

Interview: Co-Directors Sarah Burns, David McMahon of 'The Central Park Five'

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CHICAGO – It was Sarah Burns, the daughter of legendary documentarian Ken Burns, that brought the passion for her first project with her famous father, along with husband and co-director David McMahon. “The Central Park Five” also features Raymond Santana, one of “five” who were wrongly accused in the famous New York City trial. They were all here in October at the Chicago International Film Festival.

The documentary is about a severe miscarriage of justice. In New York City on April 19th, 1989, a female jogger was sexually assaulted in Central Park. Five men of color – Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Raymond Santana, Kharey Wise and Yusef Salaam – merely boys at the time, were in proximity of the incident and arrested for the crime. Despite no evidence that they committed the assault, confessions were coerced and used against them at a hastily assembled and highly publicized trial. When the inevitable guilty verdict was rendered, the boys were unjustly incarcerated during a crucial period in their lives.



Courtroom Drawing from the Trial of 'The Central Park Five'
Photo credit: Sundance Selects

Sarah Burns, in [Ken Burn's interview](#) [17] with HollywoodChicago.com, was said to be the catalyst for believing in and keeping this project moving forward (which began as a book), and her husband David McMahon took care of the crucial job of managing the film project on a day-to-day basis.

Raymond Santana was a young teenager when he in the wrong place, Central Park in New York City, at the wrong time in 1989. He was arrested that night was eventually coerced into a confession by the New York City police department, and was incarcerated after a hasty trial. The injustice that Santana and his fellow four accused victims defines the essence of Franz Kafka's fictional view in his novel “The Trial.”

Sarah Burns, David McMahon and Raymond Santana talked to HollywoodChicago.com, during the Chicago International Film Festival in

October of 2012. Their film is a definitive American story, exposing the rotten underbelly of our legal system's adherence to a fear-based brand of "justice."

HollywoodChicago.com: This is another poignant true story regarding the racial stereotypes and divide when it comes to the justice system in America. How do you think an incident like this defines the character of this country?

Sarah Burns: I think this story is much bigger than just 'this story.' That is part of what drew me to it in the first place, when I began working on a book regarding the incident. It felt like it was important to tell the story of the 'Five' properly, to give them the opportunity to tell their story properly, in a way to tell their story in a way that hadn't been told before. But also it felt like something that allows us to understand the larger issues, as a country, in which we still struggle, and that we're still struggling through.

In the film, we're looking at New York City in the 1980s as a way to figure out what happened then, in a case that reflects that time, to some extent. The city has certainly changed since then, but not that much. Many of the attitudes are still the same, and the assumptions that people make about black and Latino teenagers – assumptions like in the Trayvon Martin case, where a black teenager is killed simply because of his skin color – those assumptions haven't changed.

HollywoodChicago.com: What failures occurred based on these assumptions?

Burns: Part of looking at this case is understanding how this happened, and that's part of the answer. Part of it is about false confession, a lesson we all need to learn about, and understand how that happens. And the failures of everyone at every level of the story – the police, the prosecutors, the media and the public – everyone got this wrong.

David McMahon: Sarah summed it up well, I would just add the 'stop and frisk' issue to the list of examples of how we're still wrestling with these same issues.

HollywoodChicago.com: Raymond, as a member of the Central Park Five, you've had your share of experience with the media and what the glare of those lights can do to a person. Since you were a victim of trial by media, what is your opinion of the power of that media machine, both in the guilty verdict you had to suffer from them and the power of Ken Burns documentary skills to tell the truth within that media?

Raymond Santana: Back in 1989, that media sent us to jail for seven years, and dissected my life when I was only 14 years old. That media described me in terminology like 'rapist,' 'wolf pack' and 'wilding.' That media then destroyed our lives. Today, with the film, it's really about putting our lives back together. It shows our humanity away from those labels, and it's powerful. The audience will hear our voices, and connect on a whole different level. In a sense, it gives us back our power, and heals us in the process.



Then and Now: Raymond Santana as the Accused in 1989 and as an Adult Today
Photo credit: Sundance Selects and Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: David, since you've collaborated with Ken Burns over four of his documentaries, and observing the various styles, how do you see 'The Central Park Five' as both similar to his previous work, and different?

McMahon: I think that the themes in 'The Central Park Five' are themes that Ken has been exploring for over thirty years. It is a different undertaking for all of us, given that the film is short enough for a theatrical release and can be absorbed in a single serving. Also different is that it doesn't use narration, which Ken has used over the years. We have the voices of the Five to drive the story, and it was the voices of those five men told the story so well. While we have different stylistic choices in the film, we're still looking for answers to the same questions that Ken has been asking for a long time.

HollywoodChicago.com: Raymond, before you were approached to participate in this documentary, had you seen any of Ken Burn’s previous works?

Santana: No, I didn’t know who Ken Burns was.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you watch the previous works as you were going through these interviews, and what were your feelings toward them?

Santana: I did watch the Jack Johnson documentary [‘Unforgivable Blackness’], but as far as our film was concerned, I was anxious to see the finished product. I trusted Sarah, because she was writing the book and had the facts, and had been with us for so long. She was seeking our truth, and she had it the truth. We didn’t even know she was Ken Burns daughter, we just knew her as Sarah.

HollywoodChicago.com: Currently you’re embroiled in a controversy regarding the City of New York, where they are issuing subpoenas demanding to see your film footage, interviews and outtakes to to both defend their reputations and against the wrongful prosecution lawsuit regarding the case. Why do you think they are being so cowardly and disingenuous towards their mismanagement of the case, and in your opinion why is truth so difficult to face for the power of the law?

McMahon: There are so many people invested in the original outcome, there are prosecutors and the police who staked their careers on it, and there was the press who spilled a lot of ink and came to harsh conclusions. It’s hard to walk that back and apologize, plus there were missed opportunities that make it more painful. Then to have in the city in 2002 rescind the convictions, it’s almost like they’re standing more firmly regarding the original outcome. It’s a shameful and disappointing protective mechanism. It’s like they can’t say they got it wrong or make it whole again for the Five.

Burns: I don’t know why it’s so hard for the city officials to face up to it, but it seems to be. It’s not just like they’re fighting the civil suit with every tool they have, but also there are people involved in the case who have come out – especially around the time the convictions were being vacated – and tried to suggest that the Five are still guilty. This seems to be part of the strategy the city is using in defending against the wrongful conviction lawsuit. That they did a great job initially and are sticking to that job that they did. Which is mind boggling, considering the facts as we know them to be.

HollywoodChicago.com: Raymond, you had your youth taken from you by unjust incarceration. When you observe a younger person right now, someone about your age when this all went down, what it is about their innocence that you realize you never experienced?

Santana: When I see these kids now, and I have done some talks to them, I always tell them enjoy life, don’t try to grow up overnight. Because that was taken away from me, replaced by a prison life. Sometimes I wish I can go back and experience that, because now I know it’s precious. I did miss that time period of coming into my own or getting a first job, it’s those moments in time that I missed the most. That’s when you make your early mistakes, but now as a grown man I have to walk on eggshells, because I simply can’t make those mistakes that a kid can make.

HollywoodChicago.com: Sarah, this is your first collaboration with your father. What did you personally learn about him by watching his documentaries over the years, and how did you inject what you learned into ‘The Central Park Five’?

Burns: I very much grew up around this, and yes, it’s my first time working on a documentary film, and I think I learned to do it through osmosis. I would sit in the screening room when I was younger, and consult on shot selection. [laughs] I was participating in that and hearing him speak around the country. Certainly what I learned about storytelling comes from those experiences.

HollywoodChicago.com: David, this is your fourth collaboration with Ken Burns. When did you first encounter him, and how would you define his contribution to American storytelling and culture?



Raymond Santana, Sarah Burns and David McMahon
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

McMahon: I remember I first noticed his work with the documentary ‘Baseball,’ and I first went to work with him as an apprentice editor on his ‘Jazz’ documentary. In some ways, he’s created an original language as a filmmaker, in gathering these accounts and having actors read them. The style, the moving camera across the photographs – in the beginning people often mistook that technique for newly found footage – that was a revolutionary approach to imaging. And in the revisiting of history in the way that he does, the emotional archeology he portrays,

nobody had ever done it on that scale. The peeling back of the layers. It’s a gift that he’s given us, the exploration of the past through great storytelling.

HollywoodChicago.com: Raymond, What advice would you give that younger boy you once were before the incident, and how do you think that advice would have changed your life?

Santana: First, stay in school. And then I’d tell him to make sure our parents have some knowledge about police procedure, and how to conduct themselves to the police. That message should also be relayed back to the kids. The message should always start with the parent and get back to the kid. It’s about keeping your mouth shut and getting your parents involved.

HollywoodChicago.com: Given the aspect of racial tension and guilt that is exposed in your film, what are your opinions regarding the Republican and rightwing prosecution of President Barack Obama as a contender and candidate for the highest office in the land, and how in a broader sense does that parallel the issues in your documentary?

Burns: I certainly think the way that certain language is used is an interesting mirror to this case. When I first started studying the incident I started with the racial element of the language in the newspapers, ‘wilding,’ ‘wolfpack,’ the connection to animals and savagery. This has a long history with persons of color, and you see the same coded language in the way that people talk about President Obama, the way they make him seem foreign and the birth certificate movement. This is just another way to make him seem like the ‘other,’ and therefore not to trusted. It’s part of the same problem...people are suspicious of the ‘other’ and will never be comfortable with someone who is different than them.

“The Central Park Five” continues its limited release in Chicago on December 7th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Written and directed by David McMahon, Sarah Burns and Ken Burns. Not Rated.



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