



LEAVING ANGOLA

A Film by Andrew Kukura
2026 | 93 minutes | United States

LOGLINE

Filmed over seven years, with rare access inside America's largest and most notorious maximum-security prison, *Leaving Angola* tells the story of Justin Singleton, a man serving life without parole for murder, who forms a powerful bond with Derek Moss, a young father preparing for early release. When Derek returns home, events unfold that ultimately change the course of both of their lives.

SYNOPSIS

Justin Singleton has been serving life without parole at the Louisiana State Penitentiary – known as Angola, America’s largest and most notorious maximum-security prison – since he was 22 years old. While incarcerated, he has become an inmate pastor and a vocational mentor in Angola’s pioneering re-entry program, teaching young non-violent offenders valuable trade skills while guiding them away from the paths that could lead them back to prison.

Through this program, Justin forms a strong bond with Derek Moss, a non-violent repeat offender who is two years from release. For Derek, whose own father is serving 25 years to life in prison, Justin becomes a father figure, passing on the wisdom that might help another man remain free, while he himself is condemned to die in prison.

But when Derek returns home, he discovers that he cannot escape his past. The challenges of rebuilding relationships, finding stability, and resisting old patterns test everything Justin has tried to impart. Meanwhile, inside Angola, Justin’s story continues through Kelly Garrett, his fiancée, who is working tirelessly on his behalf in hopes of one day seeing him set free. Through her, we witness how love and commitment can endure in a place designed to keep people apart.

Filmed over seven years with rare access inside America's largest maximum-security prison, *Leaving Angola* is a story about finding family and uncovering one's true potential in an unlikely place – about hope in a place once designed to extinguish it – and about the possibilities and limits of change in the state with the highest rate of incarceration per capita in America.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Leaving Angola began in 2017 when my producing partner, Jenny Phillips, was invited to screen our previous documentary, *Beyond the Wall*, for the Re-Entry mentees inside Louisiana State Penitentiary – otherwise known as Angola. That film focused on the struggles faced by returning citizens as they navigate life after prison and showed the ways in which formerly incarcerated individuals could help mentor other returning citizens – something that parole conditions in Massachusetts often prevent.

In Louisiana, this idea was actually being implemented before release: a program aimed at curbing recidivism by pairing mentors serving life sentences with non-violent offenders who qualified for early release. At the time of the screening, neither of us knew that a program such as this existed anywhere in this country, let alone at Angola, a place that looms large in our cultural imagination. Jenny, who had dedicated her life's work to helping incarcerated individuals find the programs and resources to turn their lives around, returned from this screening convinced that this was a story that needed to be told.

We went down with a small crew in May 2018, filming for five days at the prison, with plans to return for a longer shoot in the fall. Less than two months later, Jenny passed away. I made the commitment to return and finish what we had started together. Seven years later, *Leaving Angola* is complete – a testament to all of the individuals who put their trust in me and helped me share their story, a privilege I did not take lightly.

At the beginning, Jenny and I envisioned this film as something similar to our first collaboration, *The Dhamma Brothers*, a portrait of a groundbreaking program as told by its participants. But the longer I filmed with Justin and Derek, the more convinced I became that I was making a film about the two of them, about their complex relationship, about finding friendship and hope in an unlikely place. Both when the camera was rolling, and more importantly when it was not, I witnessed a powerful bond between them and how Justin was emerging as a surrogate father to Derek, whose own father was serving 25 years to life in a federal penitentiary. Justin's mentorship seemed to take on more and more urgency as he encouraged his "little brother" to break the cycle of recidivism and live the life that he himself could never have.

Meeting Kelly Garrett, Justin's fiancée, two years into filming was another turning point. Through her, I came to see how human bonds can endure and transform lives even when there are literal walls keeping people apart.

For me, *Leaving Angola* is a film about the human capacity to change and the challenge to all of us to never give up on one another, even when the odds are stacked against us. It is ultimately a film about perseverance – the perseverance of the individuals at its center, the perseverance of officials and reformers working to effect change in a place synonymous with mass incarceration, and the perseverance of those who are struggling to find meaning when confronted with a life sentence.

As Justin says in the film, “the two most important days in a person’s is the day they were born, and the day they found out why.” Justin ultimately found his why in what many would consider the most unlikely of places.

— Andrew Kukura

ANDREW KUKURA
Director/Producer/Writer

Andrew Kukura is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and Principal/Creative Director of Northern Light Productions, where he has been producing both short-form and long-form documentary work for over twenty years. His directing credits include *Revealed: The Hunt for Bin Laden*, a two-hour History Channel special featuring interviews with Presidents Obama and Bush, Secretaries Clinton and Gates, and members of Seal Team Six. Other notable directing credits include *Urban Nutcracker: Beyond the Stage*, a two-hour PBS holiday special, and *The Dhamma Brothers*, a theatrically released feature about the profound effects of Vipassana meditation on inmates inside a maximum-security prison in Alabama, which won numerous awards and was featured as part of Oprah's Soul Series. As a producer, writer, and editor, Andrew's work includes *Killer Poet*, an independent documentary selected for Hot Docs and winner of multiple Best Documentary awards, as well as *Circus Without Borders* and *Beyond the Wall*, for America ReFramed.

Andrew has been Creative Director on multimillion-dollar projects for museums and visitor centers including the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, the National World War II Museum, and the Canadian Museum of History, among others. His work has been featured on NPR, PBS, The New York Times, OWN, History Channel, Hulu, and Netflix.

JENNY PHILLIPS
Producer

Jenny Phillips was a filmmaker, cultural anthropologist, and psychiatric nurse whose work focused on the lives of incarcerated individuals and the transformative potential of mindfulness and emotional literacy programs within prisons. With more than fifteen years of direct teaching experience inside prisons and jails, she brought both professional expertise and deep compassion to her filmmaking.

Jenny directed and produced the award-winning documentary *The Dhamma Brothers*, which followed inmates inside a maximum-security prison as they participated in a Vipassana meditation course, as well as *Beyond the Wall*, exploring the challenges faced by returning citizens after release. She was also the author of *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers: Meditation Behind Bars*, a collection of letters and interviews from inmates who took part in the meditation course. Her work consistently sought to illuminate the human stories within incarceration and to foster greater understanding of the social and emotional barriers confronting those reentering society.

KEY CREATIVE TEAM

Tim Raycroft

Editor

Tim Raycroft has been editing documentary films for more than 25 years. His work has screened at film festivals, aired on cable and public broadcasting, and been featured in museums and national parks across North America. Known for his collaborative approach to storytelling, Raycroft has worked with a wide range of directors and producers to shape character-driven and long-form documentary projects.

In 2025, he joined the faculty at Bridgewater State University, where he teaches and mentors emerging media makers.

Joe York

Cinematographer

Joe York is a documentary filmmaker and cinematographer whose work explores the culture and social history of the American South. A longtime contributor to the University of Mississippi's Southern Documentary Project and the Southern Foodways Alliance, he has produced more than 50 short films and four feature-length documentaries. His work has appeared on PBS and in publications including The New York Times, The Atlantic, and The Bitter Southerner.

Jesse Beecher
Cinematographer

Jesse Beecher is a Director of Photography with Northern Light Productions whose documentary work spans multi-camera interviews with U.S. presidents to vérité filmmaking inside state prisons and remote backcountry environments. His cinematography is grounded in careful observation and a sensitivity to character and place. His visual approach favors restraint and intimacy, allowing people and environments to reveal themselves gradually on screen.

Ruth Mendelson
Composer

Ruth Mendelson is an Emmy-nominated composer, producer, and arranger whose work has been recognized as a New York Times Critics' Pick. For more than 25 years, she has written original scores for documentary and broadcast projects for HBO, National Geographic, Discovery Channel, PBS, CBS, and NBC, among others. Her approach to film scoring emphasizes emotional clarity and narrative restraint. She also teaches in the Film Scoring Department at Berklee College of Music.

FILM DETAILS

Documentary

93 minutes

United States

English

Year: 2026

Shooting Format: XF-AVC (12-bit 4:4:4)

Aspect Ratio: 1.90:1

CREDITS

Written, Produced, and Directed by

Andrew Kukura

Producer

Jenny Phillips

Cinematographers

Jesse Beecher

Joe York

Sound Engineer

Brian Petersen

Editor

Tim Raycroft

Co-Editors

Andrew Kukura

Glenn Fukushima

Music

Ruth Mendelson

Executive Producers

Dinah Buechner-Vischer

Frank Phillips

Northern Light Productions

Executive Producers

Tim Lay

Andrew Kukura

Bestor Cram

Consulting Producers

Susan Bellows

Beth Sternheimer

Archival Producer

Rich Remsberg

Associate Producers

Charlotte Benoit

Daniela Moya

Nicole Orsini

Talia Sabato

Natalie Williams

Graphic Design

Kunjal Shah

Additional Field Production

Field Producer — Barbara Seidl
Cinematographer — Nikki Bramley

Legal Services

Thomas D. Herman

Archival Courtesy Of

Church Point News

The Eunice News

Getty Images

Pond 5

JTE Multimedia

Louisiana State Newspapers

WWL-TV

Special Thanks

Thomas E. Coury

Freedom Behind Bars Foundation

Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation

Al King

Judge William J. Knight

Ken Pastorick

Polly Phillips

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The Administration and Staff Members at:
22nd Judicial Re-Entry Court
The Louisiana Parole Project
Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections
Louisiana State Penitentiary
Voice of the Experienced

With Gratitude

Stephanie Allen

Samantha Angelle

Mark Bould

Billie Cannon

Eric Carlsen

William D. Carruthers

Ann Cavalier

Danny Chain

Louis Cruz

Mason Cryer

Louie Diaz

Dustin Dicklen

Taylor Dueweke

Governor John Bel Edwards

Craig Estave

Jason Fazekas

Matthew Fields

Michael Gachot

Herbert Garrett

Kelly Garrett

Petra Garrett
George Gillam
Tawan Gradney
Susan Gray
Catherine Guillory
Micki Guillory
Thomas D. Herman
Cevan Hewitt
Andrew Hundley
Felix Indest
LaKeshia Jackson
Jordan Jacobs
Llyr Johansen
Frazier Jordan
Freeman Joseph
William K.
Secretary James LeBlanc
Christina Lindstrom
Matthew Maclean
Rep. C. Denise Marshall
Julie Martini
Emilia Martini-Kukura
Eric Matthews
Juan Matthews
Chasity McCurry
Eric Mehan
Keith Morse
Derek Moss

Vicki Powell Moss
Kevin O'Neill
Cole Permenter
Mike Phelps
Kevin Ramsey
Judy Richardson
Elena Rippel
Rick Sharkey
John Sheehan
John Sherrer
Justin Singleton
Stephanie Smith
Anna H. Spears
Warden Perry R. Stagg
Sandra Stepler
Jodie Sturgeon
Joshua Styles
Jason Taylor
G.S. Thompson
Huey Scott Thompson
Greg Torres
Marjorie G. Vernon
Daryl T. Waters
Shelby Weary
Freddy Welch
Denise West
April Williams
Kim Wilson

Warden Gary Young

This film is dedicated
to the memory of
Jenny Phillips

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