

Just Vision Presents

MYNEIGHBOURHOOD

Directed and Produced by Julia Bacha and Rebekah Wingert-Jabi
Written and Edited by Rebekah Wingert-Jabi

AWARDS

Winner, George Foster Peabody Award, 2013
Winner, Best Short Documentary, Warsaw Jewish Film Festival, 2012
Winner, Special Award, Al Jazeera Documentary Film Festival, 2012

Official Selection, Tribeca Film Festival, 2012
Official Selection, The Good Pitch Europe, 2012
Official Selection, Sheffield Documentary Festival, 2012
Official Selection, San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, 2012
Official Selection, Chicago Palestine Film Festival, 2013
Official Selection, Traverse City Film Festival, 2012
Official Selection, Dokufest Kosovo, 2012
Official Selection, Rio International Film Festival, 2013
Official Selection, Camden International Film Festival, 2012
Official Selection, Washington West Film Festival, 2013
Official Selection, Mostra de Cinema Oriente Médio (Middle Eastern Film Festival), 2012

FOR MORE INFORMATION: www.justvision.org/MyNeighbourhood

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SYNOPSIS

Mohammed El Kurd is a Palestinian boy growing up in the neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah in the heart of East Jerusalem. When Mohammed turns 11, his family is forced to give up part of their home to Israeli settlers, who are leading a campaign of court-sanctioned evictions to guarantee Jewish control of the area.

Shortly after their displacement, Mohammed's family and other residents begin peacefully protesting against the evictions, determined not to lose their homes for good. In a surprising turn, they are quickly joined by scores of Israeli supporters who are horrified to see what is being done in their name. Among them is Jewish West Jerusalem resident Zvi Benninga and his sister Sara, who develop a strong relationship with Mohammed and his family as they take on a leading role in organizing the protests.

Through their personal stories, *My Neighbourhood* goes beyond the sensational headlines that normally dominate discussions of Jerusalem and captures voices rarely heard, of those striving for a shared future in the city.

My Neighbourhood follows Mohammed as he comes of age in the midst of unrelenting tension and remarkable cooperation in his backyard. Highlighting Mohammed's own reactions to the highly volatile situation, reflections from family members and other evicted residents, accounts of Israeli protesters and interviews with Israeli settlers, the film chronicles the resolve of a neighbourhood and the support it receives from the most unexpected of places.

My Neighbourhood is directed and produced by Rebekah Wingert-Jabi, who documented Mohammed's story over two years, and acclaimed filmmaker Julia Bacha. It is the latest production by Just Vision, an award-winning team of Palestinian, Israeli, North and South American filmmakers, journalists and human rights advocates dedicated to telling the stories of Israelis and Palestinians working nonviolently to achieve security, freedom and peace.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENTS

The story we set out to tell in *My Neighbourhood* is still largely unfinished. Mohammed's family and their neighbors have yet to regain their homes, and the specter of displacement remains very real for hundreds of others living in Sheikh Jarrah and across East Jerusalem. In the meantime, protests involving both Israelis and Palestinians continue, though it is still unclear how successful they will be in their campaign to halt and ultimately reverse the evictions.

Yet it was precisely the open-endedness of this story, and the urgency of this particular moment, that led us to create *My Neighbourhood*. Events in Jerusalem – the geographic, religious and emotional focal point of the conflict – have a way of quickly spiraling outwards and influencing, for better or worse, the atmosphere throughout the

region. Jerusalem can either be an unstable powder keg with the potential to ignite the entire Middle East, or, however remote a possibility it may now seem, a shared city that sets a tone of cooperation and mutual respect between Israelis and Palestinians.

My Neighbourhood came out of a desire to bring crucial local and global attention to those working towards the latter option, in the hopes that it will protect and empower them at this extremely fragile time. We created the film with an understanding that these competing visions are being played out on the ground right now, while the city's future hangs in the balance.

Over the past few years, as we toured around with our previous films *Budrus* and *Encounter Point*, we've been repeatedly struck by the transformative power of an audience's attention. For those like Mohammed and Zvi, who have chosen to struggle nonviolently for the future of their city, the knowledge that others in their societies and around the world are watching and supporting them is invaluable.

This idea formed the basis of a recent TEDTalk I gave, in which I described how both nonviolent and violent movements essentially clamor for the same thing: the validating force of being noticed. It is the fuel on which they run. And in Jerusalem, perhaps more than any other place in this conflict, we have for too long been willing to give ample attention to violence and extremism, while neglecting the courageous efforts of those pursuing a more constructive path without arms.

My Neighbourhood is an attempt to shift that dynamic. To see Jerusalem not solely from the perspective of politicians and religious extremists, but rather through the eyes of individuals growing up in the city, and hoping, despite all they have experienced, that a more noble and equitable future exists for all who live within it. The film is our response to the challenge those like Mohammed and Zvi pose to all of us who care about Jerusalem and the region's future: to bring new storylines and new expectations to this beloved and beleaguered city.

-- Julia Bacha

I first started filming in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in 2008, when Palestinian families there started to receive eviction notices. At the time, I had been living in the region on and off for seven years. I knew well the profound impact that settlement growth and home evictions had on the prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians but felt little attention had been given to how they affect the lives of those involved. I wanted to shed light on these issues through film, with the hope that it would lead to a better understanding of these significant obstacles to peace.

I met Mohammed, who was 12 at the time, while filming in the neighborhood. He introduced himself to me asking if he could interview me for a film he was making. He was full of curiosity and had an energy that struck me as remarkable for someone who had recently been evicted from his home. After he interviewed me, I started interviewing him,

and came to understand that film and poetry were a means he used to express and share the anger and vulnerability he felt after his eviction and those of his neighbors. His response encapsulated what I had witnessed throughout the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. From the onset this community was determined to doggedly struggle for justice nonviolently. In doing so, the residents emerged from the traumatic events of the evictions with a surprising sense of hope that if they just kept at their struggle, justice would ultimately prevail.

When Israelis started crossing the invisible line between West and East Jerusalem to protest the evictions, some in the community found greater reason to have hope, others were skeptical. Mohammed, who had only known Israelis as settlers and police, made friends with Israelis who chose to struggle for the same justice Mohammed was seeking. I never expected to witness these types of interactions in such a volatile area and was very surprised that it was there, at the heart of the battle for the future of Jerusalem, that I witnessed a foundation for peace in the city being laid.

With as much hope as that experience gave me, the reality on the ground in Sheikh Jarrah today is troubling. After being evicted from his father's home, Mohammed and his family moved in with his grandmother and now face the possibility of being forced out of this home too. Hundreds of others in Sheikh Jarrah and East Jerusalem are facing a similar threat. Courageous Palestinians and Israelis continue to protest nonviolently in Sheikh Jarrah and are trying to keep alive the very unique spirit that emerged there. I hope that as their story gets out to audiences that they will find the strength to continue to keep that spirit alive where it is most needed, in Jerusalem, at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

-- Rebekah Wingert-Jabi

PROTAGONISTS

MOHAMMED EL KURD is a Palestinian boy born and raised in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. At age 11, Mohammed comes home from school to find half of his home taken over by Israeli settlers and his grandmother hospitalized. Forced to live under the same roof as the settlers, Mohammed quickly develops deep feelings of animosity towards Israelis. Yet when Israeli activists soon begin arriving in the neighborhood to join residents in protests against the evictions, Mohammed is surprised. "These are Jews? How can they be Jews?" he asks himself, adding that he soon learned that "opinions differ within societies." Mohammed gradually develops relationships with the Israeli activists, and becomes committed to finding a nonviolent way to regain his home and stop the evictions.

ZVI BENNINGA is an Israeli medical student who grew up in West Jerusalem. When he hears about the evictions taking place in Sheikh Jarrah, he and his sister Sara begin attending vigils and protests regularly. He believes the evictions and settlements are destroying the moral fabric of Israeli society and making a shared future in Jerusalem impossible. Before long, Zvi and Sara convince their parents, who are initially

uncomfortable with the idea of challenging the Israeli authorities, to join the protests. Reflecting on his activism, Zvi says: “On the one hand [my activism] made me much more critical towards the place where I live. On the other hand it really connected me to this place. It made me realize that I care about what happens here and that I stay so I can be involved.”

RIFKA EL KURD is Mohammed’s grandmother, and has been living in the El Kurd family home in Sheikh Jarrah for over half a century. She first arrived in the neighbourhood as a refugee in the 1950s, after her family had been displaced from Haifa in the 1948 War. Rifka hopes the protests in the neighbourhood can help her regain her home, yet she is wary of Israeli participation in the struggle. “If you want to hear the truth, I don’t really trust them,” she says. “You’re telling me they will leave their people...their religion and join us? It’s not logical.”

YONATAN YOSEF is the spokesperson for the Israeli settlers living in Sheikh Jarrah. He sees the settlement of Jews in the neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem as a religious duty and an integral part of the Jewish “Return to Zion.” According to Yonatan, the eviction of Palestinian families is a necessary side effect in this effort. “Our dream is that all East Jerusalem will be like West Jerusalem:” Yonatan says, “A Jewish capital of Israel.”

FILMMAKER BIOS

JULIA BACHA

Director/Producer

Julia Bacha is a media strategist and award-winning filmmaker whose work has been exhibited at Sundance, Tribeca, Berlin, Jerusalem, and Dubai International Film Festivals, and broadcast on the BBC, HBO, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya television channels. Since graduating Magna Cum Laude from Columbia University in 2003, she has strategically used film to highlight under documented stories from the Middle East. Julia started her filmmaking career in Cairo, where she co-wrote and edited Jehane Noujaim’s critically acclaimed documentary, *Control Room* (2004), for which she was nominated to the Writer’s Guild of America Award. *Control Room* marked the first time most Americans were exposed to an inside view of Al Jazeera and generated wide public debate about US media coverage during the war in Iraq. Since 2004, Julia has been working closely with Ronit Avni to develop and implement Just Vision’s media strategy. She wrote and co-directed *Encounter Point* (2006), which was broadcast on Al Arabiya and endorsed by the Israeli Education ministry, directed and produced *Budrus* (2009), which had a palpable impact on US and Arab media coverage of nonviolent resistance in the Middle East, and directed and produced *My Neighbourhood* (2012). She has been a guest on numerous television shows such as Charlie Rose, MSNBC’s Andrea Mitchell Reports and Al Jazeera’s Frost Over the World. For her influential work in shaping media in the US and beyond, Julia is the co-recipient of the 2009 King Hussein Leadership Prize, 2010 Search for Common Ground Award, 2011 Ridenhour Film Prize and the 2012 O Globo “Faz Diferença” Award. Julia is a Term Member at the Council on Foreign Relations and her TEDTalk “Pay Attention to Nonviolence” has been viewed by hundreds of thousands of people worldwide.

REBEKAH WINGERT-JABI

Director/Producer/Writer/Editor

Rebekah has over twelve years of producing, directing and editing experience in film and television. She worked on films that aired on Al Arabiya, the Discovery Channel, and PBS. Rebekah lived in the West Bank for eight years where she worked with Palestinian and Israeli filmmakers to produce fiction films (*Swish, Swish*) and documentaries (*A Good Samaritan*). She also taught filmmaking at Al Quds University and Dar Al Kalima College. Rebekah has managed several youth media projects in the Middle East including a Palestinian-Israeli video exchange project. She is currently directing and producing a documentary film about the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem. Rebekah achieved a Master of Fine Arts in Film and Television Production from the University of Southern California School of Cinema-TV where she was awarded the Thomas Bush Cinematography scholarship.

RONIT AVNI

Executive Producer

Ronit Avni is an award-winning filmmaker and human rights advocate. She is the Founder and Executive Director of Just Vision, an organization dedicated to increasing media coverage and support for Palestinian and Israeli efforts to end the occupation and the conflict without arms. Her work has been featured in major news outlets, including *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, The BBC, NPR and *The Economist*. Ronit produced the film *Budrus*, which was hailed in *The New York Times* as "this year's must-see documentary." Ronit also directed and produced the critically acclaimed film *Encounter Point*. Her team has garnered awards at the Tribeca, Berlin, San Francisco, Silverdocs and Jerusalem film festivals. Previously, Ronit trained human rights defenders to incorporate film into their advocacy efforts while working at Peter Gabriel's human rights organization, WITNESS. She now sits on the WITNESS board. Ronit is a Young Global Leader through the World Economic Forum and a Term Member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

GEETA GANDBHIR

Supervising Editor

Geeta Gandbhir has over nineteen years of varied experience in the fields of film, television and animation. She has been nominated for three Emmy Awards, and has won two, and her films have won one Academy Award and three Peabody Awards. Recently, her film "God is the Bigger Elvis" with director Rebecca Cammisa was nominated for the 2012 Academy Awards. She has worked with distinguished, award-winning directors and producers such as Spike Lee, Robert Altman and Sam Pollard. In television, she has worked for PBS, MTV, Discovery, Court TV, Oxygen Media, HBO and many others. Recent works include the PBS series African American Lives with Henry Lewis Gates, the four-hour documentary When the Levees Broke for filmmaker Spike Lee for which she won an Emmy Award for Best Editing. She just finished work on Spike Lee's follow-up to "When the Levees Broke" entitled "If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise" for HBO, for which she was nominated for an Emmy Award, and a film on breast cancer for HBO, entitled "The Education of Dee Dee Ricks" with director Perri Peltz and "God is the Bigger Elvis" for HBO. She is currently working with author and Academy Award-nominated director Sebastian Junger on a film about photographer Tim Hetherington who was killed in Libya in 2011.

JUST VISION

My Neighbourhood is produced by the non-profit organization, Just Vision. Comprised of an award-winning team of Palestinian, Israeli, North and South American journalists, human rights advocates and filmmakers, Just Vision creates documentary films and other multimedia resources aimed at raising awareness about the underreported efforts of Israeli and Palestinian civilians working nonviolently to resolve the conflict and end the occupation. *My Neighbourhood* is Just Vision's latest production, coming on the heels of acclaimed documentaries *Budrus* and *Encounter Point*. For more information about Just Vision, visit www.justvision.org.

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