

A Cinema Guild Release

KARTEMQUIN FILMS in association with RISE FILMS present

# THE INTERRUPTERS

A film by Steve James and Alex Kotlowitz



**Photographed and Directed by Steve James**

**Produced by Alex Kotlowitz and Steve James**

(Note to press: When referencing *The Interrupters*, please credit both Steve and Alex; they were creative partners in the making of the film. Thanks.)

Official Selection, Sundance Film Festival, 2011

Special Jury Award, Full Frame Film Festival, 2011

Audience Award for Best Documentary, Philadelphia Cinefest, 2011

Best Documentary Award, Miami International Film Festival, 2011

Best Documentary Award, Minneapolis Film Festival, 2011

True Life Fund Winner, True/False Film Festival, 2011

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## SYNOPSIS

THE INTERRUPTERS tells the moving and surprising story of three dedicated individuals who try to protect their Chicago communities from the violence they, themselves once employed. These “violence interrupters” (their job title) – who have credibility on the street because of their own personal histories – intervene in conflicts before the incidents explode into violence. Their work and their insights are informed by their own journeys, which, as each of them point out, defy easy characterization.

Shot over the course of a year out of Kartemquin Films, THE INTERRUPTERS captures a period in Chicago when it became a national symbol for the violence in our cities. During that period, the city was besieged by high-profile incidents, most notably the brutal beating death of Derrion Albert, a Chicago High School student whose death was caught on videotape.

The “violence interrupters” work for an innovative organization, CeaseFire, which is the brainchild of epidemiologist Gary Slutkin who for ten years battled the spread of cholera and AIDS in Africa. Slutkin believes that the spread of violence mimics that of infectious diseases, and so the treatment should be similar: go after the most infected, and stop the infection at its source.

Their work is fraught with moral quandaries. They have to step between adversaries, often people they know. They need to acknowledge people’s grievances while simultaneously pulling them back from acting on them. And on occasion, they find themselves using the very threat of violence to defuse an altercation. As they venture into their communities, they confront the importance of family, the noxious nature of poverty, and the place of race. And they do it with incredible candor and directness.

Ameena Matthews, whose father is Jeff Fort, one of the city’s most notorious gang leaders, was herself once a drug ring enforcer. But having children and finding solace in her Muslim faith pulled her off the streets and grounded her. In the wake of Derrion Albert’s death, Ameena becomes a close confidante to his mother, and helps her through her grieving. Ameena, who is known among her colleagues for her fearlessness, intervenes in an argument over \$5, a gang altercation and a group of young men thinking of retaliating for a friend’s murder. During one interruption, Ameena befriends a feisty, troubled teenaged girl who reminds her of her own self at that age. The film follows that friendship over the course of many months, as Ameena tries to nudge the troubled girl in the right direction.

Cobe Williams, scarred by his father’s murder when he was 12-years-old, was in and out of prison, until he had had enough. Like Ameena, his family – particularly a young son – helped him find his footing. Cobe disarms others with his humor and his general good nature. His most challenging moment comes when he has to confront a man so bent on revenge that Cobe has to pat him down to make sure he’s put away his gun. Like Ameena, he gets deeply involved in the lives of those he encounters, including a teenaged boy just out of prison and a young man from his old neighborhood who’s squatting in a foreclosed home.

Eddie Bocanegra is haunted by a murder he committed when he was seventeen. It’s become the centripetal force in his life. His CeaseFire work is a part of his repentance for

what he did. Eddie is most deeply disturbed by the aftereffects of the violence on children, and so he spends much of his time working with younger kids in an effort to both keep them off the streets and to get support to those who need it – including a 16-year-old girl whose brother died in her arms. Soulful and empathic, Eddie, who learned to paint in prison, teaches art to children, trying warn them of the debilitating trauma experienced by those touched by the violence.

THE INTERRUPTERS follows Ameena, Cobe and Eddie as they go about their work, and while doing so reveals their own inspired journeys of hope and redemption. From acclaimed director Steve James and bestselling author Alex Kotlowitz, this film is an unusually intimate journey into the stubborn persistence of violence in our cities. The film attempts to make sense of what CeaseFire's Tio Hardiman calls, simply, "the madness".

## THE INTERRUPTERS

### DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT – STEVE JAMES

For me, making THE INTERRUPTERS, feels like a homecoming. Since completing *Hoop Dreams* in 1994, I've made documentaries that have taken me to near and far-flung places - Southern Illinois, Texas, Fiji, Nigeria, and Virginia, among others - but I guess you could say my heart and soul belongs to Chicago. This film gave me a chance to return to some of the same streets and neighborhoods we traversed in *Hoop Dreams*. And while that film followed the fortunes of two families hoping to use basketball as a ticket out of poverty, the harsh realities of urban violence and despair suffused their lives then and now. In recent years, two main subjects from the film, Arthur's dad Bo and William's brother Curtis, were murdered. In both cases, these tragedies had a profound impact on the families. With the Agee's, it led to Arthur's mom moving away from Chicago and back to Alabama where she was born, while Arthur for a while drove his father's car and wore some of his clothes in a desperate attempt to keep his memory alive. With William, his older brother's death sent him spiraling down, and eventually to his calling as a minister.

Bo and Curtis were on my mind when I first read Alex's New York Times Magazine cover story on CeaseFire (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/magazine/04health-t.html>). Alex and I have been friends for about ten years. We met when an acquaintance decided we should know each other. I already knew Alex's seminal book, *There Are No Children Here*. In it, he'd done something remarkable: spend extensive time with a family living in one of Chicago's notorious housing projects. What emerged was a book that illuminated honestly and heartbreakingly the lives of two brothers exiled to the margins of our society like so many in these neighborhoods.

Alex's NYT's article on CeaseFire struck a chord with me in the way it vividly told the story of an organization trying to find a new way to impact what has seemed an intractable problem in these communities for decades, one that no longer made headlines, perhaps leaving people numb or resigned to it.

So I called Alex up and said, we may have found the film project to do together. He agreed so we began meeting with various CeaseFire staff and interrupters Alex had interviewed to see if a film was possible – and determine if it were plausible for us to gain real access to the work the interrupters do in the streets. Encouraged by their response and our fundraising success, filming began in earnest in the Spring of 2009. We shot over 300 hours during the next 14 months. The core team during the production phase was Alex, co-producer and sound recordist Zak Piper, and myself. We wanted to keep the crew small enough to encourage an essential intimacy and authenticity. For this reason, I also handled the camera to eliminate the need for one other crewmember. Alex had never been involved in a film like this before, but he proved to be a quick learner. Because he knew the landscape of the inner city so intimately from his other work, it felt like we were on the same wavelength from the start. And not surprisingly, he was a terrific interviewer.

The other core team member was talented editor Aaron Wickenden, who began cutting scenes in January of 2010, while our filming was in full swing. Aaron and I eventually tag-team edited once filming was largely complete. (Although we were a constant source of

humor at Kartemquin Films because we never met a scene we didn't want to film, even deep into the editing). A cynic might ask just how much editing was done given a running time of 2:24! Whether the film deserves and rewards its length is up to every viewer to decide. But for us as filmmakers, we felt it our duty to give the viewer the kind of complex, surprising, sometimes disturbing, sometimes incredibly moving experience in the theater that we were privy to over those 14 months. We want the film to be an immersive experience for the audience, one that plunges them into communities plagued by violence, while also allowing them to step back and understand it. We also hope THE INTERRUPTERS challenges viewers on their assumptions about these communities, and encourages them to care. And maybe even to act. To that end, Kartemquin Films, which has been my filmmaking home since I began with *Hoop Dreams*, is attempting an ambitious outreach and civic engagement campaign around the film designed to ensure the film inspires a national discussion on violence prevention and is seen by the communities most affected by the issue. This is hardly unusual for Kartemquin; it's a commitment we make on every documentary we produce. This is just one reason why I have chosen to continue making films with them for almost twenty years now.

People ask me, "Wasn't it incredibly dangerous and depressing?" The truth is we never felt in any true danger, in large part because of the respect commanded by our interrupter subjects in their communities. Cobe, Ameena, and Eddie took good care of us. They are extraordinary people for the lives they've lived and the lives they've saved. Two men and one woman - ex-gangbangers, convicts and street players - who'd once been part of the violence they were now bravely trying to interrupt. And I was never depressed by what we filmed either. Maybe its because Cobe, Ameena, and Eddie inspired us with their own personal stories of redemption, and by giving us a chance to witness firsthand their impact on other people's lives. And maybe it's because they are such a joy to be around. I've told Cobe that he should have his own cable show in which all he does is call people on the phone to chat. He's one of the most generous, and sweet people I've ever met, making it impossible to believe he'd done three stints in prison for everything from selling drugs to attempted murder. Eddie has to be one of the most sincere and thoughtful subjects I've come across. A man who committed the ultimate act of violence, and now commits himself so completely to helping others. And Ameena, who can take over every room she walks into with her charisma and personality, yet is also one of the most private subjects I've ever filmed.

In any long term filming process, trust between filmmakers and subjects become paramount, the key to access and intimacy. It didn't happen overnight. It rarely does. In this film, the initial challenges were for people in the communities to understand that the film crew wasn't tied to the police, and that the interrupters' real focus in any mediation was on helping them, not filming them. We had an understanding with our interrupters that if a situation seemed potentially too dangerous or if our being there would compromise the mediation, we would stand down. This became an issue with Eddie in one of the Latino neighborhoods beset by gangs when he was told that we weren't welcome there anymore. The more time we spent with our interrupters hanging with them even when a crisis wasn't imminent - going to Cobe's son's football games or Ameena's daughter's birthday party - the more comfortable they became with us and the camera. That then translated to the streets where it was important that people understand why we were there, why we wanted to film them. Ultimately, they trusted the interrupters and believed we were not there to vilify and judge, but to illuminate and understand. That's pretty much

been my guiding principle as a filmmaker, and Alex's as a writer. Nowhere was that more true than with this film.

Making THE INTERRUPTERS was a gift. I became a documentary filmmaker because I wanted to understand people and communities other than the ones I've lived in. The best film experiences are akin to living inside a rich and surprising novel. Your own personal life and day-to-day worries tend to recede and pale in comparison as you bear witness to the lives and often profound struggles of others.

One of my favorite anecdotes from making the film occurred the day of the tense Englewood incident that is early in the film. In the midst of all the chaos, someone stole some of our film equipment that was stashed inside the CeaseFire Englewood office. When we discovered the theft, six interrupters sprang into action, jumping in cars and zooming off to find the young man someone had spotted trotting amicably away from the scene minutes earlier with a strange looking bag (or camera bag) over his shoulder. I was touched by their efforts and felt that this showed how much the interrupters had embraced us as friends, not just filmmakers who continually "stalked" them, as Ameena would often rib us. Minutes after they rode off, Ameena returned with the young perpetrator. At her urging – and who can possibly resist Ameena? – the young man handed the bag back over to me along with an sincere apology. Such was the respect he had for her.

Perhaps the most memorable moment for me was when we filmed Cobe taking Lil' Mikey to the barbershop to apologize to a family and patrons he'd robbed at gunpoint three years earlier. That one scene is a microcosm for the whole film. Through that mother's eyes we saw who Lil' Mikey once was, capable of terrorizing a family and scarring them to this day. And we saw Lil Mikey today, determined to walk back in and sincerely apologize so that he can move on with his life in a completely positive direction. And months later when Lil Mikey finally landed a job at a day care center, we filmed him tenderly helping put small children down for their naps. A class X felon had befriended each of those precious children, even knew whose special blanket or pillow was whose. I had to wipe away the tears as I filmed. With Lil' Mikey - and Ameena, and Cobe, and Eddie - we met people in this film that have done terrible things in their lives, but who now have found their way back to their true selves.

## PRODUCER'S STATEMENT – ALEX KOTLOWITZ

Since I wrote *There Are No Children Here* twenty years ago I've seen much change in our inner-cities. Across the country, public housing has been razed. School reform has taken on a sense of urgency. The churches in our inner-cities have become more active. But the one constant has been the violence. It's come to define the lives of far too many. Over the past two decades, one young man I knew from my time in the projects was convicted for homicide, another four have been murdered. When one of them, Jojo Meeks, who had a smile so wide you felt like you could walk right in, was gunned down on the city's West Side, his death took on the texture of a myth. A case of mistaken identity, many said. Revenge for an altercation he'd had years ago, others claimed. As it turns out, his murder was pedestrian and foolish: he held up some drug dealers. He came waving a pellet gun. They were better armed.

The story of violence in our cities is filled with myths, even fictions. We've come to look at young men in the communities as predators. We've come to think that the best way to deal with the violence is to send people to prison for long terms. We've come to believe that most of the violence involves gangs fighting other gangs.

We wanted this film to knock people off balance, to get people questioning some of their assumptions. But most importantly we wanted to both put a human face on those living in our most devastated communities – and to give all of us some reason for hope.

When we began filming, all we knew is that CeaseFire's interrupters would be the film's driving force. We imagined this not so much a film about CeaseFire, but rather a film that through the eyes of the interrupters took a probing, questioning look at the violence of our cities. We began by filming their Wednesday meetings which allowed us to get to know the individuals around the table – and alerted us to disputes going on in the neighborhoods.

We knew though that the real challenge was: Could we get the kind of access on the streets that we felt we needed? It took time. We spent four months filming these weekly meetings. We went out into the neighborhoods with various interrupters, getting to know them and their communities. We slept with our cell phones by our bedsides, waiting, hoping for a call from one of the interrupters inviting us to film them mediating a dispute. But we became increasingly frustrated by our inability to film an interruption.

One afternoon, we got a phone call from Cobe, someone who at that point we didn't know particularly well. He told us that if we could get down to the South Side later that day, he might have something for us. He had gotten a phone call from someone he'd met years earlier in the County Jail. The young man, Flamo, was beside himself with anger. Someone had called the police about alleged guns in his house, and when the police came they handcuffed Flamo's mom and arrested his brother. Flamo was intent on seeking revenge. Cobe had told Flamo that he was bringing along "my film crew." (That's how Cobe came to refer to us.) We were able to film this raw, on-the-edge moment as Cobe and his colleague, Rodney tk, tried to talk Flamo down. Word quickly got around to the other interrupters about the incident – and about the filming, and doors slowly opened. If we could film a guy about to go off and hunt down his antagonists, the thinking went, what else couldn't we capture?

We were sensitive to the fact that we had in some cases been invited into these very private moments, and so while we often pushed for access, we knew enough when to step away. For instance, when Cobe approached the barber shop to ask if Li'l Mikey could come by to apologize, the owner was skeptical and reluctant. We told him that if it was our presence that made him hesitant we'd step aside, that this was too important for Li'l Mikey. In the end, the barbershop owner not only agreed to let Li'l Mikey return to apologize, but invited us in, as well. There were also times that the film's subjects went places we didn't expect. Towards the end of our filming, we asked Eddie if he'd take us to the street where he had committed his murder. We wanted to get a shot of the block. Eddie had already talked to us a lot about the crime, and each time it became more draining and difficult for him. We assured him that we had enough, that we didn't want or need to talk to him about it any more, but as we drove up to the site of the murder, Eddie began to open up in an even more profound way than he had earlier, and so that moment became a moving and powerful scene where Eddie revisits the place that forever altered his life.

In those early months, Steve and I talked a good deal about how we might find a narrative thread for the film. Both of us – Steve in his films, me in my writings – are absolutely committed to story, to the simple notion that people keep on watching films or reading books because they want to know what's going to happen next. There wasn't a clear narrative here, and so we looked for ways to create some drive. Part of the process of storytelling is a sense of discovery, but in film that can be tough – in large part because of costs. We were fortunate that we were able to do all the filming in Chicago through Kartemquin Films (I wish there was a Kartemquin for writers) – and we kept the size of the crew to an absolute minimum. It was myself, Steve – who ended up doing all the shooting – and Zak Piper who did sound. It meant that we could take some gambles, and so as we began to home in on our three main subjects – Ameena, Cobe and Eddie – whenever something would come up in their work, and they were open to it, we'd join them. And soon these small, but incredibly compelling stories began to unfold: Ameena's efforts with Caprysha, Cobe's mentoring of Li'l Mikey, Eddie's interaction with Vanessa and her family, to name just a few. What was most exciting is that with many of these stories we were surprised – sometimes astonished – by the direction they took, and when that happened we knew that we had not only a potentially powerful film, but one that had the potential to be provocative, to push people to rethink their preconceptions.

Extensive interviews with our subjects along with extensive interviews with Gary Slutkin, the founder of CeaseFire, and Tio Hardiman, who had come up with the idea for the "violence interrupters" at CeaseFire, added another layer to these stories. I've done some television work before, and have always been frustrated by the interviewing process. It can feel awkward and limiting, especially when we had pre-interviewed subjects. Steve is unusual I suspect among filmmakers. Steve made sure to set up the filming of the interviews in a way that felt comfortable for whomever was being interviewed. We used minimum lighting – and again kept the crew small, just the three of us. We also allowed the interviews to go on for as long as they needed to be. Some lasted as long as four hours. Steve and I worked together here. Since he was shooting, I'd conduct the interviews, but inevitably Steve would chime in with questions of his own, and before long we had an honest, open and often quite intimate conversation going on between the three of us. The interviews were often true revelations. We didn't go in knowing the answers we needed or



wanted. We viewed it as an exploration. It's something Steve and I share: we want to be surprised, we want to feel like we've come away having learned something new.

In the editing room, Steve took a first run at trying to piece together some semblance of structure. To me, it felt like this impossible jigsaw puzzle. But Steve seemed undaunted. He has an uncanny ability to hold the outlines of the film in his head, something that I, accustomed to the written page, am still tangling with. By the end of the summer, we had a basic structure in place, a foundation from which we could build. We met regularly as a team – Steve, myself, Zak and Aaron Wickenden (who began editing scenes about six months into our filming) to talk about what was and wasn't working. I'd come by the editing room (tucked away in a corner of Steve's basement where in the winter months we learned to come wearing long underwear and caps) to look at scenes with Steve, and wrestle with the structure. We read through hundreds of pages of transcripts, looking for those salient thoughts which would help both reveal much about the violence – and reveal much about the subjects. Given the number of interviews we'd done over the course of the year, there'd be times one of us would stumble on a revelation or a provocative thought that we'd forgotten about.

Steve and I have been friends for 10 years and over that time I've become – already was, really – a big admirer of his work. In 1993, before we'd met, my agent called and asked if I'd take a look at a film that hadn't yet been released. A publisher wanted to know if I'd write a book to accompany the film. It was, of course, *Hoop Dreams*, and I declined the offer to write anything. I was in awe of the film, and told my agent: There's nothing left to be said. (Honestly, it came as close to a novel as anything I'd seen on the screen.) Over the years, we've talked about collaborating on a project, and in *THE INTERRUPTERS* we landed on a subject that has haunted both of us. It suited us well. *THE INTERRUPTERS* feels like a natural bookend both to *Hoop Dreams* and to *There Are No Children Here* - a kind of reprieve.

Steve and I, fortunately, share similar sensibilities. Both of us are committed to being honest to what we've seen and heard, and to try as best we can to get our audiences in the shoes of our subjects, to look at the world through their eyes. Here, too, we were fortunate in that all three of the film's principals -- Ameena, Cobe and Eddie -- felt it important that people look at their communities with fresh eyes. And each of them was always concerned that the film not be about them, per se, but rather in the end about their neighborhoods, about their work. (When we screened a rough cut for them, each of them excitedly talked with pride about the other two.) What's also remarkable about the three is that each, given their personalities and their journeys, challenge what we think we know. With each of them, it's hard to imagine them running the streets. It's hard to imagine them being a part of what Tio calls "the madness". And the implicit lesson in their stories is if Eddie or Ameena or Cobe could find themselves where they are now, why can't a Caprysha or a Li'l Mikey or a Flamo? There are second acts in life. Ameena, Cobe and Eddie are testament to that.

One of the things I worried about as we were filming was how were we going to keep this film from being a completely grim and disturbing experience. I mean, who wants to watch a film about beatings and shootings? Two things happened. One, as we stumbled upon various stories it became clear that there were going to be some pleasant and surprising conclusions. But secondly, I realized how much I looked forward to filming (and we did a

lot of it, over 300 hours), because inevitably we had such a good time. That was in large part because of who we were hanging out with. Tio would regale us with stories from his time as a hustler. Ameena would tease us for ‘stalking her’ – and during filming make faces at the camera, just to let us know with a wink and a nod that she didn’t forget we were there.

Eddie shared his passion for books and baseball cards (not necessarily in that order.) During the year and a half we filmed, Eddie renovated a house – and set aside the attic for his very (and I mean ‘very’) extensive baseball card collection. Cobe kept us laughing, and led us to some great eateries on the South Side. (He also called us constantly; the man lives on his phone.) It’s not to say there weren’t moments of poignancy, even tears (like during the filming of the barber shop scene) but what was both amazing and stirring is despite all the forces bearing down on them and those around them, each of the interrupters not only kept their head above water, but flourished. They were an inspiration to me. And I hope that through this film they become an inspiration to others.

## THE INTERRUPTERS

### SUBJECT BIOS



**Eddie Bocanegra**, who's 34, has been a violence interrupter for the past two years. He spent 14 years in prison for a murder he committed when he was 17. He's presently working towards his social work degree at Northeastern University. In addition to his work with CeaseFire, Eddie has started a therapeutic support group for mothers who have lost children to violence and teaches art in the schools and in summer programs run by Enlace Chicago, a community organization in Little Village, the neighborhood where he grew up. His mentors at CeaseFire have been two experienced interrupters, Zale Hoddenbach and Eddie Lopez.



**Ameena Matthews** has been with CeaseFire for three-and-a-half years as a Senior Violence Interrupter. The mother of four children – two who are grown and two who are ages 12 and 9 – she is married to Abdur Rasheed Matthews, who is the Iman at the Al Haqqani Mosque & Community Center. Ameena, who grew up in Englewood on the city's South Side, is the daughter of Jeff Fort, one of the city's most infamous gang leaders. In the 1960s, the El Rukns, which were under Fort's leadership, were seen by some as a catalyst for positive growth in their neighborhoods. Fort is now serving time in prison for drug trafficking and terrorism charges; he was alleged to have conspired to commit terrorist acts on behalf of Libya in exchange for money. Ameena credits her family and her early life experiences with her desire to educate and effect change in the neighborhoods that she calls home.



**Ricardo “Cobe” Williams**, who’s 38, has been working at CeaseFire for four years. Cobe, who like Ameena grew up in Englewood, lost his father when he was 11; his father was murdered. Between 1993 and 2004, Cobe spent three stints in prison, for drug related charges and for attempted murder. When CeaseFire lost funding in 2007, Cobe continued to work at his job without pay until his position was restored seven months later. Cobe, who’s married to Andrea Williams, has four children; they range in age from 10 to 15. They live in Yorkville, a far west suburb. Cobe, who’s about to earn his High School equivalency, was this past December promoted to a new position. He now works as a national trainer at CeaseFire.



**Tio Hardiman**, the Director for CeaseFire Illinois, has been with CeaseFire since 1999. Tio helped oversee expansion of the program from five Chicago-based community sites to 26 sites throughout the State of Illinois – and in 2004 created and piloted the introduction of the Violence Interrupters. Tio grew up on Chicago’s West Side, where he succumbed to the streets, battling a drug addiction and hustling to make a living. He now holds a Bachelors degree in Liberal Arts from Northeastern University and a Masters degree in Inner City Studies. He’s also a frequent media contributor on the issue of violence, appearing on numerous national television programs.



**Gary Slutkin, M.D.** is the founder and Executive Director of CeaseFire. Gary, who was trained as an epidemiologist, has worked extensively with tuberculosis and AIDS, in both the U.S. and abroad. He spent ten years in Africa battling infectious diseases, much of that time with the World Health Organization. In 1995, he began working with Chicago leaders to develop a public health-based approach to stopping violence. Gary has been called upon from Los Angeles to Africa to Iraq to replicate and adapt this approach. He is an Ashoka Fellow, a Professor of Epidemiology and International Health at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a senior advisor to the World Health Organization and the 2009 Winner of the Search for a Common Ground Award.

## THE INTERRUPTERS

### FILMMAKERS BIOS

#### STEVE JAMES

##### Director, Producer, Cinematographer, Editor

Steve James is best known as the award-winning director, producer, and co-editor of Kartemquin's *Hoop Dreams*, which won every major critics award as well as a Peabody and Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award in 1995. The film earned Steve the Directors Guild of America Award, The MTV Movie Awards "Best New Filmmaker" and an Oscar nomination for editing. *Hoop Dreams* was selected for the Library of Congress' National Film Registry, signifying the film's enduring importance to American film history. Steve's other award-winning films produced with Kartemquin include *Stevie*, winner of major festival awards at Sundance, Amsterdam, Yamagata and Philadelphia; the PBS series, *The New Americans*, which won the prestigious 2004 International Documentary Association Award for Best Limited Series; *At the Death House Door*, which won numerous festivals and was Steve's fourth film to be officially short-listed for the Academy Award; and *No Crossover: The Trial of Allen Iverson* for ESPN Films' International Documentary Association-winning series *30 for 30*.

THE INTERRUPTERS is Steve's sixth film in partnership with Kartemquin and his fifth film to play at the Sundance Film Festival. The film will be broadcast on PBS' *Frontline* in late 2011. Steve's other work includes *The War Tapes*, which he produced and edited, and which won the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival Grand Prize.

#### ALEX KOTLOWITZ

##### Producer

Alex Kotlowitz is the award-winning author of three books. The New York Public Library selected *There Are No Children Here*, a national bestseller, as one of the 150 most important books of the twentieth century. The book, which received The Helen Bernstein Award and a Christopher Award, became a made-for-TV movie produced by and starring Oprah Winfrey. *The Other Side of the River* received *The Chicago Tribune's* Heartland Prize for Nonfiction. Alex is a regular contributor to *The New York Times Magazine* and public radio's *This American Life*, and his work has been collected in numerous anthologies. One reviewer wrote, "Alex Kotlowitz's stories inform the heart." Another commented, "Kotlowitz is an omnivorous observer, discerning listener, and unassuming witness to urban life."

Alex's work has also appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Rolling Stone* and *The Wall Street Journal* (where he was a staff writer for ten years), as well as on PBS's *Frontline* and NPR's *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*. His play *An Unobstructed View* (co-authored with Amy Dorn) premiered in Chicago in June of 2005. He's a writer-in-residence at Northwestern University, and regularly gives public lectures around the country. His journalism honors include the George Foster Peabody Award (radio), the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award (print), the George Polk Award (television) and the Thurgood Marshall Award (print). He is also the recipient of six honorary degrees. *The Interrupters* is Alex's first film.

#### ZAK PIPER

##### Co-Producer, Location Sound Recordist

Zak Piper is Kartemquin Films' Director of Production and has been on staff at Kartemquin since 2002. Most recently he served as co-producer on the award-winning *At the Death House Door*. Zak is also the associate producer of *Prisoner of Her Past*, Kartemquin's co-production with The Chicago Tribune, which was released in the spring of 2010.

Zak served as the location sound recordist for *Burning Ice*, *At The Death House Door*, *In the*

*Family, Prisoner of Her Past, and Typeface*. Previously, he has acted as sound recordist on a variety of documentaries for the CBC, Channel 4, and PBS.

Zak began at Kartemquin by serving as post production manager on the acclaimed PBS documentary mini-series, *The New Americans*. Zak currently is developing a project with Gordon Quinn about the impact and legacy of the Chicago Public School Boycotts of 1963 and 1964.

## **AARON WICKENDEN**

### **Editor**

Aaron Wickenden is a documentary film editor and *The Interrupters* marks his fifth major collaboration with Steve James. He co-edited, co-produced and was post-production supervisor on James' award-winning documentary *At the Death House Door*, and was associate producer, additional editor, and post-production supervisor on *The War Tapes*. Aaron has also edited for directors such as Bill Siegel (Academy Award nominated co-director of *The Weather Underground*), and Katy Chevigny (co-founder of NYC's Art's Engine), and assisting editor Lisa Fruchtman (*Apocalypse Now*).

His recent editing credits include: *The Calling*, a four hour series for PBS' Independent Lens; and *Scrappers*, a feature film that won the Best Documentary and Audience Award at The Chicago Underground Film Festival. Other credits include: *Fever Year: Andrew Bird in Concert*, *Bonneville*, *Milking the Rhino*, *Reel Paradise*, *The New Americans*, and *Worst Possible Illusion: The Curiosity Cabinet of Vik Muniz*. He is currently collaborating on a transmedia project titled "Almost There" which made its debut at Chicago's Intuit Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in 2010, and will be published as a book by Princeton Architectural Press.

## BACKGROUND ON CEASEFIRE

**THE STUBBORN CORE** of violence in American cities is troubling and perplexing. Even as homicide rates have declined across the country, gunplay continues to plague economically struggling minority communities. For 25 years, murder has been the leading cause of death among African-American men between the ages of 15 and 34, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has analyzed data up to 2005. From 2004 - 2009, a number of cities have seen an uptick in murders: up 25 percent in Oakland, 27 percent in St. Louis, 40 percent in Oklahoma City and 23 percent in Memphis. In Chicago, where on average five people were shot each day in 2009, 86 percent of the assaults were concentrated in half the police districts.

CeaseFire, which was founded in 1995, applies the principles of public health to the brutality of the streets. CeaseFire tries to deal with these quarrels on the front end. It doesn't necessarily aim to get people out of gangs — nor interrupt the drug trade. It is focused on one thing: preventing shootings.

CeaseFire's founder, Gary Slutkin, who's an epidemiologist, believes that violence directly mimics infections like tuberculosis and AIDS, and so, he suggests, the treatment ought to mimic the regimen applied to these diseases: go after the most infected, and stop the infection at its source. In the case of violence, you use those who were once hard-core, once the most belligerent. They are the most convincing messengers. (The Violence Interrupters are paid \$28,000 to \$30,000 a year, and those working full time receive benefits from the University of Illinois at Chicago, where CeaseFire is housed.)

CeaseFire hopes to shift how we think about violence, from considering people as good or bad to viewing them in terms of healthy and unhealthy. In the end, CeaseFire hopes to change behavior or social norms, something the public health field has gotten increasingly better at. Think smoking and AIDS. "Violence and killings are not inevitable," says Daniel Webster, a professor at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health who has worked with CeaseFire in Baltimore. "The (killings) actually are preventable. And just the fact that things go in cycles doesn't mean the upward swing is inevitable."

CeaseFire has had a very visible public communication campaign, which includes billboards and bumper stickers (which read: Stop. Killing. Now.), as well as rallies — or what it calls 'objections' -- at the site of killings. It also employs outreach workers who counsel and mentor those most at risk. Much of the research on modifying behavior indicates that's what most effective is peer or social pressure.

Independent researchers hired by the Justice Department concluded that CeaseFire has had an impact. The study found that in six of the seven neighborhoods examined, CeaseFire's efforts reduced the number of shootings or attempted shootings by 16 percent to 27 percent more than it had declined in comparable neighborhoods.

Numerous cities, including Baltimore, Kansas City, Mo. and New York, have replicated components of the CeaseFire model and have received training from the Chicago staff. CeaseFire's model has also received interest internationally. Their model is being used in Trinidad-Tobago, Capetown, South Africa, Juarez, Mexico and London, England. CeaseFire has also worked with the State Department in Iraq.



## THE INTERRUPTERS

### **KARTEMQUIN FILMS – JUSTINE NAGAN & GORDON QUINN**

#### **Executive Producers**

Founded in 1966 to produce documentaries that examine and critique society through the stories of real people, Kartemquin Films serves as a home for independent media makers who seek to create social change through film. This Chicago-based documentary powerhouse has won every major critical and journalistic prize, including an Emmy, a Peabody and an Oscar nomination. 2010 was the most productive year in Kartemquin's history, with the release of three new features (TYPEFACE, PRISONER OF HER PAST, and NO CROSSOVER: THE TRIAL OF ALLEN IVERSON), and production on five works-in-progress. The organization was also honored with the Altgeld Freedom of Speech Award for "unflinchingly holding up a mirror to American society," and hailed as "a success story we should all celebrate" by Chicago's WBEZ radio.

Kartemquin's community of talent and socially engaged business model has long made it a sought after production and distribution partner. Their films move viewers, unite communities and live for years beyond their initial release.

In 2011, Kartemquin will celebrate their 45th anniversary with a series of special events, screenings and educational workshops across the country to engage audiences in a greater conversation about using film to create change. 2011 will also see the release of two high profile Kartemquin documentaries: THE INTERRUPTERS - by Academy Award-nominee Steve James - and A GOOD MAN, a profile of provocative choreographer Bill T. Jones.

A revered resource within the film community on issues of fair use, ethics, story structure and civic discourse, Kartemquin is internationally recognized for crafting quality documentaries backed by audience and community engagement strategies, and for its innovative media arts community programs. Kartemquin is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization. [www.kartemquin.com](http://www.kartemquin.com).

### **RISE FILMS - TEDDY LEIFER & PAUL TAYLOR**

#### **Executive Producers**

RISE films founded three years ago is a boutique Television and Film production company, headed by Teddy Leifer. RISE's first feature documentary, WE ARE TOGETHER (Channel 4/HBO/EMI, Dir. Paul Taylor) won 14 international awards. The second, ROUGH AUNTIES (Channel 4/HBO, Dir. Kim Longinotto) won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance 2009. Recently completed films include COWBOYS IN INDIA for More4 and ITVS, ROAD TO LAS VEGAS for More4, and a world exclusive on CASTER SEMENYA for BBC TWO. At the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, RISE is proud to present two documentaries - KNUCKLE (Dir. Ian Palmer) and THE INTERRUPTERS (Dir. Steve James).

RISE is currently working with Kirby Dick on his latest film, THE INVISIBLE WAR, expected to be a 2012 release.

RISE is now building a comedy slate. With a 'gang' of the most exciting comedy writers and writer/performers, RISE is providing a new home for emerging talent in which to develop projects with the support of the collective.