

NTI Upstream Presents

**Moment to Moment:
Teens Growing Up With FASDs**

www.ntiupstream.com/moment

Directed by Gabe Chasnoff

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TECH SPECS:

Running Time: 56 minutes
Aspect Ratio 16:9
Rating: Not Rated

Moment to Moment: Teens Growing Up With FASDs

SYNOPSIS (Short)

Under the best of circumstances, adolescents face an uphill battle on their way to maturity. Adolescents affected by prenatal exposure to alcohol, including those within a diagnosis of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs), endure additional challenges, trying to understand and interpret stimuli that are coming at them from multiple directions. All adolescents face difficulties associated with reaching young adulthood: hormonal and behavioral changes, sexual activity, and a desire for increased independence. But adolescents with FASDs have impaired brain function and must learn to cope with how that functioning affects decision-making, and the growing demands of school and peer relationships.

Moment to Moment: Teens Growing Up With FASDs explores the lives of four adolescents with FASDs and the effects that prenatal alcohol exposure has had and continues to have on their journeys to finding independence, fulfillment, and understanding the world around them.

SYNOPSIS (Extended)

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Under the best of circumstances, adolescents face an uphill battle on their way to maturity. Adolescents affected by prenatal exposure to alcohol, including those within a diagnosis of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, endure additional challenges, trying to understand and interpret stimuli that are coming at them from multiple directions. All adolescents face difficulties associated with reaching young adulthood: hormonal and behavioral changes, sexual activity, and a desire for increased independence. But adolescents with FASDs have impaired brain function and must learn to cope with how that functioning affects decision-making, and the growing demands of school and peer relationships.

Moment to Moment captures the challenges that families must overcome as children with FASDs reach maturity and attempt to strike out on their own as young adults. Many adolescents with FASDs end up in trouble with the law for reasons they cannot comprehend, and consequently, are at the mercy of a court system that most often does not accept or understand their plight.

As adolescents with FASDs get older, mood disorders, anxiety, and depression become increased threats to their emotional and psychological health. They are often manipulated

by their peers, and due to the brain damage caused by prenatal substance exposure, lack the ability to stop bad behaviors and inhibit themselves. Because the human brain is not fully mature until age 25, parents of children with FASDs report that at this age, emotional behavior and social skills finally develop more fully. They are able to engage in social and employment worlds, although with limited success.

Moment to Moment: Teens Growing Up With FASDs takes an intimate and eye-opening journey into the lives of those affected by FASDs and those of their families and friends. The film, produced by a small crew from Chicago, looks at young people with unique needs growing up and entering into a social system that is not prepared to provide the services that are necessary for a successful future.

PRODUCTION NOTES by Director Gabe Chasnoff

Moment to Moment: Teens Growing Up With FASDs was shot in numerous cities and towns across America. The hectic production and travel schedule required to produce this film speaks to the nature of this devastating disorder – that it can occur anywhere, within any community, among any demographic of people. The film is a result of many hours waiting, watching, and listening while on location with the families and young adults. At any given moment, the smallest change in stimuli or social interaction could throw one of the subjects in the film into a violent rage or emotional breakdown. During a seemingly typical conversation between mother and daughter, Kara Hurley, 19 years old, melts down when she learns that her mother treated her younger sister to hamburgers and ice cream and that she didn't get any. Flopping onto a small step stool, she curls curled herself into a ball and is inconsolable. It was difficult documenting those moments. My instinct was to comfort, calm, and reassure. But as a filmmaker I forced myself to stand on the sideline, lest I alter the natural course of events. At times it feels unethical continuing to roll camera - capturing other peoples' moments of distress of raw vulnerability. To reassure myself, I constantly repeat in my mind that recording and sharing moments like these will, hopefully, expose the true nature of the devastating effects of prenatal alcohol exposure and influence women to make healthier choices while they are pregnant.

Producer Paul Eggers and I were able to make our presence lesser known on location by using smaller, lighter, and more maneuverable DSLR cameras to shoot this film. For previous documentaries my crew and I utilized either shoulder-mounted cameras or larger handheld cameras such as the Panasonic HVX200. For *Moment to Moment* we used the Canon 7D with a series of high-powered Canon L-Series lenses. Not only was it more comfortable during long days of shooting using the DSLR cameras, but we were more inconspicuous when among the general public. People did not react to us the same way they would have had we been using larger video cameras. As a result, we were able to capture more authentic human behavior and interaction.

One thing that surprised me during this production was how eager people were to have their opinions recorded. Typically, when discussing controversial issues, people tend to

stay very neutral with their opinions. We interviewed numerous professionals and government officials for this film; there existed a certain sense of urgency in their tone and behavior during the interviews. We spoke with several officials in Washington DC after an event hosted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention called *FASD: Children and Youth in the Justice System*. Throughout the course of our numerous conversations, the message was essentially the same: more needs to be done to prevent FASD and that we, as a nation, need to work harder to educate ourselves and each other about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy. It felt good interacting with government officials who were willing to take a clear stand on this issue.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

My relationship with the topic of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders started when I began working with my father, Dr. Ira J. Chasnoff, about ten years ago. He is an expert and leading researcher in the field of prenatal drug and alcohol exposure and owns and operates a not-for-profit that works exclusively with children who have been prenatally exposed to substances of abuse. Back then I knew and understood very little about FASDs and it wasn't until we teamed-up to produce a short, educational documentary about four families who adopted children with FASDs, called *The Listening Heart*, that I came to fully recognize the devastating effects of prenatal substance exposure. At that point, I came to understand the lifelong trauma that consuming alcohol during pregnancy could create.

The Listening Heart focused on children ages 8-13. And though those children had issues that no child should ever have to suffer through, it was reassuring to know that they all had a safety net in the form of loving families and systems of care via their schools and special education programs that would help guide and steady them when they stumbled. For the young adults in *Moment to Moment*, save for their loving families, there exists no such safety net as they age out of various systems of care and enter a world that is not prepared to deal with the types of issues that they will encounter, such as issues with the law, sexuality, relationships, technology, behavior management, and understanding cause and consequence, to name a few.

As the adoptive parents of these children get older, begin pursuing their own goals in retirement, and provide less hands-on care for these adolescents, the question comes up: where do these young adults go, what do they do, with whom do they share their lives? One of the girls in the film, Kara, is nineteen years old and unable to tell time on an analogue clock – she will never be able to tell time because that part of her brain was damaged while she was in-utero. In addition, unless she is constantly reminded and pushed, she will go without brushing her teeth, hair, or bathing for weeks on end. Personal hygiene simply does not occur to her. Allison, 17-years-old, sent nude photos via text message to a man that she met on the internet and whom she has never met in person. Jerry, 19-years-old, is prone to severe rages where he is able to take down multiple adults simultaneously. He has had several run-ins with the police and been arrested on numerous occasions. He is currently institutionalized. What will happen to

these young adults when they have no direct supervision or someone to explain their behavior to others is yet to be seen.

Public policy surrounding this issue is weak at best. Alcohol companies shun the idea of full-fledged public service campaigns to educate young women of childbearing years about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy, lest these companies take a hit to one of their biggest markets. Though research has shown that consuming alcohol during pregnancy can result in birth defects and other abnormalities, some obstetricians and others in the healthcare field continue to tell their patients that it is okay to have a glass or two of wine a week during their pregnancies.

The diagnosis of FASDs is a controversial one. Every woman metabolizes alcohol differently. Thus, every woman will pass on a different amount and concentration of alcohol to her fetus during pregnancy. Because it is impossible to pinpoint exactly where and when the damage is being done to the fetus, there is reluctance by some healthcare professionals to promote complete abstinence from drinking during pregnancy. Some women will drink and there will be no effects on the baby. Others will drink and the child will be severely brain damaged. What I don't understand is if there is even the slightest chance that drinking alcohol during pregnancy can damage a baby for life, why even risk it? What is the draw to alcohol? What is our compulsion as a nation that we are unwilling to stop drinking for at least nine months? (Alcohol can also be passed through the breast milk and damage the developing brain of the new born.) Is this simply an issue of public education or a larger, systemic issue of dependence on the consumption of alcohol, even in small amounts?

We decided to create this film because there really is no other like it on the market. Not only did we want to explore a world that has yet to be explored on this intimate of a level, but we wanted to create a documentary that could actively be used to educate the public and be used as a training tool within the healthcare, foster and adoptive family, and school systems. Beyond being a conversation starter, we want the film to be a catalyst for change – not only in behavior for pregnant women – but in the way our society understands FASDs and treats people who possess the diagnosis.

FASDs is the number one cause of preventable mental retardation in the United States. *It is one hundred percent preventable.* During a particularly dark moment during our interview with adoptive father Bob Russo (father of Brittany and Allison, both of whom have FASDs), he said, "Sometimes I think about who they could have been without the FASDs – had their birth mother not drank during her pregnancy. But that's just too hard, so I try not to think about it." I found myself wondering the same thing. All of these young adults would have been completely different people and would have lived completely different lives – perhaps gone on to do great things – if only their birth mothers had abstained from drinking during their pregnancies. That's a hard pill to swallow. Gazing at the subjects in the film, I found myself wondering how they would look without the classic facial features associated with FASDs: flat nasal bridge, low set ears, narrow eyes, thin upper lip. And for those without the facial deformities, I wondered about their potential and missing out on what, for so many of their peers, are standard

rights of passage: moving out of the house, going to college, getting married, pursuing a career, having a family of their own. All of the parents interviewed for the film agreed on one thing – that they would most likely all have to be involved in their adoptive children's lives for the long term and that there is no way any of their children could ever raise a child of his/her own. How could you if you can't understand the concept of credit and money management, remember to brush your teeth, or have fits of emotional breakdowns or rage?

One of my goals in producing this film is to create a compelling story that fuses compassion with science. You can present all the objective data in the world to make a case, but without speaking to the heart, no one will listen. *Moment to Moment* uses the stories of these four adolescents as an appeal to viewers that things could have been different, can be different, and that by simply educating ourselves and each other, we can change the course of the future for so many children and families.

It was truly a joy to make this film. The families and main characters in the film welcomed us with open arms and unbridled enthusiasm to share their stories. We are truly grateful for their courage, trust, and patience, and hope that their stories inspire behavioral and systemic changes.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

GABE CHASNOFF (Director/Producer/Writer/Editor) is a graduate of the University of Southern California School of Cinema Television and an award-winning documentary filmmaker. He is the Executive Vice President of NTI Upstream - an independent multimedia production company dedicated to advancing the conversation about the issues of health and social welfare. In 2004 he produced his first documentary film *The Listening Heart*, about four families who adopted children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD). In 2008, he produced and directed *Renaissance Village*, the award-winning documentary film about the largest FEMA trailer park that was established after hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast. Chasnoff has written, produced, and directed numerous independent productions for the healthcare industry on subjects ranging from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome to Public Service Announcements geared towards the prevention of substance abuse during pregnancy.

PAUL EGGERS (Producer/Writer/Editor) is an accomplished journalist, veteran producer, and gifted storyteller with international experience. Paul strives to creatively engage audiences on issues of health and social welfare. His list of projects includes an informative and engaging animated series educating at-risk populations on the dangers of drinking while pregnant. Prior to his work with NTI, he has interviewed Nobel Prize winners, sitting Senators and Fortune 500 CEOs while reporting from three continents as a business news correspondent. A graduate of Duke University, he currently lives with his wife in North Carolina.

ABOUT NTI UPSTREAM

NTI Upstream is an educational multimedia production company and community solutions training center. It focuses on providing resources aimed at the healthy development of children and their families. NTI Upstream's materials and community solutions training focus on the prevention and treatment of substance abuse during pregnancy by addressing the early intervention and treatment needs of children affected by prenatal exposure to alcohol and other drugs. NTI Upstream specializes in translating information and knowledge developed through research and clinical care into educational programs and materials for professional and public use. All of the materials produced by NTI Upstream are research-based and include the most accurate and up-to-date, clinically-based information available. NTI Upstream produces books, brochures, videos, software, learning materials for the classroom setting, and training curricula for community outreach programs. NTI Upstream works directly with parents, teachers, healthcare professionals, adoption and foster care workers, and the legal community – anyone who works with children.

CREDITS

NTI Upstream
Presents

MOMENT TO MOMENT: TEENS GROWING UP WITH FASDs

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Ira J. Chasnoff

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Gabe Chasnoff

Produced by
Gabe Chasnoff and Paul Eggers

Written by
Gabe Chasnoff

Script Editor
Jonathan Leuchs

Animation
Peter Morain, Glacier Design Visualization

Video and Sound Editing
Gabe Chasnoff

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Like Me, Like You

Original Theme Song
“Helping Hand”
Written and Performed by
Sarah Pigion

Music Recorded at
The Lair Studio

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Mary Grace Russo
Brittany Russo
Allison Russo

Carole Hurley
Kara Hurley
Emma Hurley

Joe Klein
Sandy Klein
Jerry Klein

FEATURING (in order of appearance)

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Generous Support Provided by
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Special Thanks to
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Articles

“Arizona Panel Balks at Recommending Commutation”
News article reprinted with permission from
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“Identifying Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Among Youth
in the Criminal Justice System”
Journal article reprinted with permission from
Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics,
Vol. 20, No. 5, October 1999

“Mitigating Evidence in a Death Penalty Case”
Journal article reprinted with permission from
American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law,
36:3:411-413, September 2008

“DSM-5 Diagnostic Criteria for Neurodevelopmental
Disorder Associated with Prenatal Alcohol Exposure”
Reproduced with permission from the
Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,
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American Psychiatric Association.

Special thanks to all of the participants who welcomed us with open arms and honored us
by sharing their stories.

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