

THE LAUREL OF ASHEVILLE

THE ARTS AND CULTURE OF COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE MOUNTAINS

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From Helene and Back – Nature's Wakeup Call: New Radio Documentary Shares Voices of our WNC Community

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Asheville rail yard during the 1916 flood

On Tuesday, September 23, at 9 p.m., the Center for Cultural Preservation (CCP) presents the debut of *From Helene and Back – Nature's Wakeup Call*. Just ahead of the anniversary of Helene's destruction, this new one-hour documentary will air on local public radio station WNCW 88.7 and will also be available for livestreaming on wncw.org. In addition, on Tuesday, September 16, at 9 p.m., WNCW will rebroadcast CCP's radio documentary on the Great Flood of 1916.

David Weintraub, the program's producer and CCP's director, says that his first instinct as a filmmaker after Helene hit was to grab his camera and document the devastation, but he stopped himself. "The last thing I wanted to do was stick a camera in the face of someone who just lost everything," he says. "Three thousand homes were destroyed, and 30,000 homes were severely damaged in Helene and whether we were personally impacted, we also faced the trauma of what our friends and neighbors went through. Those images will live with us for the rest of our lives."

He chose instead to help by donating and reaching out to his neighbors, giving people time to heal and first responders the space to work. When the time was right for documenting, "I thought it was better to tell the Helene story through the voices of our emergency responders, people directly impacted, those involved in relief, Cherokee elders, landslide experts and meteorologists without showing another scene of a floating house being torn apart by relentless floodwaters," he says.



David Weintraub interviews Luverne Haydock

With these personal stories, he hopes, comes awareness of the area's geological history. "Geologists tell us that major storms that cause thousands of landslides and massive flooding have occurred in these mountains for millions of years," Weintraub says. "In the historical record, according to Rick Wooten, one of our area's leading experts on landslides, they occur here every 20 to 30 years. And many of them occur in the same places that were devastated by Helene. In the past 108 years, there have been three major storm events that caused thousands of landslides (1916, 1940, 2024) and at least a dozen storm events that resulted in hundreds of landslides and massive flooding."

The experiences shared in *From Helene and Back* offer lessons, including ones handed through generations from those who experienced the 1916 flood to present-day residents of the area. "They had learned the lessons nature was telling their families 108 years ago and they moved away from vulnerable areas," says Weintraub. "Many of them, when they heard Helene was going to be similar to 1916, responded swiftly and avoided certain tragedy. We cannot control the weather, we cannot fix the geologic vulnerabilities of our mountains, but we can build smarter: establish rules, like steep slope ordinances, tree ordinances, floodplain ordinances that better protect us from future harm."



David Weintraub, right, interviews Jim Fox

Recognizing and understanding the geology and weather of Western North Carolina and respecting the power of water are starting points. "The Cherokee believe that nature is our best teacher," says Weintraub. "So what is Professor Helene trying to teach us? I believe that Helene and the Great Flood of 1916 show us that when we live in partnership with nature, we can survive and thrive, but when we put ourselves in harm's way by building in floodplains and on steep slopes with a long history of landslides, we repeat tragedy on tragedy." He adds: "For our grandchildren and great grandchildren's sake, it's time that we take seriously what nature has been telling us for generations. This is what I hope the radio documentary will drive home."

Learn more about the documentary work of the Center for Cultural Preservation at [SaveCulture.org](https://www.saveculture.org).