KARTEMQUIN FILMS AND BETI FILMS PRESENT
RAISING BERTIE
AN INTIMATE PORTRAIT OF
THREE AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS
COMING OF AGE IN RURAL NORTH CAROLINA
RAISING BERTIE
Directed and Produced by Margaret Byrne

2016 / 96 minutes / 1.78:1 / Dolby Digital 2.0 / In English / USA / Not Rated

RaisingBertie.com
Press images and poster art available at:
bit.ly/RBpressstills

Video Clips:
Raising Bertie Official Trailer – 2:25 -
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ufvE---JG
NY
Junior Skips Rocks - :37 -
https://vimeo.com/92985387

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SYNOPSIS
"I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all.” - James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son

Set in Bertie County, a rural African American-led community in Eastern North Carolina, Raising Bertie offers viewers an authentic and tender portrait of the lives of three young boys - Reginald “Junior” Askew, David “Bud” Perry, and Davonte “Dada” Harrell - as they face a precarious coming of age.

Rural minorities like the youth in Bertie represent some of the nation’s most vulnerable and least visible. Like many rural areas, Bertie County struggles with a dwindling economy, a declining population and a high school graduation rate below the state average. The Perdue chicken processing plant is Bertie’s last major employer, and the 27 prisons that lay within a 100 miles of Bertie cast a long shadow. Bertie County is predominately African American - its challenges compounded by generations of economic and educational discrimination and exclusion.

Bertie also is the home of Junior, Bud, and Dada, three engaging young men with difficult pasts attending high school at The Hive, an alternative school for at-risk boys. There, we meet Vivian Saunders, a passionate community activist from Bertie County. At The Hive a combination of respect, socio-emotional learning, and mentorship helps to put these young men’s lives on track. The Hive is a beautiful model of effective, supportive, and innovative interventions that help to improve opportunities and the quality of life for African-American boys and young men in Bertie.

But, when budget shortfalls lead the Board of Education to close The Hive, Junior, Bud, and Dada must return to Bertie High School and a system that once failed them.

This raw and starkly poetic Kartemquin vérité documentary weaves the young men’s stories together as they navigate school, unemployment, violence, first love, fatherhood, and estrangement from family members and mentors, all while trying to define their identities.

Intimate access depicts an honest portrayal of the boys’ perspectives and the caring adults in the community who understand what it means to take care of their own. The film is an in-depth look at issues facing many of rural America’s youth of color and what happens in the everyday lives of young people caught in the complex interplay of generational poverty, economic isolation, and educational inequity. Raising Bertie is an experience that asks us to see this world through their eyes and incites recognition and understanding of lives and communities too often ignored.
Reginald “Junior” Askew is a slight, charming seventeen-year-old boy possessed by the fearlessness of youth. He has always dreamed of what lies beyond Bertie, but struggles to see the route. When we meet him at the age of seventeen, he can barely read. He lives in a small home wedged in between fields of corn with his mother, who was left to care for him when his father was incarcerated for murder when Reginald, was three years old.

“I’m glad I can look back and see my younger days and see how it was for me back then, keeps me on the road I’m on today. And I got two very good friends out of it, Margaret and Jon.

I love people. I’m a family man. I’m just like everyone else in the world. I may have made bad choices, but I’m not letting those choices determine the outcome of my life. I’m out here workin’, doin’ it.”
CAST

David “Bud” Perry is a farmer who hopes to someday take over his father’s landscaping business and become his own boss. Growing up in what he refers to as “the hood” of Bertie, he has developed a tough exterior, leading to repeated suspensions for fighting and altercations with authority that threaten to derail his dreams of stability and success as an adult.

“I have never done anything like this and it was a new experience. Sometimes I didn’t want to do it because I wasn’t used to being on camera and I was nervous. Margaret and Jon made me feel comfortable. My favorite moments from the film are from The Hive, graduation, prom, and cutting grass.

I want a lot of kids to see Raising Bertie and see how the Hive started. They will see we live in the country and everybody doesn’t have a lot, but we do our best to have a good community.

I’m a good person and a bad person, but I think people like me overall. They think we are bad, but we ain’t bad we just don’t take no shit.

Ever since I was five or six years old I saw my grandaddy raising hogs, and when I was fourteen I started cutting grass with my daddy. Now I work at Smithfield so I am used to workin’.”
CAST

Davonte “Dada” Harrell is the youngest and most sensitive of the three boys, with an emotional honesty that is striking for someone his age. He dreams of something beyond Bertie, and hopes to someday open his own barbershop. For Davonte, family is everything and the recent separation of his parents weighs heavily on his heart. Like many high schoolers he also worries about graduating, making the football team and building his first serious relationship with a girl.

“The experience of filming Raising Bertie was life changing. I grew from a kid who never spoke up for himself to a young man that can speak with confidence. I believe the sky’s the limit. My dream is to go to barber school and own my own business one day.”
DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT - MARGARET BYRNE:

I originally came to Bertie County in 2009 to make a short film about the Hive, an alternative school for boys. I fell in love with the place and I saw value in a part of the country that the rest of America seemed to ignore.

After visiting the Hive, I knew there was an important story to be told about the African American boys growing up in Bertie. When talking to the students, I observed that they all had one thing in common: they all felt misunderstood. We planned to follow three young men at the school for one year, but early into filming, the Hive was closed down by the Board of Education because of budgetary shortfalls.

Instead of abandoning the project, we continued to film Junior, Bud, and Dada as they returned to the public high school. I wasn’t sure where the story would lead, but I did know that the perspective of the boys was worth sharing. People would ask me, why are you filming them? First and foremost, I saw their value and I recognized that they were often overlooked and pushed to the side. I also saw that the majority of youth in the community were experiencing similar struggles and I knew I didn’t want to focus on stories of the exception.

Despite appearances and differences in upbringing, their struggles felt familiar to me. At the time, I was married to an African immigrant who faced many of the same challenges that the boys did. He not only faced the negative stereotype of being black and poor, but, despite having a high school diploma, he could barely read. None of this defined him. I knew the strong man he was, when he was in his element. I recognized a similar passion and potential in Junior, Bud, and Dada.

This film has been a labor of love. As a single mother on public aid, I’m not a typical documentary director. My daughter stayed with me in Bertie and came with us on shoots. She was two when I started this film and has grown up with these families, who are now like family to us. Over the last seven years, we have maintained close, trusting relationships with each family in the film. I love them and am honored that they trusted me, gave me an unfiltered window into their lives, and believed what we were doing was important.

In editing this story, there were competing pressures: to fight against stereotypes, to tell an exciting story, to tell a story of unexpected success, and to prove that a filmmaker can communicate an honest story about a culture that is not her own. The truth is, I made a film about three kids that I met and cared about. I knew their story needed telling. The individuals in this story are representative of their community and they matter.
PRODUCER’S STATEMENT - IAN ROBERTSON KIBBE:

I grew up in Chapel Hill North Carolina, a mere three hours from Bertie County, yet the first time I learned about Bertie was working on this film. For many of us in the state, Eastern North Carolina and rural communities like Bertie are places we stop on the way to the beach for barbeque or boiled peanuts, and not much more.

Working on this film I’ve been amazed not only by how little I knew about this community, but also how fortunate I have been in my life, largely due to circumstances I had no control over.

I am multiracial - white and Afro-Jamaican - yet I look like a Swedish Ski Instructor. I came of age living in the skin of privilege, surrounded by good schools, economic opportunity and mentors. I was provided the space to make mistakes and still find success. I wore hoodies, occasionally skipped class, went to parties, slept in. I have been known to break traffic laws with relative impunity. Yet, I was not criminalized by the media or justice system based on my zip code or the color of my skin, but instead raised to feel entitled to all the promises that our country strives for in its most hopeful rhetoric. Had I looked a little different or been born a few miles away, I might be in this story, instead of helping to tell it.

Growing up is hard enough without the pressure of poverty or the burden of historical injustice or the ancestral trauma of slavery. In Bertie the scars are still fresh, the cuts still being made. One does not need to travel far back in time to see the impact of Jim Crow, racist labor and agricultural policy, and a biased criminal justice system. Plantations replaced by tenant farming, replaced by factory work, replaced by a prison industrial complex. We have traded field sacks for handcuffs and cotton for young men. Generation after generation - by law, by war, by the heat of the sun - black men, fathers, brothers, role-models have been removed from our society. And yet, we have the audacity to wonder why so many young black boys struggle to become successful men?

Too often in researching this film and in rough cut screenings or funding rejections we heard people say: “It’s not a race issue, it’s a poverty issue.” Or, “It’s not poverty, it’s education.” The truth is it is all of these things. And more. It’s geographic isolation, educational disenfranchisement, mass incarceration, single-mothers, slavery, family, faith, voting rights, globalization. It’s also just adolescence. These issues layer and weave together like kudzu, and play out in people’s daily lives in subtle but very real ways. These are complex issues and addressing them requires uncomfortable and complicated conversations.

I hope that this film creates the space and empathy needed to have them.
Press

"Essential" [...] "Charts nothing less than what it’s like to try to grow up free in the prison capital of the world."
— Alan Scherstuhl, Village Voice

"The experiences and challenges of the rural poor might make it into the national conversation as an abstraction, but rarely with the specificity of this intimate portrait of a black community."
— Sheri Linden, Hollywood Reporter

"Deserves a place beside the great achievements in longitudinal film."
— Scott Pfeiffer, The Moving World

"A moving chronicle, and a potent treatise on institutional failings that knows to demonstrate said problems instead of merely preaching them."
— Daniel Schindel, Paste Magazine

“Profound.”
— Tambey Obenson, Shadow and Act

“Powerfully drives home what is obvious and yet what most of us fail to see: Bertie County is America. It’s Chicago. It’s Detroit. It’s Los Angeles. It’s a portrait of communities and families striving to do right by their kids, but where schools and lack of job programs fail to meet communities’ most desperate needs.”
— Miriam Di Nunzio, Chicago Sun-Times
"Byrne masterfully uses her access to create empathy for the teenagers’ plight... there is an overwhelming sense of emotional resonance with each of the heartbreaks and triumphs the young men experience in the film... Raising Bertie strongly executes the things that a documentary in this genre should accomplish — it points to a larger issue by using the affected individuals to tell an honest story.”
— Nicholas Allen, Vox Magazine

"Riveting... there are no true happy endings, but after spending two hours with these remarkable people and gaining an understanding of their plight, it renews your faith in the human spirit.”
— Al Alexander, The Patriot Ledger

"Raising Bertie is the Boyhood of this year’s AFI DOCS, but with more of an urgent social subtext...”
— Dean Essner, Washington City Paper

"A faithful depiction of three young black men growing up in rural North Carolina. After the premiere of the film, the subjects came on stage and one of the men said that that moment was “the happiest day of my life.” Real honest emotions from real subjects, real people, real experiences.”
— Tom Roston, POV blog

"In a time when political dysfunction, farcical pop culture recaps and kitten videos seems to capture and hold the media and nation’s attention, Raising Bertie fills a tremendous void. Through careful, long-form visual storytelling Raising Bertie artfully explores larger problems plaguing the South... Every state legislator, every high school student and dammit, every citizen who cares about the state needs to watch Raising Bertie.”
— Sandra Davidson, Bit & Grain
"Astounding and powerful.”
— Bryn Gelbart, Indiewire

“The documentary brilliantly weaves the young men’s stories together, as they transition from their teens into manhood, engaged in a shared struggle for social and economic survival.”
— Brian C. Bush, Huffington Post, Black Voices

“A curiously intimate look at what life is like for young black men in an impoverished rural community where opportunities are scarce and potential pitfalls are everywhere... The film resonates powerfully with contemporary issues of racial inequality, educational opportunities and the Black Lives Matter movement.”
— Glenn McDonald, The News & Observer

“A subject that we all think we know about, but have never seen this intimately, and it’s powerful.”
— Rob Tiller, The Casual Blog

“An unusually intimate view of these young men’s lives, telling stories that are often left out in discussions of racism and poverty.”
— Sarah Boslaugh, Playback: stl
FILMMAKER BIOS:

Margaret Byrne, Director / Producer, has worked in documentary film for over fifteen years. She was a cinematographer and an additional editor on Emmy nominated American Promise (2013), a thirteen-year project following the education of two African American boys from New York City, and Slaying Goliath (2009), a feature documentary following an inner city youth basketball team. Margaret produced and edited a music documentary series which launched MTV across Africa in 2005. She was previously a Creative Director at Universal Music. She is the founder of Beti Films.

Jermaine Cole, Executive Producer, better known as J. Cole, Jermaine Cole is a Grammy nominated, multi platinum selling hip hop recording artist and record producer from Fayetteville, NC.

Gordon Quinn, Executive Producer, Legendary founder and Artistic Director of Kartemquin Films, Quinn has over 50 films to his credit, having played a critical creative role in countless others. He was the International Documentary Association’s 2015 Career Achievement Award recipient.

Justine Nagan, Executive Producer, Executive Director of POV, Former Executive Director of Kartemquin Films, Director of Typeface and Sacred Transformations, Executive Producer of films including The Interrupters, The Trials of Muhammad Ali and Life Itself.

Ian Robertson Kibbe, Producer, is originally from North Carolina and has spent the last 10 years working as a producer and director with close ties to Kartemquin Films. Ian was the engagement coordinator for the award-winning PBS documentary exploring religion, The Calling. His work has appeared on CNN, Time, Huffington Post, NPR and PBS. Ian is multi-racial and has his own unique and complex relationship to "race" and identity. As he puts it, "My father is White-American, my mother is Afro-Jamaican. Together they made Macaulay Culkin."
**FILMMAKER BIOS:**

**Jon Stuyvesant, Director of Photography / Producer,** has been working in documentary film for over a decade and has also worked on a host of doc-based television programs for a wide variety of networks including OWN, TLC, and A&E. He was a director of photography for Emmy nominated American Promise (2012). Jon earned a BFA in Film & Photography from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2003, which is where he met his longtime friend and creative partner Margaret Byrne, director of *Raising Bertie*.

**Leslie Simmer, Editor / Co-Writer,** is Kartemquin Films’ Director of Editing as well as Senior Editor on staff. Most recently she edited and co-wrote *The Homestretch*, as well as the Emmy-nominated *As Goes Janesville*. Her prior work includes editing the Emmy-nominated *In the Family* (for which she received the Best Editing prize at the “Best of the Midwest” Awards), and Co-Editing the award-winning *The War Tapes* with Steve James. She has been an editor on *In the Game, Tony and Janina’s American Wedding*, and provided additional editing on Steve James’s *No Crossover: The Trial of Allen Iverson*. Leslie has proudly worked with Kartemquin for 19 years.

**Eric Andrew Kuhn, Composer,** is a musician, composer and producer currently based in Durham, NC. His past film score work includes the 2014 documentary *The Immortalists* and the award winning short film *Santa Cruz del Islote*. He also composes for dance and theater, and performs and records with a number of musical groups; including Eric and Erica, Sean Hayes, Michael Musika and Thao With the Get Down Stay Down. Eric was deeply moved by the people and stories documented in *Raising Bertie*, and enjoyed working in depth with the filmmakers to create a musical landscape to honor and support them. The project also coincided with his return to his home state of NC, and he is grateful for the opportunity to be part of a story with local roots, and a crucially important larger message.

**Kartemquin Films** is a not-for-profit collaborative center for documentary media makers who seek to foster a more engaged and empowered society. In 2016, Kartemquin will celebrate 50 years of sparking democracy through documentary. Best known for producing *Hoop Dreams* and *The Interrupters* among over 50 other documentaries that examine and critique society through the lives of ordinary people, Kartemquin has won every major almost every available prize for documentary filmmaking, including multiple Emmy, Peabody, duPont-Columbia and Robert F. Kennedy journalism awards, Independent Spirit, IDA, PGA and DGA awards, and an Oscar nomination. A revered resource on issues of ethics and storytelling, Kartemquin is internationally recognized for crafting quality documentaries backed by comprehensive audience engagement, and for its innovative programs and advocacy designed to elevate the documentary community.

[www.kartemquin.com](http://www.kartemquin.com)
Production Company/Funders/Partners:
A Kartemquin Films and Beti Films Co-Production

Funders/Supporters:
MacArthur Foundation
Ford Foundation
BritDoc
Good Pitch
IFP
Chicago Media Project
Southern Documentary Fund
One Economy Corporation
Harper Foundation

Supporters:
We have begun identifying and contacting a number of rural organizations hungry for content that addresses their communities and gives them a voice. These include educational organizations, health provider networks, community banks and schools that have expressed an interest in the film. We plan to work closely with these organizations to develop and implement our engagement strategy. These partners include:

- Battelle for Kids
- Raben Group
- JFF
- Opportunity Nation
- The Urban Institute
- NC Community Development Initiative
- National Rural Education Association (NREA)
- Self-Help Credit Union
- Fathers, Families, and Healthy Communities
- RCCP2
- North Carolina Justice Center
- NC Rural Community Schools and Trust
- The Northeast Leadership Academy
- The NC Rural Center
BACKGROUND ON THE ISSUES & OUR IMPACT GOALS:

Education and Employment
Watching Raising Bertie, we become painfully aware of an education system that fails to address or even understand the needs of its students. When a lack of funding forecloses the best opportunity for these young men to graduate from high school prepared to succeed, they must return to the local high school system that failed to meet their needs. Unfortunately, rural school districts across the country face a myriad of challenges beyond inadequate funding, including attracting and retaining effective educators; school reform models that are difficult to replicate in rural communities; and transportation of children who often live miles from school.

These challenges are further compounded by the lack of meaningful job training opportunities, including work-based learning opportunities, such as internships, mentorships, and apprenticeships. Young people in rural communities do not suffer from a lack of talent or work ethic. Rather, they suffer from a lack of opportunity.

Opportunity Gaps In Rural Communities
Rural communities like Bertie play a critical role in our nation’s economy, including providing much of the country’s food and water. However, many rural Americans are not sharing in our nation’s overall economic growth. Rural poverty has increased to its highest levels since the 1970’s. One in four American students attend school in a rural community, and two out of every five of these students live in poverty. A 2015 report from the USDA found that rural child poverty rates are rising and currently, 85% of our country’s persistent poverty counties are in rural America.
BACKGROUND ON THE ISSUES & OUR IMPACT GOALS:

For minority youth living in rural areas, the crisis is compounded by racial injustice and further disenfranchisement. When people talk of rural America, most often they are envisioning white rural America, not the one-fifth or rural residents who are people of color, leaving an important segment of our society out of the conversation. Poverty rates for minorities in rural areas are nearly three times that of rural whites and research shows that 20% of African American youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are disconnected - neither in school nor working. This is nearly double the rate of white youth.

As communities around the country responded to President Obama’s call to action to improve opportunities and outcomes for young men and boys of color through the work of My Brother’s Keeper, and now My Brother’s Keeper Alliance, policymakers must be intentional about tackling the challenges of rural youth of color. Unfortunately, there is a significant gap in media and political attention paid to rural communities of color and the young people who live in them.

Community leaders and foundations are taking action and galvanizing resources to support proven, research based interventions to address the needs of opportunity youth. Many of these interventions, including community based solutions and mentorship, must be tailored to meet the needs of young people living in rural communities, recognizing the benefits and cultural resources that many rural communities rely on, such as close family ties, self-sufficiency and strong faith values.

Our goal is to inspire complicated discussions about systemic cycles of inequality in America. While other films address issues of education inequality, lack of access to employment, racism, and rural poverty, Raising Bertie is unique in its longitudinal observation of everyday life and the intimate ways these institutionalized systems affect Americans.

Working with community advocates, policymakers, educators, and service providers, we aim to change the national conversation to a wider perspective and create space for dialogue that can address these issues systematically. We hope to raise the important and difficult conversations needed to help break the cycle that restrains achievement of the individuals represented in the film.
Directed and Produced by
Margaret Byrne

Produced by
Ian Robertson Kibbe

Director of Photography
Jon Stuyvesant

Edited by
Leslie Simmer

Executive Producer
Jermaine Cole

Executive Producers
Gordon Quinn
Justine Nagan

Original Score Composed by
Eric Andrew Kuhn

Written by
Margaret Byrne & Leslie Simmer

Producer
Jon Stuyvesant

Story Consultant
Gordon Quinn

Director of Production, Kartemquin Films
Hillary Bacheldor

Post Production Supervisor
Ryan Gleeson

Additional Camera
Margaret Byrne

Additional Editors
Hillary Bachelder & Ryan Gleeson

Assistant Editors
Frances Cedro
Carlos Cova
Eugene Kobayashi
Nancy McDonald

Technical Supervisor
Jim Morrisette

Additional Music Composed by
Robin Landy

Musicians
Drew Anagnost
Leah Gibson
Jonathan Henderson
Eric Kuhn
Robin Landy
Dina Maccabee
Lewis Patzner
Rachel Rollins

Music Mixed by
Ari Picker & Eric Kuhn

Designers
Mark Argenti
Jillian Dudziak

High Definition Finish
Nolo Digital Film

Digital Colorists
Elliot Rudmann
Boris Seagraves

Online Edit
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Producer at Nolo Digital Film
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