

# Director's Statement

"My biggest passion in life is telling the stories that people often overlook. As a kid, my mother would take me to homeless shelters and soup kitchens to volunteer on the weekends. I became fond of the families we served, and would often invite the other children to play on the playground with me. We played like normal kids, giggling over inappropriate jokes and acting out scenes we made up in our heads. Despite this, back at the shelter, people passing by would look the other way muttering dehumanizing remarks: "If you give them money, they'll just spend it on drugs," or "Don't look at them, they're dangerous." I didn't understand why people were so cruel to my friends. To me, they were some of the kindest people I had ever met. I felt guilty that so many children just like me could be discriminated for sleeping where they can, while I was able to return home to my warm bed unscathed by the glares of neighbors. I wanted more than anything for my peers to understand why I cared for them so much, but in small-town suburbia, minds are not easy to change. Now that I'm older and the ridicule has worsened, I cannot think of a better community to highlight as my Directorial debut — the people society has left behind to rot away.

*The Neighbors We Left Behind*, centers on the homelessness epidemic in Tennessee and its national impact. My involvement in this film began in November of 2022 when I first connected with Open Table Nashville about its concept. I wanted to hear from experts on how to film a topic like this in a respectful, non-exploitive way. Thankfully, OTN welcomed me with open arms and guided me through the twists and turns of how HB-0978 came to be and how systemically rooted it all is. Instead of providing the unhoused with affordable housing, legislators would rather spend government money to raid camps and displace their inhabitants. After learning this, I knew I had to make this film a reality. When the bill was initially announced, so many people were posting about their outrage, but soon these "activists" moved on to the next big headline. My crew and I hope to utilize our filmmaking talents to shed light on the injustice that is taking place right under our noses. We hope that this documentary brings awareness back to this topic so other states don't fall victim to the same fate.

My biggest inspiration throughout production has been *Heroin(e)* by Elaine McMillion Sheldon. The documentary effortlessly submerges a viewer into the story in the same way a feature film would, balancing both information and heartbreak in a powerful, yet inspiring manner. Cinema, whether fiction or non-fiction, should transport the audience to a different world. I want each image on the screen to be raw and filled with emotion, not stale and stagnant like most documentaries have become. I strive to emulate this type of cinematic documentary so that the viewer finds their heartbreaking alongside this community.

We have filmed countless organizations and activists such as Open Table Nashville, The Affordable Housing Taskforce, Mike Engle, Mary Beth Shinn, and Housing Not Handcuffs. The film is currently running on a volunteer basis along with some of my own financial contributions and the hopes of earning grants. Although the above organizations will be promoting our film to their wide audiences, their money is best spent getting resources for those on the streets. We have been fortunate that local filmmakers donated their equipment and time because of their passion for this topic and the people of Tennessee. If this film does make a profit, my crew and I have decided to donate it to the organizations we've worked with to help further support the cause. By no means is this film going to fix the years of systemic and societal stigma, but it will reignite the conversation and, hopefully, push for progress."



*Elizabeth Phillips*