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*New radio documentary chronicles
lessons learned from Helene*

BY EDWIN ARNAUDIN

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David Weintraub thought he was done making documentaries. But like a far more benevolent Michael Corleone, just when he thought he was out, Tropical Storm Helene pulled him back in.

Noting that nonprofit filmmaking is "a labor of love," the executive director of the Flat Rock-based Center for Cultural Preservation is also up front about it being an exhausting process. To remain solvent, he'd been handling everything from the camera work to the editing as well as fundraising and marketing himself.

"I knew I needed some time off to reflect on where I was needed next," Weintraub says. "But as Helene unfolded, tens of thousands began viewing the old videos I created about the Great Flood of 1916 [in his 2016 documentary *Come Hell or High Water*]. 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."

The result is "From Helene and Back — Nature's Wakeup Call," a one-hour radio documentary that debuts on WNCW 88.7 FM on Tuesday, Sept. 23, at 9 p.m. — mere days before the one-year anniversary of the storm's arrival.

AUDIO OR VISUAL?

Since Weintraub has been studying major floods in the Southern Appalachians for 20 years, he realized he was well-suited to tell this story and give some context to Western North Carolina's collective Helene experience. But he first had to suppress his instinct to tell visual stories — which proved easy once the area's internet service was restored and images of flooding and destruction dominated TV and social media.

"Seeing how many sacred places were lost and noting the tragedy that our region endured, the last thing I wanted to do is interfere with first responders doing their job, and 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. Nor could I imagine searching for people who lost everything and then sticking a camera in their face so I could 'get the story.'"

Contemptuous of disaster tourism or telling stories on the backs of those most in need — "That's voyeurism, not storytelling," he says — Weintraub instead watched and listened, trying to help his neighbors the best he could while waiting for the mud to clear. As 2024 wound down, he realized that an all-audio project was the proper way to approach this natural disaster without inundating survivors with visual trauma. He then put the word out that he was collecting stories about people's Helene experiences.

"Between hearing back from storm survivors and recontacting interviewees from my 1916 flood film, I started to build an archive of flood stories," Weintraub says. "Predictably, people whose families went through the Great Flood of 1916 did OK in Helene. Most were inconvenienced by the storm, but few were in harm's way because they learned well that nature's fury takes its toll worse in floodplains and slopes with a long history of debris flows. They were prepared to weather the storm and stay out of vulnerable areas."

Because Weintraub depended upon survivors to reach out to him, he didn't experience resistance from interviewees. And since there are many knowledgeable experts who understand Helene was a weather pattern that happens every 20-30 years here, he reached out to meteorologists, landslide and flood experts, emergency managers, policymakers and Cherokee elders.

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REAL TALK: David Weintraub, left, interviews Cherokee elder Davy Arch for the radio documentary "From Helene and Back – Nature's Wakeup Call." Photo by Rachel Quinn

"What I was definitely not going to do was to contact people cold and force them to relive their trauma," he says. "The folks I interviewed, survivors and experts alike, were not only not hesitant to talk, they wanted to tell their story. They wanted people to better understand what their friends and neighbors went through and what we could learn from this storm."

So numerous were the epiphanies that came from these interviews that Weintraub wishes he had eight hours to use, rather than merely a 60-minute radio program. From Cherokee elder **Davy Arch**, he learned the long view of storms and tragedies the tribe faced going back 13,000 years — "Which really put Helene in context," Weintraub says. And from a disaster response nurse, he learned the importance of self-care and being present for others.

Landslide and flood experts taught the documentarian that storms like Helene have been ever-present in WNC throughout recorded history and that geologists have found evidence of them for millions of years. Lastly, from survivors, he learned that sometimes it takes a disaster to understand whom you can truly count on — and that sometimes reliability comes from sources that you least expect.

BROADCAST NEWS

In finding a local radio partner for "From Helene and Back," Weintraub teamed back up with WNCW. He previously worked with the station's former music director **Kim Clark** to adapt *Come Hell or High Water* as a radio documentary. And several years ago, Weintraub adapted *A Great American Tapestry*, his film about Appalachian music history, to radio on WNCW.

"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."

As the broadcast date and Helene anniversary near, Weintraub is especially mindful of humanity's penchant for ignoring history and allowing it to repeat itself. He and many other area residents vividly remember the destruction that hurricanes Frances and Ivan brought to the Asheville area in 2004 and how it didn't take long for real estate signs to go back up and for people to rebuild in the same spots where floods and landslides occurred.

"We have short memories, and the real estate industry plays on that to convince us that all of this is just 'old history,'" he says. "And of course, there are always new people who move here who don't take the time to learn from their neighbors because we're all too focused on looking at our screens to realize that there's such a wealth of information right next door. 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."

Weintraub will certainly not forget — but after "From Helene and Back," is he ready to move on from documentaries? He says that had he been asked about his plans six months ago, he'd have said he's done.

"But documentary filmmaking is about truth telling. 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. That's what the documentarian does," he says. "I'm definitely taking a break from filmmaking, but I can't say I've hung up my camera forever. There are still so many stories to tell."

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