supported by the Sundance Institute, The Jerome foundation, Women Make Movies and the Tribeca Film Fund. <https://www.hannahbuckeditor.com/>

CINEMATOGRAPHERS

Kjerstin Rossi is a filmmaker, cinematographer and editor. Her editing credits include **The Lazarus Effect**, an HBO production that examines the impact of free Antiretroviral medicines in Zambia, **Collaborators** about filmmaker Spike Jonze and his creative team, and the feature documentary **Elaine Stritch: Just Shoot Me** about the legendary Broadway actor. Kjerstin has edited several experimental documentary works, including **Mud Fountain** by Wangechi Mutu (Deutsch Guggenheim, 2010), **SOSW Ballet** by Anna Gaskell (acquired by Whitney Museum, 2011), and **Eat Cake** (Brooklyn Museum, 2013). Her experimental short **Super Queers** premiered at the Tate Modern and she is currently directing **Singing Was the Only Way Through**, a short hybrid documentary related to the psychiatric survivor movement.

Mark Tumas is a filmmaker producing work within the forms of short narrative, experimental video, and personal documentary. His past work has dealt heavily with mental illness and psychological disintegration. In 2012 Tumas received a Princess Grace Film Honoraria Grant for his narrative short **Sweepstakes**. The film premiered at the 2014 Tribeca Film Festival. Tumas is the editor of the fiction feature, **Namour** (directed by Heidi Simane) which premiered at the Los Angeles Film Festival in June 2016 and was theatrically released by Array Releasing in March 2017.

WEB DEVELOPER/TECHNOLOGIST

Mike Knowlton is a recognized leader in the global Transmedia community and Co-Founder of the non-profit, immersive storytelling community **StoryCode**. His work at StoryCode has created a vibrant cross-discipline community of innovative creators. Mike's background spans design, programming, advertising, sales/fund-raising, production, and filmmaking. As a Creative Technologist he founded and led a number of technology companies including user-interface design firm Nascent State, digital agency **BASIK**, open-source Flash technology **Frontal** and Murmur. He has led large multidisciplinary teams in developing complex software applications for brands including Gucci, MoMA and Tiffany & Co. He speaks regularly at leading cross-media conferences including AD:Tech, the Power to the Pixel Market, Storytelling 1.X and StoryWorld.