

Woke Up Alive – Production Notes

'A Different Look at Israel...'

Woke Up Alive began in 2006 when Mark Blacknell, an agnostic, thirty-five-year-old, environmental policy analyst from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania sat down to watch television. Trying to unwind after a hectic day at work, Blacknell channel-surfed his way to a PBS documentary featuring the ideas of Israeli peace advocate and nature conservationist Dr. Yossi Leshem. Leshem, a wild-looking Orthodox Jew in a yarmulke, believes birds and nature can teach us all we need to know about peace, tolerance and even ourselves. Leshem pointed out that for tens of millions of years, migratory birds have successfully done what humans can't seem to do: share the Middle East.

As Blacknell watched Leshem enthusiastically release a rehabilitated bird into the desert sky while telling a mixed group of smiling Palestinian and Israeli children that "Birds know no boundaries," Blacknell's imagination flew off with the bird in a new direction.

"After I watched the show and had some time to digest it, I felt Yossi's message had an accessible wisdom that far exceeded anything I had ever heard before. I could've cared less about Israel before that night. But after that night, Israel became the place I had to be. Nature and peace were my connection to the Holy Land—not religion or politics."

-Mark Blacknell

In the months that followed, the two comrades developed a long-distance friendship and it wasn't long before Leshem invited Blacknell to Israel to see for himself how the natural world was influencing peace and healing in the region. Hoping a radical change of environment would energize his lagging spirit, Blacknell made the risky decision to drop everything for a three-month adventure of a lifetime across the Holy Land.

Dr. Yossi Leshem remembers the first day he talked to Blacknell: "When he [Mark] first called on the phone, I thought *Wow, this guy is just as crazy as me* but I could tell right away he would bring a different perspective over here. He wasn't a typical tourist, so without really thinking I told him to come. It takes people as crazy and committed as the two of us to bring about change."

Recent Boston University film graduate Jesse Goldberg heard about Blacknell's trip from an old professor and decided to tag along with a camera. Not wanting to distort reality, Blacknell agreed to Goldberg's request but insisted on no scripts or direction as a condition of filming.

"I had absolutely no clue what Mark hoped to achieve in Israel and I don't think he really knew at the time. Mark was all over the place. We just went from one place to the next with no particular order to it all. It wasn't exactly the best way to make a movie but following him around Israel was equally one of the most spiritual and absurd experiences I ever had in my life. Spiritual absurdity, yeah, that's what defines this project best."

-Jesse Goldberg

Israel is a small place and word soon spread about a curious American traveling around the country looking for friends who appreciate nature and peace. From providing gear or a meal to sending Blacknell to an interesting person or place, hundreds of people all over Israel (Arab, Christian and Jew) offered help. *Digital Samsara* donated their music for the soundtrack; a non-profit environmental organization provided free rooms at their field schools; an Al Jazeera cameraman invited the filmmakers to his mountain home; a Bedouin shepherd offered up one of his desert tents for the night. The spirit of the project was clearly appreciated.

And the help didn't end when the camera shut off. Nearly four years after Blacknell first left Pennsylvania, a dedicated team of international volunteers led by first-time filmmaker Michael Poggenburg of Seattle, Washington and producer Eyal Bartov of Israel National Geographic, saved *Woke Up Alive* from the brink of death.

"I began this project as an editor, but soon learned that I would be taking on the role of a director just as much. When I first talked to Mark, he definitely had ideas, but I was in charge of digging through more than a hundred hours of footage and finding how to turn those ideas into a film – something two editors had previously tried to do without much success. Despite never setting foot in Israel, I've come to know the country and its people, and despite working with Mark for over a year, I've managed to maintain my sanity!"

-Michael Poggenburg

One of Israel's most cherished national figures, Dr. Yossi Leshem, sums it up best: "This movie *Woke Up Alive* is a good thing for nature and a good thing for peace. Mark is also a great example of a grown-up person who isn't afraid to learn and change. When you capture this type of diversity and perspective in a single movie, it's bound to be a big story, no matter how small the budget."

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