



# NORTHERN LIGHT

**A film by Nick Bentgen and Lisa Kjerulff**  
**An Icarus Films Release**

USA / 2013 / 105 minutes / Color / 1.78 / 1080P / English  
 Most Innovative Feature Film, 2013 Visions du Réel Festival  
 Best Cinematography, 2013 New Orleans Film Festival  
 Official Selection, 2013 BAMcinemaFest  
 Official Selection, 2013 HotDocs Film Festival  
 Official Selection, 2013 True/False Film Festival  
 Official Selection, 2013 Viennale Film Festival

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## FILM SYNOPSIS

Set against the backdrop of a town's annual snowmobile race, *NORTHERN LIGHT* explores the working class experience in a series of captivating personal stories of recession-era America. The lives of three families change profoundly in the north woods of Michigan, where winters are unforgiving, jobs are hard to come by, and the line between living life and simply surviving is razor-thin. This cinematic, observational documentary explores the American working class experience through character-based storytelling. As racers and their families pin their hopes to a 500 mile-long test of endurance, small triumphs and giant sacrifices are made along the way. Dysfunction and hardship permeate the cold, but this harsh setting is simultaneously the site of community and familial intimacy. Filmed over the course of several years spent with the film's protagonists, *NORTHERN LIGHT* is a fresh and vital contribution to the tradition of contemporary American *cinéma vérité*.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The Upper Peninsula of Michigan means a great deal to me. My father grew up in Saint Ignace, and my family has lived there for five generations. I've always been fascinated by the region's frozen landscape and the lifestyle it fosters. I spent two years in Michigan filming *NORTHERN LIGHT*. My filmmaking partner, Lisa Kjerulff, and I began photographing three families who were about to compete in the Sault Saint Marie I-500, an annual snowmobile race in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

This race was unlike anything we'd ever seen—a rich and dramatic community gathering and an undeniably cinematic spectacle. Snowmobiles hurtled at breakneck speeds around a mile-long oval track of pure ice for 500 miles. A crowd of thousands stood on giant hills of snow, transfixed throughout the morning and into the freezing

night. We quickly discovered that beyond the loud, explosive action of this race was a community marked by genuine devotion and hard work—breakfasts before dawn, prayers before dinner, and naps after the night shift.

We continued to film after the race, capturing intimate portraits of these families as they were making it through the day. As we kept filming, the effects of the financial crisis took hold of the country, and the lives of Walt, Marie, Emily & Isaac and their families began to change profoundly.

We became captivated by their dramatic and unexpected stories. We decided to craft an observational film that tracks the intertwining lives of these three families—no interviews, no explanations, just the drama of life unfolding in the present tense.

We stayed in each family's home and cooked dinners together. We shared many warm holidays. Emily, Isaac, Walt, Becky, Nick and Marie and their families invited us into their lives with a level of trust and honesty that still amazes me. They allowed us to create an emotional film that immerses the viewer in the changing lives of working class Americans.

Throughout the production of this film, I was humbled by the stubborn work-ethic of the families I came to know. Walt woke before dawn to drive his eighteen-wheeler to Alabama, Texas, and Pennsylvania. In the span of a single day, Marie worked the early shift at Walmart, picked up extra hours as a cleaning lady, cooked dinner for her children, and studied for her exams late into the night.

The families of rural Michigan are the inheritors of pioneers and homesteaders; ruggedly independent and determined, living with hope in an unforgiving environment and retaining a spirit of self-reliance I can know only by example. I'm amazed by the footage we've captured—its quality not created by any technique but found in the genuine and generous nature of three compelling American families. I'm proud to have shared this experience with them.

—Nick Bentgen

## IN THE PRESS

"Check out *Northern Light*, Brooklyn-based filmmaker Nick Bentgen's documentary about working-class families in Michigan's Upper Peninsula passionate about competitive snowmobile racing that was one of the finds at this year's True/False Film Festival." –Steve Dollar, *The Wall Street Journal*

"An elegantly assembled work that gathers slowly."

–Nicolas Rapold, *Film Comment*

"I'll not soon forget the durational brilliance of an extended fixed shot of a snow-suited timekeeper on a frozen lake patiently waiting as a snowmobile zips into and out of view, its roar slowly fading into the wintry quiet and then reviving before the vehicle comes speeding through the frame again, as tedious and entrancing as a clock."

–Eric Hynes, *Cinema Scope*

"While the snowmobile race at the center of the film is dramatic and engrossing, encompassing an entire film within itself, it's the small, quiet glimpses that pull the viewer in, casting a compassionate eye on lives on the margins. But everybody struggles, and on a fundamental level "*Northern Light*" is a film we can all relate to."

–Craig Hubert, *Blouin ARTINFO*

"I realize I'm making a bold statement here, but while watching Nick Bentgen and Lisa Kjerulff's artistic documentary, instead of comparing it to other documentaries, I found myself thinking about Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Bentgen's family is from this frozen corner of the country, and it shows in each and every frame. Patient, observant, and deeply generous, *Northern Light* is a welcome respite from the typical message-based nonfiction one stumbles across seemingly everywhere these days." –Michael Tully, *Hammer to Nail*

“By turns a thrilling sports film, an ethnographic portrait of Mid-West ruralites, and an essay on bodies and human ambition, Nick Bentgen's film would feel like a breakthrough even if one were only looking at its veiled observations of gender roles, with the women seemingly cast aside as workman's assistants and cheerleaders, until they aren't. The final shot, showing a basic workout routine, is a stunning image in its own right, and is as pointed and in-your-face as any closing statement I've seen all year, if only for the audacity of ending this film on that note.”

–Blake Williams, *BlogToronto*

“A visually sumptuous and stirring observation piece that generates a similar small town despondence surrounding an annual snowmobile race in a northern Michigan community feeling the effects of the economic depression.” –Robert Bell, *Exclaim*“

Though concerned with rural life in wintry economic times, Nick Bentgen's debut documentary captures all of life, not just the bad stuff. Told in short, stolen snippets, it's one beautiful image after another, showing its Michigan subjects trying to win at various competitions. Ups and downs are captured, but the impression that comes off is people just keepin' on keepin' on.” –Matt Prigge, *Metro*



## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

**Nick Bentgen** is a Brooklyn-based director and cinematographer. He was selected for IFP and the Film Society of Lincoln Center's Emerging Visions Program at the 2011 New York Film Festival. As a director of photography, Bentgen was recently director of photography for Matt Wolf's new documentary, *Teenage* (Tribeca 2013 / Hot Docs 2013) and Daniel Carbone's feature narrative, *Hide Your Smiling Faces* (Berlin 2013 / Tribeca 2013). He has directed music videos for artists including *Small Black and Pitchfork's Juan's Basement*, and contributed to installations including Matt Keegan's *[Apple] NY*. Bentgen has also directed and photographed commercials; his clients include New York City Ballet, Swarovski, American Express, Friends of the Highline, Google and Apple.

**Lisa Kjerulff** has produced over twenty commercial documentary pieces for New York City Ballet, as well as the documentary *Americans In Paris: New York City Ballet on Tour*. Kjerulff has produced music videos for artists Small Black and Devendra Banhart. For agencies and production companies including JWT, BBDO, Heist Projects, Ghost Robot and Plus Et Plus, she has commercials for clients including Microsoft, Swarovski, Kiehl's, Macy's, American Express, Trident and Smirnoff.

## FILM CREDITS

Title	"Northern Light" A film by Nick Bentgen and Lisa Kjerulff
Directed and photographed by	Nick Bentgen
Produced by	Lisa Kjerulff
The filmmakers wish to thank	The Garlinghouse Family The Komarnizki Family The Wolfgang Family
Co-Producers	Bernard Bentgen and Christy Kelly-Bentgen
Co-Producers	Tom Paitson Kelly, Gregory Reardon, Amelia Huges and Jon Hughes

Associate Producers	Sierra Pettengill and Yoonha Park
Editor	Yoonha Park
Additional Editor	Saela Davis
Music by	Saunder Jurriaans and Danny Bensi
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Visual Effects	Dan Anthony Kelly
Colorist	Sam Daley
Post-production Assistants	Ariel Jackson, Maurice Maultz, Jennifer Reiland, Micah Hesse and Aaron Graham
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Astral Photography	Ethan Goldhammer
Still Photography	Anna Rose Holmer
Titles Designed by	Familiar, Carl Williamson, and Ian Crowther
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Cassandra Komarnizki  
Jason Komarnizki  
Jake Komarnizki

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Michelle Layle  
Nancy & Rob Letts  
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Kevin Martinchek  
Emily McKerchie  
Jenna McKerchie  
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