“Storytelling is such a powerful tool for change”: Filmmaker Amanda Mustard on intergenerational trauma, centering the voices of survivors, and normalizing conversations about childhood sexual violence.

Alec Saelens

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Alec Saelens: Could you please introduce yourself, describe the work that you're doing, and the problem that you're addressing.

Amanda Mustard: I am Amanda Mustard. I am a filmmaker and photojournalist, and I directed a documentary film called Great Photo, Lovely Life, which was an eight-year documentation of my attempt to de-normalize and face head on the generational trauma and child sex abuse that happened in my family at the hands of my grandfather.

Alec Saelens: Can you say more about how you're bringing attention to this issue? How has your documentary helped raise awareness about it, and who's your audience?

Amanda Mustard: I made this film almost as art, as a form of art therapy. I didn't necessarily know where it was going to go, nor was I a filmmaker at the start of this. In all of the films and docs that I had seen about incest and generational trauma, the representation was very black

and white, and often told by somebody from an outside perspective. It just wasn't my experience in my family.

It is incredibly complicated and messy when you are abused by somebody that you are supposed to love, and that you often do love. I wanted to make a film that showed my attempt to just even talk about it in my family for the first time, and it included a pretty unprecedented interview with my grandfather, who kind of opened up and was candid about everything.

I would just say that it was important for me to make something that acknowledged the complexity of what it is to be in a family that's been riddled with this for generations. The audience was, ideally, anybody, because the stats are so wild. We all know how prevalent this is. We also made the film with the approach of it is about sexual violence against children, but also, it could be about any of the family secrets that we kind of feel this responsibility to carry generationally, and the toll that that takes on us.

The audience was pretty wide, and obviously, there's an immense amount of survivors who have felt very seen by it, but I also had in mind people with the attraction of children watching it, and being able to really understand the impact it can have.

Alec Saelens: Thanks for framing that. Can you talk more about what makes the approach that you used in this documentary distinct?

Amanda Mustard: Yeah, so the approach that I took to this was fairly distinct, because it was my grandfather. It's a pretty front seat perspective. I do not have any memories of being abused by my grandfather myself. He moved out of the state two years before I was born, so it was kind of just pure luck. Then he went to prison for the first time pretty soon after I was born for an attempted rape of a child in Florida.

That is, I am a survivor from other close people in my life, so I had a certain perspective. I was also a journalist in the Arab Spring in Egypt, where sexual violence against women was truly historic and notable. I was very normalized to all of it growing up, as you can be in any kind of family situation. We all have the things that we think are normal. It was through my experiences in early adulthood, having left the country to become a photojournalist, that really opened my eyes to like, "Wow, this was absolutely not normal."

I just got really curious. What makes it [distinct] is that I had this experience of like, "This is my family, and I have this perspective, and I also have my own experiences trying to [heal] myself from the generational trauma that resulted from this." There is a very specific second hand

trauma that comes from being raised by traumatized people also normalized to this. It was very complex, but I also had a set of journalism ethics that I could apply to the structure of this project, which really helped me throughout.

It was a near impossible feat trying to be the director, and the journalist, and investigate my grandfather, and interview my family, but I am also inherently involved. It was just a very specific POV. I was really inspired by the work of a British documentarian, Louis Theroux, who is very driven by curiosity and just lets people speak. Being led by curiosity and a human-to-human respect, regardless of who's on the other side of that interview, creates this space of openness and vulnerability that allows us to actually ask real questions, and try to understand what's going on here. How can we get ahead of this? Just seeing people as human beings, which I know is a tough pill to swallow for a lot of people, with the anger that comes with the abuse of children, which is totally fair.

When this is in your family and has defined so much around you and the people around you, the anger doesn't serve a purpose after a certain point. You have to start asking, like, "Okay, he is a human being. What needs did he have in terms of psychiatric support or resources to curb his urges and manage them? What resources could have been in place that would avoid the abuse to begin with?"

I'm very interested in the idea of the prevention of child sex abuse as a public health approach, that this is something that we can get ahead of before it happens, and not just have this entirely punishment-focused solution, which isn't a solution at all. It plays a role in it, the prison system, but it's definitely not the entire answer. Basically, I'm very interested in the complexity of it and the messiness of it.

Alec Saelens: Yeah, I appreciate that. I admire the fact that you really go behind the anger and the pain to try and understand, "Okay, what's the issue, and what can be done about it?" Do you have examples of the impact that your work has led to, and how do you know that the documentary had that impact?

Amanda Mustard: It's been really rewarding, the process of making this film was unspeakably difficult in a lot of ways, from fundraising to the interpersonal family stuff. When it came out, I'd never created a piece of journalism or media that has had such an incredible platform, and is available on HBO Max. I can't say publicly how many people have seen it, [but] a lot of people have seen it. I have gotten hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of emails and messages.

It has been so moving and heartbreaking to see how many people relate to it. When I say relate to it, it's not just the experience of CSA [childhood sexual assault], it's the silence around it, it's the complexity of the emotions you have around it. It's feeling like everybody around you has this anger fueled expectation of how you should feel, so it really minimizes the experience of what it is to go through this, that it's just like, man, sometimes you still love your dad, or your uncle, or your brother, and you just want them to get help.

It's not as easy as the approach that a lot of people have, which is to put them through a wood chipper, bullets are the answer, this kind of vigilante, barbaric, I don't know, dehumanizing approach to it. Yes, the abuse is horrifying, but if we actually want to get ahead of it and try to solve it requires us to get comfortable with the discomfort of reality and talk about it.

Alec Saelens: I'm curious, in addition to getting in front of it and becoming comfortable with the discomfort of talking about this, are there specific shifts in cultural norms that you hope to be able to instigate through this work? What are the strategies to move the needle?

Amanda Mustard: Sure. I will blanket say that it is educating ourselves about the actual reality of how this happens. What are the stats? We've kind of trafficked in some really bad information over the years from stranger danger. 90+ percent of underage victims are abused by somebody that they know. I believe the stat is a very significant number, I don't want to quote this, because I don't know the exact number, but I feel like it was upwards of 70% of underage victims, the perpetrator is also underage.

Just having information like this really changes the scope. It changes the framework of maybe we can do something about this. Having better sex education around consent, and this and that, and for underage kids, having resources for families to develop better communication and trust around talking about these things. If something happens, it's not shameful and doesn't get buried.

There are organizations, like Stop it Now in the UK, which is fantastic. Elizabeth Letourneau at the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sex Abuse at Johns Hopkins is just an absolutely incredible force in the US for research, and helping people understand that this is preventable. There is a way that we can get them support, get people who have the attraction to kids support ahead of time that avoids the abuse to begin with.

The Moore Center has a lot of affiliates as well. There's organizations in Canada and Germany that are all working to try and change the public discourse on this through data and research.

There's also a great website called Help Wanted. I think Stop It Now does something similar, where it's like a hotline and support resources for people with the attraction of kids that just don't know what to do, because that's the problem. When we create this massive stigma, it makes them afraid to ask for help. We don't really have a lot of resources out there, but it's starting to pick up, which is inspiring. I do screenings and talks with a lot of these organizations, because I think that I want the film to just be a tool to put a specific human experience on all of the data and the research.

Alec Saelens: You talked about how hard it is to actually have these conversations within your family, but what do you think are the challenges to do more of this kind of work, documentary reporting on these types of issues? What are the ways in which you could think of getting around those issues?

Amanda Mustard: Honestly, in my experience, the hardest part about this was fundraising to do the film properly. It really took a huge toll on me juggling the filmmaking. For non-filmmakers, we've all seen movies, and we've seen that list of credits. It takes a lot of people that all should be getting paid to make a film. For six of the years, it was mostly just me and my co-director, Rachel Beth Anderson. She would come and film whenever I would have things lined up. It was really, really exhausting.

I do feel like I was more qualified, having journalism experience in navigating this ethically, and also taking care of myself to the best I could, but it was still a tall order. As the director, continually going to film festivals and pitching and applying to grants [meant] spending weeks and weeks and weeks, over years, just writing and rewriting and almost editorializing my family's trauma. It felt awful, [but] it's just what I had to do.

If I would've had more money and been independently wealthy, I could pay a producer to do that. But that wasn't the scenario. I really had to kind of separate myself from it. I got real thick skin over all the rejection, because so many people were fascinated and wanted to hear more, especially given that there was this interview with my grandfather. Then people are hesitant to film something like that, to associate your name with it.

I can't even count how many times I've had to pitch it in a way that is like a performance, in the way that pitching anything is. It just felt really gross to me. That's why when finally, I think it was seven years into the process that HBO came on board, I can't tell you how relieved I was to finally have them go all in, have the budget for everyone to get paid. I would say that that was

the most stressful part for me, just because I was fairly prepared and qualified for the other parts of it, which weren't easy.

I've always been very outspoken, and I've worked in the advocacy realm of journalism for mental health and PTSD. We worked with the DART Center, who did training for the whole team. I was really consistent through the process, just making sure our core values of, "We're going to do this as sustainably as we can, as we are allowed to," [were there].

We had a mental health line in the budget, no questions asked, that could go towards therapy, or a massage, or whatever is your form of decompression. We tried to schedule dark weeks to make sure that people could step away. In all honesty, it was great for everybody. I think I shouldered a lot of the overflow.

Alec Saelens: By overflow, you mean all of the emotional charge that came up?

Amanda Mustard: I think because I was wearing so many hats, and I didn't want to cause further harm to anybody on the team, but that also just meant, "Okay, so we're going to let these people have off for the week. Well, I'm going to do that work instead," and it would be unpaid, and then I wouldn't get a break. It was just like, "I just have to make this film. It's my baby." I think I really pushed the limits of how we can make films sustainably, but there's still just kind of unavoidable realities of the industry that make it really difficult.

Alec Saelens: That makes a lot of sense. Shifting a little bit and thinking about ecosystems, what do you think is the place for partnerships and coalitions in order to push this kind of work forward? What is the value of having an ecosystem of various different stakeholders working together to address this type of work?

Amanda Mustard: It's really critical. It's really the only way forward, because there aren't a ton of people working in this space. We all want to end the violence against children. We all want that. Are we all able to really sit with the reality of what that would take? It's tedious. It's often not exciting. It's a lot easier to just be angry about it. The people that are working in this space are just absolute legends, truly.

I've been to a few conferences that bring them all together, and it is such a special place of people that really get it. It's my favorite place, it's my favorite kind of audience to show the film to. Everybody appreciates the nuance and is kind of living for that. Working together, so there's not any overlap, so that things are complementary.

In a way, I did my best to be my own little coalition through this process, of pulling all these kind of parts of my past, and my connections with the DART Center, bringing that into the film space, and then working with these organization who are more like data and research driven, and are actually providing the resources to survivors and people at risk of causing harm.

It's just essential for people like me, storytellers that are creating pieces of work that really humanize the issue. If our work can be used in tandem for what the people are doing on the more data-driven side, then other organizations can be a part of doing that sustainably. I think that a coalition is absolutely necessary.

Alec Saelens: I was speaking to someone else yesterday who works internationally on this issue, and one of the things that they're saying is there's a lot of people who want to do well to address the question of CSA around the world. There's a need to be able to support frontline organizations that are doing the work of supporting survivors, and providing care and support to victims of abuse. What do you think is the most effective way to support those organizations and to support the people who are survivors of abuse?

Amanda Mustard: It's such a big question. I'm thinking in terms of the film process, it's amazing how many victims of more high profile sex abuse cases have been a part of documentaries, where there isn't a lot of care put into the process. There isn't a lot of information given to them, even about how long the interview might last. We're really lacking. We could be more trauma informed in how we are going to record their stories and how we go about that. That's really important.

There's child advocacy centers, which was something that I never knew about until later in this process. [These are] places where you can take a child who's been abused to report in a very trauma-informed way, and everybody is in that space, from law enforcement to the doctors. Everyone's in one space, and they can tell the story one time, rather than the repeat trauma over and over and over.

You could talk all day about the different angles in which they could be supported. Also, I feel like one of the biggest ways that we can support survivors is asking them what they need and what they want when we're putting together these solutions. I'm not talking about professionally, it's more just culturally, there's a lot of opinions. Just the pressure to be the perfect victim. There's not a lot of room for nuance.

I think the best thing that we can do for survivors at large is let them speak for themselves, and not put them in a box, because that really hinders their ability to move through this and process the things that they're authentically feeling. Let's not assume.

Alec Saelens: Can you share more about the child advocacy centers, with all the various different agencies that need to be involved, that need to hear the story, being there all at once. I think that is a really interesting model. Have you seen that model set up?

Amanda Mustard: Yeah, they're called child advocacy centers. They're all across the country. I just didn't know that it was a concept. I don't know the exact history of how far back they go.

I have a friend named Sasha Joseph Neulinger, he put a film out called Rewind, about his experience overcoming and facing the abuse he experienced within his family. One of the things that was the most traumatic for him was for years of his childhood, he had to repeat over and over and over, and it was picked apart, and thrown around court. The process of that was so damaging. It would've changed his life, it would've changed his family's life, if they could have gone to a child advocacy center. He actually does a lot of work, speaking, and fundraising for child advocacy centers [now].

I actually found out that someone in my family that was abused more recently, in a situation outside of the family, went to a child advocacy center, and it was very smooth. It was done in such a way that they were able to leave and kind of move on with their lives in a much easier way than if it's dragged out. It's just a form of torture, honestly, having to repeat over and over and over. I think that that's a really important thing.

There's a documentary called Subject, and it profiles a number of subjects from some of the biggest documentaries in the past 20 or 25 years, I don't know how many years. One of them is the son from Catching the Friedmans. It examines, did this experience of making this documentary change your life for the better or for worse? It's really fascinating and there's a lot of commentary on what we can do with this relationship with, if you want to say survivors, or anybody whose stories you're telling, but in this case, CSA survivors, just bringing them more into the process, keeping them more informed. We all know that paying subjects is really not a thing in journalism, but in film, given that these films are so monetized off of the backs of these stories, there's more of a conversation happening about, do we make the subjects co-producers?

If the film does well, do we give them a cut? Because it couldn't be done without them and their vulnerability. That's an ethical debate around that issue. There are ways that we're trying to kind of empower and respect the roles that survivors play in their own stories being told.

I should have mentioned one more organization doing really great work in Canada. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health [CAMH]. Dr. Ainslie Heasman is a Clinical Forensic Psychologist at the Sexual Behaviours Clinic at CAMH in Toronto. Talking for Change is the program that they run that provides direct therapeutic support for those at risk of abusing. It says, "At Talking for Change, we help individuals troubled by their sexual interest or behaviour involving children live a safe, healthy, and non-offending life." [That is] so important and goes to the previous things [I talked about].

Alec Saelens: What are the insights or teachable lessons that can be taken from your work that can inform strategies to address CSA worldwide? Do you have any advice to give to someone trying to do similar work to what you're doing?

Amanda Mustard: I think storytelling is such a powerful tool for change, and getting people to understand why this work is so important, and even more so... It's a big pill to swallow when it comes to what the solutions actually are on the side of those at risk of abusing, those with the urge to abuse kids.

In order to do that there's this heavy lifting that has to be done to educate people, and storytelling through whatever medium it is, like using the real voices and the real experiences of people, really helps bridge that gap and mobilize a shift in understanding. The power of storytelling to push us forward on various approaches is so critical.

You can do all the research and have incredible data and insights, but then how do you get that to the people? How do you get that to the masses? How do you change generations of being given the wrong information? I'm a big proponent of working together in that way. It can be a really powerful PSA. I just think that having the media play a role in this is really critical.

Alec Saelens: What would it take to get storytellers at the forefront or part of that spearhead that can help with the prevention of child sexual abuse, as opposed to coming after?

Amanda Mustard: Money. Truly, just money. I know that funding across the board for CSA on either side of the issue is really tough. There's grants for all kinds of topical storytelling, and I just think if there's money that will fund it, there's plenty of stories that could be told.

Alec Saelens: Who do you think needs to hear those stories, first and foremost?

Truly, everyone. There are people that have more power than others in terms of the ability to change policies at a governmental level. We need to change the culture. We need to change the culture of how we approach this. When we think of pedophilia or the abuse of children, what comes up in us? What are our reference points? We need to work across the board.

I think there's an interesting comparison I've heard made in the community of researchers and professionals on this, and that's, there was a time that cars did not have seat belts, and there were just tons of people dying needlessly in car accidents. The solution isn't sexy, the solution isn't exciting, seat belts, but it drastically changed this big public health issue. It's kind of similar. Some of the solutions might not be as complicated as we think. We just need to be able to listen and stay calm enough to learn where we are, and what can be the answers.

Alec Saelens: In the next five years, what do you see as the scope of progress on this front?

Amanda Mustard: I hope that the community of people working in the area of prevention only gets bigger. I hope that there's more funding for it. I hope that as a society, we can unlearn and relearn a more productive response and approach to this, that actually creates space for the resources that would actually prevent CSA. We're very, very focused on punishment.

There's billions of dollars spent every year in the US on incarcerating those that abuse children, which I'm not saying that isn't a part of it, but we also know that that system in and of itself isn't exactly helping them to curb the behavior in a helpful way. [Much less] is spent on prevention efforts. There's so much room to change our attitudes culturally towards one of more productive prevention. This is a public health issue, it is preventable.

We are already coming from a place where when I was a teenager, I was obsessed with To Catch a Predator. I wanted to be a decoy, which is just so ironic, because I didn't even really understand that it was a problem in my own family. Just think of those of us that watched that, that's wild. That's how we were dealing with it. That's a reflection of the culture. Granted, we aren't airing that anymore, but I don't know how much further we've come. We're getting there, but I just would love to see us in a different place with our cultural attitude towards it, just better information, more informed.

Alec Saelens: Thank you for everything that you shared here. It's been really informative.

Alec Saelens is a former journalist who supports SJN and its partners track solutions journalism's impact on society and the industry. In his former role, he researched and consulted on the connection between solutions journalism and revenue. He is co-founder of The Bristol Cable, the UK's pioneering local media cooperative. Before SJN, he was a researcher and coach for the Membership Puzzle Project and an analyst for NewsGuard.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*