

# *'Scenes from the Glittering World' with Director Jared Jakins*



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*Scenes from the Glittering World* (2021), directed by [Jared Jakins](#), follows three Indigenous youth, Granite, Ilii, and Noah, in a coming of age story told on the fringes of the Navajo Nation. The film is a meditation on adolescence, trauma and the power of connecting with a homeland. Filmed at the most remote high school in the continental United States, at the farthest edge of the Navajo Nation, the film shares the stories of Indigenous youth as they grapple with ambitious dreams, their family responsibilities, and the isolated nature of their community – all while the school itself faces existential questions about its purpose and future.

When director Jared Jakins first set out to make *Scenes from the Glittering World*, his intent for the film was entirely different from what we experience in the final cut. In the beginning, Jared began shooting with a focus on documenting the robotics team at the high school, a much more focused, and less nuanced, approach. Upon entering the community, meeting members of the local area, and experiencing

first-hand the beauty that life on the reservation can provide, he knew the film would naturally head in a completely new direction. From that moment forward, the film's tone, theme, intent, subject matter, and direction all radically changed.

Jared is a South African-born documentarian who's work has screened at major film festivals around the world and has appeared in publications such as *The Atlantic*. He takes a strong interest in stories of cultural intersection, while seeking to document images of community and identity emerging from those collisions. While *Scenes from the Glittering World* is Jared's feature-film debut, it has gained the attention of many prominent documentary film-festivals, such as proudly premiering at the [2021 Full Frame Documentary Film Festival](#). In addition to directing, Jared also spends his time as the film curator at the [Granary Arts Center](#) in Ephraim, Utah.

Jared, along with Cultural Advisor-Producer Roni Jo Draper, and Sorø Films have come together to create a film that poetically conveys the pain, beauty, humor, and joy that adolescent life on the reservation can provide. This is an inside look into Jared Jakins's process while directing *Scenes from the Glittering World*.



**Let's go back to the very beginning, to the origin of the idea behind *Scenes From The Glittering World*. How did this film originally come about?**

Like most people in the American West, I am a transplant. I arrived as a child from South Africa when my family immigrated to a small Mormon community in Utah. At an early age, I learned of the West's mythic place in the wider fabric of the United States and found myself fascinated by its checkered history. At the same time, I felt culturally and emotionally displaced as an outsider in my new home. Because of these formative experiences I have been drawn to documenting the stories of others who, for whatever reason, have been displaced culturally, economically, geographically, or even through settler colonial oppression.



When I first learned of the Navajo Mountain Community, I immediately felt there was an opportunity to explore some of these themes. In engaging with our three main subjects, I found that despite physical distance and the history of oppression that still reverberates throughout the region, there is a universality and familiarity in their coming of age in America. I was inspired by the ways the subjects navigated aspirations and daily responsibilities, trauma and the weight of adulthood. I was inspired by the humor, closeness of the families, and collective resilience.

My introduction to the community came in a few phases. I shot a production for a local company that highlighted some families on the Navajo Nation that were receiving electricity for the first time in their homes. I was moved by the hardy sense of humor and resilience our subjects exuded and something stuck that if the opportunity arose, I'd like to go back and spend more time there. Not long after that experience, I read about Navajo Mountain High School's fledgling robotics team in some local papers and I felt that perhaps I'd found an entry point with broad appeal into learning more about life on the reservation. The film evolved from there. With time, I shifted my focus away from the struggling team and became determined to make contemporary portraiture that was both honest and hopeful about the reservation. The narrative needed to be rooted in the students' personal experiences and driven by their own self realizations and representations.



**Filming at a school of only thirty can be both very rewarding and challenging at the same time – did that make it easier to track or more difficult when you felt like maybe you should've been paying attention to everyone at the school?**

Yeah, 30 students is unusual for a school, so in a way we were able to spend time with 10 percent of the entire student body. But in the beginning, our focus being on robotics, we thought we'd really choose people on the team and Granite and Noah are both on the robotics team, so their selection was pretty natural. Then Illi was really interesting because she just kept catching our eye during classes when

we'd be filming, she was just extremely insightful. At one point, I remember talking about in class how I'm from South Africa and Illi rose her hand and spouted off a bunch of facts about South Africa, which I thought was really interesting that she knew so much about it. The first time we had a conversation was after that class and we just realized she was really interesting and funny.

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**In terms of the school itself, was it difficult to balance how much you wanted to include about it? There are allusions in the film that it might be having sustainability issues.**

Yeah, there were versions of the movie where the school was a much bigger piece of the picture, but as time went on, we decided to include just enough to provide a little bit of context and the ways the school might be influencing the home life



of the students. It was pretty special to have the kind of access that we had, so some of the things that came out of that, we felt were too good to lose. We couldn't film any classroom, we were allowed to film parent-teacher conferences and faculty meetings – and that allowed us to get some of the really nice moments in the film, like exchanges between teachers and parents or grandparents.

It is really interesting that the school itself has its challenges and some of those come out of the fact there are so few students, but there are other challenges perhaps too where some of the educators aren't connecting well enough with their students. One of our producers Roni Jo Draper is an educator and that aspect of the movie really interested her from the beginning, so she definitely influenced how we framed the school and the ways in which we kept it in the film.

**Could you speak about where you found your inspiration and who or what has influenced you as a filmmaker over the years?**

The Maysles, Pennebaker, Agnes Varda, and Errol Morris are among the filmmakers I often return to. Most consistently, I find inspiration in the work of regionalist photographers and filmmakers. I think of Les Blank, Dorothea Lange, Robert Frank, Ross McElwee, among others. I'm very excited about some of the formally daring work being done by many contemporary documentarians like the Ross brothers, Robert Greene, or Thomas Balmes.

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**As you know, every film is faced with its own set of unique challenges, what were some that you had to overcome in making *Scenes from the Glittering World*?**

Distance – both geographic and cultural. Geographically speaking, the Navajo Mountain community is extremely remote. It straddles the Utah and Arizona border<sup>1</sup>, nestled at the base of Navajo Mountain. It's a hundred miles to the nearest city. It's so remote that the San Juan School district built housing for teachers at the school. Since lodging at a hotel or Airbnb was simply unavailable, I was fortunate enough to be able to move my family into one of the unused teacher housing units while we did production. This proximity to the school and students helped immensely to earn trust with our subjects and their families.

The familial element is crucial to the film and I needed to prove I wasn't there to simply strip-mine the community and leave. Navigating the challenges of respectfully navigating a culture that was unfamiliar required the dedicated and generous help of many cultural advisors. Roni Jo Draper, our producer and lead cultural advisor, nurtured a passion in the whole team to get the nuances right.

**Could you share some of the successes that you had while making the film?**

Feeling the trust and collaboration grow between me and these wonderful young people was a very rewarding experience. The scenes that resulted from that trust are the centerpieces of the film and I'm very proud of the way they came out. Fortunately, we also have some exciting news on the distribution front of the film that we'll be able to announce in the near future. Knowing that the film will reach wide audiences feels like an enormous success.

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**Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently on the film?**

This is a tough question! It seems in the latter end of a production, that once trust has been established, the gears are all greased nicely and some of the best material just starts to flow. It's a natural process and one that can't really be artificially replicated. It's extremely satisfying to arrive at a place like that with collaborators and subjects. In retrospectively assessing how the relationships and threads in the film emerged, it's potentially hazardous to look back through that process and wonder why you didn't just start with some of those ideas or threads at the beginning. But it comes back to trusting the process and yourself 6 months ago and 6 months from now.

**I'd be remised if I didn't say congratulations on having the World Premiere of *Scenes from the Glittering World* at the 2021 Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. Can you describe your experience?**

Full Frame is an amazing festival. Many of my peers and mentors claim it as one of their all time favourite festival experiences. They have a reputation for being impeccable in their curation and hospitality. Additionally, the critical dialogue generated at the festival is crucial to the US and international documentary communities. It's really an honor to have been a part of the lineup this year. The team at Full Frame was extremely helpful and an absolute pleasure to work with.

**Getting to the finish line on any film is an accomplishment rarely achieved by few filmmakers. What's it like getting to this point?**

It's been about three years to this point and sharing the film with Illi and Granite and Noah and their families, that's really been the highlight so far, seeing their reactions, and it's one of those things where it's hard to articulate, but it feels really satisfying and makes the hard times worth it.





### **What do you hope audiences take away most from the film?**

I hope audiences are moved by our characters' survival, the love of their families, and the healing of their sacred lands.

To learn more about *Scenes from the Glittering World*, [visit here](#).

LISTEN TO JARED JAKINS AND RONI JO DRAPER ON THE SORØ FILMS PODCAST

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