



AMERICA MAKES REVOLUTIONARY PROMISES
BUT HER WORDS DON'T COME WITHOUT A FIGHT

In Liberty's Shadow ELLEN SEARS

AS A FILMMAKER EXPLORES HER GREAT-GREAT-GRANDMOTHER'S EPIC BATTLE TO BREAK FREE FROM A TOXIC MARRIAGE
SHE SETS OUT TO MEET A NEW GENERATION OF FREEDOM FIGHTERS MOBILIZING IN THE FIGHT AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

DIRECTED BY ELISABETH SCHLUMBERGER | CO-WRITTEN BY ANDREAS BJORNSEN
Documentary 1 X 90'

Retracing a centuries-old family scandal that tore the country apart, filmmaker **ELISABETH SCHLUMBERGER** asks: *What will it take to protect women from their abusive spouses—once and for all?*

The battle to break the silence

In Canada—and in many European countries—mental cruelty has finally been recognized as a domestic crime. But incredibly, that's only true in three U.S. states—Hawaii, California and Connecticut.

American lawmakers are sounding the alarm. Because if ‘coercive control’—the silent partner of domestic abuse—isn’t codified nationwide as a crime, then victims will remain in a vicious cycle without legal protection. *After all, why would anyone reach out for help if they know it isn’t there?*

That doesn’t sit well with filmmaker **ELISABETH SCHLUMBERGER**. In 1840, her great-great-grandmother—18-year-old Boston socialite **ELLEN SEARS**—fought an epic battle for custody that brought her husband’s mental cruelty into the spotlight. And resulted in a landmark verdict that—for the first time in history—recognized this covert abuse as a crime.

And yet—in the nearly 200 years since—why hasn’t America gone the distance?

And with her foundational principles of justice and equality for all—*why hasn’t Lady Liberty kept her word?*

Traveling through time, **ELISABETH SCHLUMBERGER** retraces **ELLEN SEARS’** historic battle to break free from her abusive husband. And—through a foreigner’s contemporary lens—tracks down the front-line activists and lawmakers determined to secure the legislation that will allow victims of intimate partner violence to break the silence. For good.

WHAT IS COERCIVE CONTROL—An insidious form of domestic abuse, coercive control—or intimate partner violence—describes a pattern of non-physical behaviors that a perpetrator uses to gain control and power by eroding a person’s autonomy and self-esteem. This can include acts of intimidation, threats and humiliation.

She dared to take on the system—ELLEN'S STORY

1840–2022

Pregnant, terrified and on the verge of a breakdown, **ELLEN SEARS** runs for her life. Escaping from a gilded cage on the Swiss Riviera, she heads first to the American Embassy in Paris. And then sails back to the US to take refuge in her powerful father's Boston home.

But **ELLEN** can't outrun the law or her abusive husband. And—when she gives birth to a son and refuses to return to Switzerland—all hell breaks loose.

Amid an all-out tabloid war and a raging debate that shakes the patriarchy to its core, a nasty trans-Atlantic showdown over custody rocks the nation. And—in the very Philadelphia courtroom where the Declaration of Independence was signed—**ELLEN**'s brave testimony brings the suffering and humiliation of women into the global spotlight.

Nearly 200 years later, her great-great-granddaughter explores the forgotten legacy of this unlikely champion who paved the way for an epic struggle that continues to this day.

*Just as her peers do today, **ELLEN** paid a high price for speaking out.*

“ For many victims, invisible forms of domestic violence are more terrifying than physical violence. It's time to update our systems and beliefs to reflect this reality. It's time to remove the stigma, shame and fear. It's time for real change. ” — 25 February 2021

Attorney, advocate and former State Senator **ALEXANDRA KASSER** is the primary force behind *Jennifers' Law*—the groundbreaking Connecticut statute that redefines domestic violence to include coercive control

ABOUT THE FILM

In the U.S., the film seeks out the **leading activists, lawyers and politicians** in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania—the very states where **ELLEN** fought her battle in 1840—to chronicle their front-line struggles, and to find out why coercive control still hasn't been criminalized.

As the film travels back and forth through time to reveal **ELLEN**'s inspiring story, these key players share what drives them to leverage their expertise, notoriety and power—all while revealing the political hurdles and legislative challenges they face along the way.

North of the border, the film also explores the explosive case of Amy Kaufman, a victim of intimate partner violence who waged an uphill legal battle against her

ex-husband—the now disgraced sportswriter and media personality Jonah Keri. This Canadian case reveals just how difficult it is to leverage legal protections—even where laws exist. And—while offering hope to survivors—reveals the critical role that prosecutors and judges play in getting the system to work for those who need it most.

Based on her own correspondence, a 20-year-old **ELLEN** recounts her journey in the first person. Timelessly dressed, she is the emotional thread that runs through the film.

Featuring shifting projections, **ELLEN** wanders through a modern environment and interacts with oversize panels that seamlessly weave together the historic and contemporary narratives.

Elisabeth Schlumberger

Director - Writer

Paris-based Swiss filmmaker **ELISABETH AUBERT SCHLUMBERGER** was studying business at NYU when she first began tracking the art and politics of the generation-defining graffiti artist Keith Haring. The resulting film—*Drawing the Line*—was featured at select festivals and broadcast around the world. Since then, **ELISABETH** has created powerful portraits of other notable cultural figures, including her most recent film—*In the Footsteps of Rebecca*—about the celebrated British writer Daphne du Maurier. The film was broadcast on PBS America, garnered record-breaking audiences on ARTE in France, and was the critics' choice of the British *Sunday Times*. **ELISABETH** has also directed award-winning shorts—including *Look At Me* and *Carpe Diem*—along with the critically-acclaimed documentaries *The Apprentices* and *Gstaad: Behind the Scenes*.

Andreas Bjornson

Writer

For more than 25 years, professional storyteller **ANDREAS BJORNSON** has been honing his craft—first as a journalist, and then as a copywriter and branding consultant. A seasoned pitch writer, **ANDREAS** works extensively with leading TV production companies, including Ideacom, Cineflix and Ah! Media (Mediawan). As a copywriter, he has produced brand-building tools across a wide range of industries, including for Cirque du Soleil, Bombardier and Mexx. And—as a journalist—he co-hosted a morning radio talk show, was a researcher at CBC Radio, and wrote for both the *Montreal Gazette* and the syndicated 90s TV magazine *Famous Homes & Hideaways*. Born in Stockholm, raised in Italy, and influenced by Montreal, Paris and San Francisco, **ANDREAS** has a unique multilingual perspective and an innate ability for revealing the core message.



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A leader in strategic partnerships and high-end co-productions, **IDEACOM International** is an audacious, independent television and digital media production company that's always on the lookout for innovative and thought-provoking content.

With its strong focus on science, health, and history, the Montreal-based firm has produced more than 500 hours of bold original series and documentaries, and has garnered over 100 awards and nominations along the way.

Tackling compelling stories and major contemporary issues, **IDEACOM**'s most recent titles include *Human+, The Future of Our Senses, Conversations with Dolphins, Who Was the Real Neanderthal?*, and the blockbuster documentary series *Apocalypse World War I*.

IDEACOM is led by **Josette D. Normandeau**—sought-after industry speaker, board member, and executive producer. And since 2017, the company has partnered with prolific production and distribution house **Cineflix Media** (Montreal, Toronto, Dublin, London, NYC) to facilitate and accelerate the production of blue-chip scripted and unscripted content for the global market.



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Founded by Francine Lusser and Gérard Monier in 2006, **Tipimages Productions** produces independent feature and documentary films and series of cultural and social relevance, commercial value, and artistic integrity. Their latest productions include the international TV series *Cellule de Crise* with André Dussollier, *The Translator*—the first feature film by Rana Kazkaz and Anas Khalaf (TIFF 2020)—and *Le Temps d'une Nuit*, a short by Alice Fargier (Clermont-Ferrand 2021). Their next feature—*Back to Alexandria*—stars Fanny Ardant and Nadine Labaki and starts shooting in May 2022.