The Independent Critic - "Betty Williams: Contagious Courage" the Most Riveting Peacejam

It's one of those uncomfortable coincidences that I received the latest feature doc from the PeaceJam Foundation less than 24 hours after the latest mass shooting in an American school - the May 18, 2018 shooting at Santa Fe High School in Texas that as of this writing is said to have claimed at least 10 lives while injuring 10 others.

Betty Williams: Contagious Courage centers around Nobel Peace Prize winner Betty Williams, a young mother living in Northern Ireland 50 years ago just as her country teetered on the brink of a civil war. The film tells the story of what is called a "quiet revolution," the peaceful yet relentless response of hundreds of thousands of people, mostly women, who countered the killing of three small children with a national rising up to demand change in their country and, subsequently, also going beyond that simple call into concrete action to make that change happen. Williams herself, who lived around the corner from where those three small children were killed, manifested the courage necessary to speak out at a time when doing so could cost one's life and her courage became, indeed, a contagious courage that united Catholic and Protestant women across the country and proved that one person can make a difference in the world and otherwise average people can overcome their fears and overcome those who would seemingly be stronger.

Perhaps it is just the timing of Betty Williams: Contagious Courage, but this feature doc written and directed by Dawn Gifford Engle may very well be the most riveting, involving feature doc yet from the PeaceJam Foundation, an organization that has been working to create feature length docs based upon the lives of Nobel Peace Prize winners. The film will have its world premiere on June 17th at the Monte Carlo Television Festival in Monaco.

Narrated by Brenden MacDonald, Betty Williams: Contagious Courage is an immensely moving documentary about Williams, the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize winner for her work as co-founder of Community of Peace People, an organization dedicated to promoting a peaceful resolution to the troubles in Northern Ireland. Rather remarkably, Williams's work since receiving the Nobel Peace Prize has only intensified as the now 74-year-old activist heads the Global Children's Foundation and is the President of the World Centre of Compassion for Children International. Williams is also the Chair of Institute for Asian Democracy in Washington D.C. and a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Nova Southeastern University who lecturers widely on topics of peace, education, inter-cultural and inter-faith understanding, anti-extremism, and children's rights issues. She's also a founding member of the Nobel Laureate Summit, which has taken place annually since 2000.
In *Betty Williams: Contagious Courage*, however, she's simply an ordinary woman courageous enough to do extraordinary things and to exhibit courage in such a way that she draws people into her journey. It's a remarkable story that is told powerfully in the film, though Engle also takes great care to examine the history of Northern Ireland's civil strife and the contributing factors that took the nation to the brink of civil war.

Lensing by Elizabeth Holloway and Dave Wruck is strong throughout the film, while Holloway edits the film to exact maximum emotional impact that continues to linger in my psyche'.

*Betty Williams: Contagious Courage* features interviews with Williams herself, a remarkably intelligent and passionate woman whose deeping feeling for those victims of violence remains evident many years after the beginning of her activism. One doesn't get the sense that Williams has burned out at all, instead she seemingly remains just as driven as ever.

If there's one true benefit to these PeaceJam documentaries, it's that they've managed to make these Nobel Peace Prize winners accessible to wider audiences and to those up-and-coming grassroots activists who follow in their footsteps. These ordinary individuals, who have done extraordinary things, feel as if they could be you or I precisely because at one point in their lives they were.

Intelligently constructed and emotionally resonant, *Betty Williams: Contagious Courage* is likely my favorite of the PeaceJam documentaries yet, simultaneously an effective and involving historical doc and an impactful call to action for all of us.

Now then, let me go find out the names of those innocent lives lost in Texas and figure out what is mine to do.

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