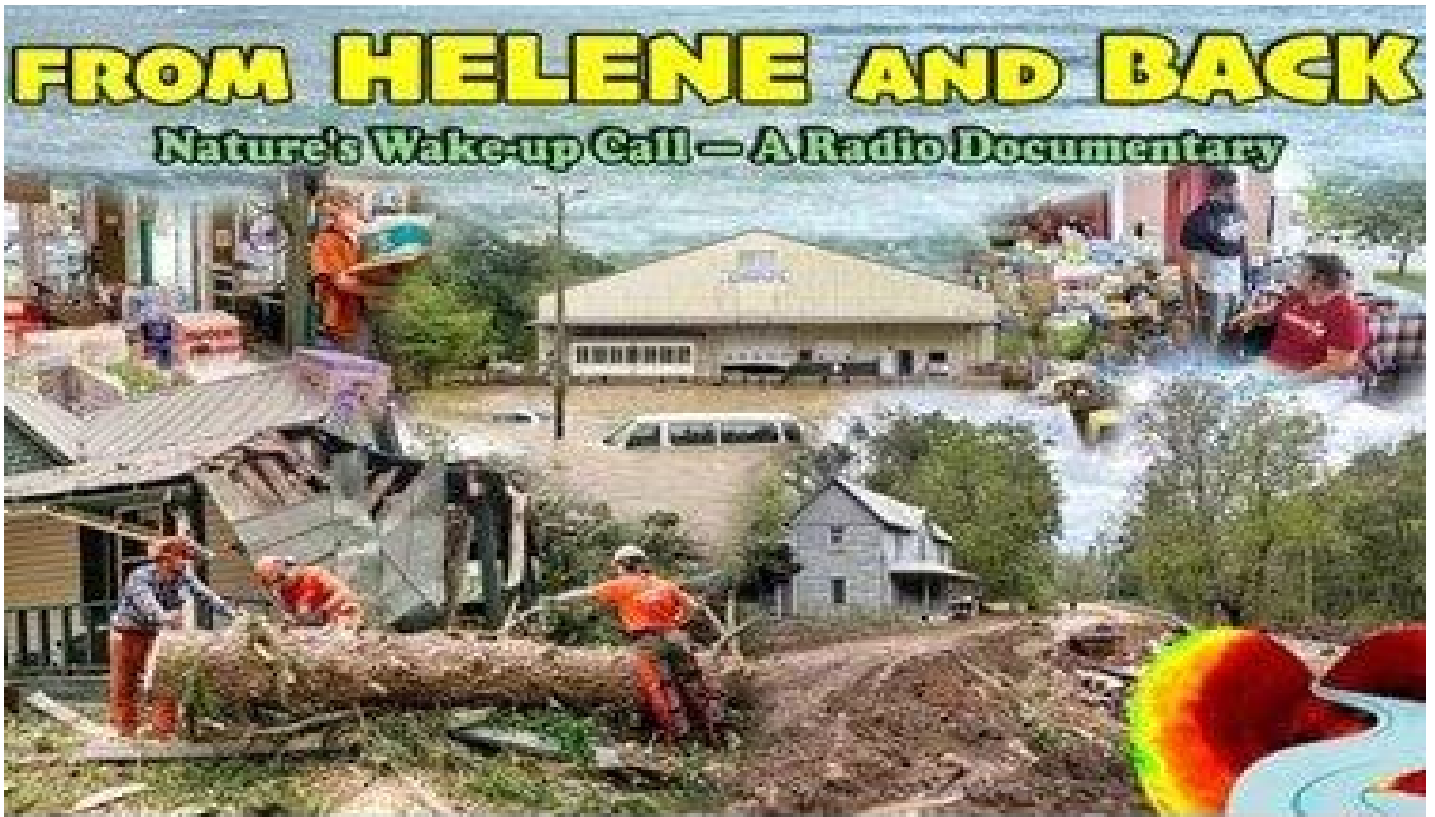


## Radio Documentary Revisits Helene And Its Lasting Lessons.



For David Weintraub, Executive Director of the Flat Rock, NC-based Center for Cultural Preservation, non-profit filmmaking has always been “a labor of love” — and one that leaves him doing everything from camera work to marketing. But after years of producing documentaries, he felt the need to pause.

“I knew I needed some time off to reflect on where I was needed next,” Weintraub says in an interview with Mountain Xpress in Asheville, NC. But when Tropical Storm Helene tore through Western North Carolina in 2024, it triggered a renewed interest in his earlier film about the Great Flood of 1916. “Tens of thousands began viewing the old videos... Hundreds commented that they realized that Helene was not a one-off but an ongoing pattern

here in the mountains. It was clear people really wanted to better understand this history and how they could be better prepared.”

That demand inspired “From Helene and Back — Nature’s Wakeup Call,” a one-hour radio documentary airing Tuesday, Sept. 23, at 9pm on Isothermal Community College-owned adult alternative “Grassroots Radio” WNCW (88.7), just before the first anniversary of the storm.

Though Weintraub has studied flooding in the Southern Appalachians for two decades, this time he opted for sound over visuals. “Seeing how many sacred places were lost... it made me sick seeing the destruction,” he says. “My first impulse is usually to pick up a camera — or five.

But I couldn't do it."

Weintraub chose not to intrude during rescue efforts or chase scenes of devastation. "That's voyeurism, not storytelling," he says. He stayed present in his community, listening and helping, before deciding that radio was the most respectful and powerful medium to tell Helene's story.

"Between hearing back from storm survivors and recontacting interviewees from my 1916 flood film, I started to build an archive of flood stories," he says. He found that families who had lived through the 1916 disaster fared better during Helene. "They were prepared to weather the storm and stay out of vulnerable areas."

Instead of seeking out traumatized residents, he allowed people to come to him. "What I was definitely not going to do was to contact people cold and force them to relive their trauma," Weintraub says. "The folks I interviewed, survivors and experts alike, were not only not hesitant to talk, they wanted to tell their story."

Weintraub wove together voices from meteorologists, flood experts, emergency managers, policymakers, and Cherokee elders, creating a textured narrative of survival, resilience, and ancient wisdom.

From Cherokee elder Davy Arch, he learned how storms fit into a history going back 13,000 years — "Which really put Helene in context," he says. A disaster response nurse emphasized the emotional toll of recovery, while geologists

explained that storms like Helene have shaped the region for millions of years.

But the most powerful insights came from ordinary survivors, who shared whom they leaned on when the waters rose. "Sometimes it takes a disaster to understand whom you can truly count on — and that sometimes reliability comes from sources that you least expect," says Weintraub.

To bring the project to life, he partnered again with WNCW, a station with which he has a long-standing relationship. "When I approached Joe Kendrick, WNCW's director of programming, about the idea of a Helene radio doc, WNCW was very excited to partner on this project," he says. "I appreciate their desire to connect music to contemporary issues, so it was a match made in heaven."

For Weintraub, radio offers intimacy and depth unmatched by visual media — especially after a visual trauma. "Despite having so many sources of content out there, much of it is noise and distraction that does little to put our world into context," he says. "That's what the documentarian does."

The timing of the broadcast is intentional, as Weintraub hopes listeners won't forget the damage Helene — or past storms like Frances and Ivan — inflicted. "We have short memories, and the real estate industry plays on that... I made this radio documentary because Helene is still fresh in our minds, and I'm hopeful that this time we won't forget and move on."