

Laura Michalchyshyn is an award winning producer and industry powerhouse who makes films with social impact. This summer's documentary on the life of Rep. John Lewis, "Good Trouble", may be her most important message yet. Here, she talks about the future of the film industry in a pandemic-present world, creating a platform for marginalized voices, and preventing the erosion of democracy.

LAURA MICHALCHYSHYN

**"I WILL DO EVERYTHING IN MY POWER TO
MAKE FILMS AND TELEVISION TO WAKE THIS
COUNTRY UP"**

By JANET MERCEL Portrait NOAH KALINA

FILM PRODUCER LAURA MICHALCHYSHYN had no way of knowing when we talked on a stifling Wednesday in July that the following Friday night, the news of venerable Congressman John Lewis' passing would be headlined on every major news outlet across the country, just as she had no idea in 2018 while in production of the documentary of his life, *Good Trouble*, that it would be released directly into the middle of a summer already known for civil disobedience and social unrest in the name of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The Congressman announced his pancreatic cancer last December after months of working closely with the producers of the film and with director Dawn Porter. "We were just as caught off guard as the rest of the country," Michalchyshyn tells me from her house in Callicoon, New York. Two days later, there is a surreality to her words. I've been watching *Good Trouble* on repeat since they sent it to me this week, taking in the archival footage of voter suppression and protests, marveling at the timeliness of this film. Michalchyshyn had told me how engaged Lewis remained, voting by proxy in the recent primary elections and requesting a

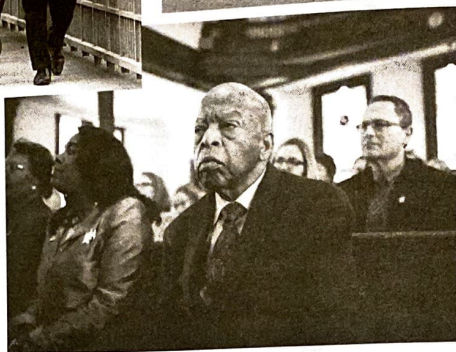
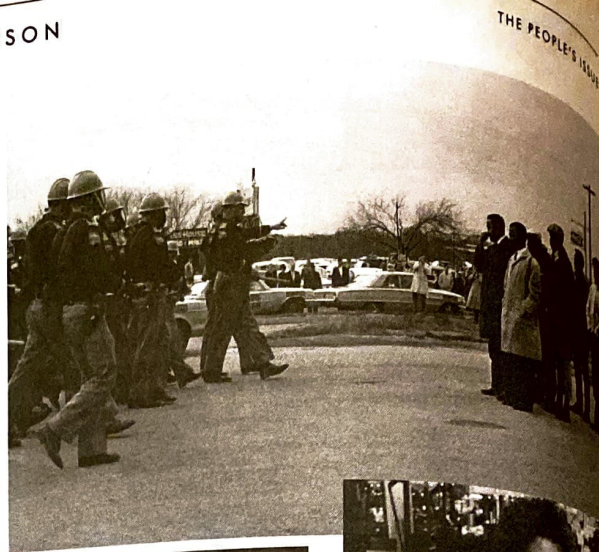
set of paints while he rested at home. (The Congressman and his late wife were known for their world-class collection of African American art, a fact with which Michalchyshyn is notably familiar, but more on that later.) "He is comfortable in repose," she says, a smile in her voice. "To me, it's awe-inspiring."

Callicoon has been home base for Michalchyshyn since the start of COVID-19 closures last March. She and her husband decamped from their 22nd Street Manhattan apartment to their eighteen upstate acres, replete with a "dilapidated and gorgeous" barn. "It's not hipster central," she warns. "I think there are 500 people here." (At last count, there were, in fact, 224, after the hamlet reached an all-time high of 266 in 2016.) "Everyone says to me, oh, it must be so relaxing up there. I'm lucky if I get outside fifteen minutes a day for a walk." The rest of the time she is in her former guest room, now a full-time office, untangling the film industry's current state. "Now we're all figuring out how to do these shows in a pandemic. I'm at my desk from nine in the morning until midnight."

The entertainment world is wrestling with a lot. Coronavirus has thrown every



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Hosea Williams and John Lewis lead the march across the Alabama River in Selma on "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965; the marchers refuse to disperse; "Good Trouble" director, Dawn Porter; Magnolia Pictures image of Rep. John Lewis in a scene from "Good Trouble"



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element of movie-making, from production to distribution to theater-going, into chaos. And for a nation drowning in the backwater of centuries of racial injustice, the responsibility to land on the right side of history looms large. Michalchysyn, for her part, is excited by the opportunity. "I'm Canadian, a Trudeau-ite. We're students of social justice! I will do everything in my power to make films and television to wake this country up." Michalchysyn is an impressive human. She produces documentaries like HBO's *Momentum Generation* and CNN series *Death Row Stories*, wins accolades such as Emmys and an Environmental Media Association Award, runs television networks, holding senior executive roles at media companies like Alliance Atlantis, Discovery Communications and Sundance Channel. And, she founded Sundance Productions in 2012 alongside Robert Redford, an original instigator of anti-blockbuster, authentic storytelling and a leader in the industry for giving voice to those committed to social impact.

"Bob always tells me, our job is to facilitate," Michalchysyn says. Currently, she means using the platform to amplify marginalized voices. I ask about her thought process right now. I wonder at our roles in a creative world, as I, a white woman writer, ask her, a white woman film producer, about the weight of her position. Michalchysyn shares none of my uncertainty. She speaks easily about social justice and manages herself while exacting change, without any directionless backpedaling many of us, seem to be grappling with. Neither does her use of buzzwords sound like the requisite PR-guided messaging from studio heads. "It's a crucial time. Everything reached a head, the 2016 election, *Time's Up*, #MeToo, immigrant rights, LGBTQ rights, Black Lives Matter. The non-righteous treatment of innocent Black men has piled on, and now it's time as a collective to say enough. It's going to take all of us."

Michalchysyn has the kind of voice that comes with years of holding high-octane positions in a high-octane industry. Authoritative. Purpose-driven, but filled

with a humor that I can easily imagine slipping into a bawdy joke when appropriate. It's the kind of voice that after a year living in Los Angeles, after a lifetime in New York, I realize how much I miss. "I go into the city once a month. I have one pitch meeting. I have one dinner outside on the street with one friend. It's an experience, sitting on Third Avenue at a table with cars in your lap. I'll take it month by month, and we'll see if I have to reevaluate my Catskills with my New York City."

There's a camaraderie that exists among any group that traverses the same route repeatedly in the name of escaping the city on weekends, whether it's the Long Island Expressway or the Taconic. The upstate-bound film community is no exception. It's evident that for all her productivity, Michalchysyn misses the days when work and play operated normally. "It's a very social business. It's fun, being at an industry event on a Thursday night and seeing everyone else who was leaving the party to drive up, too." The house has been a mainstay since she and her husband bought it in 2009 from a playwright in Beaverkill. "The first thing we did was install wi-fi." Just as they've put their Manhattan apartment on rotation for COVID-19-displaced friends in the city, the house, too, has become a safe haven for a carefully managed network of work-from-home cohorts. "We call it the upstate WeWork. The New York documentary film community is very supportive of each other."

A longstanding member of that community is Dawn Porter, with whom Michalchysyn made the Netflix series *Bobby Kennedy For President*, and *Good Trouble*. "I met a slew of great filmmakers through Sundance, including Dawn. I was struck by Gideon's Army, (Porter's 2013 documentary), about young public defenders in the South," Michalchysyn explains. "Dawn entertains while teaching. She's a former lawyer, very thorough; she prepares a film the way she builds a case. She is kind and beloved, but don't ever underestimate her."

The importance of allyship speaks deeply to them both. "I love being a



ABOVE John Lewis photographed by Danny Lyon/Magnum Photo.
Opposite page photography credits: Tom Lankford; Spider Martin; Henny Garfunkel
Ben Arnon; all photographs courtesy of Magnolia Picture:

producer with Dawn. We have a really good divide. She's the creative here, and I fight for her. She takes my suggestions, and I don't go into the edit suite." One of those suggestions came up regarding the Congressman's art collection. "Dawn had asked the Congressman, 'Can I come to your house and film?' He has some of the most esteemed African American artists in the world. I said, 'He has a Jacob Lawrence! They're at MOMA! Get the art!'" Porter did, and the resulting footage is some of the most poignant in the film, as the Congressman gives us memories of collecting with his wife, and gently walks us through the works he clearly reveres.

Capturing the scope of a life as significant as that of John Lewis is a tall order, and *Good Trouble* is there for the breadth of it. We see Lewis as the legendary civil rights activist who started corresponding with Martin Luther King, Jr. when he was a teenager. As the impassioned legislator who continued his storied history of getting arrested well into his congressional career. As a silly, fun-loving boss and friend who, as Michalchysyn says, loves music and dancing and joy. The laundry list of figures who show up in the film: Hillary and Bill Clinton, AOC, Corey Booker, Henry Louis Gates Jr. doesn't surprise Michalchysyn. "That was all for the Congressman," she says. "Once people hear it's a project for him, it's an open door."

That open door was particularly welcome when it came to the music. "Dawn said the Congressman loves Pharrell, and she wanted Stevie Wonder. I said you're killing me. I'm not telling you the licensing budget," Michalchysyn laughs, "but I will say this: When we asked for the songs, the answer was initially no. I knew we had to reach the artists directly, and when we did, the answer became yes. The artists were directly involved in making sure we had clearance."

Good Trouble wrapped production at the end of 2019 and was slated for the TriBeCa Film Festival last April. "So many people got sick in January at Sundance,

and it wasn't just the 'Sundance Flu.' Filmmakers were flying in from Italy, from everywhere." The pandemic has stretched the imagination to new proportions when it comes to distribution. Virtual screenings have sold in blocks of hundreds of tickets to the NFL, the NBA, to churches, mosques, synagogues, to Google, Hertz, and PayPal. "We had a screening with a director Q&A afterward with 500 people watching collectively. It's amazing how many stay on." Michalchysyn herself is holding a private screening at a local theater, with no more than 30 people viewing in a space that holds well over 300.

At times, *Good Trouble* is difficult to watch. Archival footage shows the pure rage of white people suppressing the rights of Black ones. The Congressman himself seems overwhelmed at one point, speaking quietly to the director while watching his own movement from sixty years ago. "Dawn. I am seeing footage I've never seen before." It is a disorienting timewarp when I turn my television back to the current news cycle, an attempted lynching in Indiana, the president defending the merits of the Confederate flag. "Number Forty-Five, who I will not name," Michalchysyn says. One of John Lewis' last and primary concerns was that our voter populace is again in danger. One of the setbacks he foresaw may have included the nationwide primary vote-by-mail fail. Michalchysyn is glad it happened when it did. "We have until November to get it right. Can you imagine if the pandemic hit October 1st?"

"We knew at the time we were making it that it was important, but we didn't know how important. There is a racial reckoning happening. Sharing this film is a good start, hearing the voices of Black people in the film. Let them speak and speak for themselves." One of her favorite parts of working with Porter is wading into the fray. "Everyone will be on the phone, talking at once, and I'll stop and say, Dawn is ready to speak. And everyone stops to listen. I'm very proud of that."