

HEALING NEEN



"WHERE THERE'S BREATH
THERE'S HOPE"
TONIER CAIN

Official Selection
Clearwater
Film Festival

Official Selection
Mid-Atlantic Black
Film Festival

Official Selection
Global Peace
Film Festival

Official Selection
Rainier Independent
Film Festival

Official Selection
Heart and Minds
Film Festival

Official Selection
The National Council
Film Festival

Official Selection
Videopolis
Film Festival

Official Selection
New Hope
Film Festival

HEALING NEEN

Short Synopsis

One woman's journey back to a childhood of abuse and forward to a life of healing herself and those still grappling with the consequences of untreated trauma, including homelessness, drug addiction and incarceration.

Long Synopsis

Healing Neen takes viewers on a journey to places and subjects that most find too difficult or uncomfortable to fathom. But it is Tonier "Neen" Cain's joyous spirit and astonishing inner-strength that leaps through the screen directly into viewers hearts, inspiring renewed hope and compassion for those still living on the fringes.

For two decades, Tonier hustled on the streets of Annapolis, Maryland, desperately feeding an insatiable crack addiction and racking up 83 arrests along the way. Rapes and beatings were a routine part of life; home was underneath a bridge or inside the locked cage of a prison. In 2004, pregnant and incarcerated for violation of parole, she was provided with the opportunity to go to a community trauma, mental health and addictions program.

Feeling safe for the first time in her life, Tonier confronted the haunting childhood memories that she tried to numb with drugs: filth and chronic hunger, sexual assaults by neighborhood men, routine physical and mental abuse dished out by her drunken mother. Realizing for the first time that she had been a victim, she began to heal and reclaim power over her life, embarking on a remarkable "upward spiral," that has no limit. Today, Tonier is the Team Leader for the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care, dedicating her life to being a voice for those still lost and still silent. Traveling the country to give speeches to professionals and work one on one with women in prisons and hospitals, Tonier is transforming her own life while helping others to embrace her motto "where there's breath, there's hope."



Tonier giving her presentation.

HEALING NEEN

Crew

WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER: LAURA CAIN
PRODUCER/EDITOR: THOM STROMER
CO-PRODUCER: TONIER CAIN
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY & ANIMATION: BEN BAKER-LEE
ORIGINAL MUSIC: CALEB STINE
AUDIO POST & SOUND DESIGN: DAVID CRANDALL
COLOR CORRECTION: MATT RIGGIEIRI
SECOND CAMERA: RAASAAN HAMMOND, LAURA CAIN, DIANA GROSS
CO-PRODUCER/CO-DIRECTOR: DIANA GROSS

WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER LAURA CAIN

A civil rights lawyer, Laura turned to filmmaking as a more personally satisfying and effective way of giving voice to vulnerable people, and to help get their stories out to a wider audience. Her first documentary, *Behind Closed Doors: Trauma Survivors and the Psychiatric System*, was an official selection at the Maryland Film Festival, the Baltimore Women's Film Festival, and won Best Documentary at the All-American Film Festival. To learn more about Laura's work, visit www.inthehollowfilms.com

ORIGINAL MUSIC CALEB STINE

An independent, restless spirit, Caleb Stine flies his Americana music just under the mainstream radar. Logging miles on blue highways and grain-lined interstates, he plays his down to earth songs in dive bars, rock clubs, and symphony halls. Passionate live shows and four self-released albums have gained Stine a grass-roots following that's had the *BALTIMORE SUN* call him the "lynchpin of the Baltimore folk scene." To learn more about Caleb's music, visit www.calebstine.com

CO-PRODUCER/CO-DIRECTOR DIANA GROSS

Diana is a filmmaker in Baltimore City.
www.gallery144productions.com

EDITOR/PRODUCER THOM STROMER

A Freelance Editor and Producer, Thom has worked for over 16 years in a variety of Television and Film programming. Editing documentary films allow him to flex his creative muscles, while satisfying his deep-rooted sense of social justice. *Healing Neen* is the second documentary that Thom has produced. He lives in Baltimore, MD, a city that satisfies his fondness for originality with a dash of absurdity. To learn more about Thom's work, visit www.juxtapostedit.com/

CINEMATOGRAPHY/ANIMATION/DVD COVER ARTWORK BEN BAKER-LEE

Ben Baker-Lee is a visual artist, director, and cinematographer born in 1980, in Baltimore, MD. After earning a BFA in Film and Television from the Tisch School of the Arts in New York City, he completed his first short fiction film "riverrun" in 2003. He has shot and directed films and videos from India to Palestine/Israel to his home town Baltimore. To learn more about Ben's work, visit www.sabreenanow.com

CO-PRODUCER TONIER CAIN

Tonier is currently the Team Leader for the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care, in Alexandria, VA. She travels the country giving presentations to audiences of professionals in a wide-variety of systems, including corrections, mental health, juvenile justice, substance abuse and social services. To learn more about Tonier, visit www.healingneen.com

HEALING NEEN

Director's Statement

I wanted to explore how people end up on the margins of society. It's frequently assumed that "those people" are sick, bad, or lazy. The fault lies within them and therefore, they are completely responsible for both their misery and their recovery. But if this underlying premise is false then all of our responses to the problems created by mental illness, homelessness, and drug addiction need to be reexamined. When I met Tonier "Neen" Cain,



Laura and Thom at the Baltimore Indie Premiere

I knew that she was the perfect subject for a documentary tackling these issues. She had been given multiple mental health diagnoses, had been a crack addict, and had spent twenty years homeless and cycling in and out of psychiatric hospitals and prisons. Her life was considered unsalvageable, and yet somehow she had transformed into this extremely charismatic, beautiful and joyous person. I was fascinated and wanted to learn more about her life and her recovery.

Cinematically, the story of her almost unimaginable triumph over the worst adversity is unparalleled. In addition, Tonier is mesmerizing to watch and has a unique ability to connect with her audience. The most apt description of her style that I've read was in a review of her presentation at the Baltimore City Stoop Storytelling series: "she tells her story like a jazz singer— more Nina Simone than Billy Holliday— there was a joy, ferocity, and an understanding in her voice and her words."

Thom (editor/producer) and I crafted Tonier's personal journey as the narrative train, taking detours here and there to present information about trauma and its impact. We are grateful that audiences are positively responding to her powerful message of hope and that our film is influencing systems throughout the country to adopt a trauma focus that better addresses people's needs. Personally, working on this film with Tonier, Thom, Ben Baker-Lee (Cinematography) and Caleb Stine (Music) has been a joyful and transforming experience.

HEALING NEEN

Q&A with Director/Producer Laura Cain and Editor/Producer Thom Stromer

1. How did you get into this project?

LC: Thom and I made a short documentary called “Behind Closed Doors”, which featured Tonier as one of four trauma survivors talking about their experience with the psychiatric system. When it was released in 2007, she and I started doing speaking engagements together. Tonier is a phenomenally gifted speaker--powerful, engaging and very, very funny, which allows audiences to take in the truly awful parts of her story. In 2008, she took me around Annapolis, where she grew up and lived on the streets. Seeing these places that she talks about brought the story to life in a way that words---no matter how effectively delivered---cannot match. That’s when the idea formed to make a documentary about her life. I went to the Maryland mental health administration, which had funded “Behind Closed Doors”, and they agreed to fund this project.

TS: I kept hearing about Tonier’s achievements after we finished “Behind Closed Doors” and was stoked that she was on such an upward spiral. I was fascinated by her. Her story really spoke to me because I had struggled with, and overcame substance abuse issues all on my own. I was amazed that she could have dropped to such a low point but then come back 10 times stronger. She had gone through the normal rehab programs before and failed. They didn’t give her the help she needed. TAMAR’s Children gave her all the tools and support that she needed.



Tonier and inmates at Maryland Prison

2. How did you get access to the prison and what was that experience like?

LC: Tonier knew the Warden, Brenda Shell, and she opened the prison to us. The first thing we did was to interview Tonier in the cell she had been locked in only 4 years prior. It was uncomfortably cramped and very hot. It was hard not to get emotional, thinking about all the time that she spent locked up and about all those still incarcerated because of our nation’s damaging “war on drugs.” According to Warden Shell, 80% of the inmates have histories that are very similar to Tonier’s---abused as children, turning to drugs to numb the pain, and getting caught up in this horrific cycle. Later that evening, Tonier gave a presentation to the inmates. Because she was speaking to her peers, her style and cadence was slightly different than what she uses for professional groups, and it worked phenomenally well on film. The next day, we returned to film Tonier leading a group discussion with 5 inmates. It was astonishing to me how open they were to speaking about some really raw, emotional stuff. One woman came across as very hardened, but when it was her turn to speak, she looked the camera dead in the eye and just opened up with the most amazing stuff. Another woman had just agreed to an abortion and it was really tearing her up inside. Her emotions were right there on the surface and it was really gripping to watch. We are so grateful to all of these women, who have been badly hurt all of their lives, to trust us with their stories.

3. How did you end up filming the family Thanksgiving? How did you put that scene together?

LC: We invited ourselves to Thanksgiving because we wanted to try and bring Tonier's family into the story, particularly her mother, Barbara. I knew that there was a risk that they would just play to the camera and that turned out to be the case. But, with cameras rolling for hours on end, you are bound to catch moments where guards are down and the truth is revealed. As tempting as it was, we decided that it would be wrong to cast Barbara as a one-dimensional villain. I am really happy that the scene allows viewers to decide whether to hate her, pity her, or both. This was the one scene I didn't even try to script. After lengthy discussions about what we wanted this scene to achieve, Thom offered to take it on. I bow humbly to his skill in wading through a morass of footage and crafting a tight, coherent and gut-wrenching scene.



Tonier looking out from her former cell.

TS: This was the most difficult scene to cut. I had to deal with it as a separate entity. The first cut of the Thanksgiving scene was an hour and a half. We had 3 cameras rolling, no time code synch, and no real shooting plan in the chaos that is a family gathering. It came out to be 11 hours of footage. I had to manually synch everything and lay it out chronologically. After that was done we could really see what we had. Being a fly on the wall of this family gathering was fascinating but the emotional intensity of the event made it very, very difficult to work with. Seeing all the children in the midst of this was so heart wrenching because you know that's the next generation who may succeed or drown. The biggest issue was how do we handle Barbara (Tonier's Mother)? We could have edited the scene and make her look 20 times worse than she does. But, I wanted to let her speak for herself and not be edited as either a good or bad person.

4. How did you decide on the rather unconventional structure for the piece and what was the process during editing?

TS: Our initial discussions involved a very conventional, linear sense of Tonier's life from birth until today. The experts would pop in to discuss the relevant part of her life as it applied to where we were at in her life timeline. I felt that would be too much holding the hand of the audience and guiding them along. We feared that it would fall flat. Laura was completely open to working in a non-linear form that allowed emotion and rhythm to guide us rather than chronological time. There was a lot of moving things around, reworking within scenes, and ultimately ditching sequences, even if we had grown attached to them.

LC: Tonier's story was ingrained in my being by the time we started editing. I also knew the contextual information that I wanted to incorporate so that her story became more universal. We had to ditch most of the so-called rules about structure, which neither one of us buys into anyway. I spent weeks on the initial script, so we'd have something to work with. It made more sense on paper than it ended up making on screen, but it was a structure to work with. After that, we went back and forth and continued to shape it, rather than trying to force the elements into any pre-conceived form. We knew that it was risky, because audiences are used to conventional structure, but we trusted their willingness to go along for the ride, wherever it might take them.

5. Why did you use animation and how did you develop those scenes?

LC: We only had one photograph of Tonier as a child and we knew that we couldn't just keep going back to that whenever she was talking about a childhood experience. From the outset, we knew that there were two scenes from childhood that would be in the film. Ben, our DP, is a very gifted artist and volunteered to take on the animation. It was a steep learning curve for all of us. The scene where Tonier's mother passes out and a man comes to her bedroom door to molest her was very difficult. Ben, Thom and I spent a lot of time discussing what to show, how to achieve the right mood, etc. It was also tough for Ben because he didn't have any profile or full body shots of a young Tonier, so he had to use stand-ins and try to match them. For the courtroom scene, I had the idea of using a style of the courtroom sketch artist. That was the easiest scene, conceptually, but Ben's art form is abstract, not portraiture, so he took a lot of time perfecting that. The sketches of Tonier's mother and father, taken from old photographs, blew us all away.

TS: Animating the alley beat down was not in our initial plan. The visual disconnect of seeing her on such a gorgeous day telling such a dark story about two guys using her sexually and then beating her, confounded me very much. I had to see that darkness on screen right next to the vibrant color of Tonier telling the story. I wanted the daytime footage to be a stark contrast to black and white "chalky" animation. I threw that initial idea at Ben and he ran with it and shaped it from there. It was a difficult animation style and process to pull off given the technical aspects of it all. He did an incredible job.



Caleb performing at Baltimore Indie Premiere

6. How did you work with the musician in scoring the film?

TS: I had worked with Caleb Stine on a short piece about two years before we got to scoring this film. I knew what he was capable of for film plus I'm a huge fan of his solo work. He is the most straightforward emotion-bending musician I have ever seen. I purposely gave Caleb free reign to create what spoke to him. I didn't tell him what kind of instruments or styles to go for. I wanted it to come from his heart. I knew Tonier would speak to him through film and that was all he needed. Before he'd start a piece, I'd describe the emotion of the scene and not much else. I'd supply a video clip of the scene to work from and leave him alone for a while. He really pushed the film to another level. The only scene that Laura and I had to give more specific direction than usual was the alley beat down scene. Finding the proper tone for that scene was so critical. After a couple passes he nailed it. In the middle of the process Caleb told us he'd like to record some vocals under the end credits and asked if that would be ok. We said "absolutely" and were thrilled that he'd even consider it. When Caleb finally let us hear the lyrics he had written, Laura and I both had this cathartic cry. It really touched us so deeply and we knew Tonier would be thrilled. Those lyrics and music really helped us find the strength needed to finish the film.

LC: I trusted that this was totally within Thom's bailiwick so I stayed out of it for a while. I'm grateful to Thom and Caleb for eventually pulling me in by sending me samples and asking for specific input. I had to let go of my distorted thinking that I had nothing to contribute because, unlike Caleb and Thom, I'm not a musician. Once I did that, the connection between the scene and the music revealed itself and I was able to give input. But, Caleb is so talented and really got the piece and what we were trying to accomplish so, other than tweaks here and there, it was largely just leaving him alone to do his thing and it was brilliant.

7. Why the use of "talking heads"?

LC: My main objection to talking heads is that I generally prefer to let survivors of abuse and injustices speak for themselves. I thought bringing experts into this piece could work, however, because Tonier herself has moved into that professional realm. I didn't feel that it any way minimized her voice. I also thought it was important to not give the viewer an easy out---"oh, she's just a poor woman from the projects, what do you expect?" In reality, child abuse happens all the time in this country and across all races and socio-economic classes. The use of experts made her story more universal, and I think that's important in terms of engendering change. It was definitely a challenge to condense and place those spots so that there was enough information to make them useful without being intrusive.



Tonier, Laura and Thom at Q&A

TS: Too many talking heads drives me insane. I was always asking Laura if we could cut this or that because I wanted to get Tonier back on screen ASAP! It took a little while for us to figure out how they fit into the overall piece. Once we figured that out, I'd move into a different edit mode and work to figure out how to seamlessly illustrate what they are talking about via graphics or B-Roll.

8. How did you get your subject to open up so completely?

LC: I had several things going for me. First, Tonier and I were already good friends, which is why she approached me to do the project. Our bond deepened throughout filming, so much so that by the end, she asked to name me her daughter's legal guardian in her will, which was such an honor and privilege. Trust between us was never an issue. Second, she's just an open book with her life---this is what she's bravely chosen to do to help others heal. Third, she has such an easy and natural relationship with the camera. Thom, Ben Baker-Lee (the DP) and I often joked that we just needed to set up the camera and get the heck out of her way!

9. What was most enjoyable about making the film?

LC: Spending so much time with Tonier and taking this journey back in time with her was very inspirational. And the whole crew was phenomenal. Ben Baker-Lee and Caleb Stine are so talented, generous of spirit, and just fun guys to hang out with. Working with Thom was a dream come true. The level of trust and respect that he and I developed was special. I learned so much from Thom and everyone involved in making this film---it was a far better education than I could get at any film school.



TS: I agree with Laura. It was such a joy to be working with all the artists on this film. Furthermore - working with Laura was the most satisfying professional relationship I've ever had with a Director or Producer. We spent the most time together going back and forth for months before we started bringing in the other folk so it could have been very claustrophobic but it was just the opposite. She has an analytical style and I work in an abstract, conceptual style. The 2 styles combined balanced each other.

Laura, Ben and Raasaan at shoot

10. What do you hope audiences take away from Healing Neen?

TS: I want people to think about how we are treating people with substance abuse issues and work towards more holistic methods of addressing their needs. When an addict hits rock bottom they need systems in place that they can access immediately to put them on the road to recovery. Putting them on a waiting list for access to a program is useless. They'll go back to using if they can't get help right there. I'd also like people to see that warehousing people in prisons is not a solution. We have the highest prison population of country in the world. We need to stop this revolving door of recidivism due to minor technical infractions and police profiling.

LC: That we need to get serious about protecting children. Society pays so little attention to the common, everyday brutalization and neglect that they endure. Child maltreatment is not just a problem for these kids as individuals. The shockingly high rates of childhood abuse and neglect among prisoners, psychiatric patients, homeless people, drug addicts, etc., makes it impossible to ignore the enormous costs every one of us bears. I also hope that the film shatters assumptions and stereotypes about people living on the fringes of society. At the very least, I hope that audiences take Tonier into their hearts and reflect upon her shining example of the human spirit and resiliency in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

HEALING NEEN

Media Reviews

Baltimore City Paper

By Bret McCabe | Posted 4/28/2010

The truly amazing thing about Tonier “Neen” Cain isn’t that she got her life together, though that’s epically impressive in and of itself. As the oldest of nine brothers and sisters in Annapolis’ Clay Street community, from the age of 9 Cain lived as the de facto protector while her alcoholic and abusive mother was absent, passed out, or otherwise occupied. Rapes at the hands of her mother’s male friends started, and even after social services placed Cain and her siblings with relatives, Cain herself turned to alcohol and drugs, eventually leading to 83 arrests and 66 convictions--for prostitution, possession, etc.--and a life of addiction, 19 years of homelessness, and a stint in the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women in Jessup. As recently as 2004, Cain was an inmate pregnant with her second child and looking for any way to realign her life.



She did, and today Cain is a team leader for the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care, a program funded by the National Center for Mental Health Services. And as recounted in *Healing Neen*, the documentary on Cain’s life, directed by Laura Cain (no relation) and presented by the Maryland Disability Law Center, Cain hasn’t just righted her life--she’s dedicated it to helping adult victims of childhood abuse in efforts to heal their lives too. And that’s what so stunning about Cain--not only all she’s overcome, but that she’s chosen to relive it day after day during her testimonial presentations before mental health care service providers and women’s prison inmates. Cain’s chosen job is publicly confronting her own past to help others envision a better future.

It's a remarkable story, but do note that this succinct, 55-minute documentary doesn't try to oversell the uplift. By telling Cain's story, the documentary advocates for trauma-informed care--identified by the NMHIC as an emerging strategy for mental health and allied human services for "every part of its organization, management, and service delivery system is assessed and potentially modified to include a basic understanding of how trauma impacts the life of an individual seeking services"--and trots out a disarming number of statistics regarding childhood trauma and incident rates for adult problems. The doc talks about the Adverse Childhood Experiences study, a joint venture between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente that investigates the relationships between childhood trauma and later health issues and behaviors in life. The ACE Study generates a score from 1-9 according to childhood experiences. Cain reported exposures to all 9 categories.

As such, parts of *Healing Neen*, though, are difficult to watch: Cain casually talks about living with her relatives--where she first learned to clean herself after using the bathroom, basic hygiene one of many things her mother never taught her kids--discovering crack, living under a bridge, and, as a teenager, being asked by her mother to marry a man so that they would have a place to live. Cain runs through these incidents fearlessly and empathetically, which is more than likely one of the main reasons she's able to get women inmates to open up to her, on camera, and talk about the lives that led them to Jessup.

And just as Cain's unflappable belief in the possibility of getting better might be what makes her so trustworthy to the women she speaks to, Cain's unimpeachable inner strength is what keeps *Healing Neen* from being too much to bear. You only have to hear about it; she lived it. And by all appearances in the documentary, Tonier Cain has only just begun to live her life.

HEALING NEEN

Sample Audience Responses

“A monumental piece”

Brenda B.

“Indescribably brilliant”

Meghan M.

“I cried tears of joy”

Barbara S.

“An invaluable tool for everyone
concerned about trauma”

Darren M.

“A profound experience”

Marcia B.

For more audience responses, articles about Tonier and her interview on WYPR-Baltimore, go to www.healingneen.com.