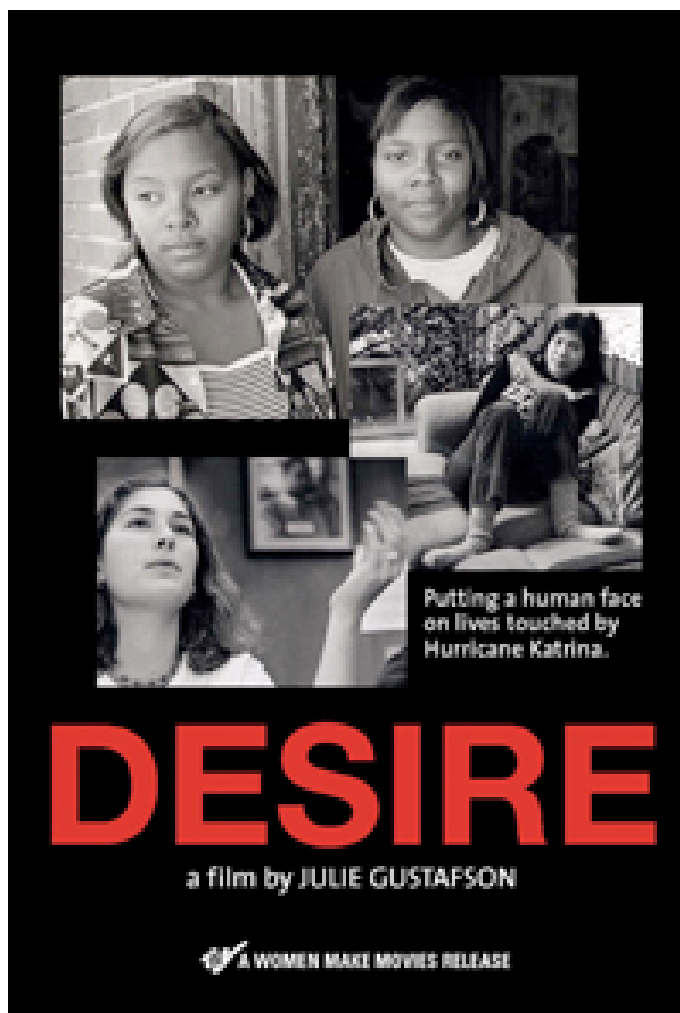


***A film by Julie Gustafson with the Teenage Girls'  
Documentary Project in New Orleans***

Includes post-Hurricane Katrina *Production Notes* from the filmmaker.



**“Gripping, insightful and absorbing ...”**  
- *VARIETY*

**“A film so full of spirit and life, you don’t want it to end.”**  
- *Barbara Kopple, Academy Award-winning Documentary Filmmaker*

**“Full of humanity and heart... profoundly moving...  
impeccable storytelling and cinematic flair.”**  
- *Shaz Bennett, Senior Programmer, AFI Fest*



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## Synopsis

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, DESIRE offers a poignant and insightful perspective on the complicated dynamics of race and class in New Orleans. Nearly a decade in the making, this landmark film documents the lives of a group of young women from the city—two teenagers from the Desire housing projects in the Ninth Ward, a working class single mother, and two girls from a prestigious private school—by letting them film their own stories. Masterfully interwoven throughout the film, these vibrant and candid shorts record the intimate dramas of the girl's changing lives, and stand in stark contrast to mass media images of hopeless Katrina victims. Eerily timely, DESIRE provides vital context to comprehend an American tragedy.



*"If you look at the street names in the project, you come up with so many ideas. Desire (that's a street) is like a wish to do something or a desire to go far. You want to have benefits and you want pleasure. You just want to feel good about yourself – that's the biggest thing you can do."*

**-Teenage Video Maker,  
Desire Housing Development  
New Orleans, LA**

## Festivals

*For the most updated list, visit [www.wmm.com](http://www.wmm.com).*

- Nashville Film Festival, 2006 Reel Current Award
- Santa Barbara International Film Festival
- Scribe Video Center, PA
- Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, Durham, NC
- Langston Hughes Film Festival
- Maine Women & Girls Film Festival
- Scribe Video Center, Philadelphia, PA



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# Credits

84 minutes, Color, Video, Documentary

Director/Producer  
**Julie Gustafson**

Co-Producer  
**Tim Watson**

Co-Director  
**Isaac Webb**

**Teenage Videomakers**

Tiffannie Johnson  
Tracy Morton  
Kimeca Rodgers  
Cassandra Swaing  
Peggy Wang

**Additional Teenage Videomakers**

Cayonna Brumfield  
Delvin Guitraux  
Lee Johnson  
Della Thomassie  
Natalie Shannon  
Jason Villemarette

Principal Photography  
**Julie Gustafson, Tim Watson, Isaac Webb, Melissa Thompson**

Editors  
**Julie Gustafson, Aaron Walker, Tim Watson**

Fine Cut  
**Jim Klein**

Contributing Editor  
**Kate Taverna**

Producing Consultants  
**Richard Ellison, Barbara Kopple, Margaret McMillan**

Additional Editing  
**Jeremiah Birnbaum, Amy Sanderson, Melissa Thompson,  
Amanda Whittenberger, Brent Josephs**

Filmmaking Mentors  
**Mika Ferris, Natalie Murrah, Amy Sanderson, Melissa Thompson, Amanda Whittenberger**



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## Credits (con't)

### Associate Producers

Mika Ferris, Rebecca Snedeker, Jake Springfield, Amanda Whittenberger, Hannah Rosenzweig

### Humanities Advisors

Ruth Smith  
Martha Ward

### Funders

Ford Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation,  
The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation The Funding Exchange, The Women's Division of The United  
Methodist Church, The National Endowment for the Arts, The National Endowment for The Humanities,  
The Louisiana Division of the Arts, The Arts Council of New Orleans, P-Flag, Ginger Berrigan, Elizabeth  
Rappaport, Lars Reilly, Margit Gustafson, Mona Gustafson Wilder, Lucius and Eva Eastman  
Foundation, Oliver and Donna Richard Family Charitable Foundation Trust, Hyslop Shannon  
Foundation and The Rosenzweig Family

### Fiscal Sponsors

Community Media Production, Inc. and Video Veracity

### Dedication to:

Richard Ellison (1923 – 2004)

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## About the Director

From a white, working-class family, Gustafson came of age during the 1960s' sexual and gender revolution. Thirty years later, as a mother, teacher and filmmaker, she found herself grappling with the still polarizing debate over teenage pregnancy, early motherhood and abortion, as well as the role that education and opportunity play in decisions young women make about these issues. As the media process was demystified, the teenage collaborators began to question Gustafson's assumptions about how their desires and choices are shaped. And just as the girls had to grapple with the risks of addressing adults and parents with their videos, they challenged Gustafson to do the same, turning the lens towards her own personal history. The film pivots around the intimacy and risk that the two generations of filmmakers share together and with the audience.

Julie Gustafson, an award-winning video maker, has been making documentaries about women and families for nearly twenty years, including the national PBS broadcasts *GIVING BIRTH*, *PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS*, and *CASTING THE FIRST STONE*.

## Production Notes

Many people ask me how I came to film in *Desire*, once a huge public housing development in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, more recently, the place where Hurricane Katrina lashed out in fury, destroying most of the community. I started researching the film *DESIRE* ten years ago. A colleague recommended that I speak with New Orleans' anthropologist, Martha Ward. I was looking for experts to help me understand the decisions that teenagers of different backgrounds make about their developing sexuality and identity. I contacted Martha and she told me she had done her fieldwork with girls in a low-income housing complex called *Desire*.

At that moment I knew I wanted to make the documentary in New Orleans, starting in *Desire*—a place that could serve as both a geographical and metaphorical starting place for the film. Martha Ward said, "No, don't come. The people don't want you. They've been studied to death!" And she was right. In this case the 'they' were a determined group of women activists that I approached who wouldn't hear of another government or foundation funded project coming into their community without sharing their own "fieldwork" with me—as well as a plan for giving something tangible back to the community.

Improvising, we agreed that I would offer summer video workshops to teenage girls and pay them a stipend. Those who worked hard and passionately were the girls we eventually focused in on for the film, including its major characters, Cassandra and Kimeca. The *Desire* girls' video work was so autobiographical and so strong, I decided to use the same workshop technique with teenagers from different backgrounds, a low-income white community (Tiffanie) and from more affluent neighborhoods (Tracy and Peggy). Throughout the five years the girls were paid honorariums as artists and allowed editorial control over their own images.

We worked together for a period of five years. A crew of 'professional' filmmakers helped the teenagers direct their videos, at the same time as they helped me film both the stories of the girls changing lives, and the process of our collaboration. Weaving together all three of these strands, the final film makes visible how the desires and choices of young women are shaped by their environments, especially economic opportunity.



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## Production Notes (con't)

Today the lower ninth ward and the Desire community are still partially submerged under the toxic waters left by Katrina. For me the contrast between the mass media images of victims stranded on roofs, withering in makeshift and dangerous shelters, absolutely without hope stand in stark contrast to the people I met while filming in Desire. They owned little, but they were hard-working, competent and vibrant survivors of poverty and discrimination. I think the images in the film the girls and I made put a human face on people that television and the press accounts suggest will never recover. It's not true. If a major portion of the outpouring of 'help' reaches them, and they share in the decision-making about rebuilding their community (perhaps on higher ground), the people from the Ninth Ward and Desire will find their way.

## The Teenage Filmmakers

**CASSANDRA SWAING** is a 15 year-old honor student from the Desire Housing Development. Filled with confidence, Cassandra tells us about her plans to join the military, attend college and become an engineer. Living in public housing, with its disadvantaged schools and lack of opportunity, will not be a barrier for her. In Cassandra's first video piece, she asserts that she won't become a teenage mother, but soon afterward she gets pregnant, and later, she gives birth to a baby girl. About having had unprotected sex she says, "I made a choice, but it was a bad choice." As the film develops we learn that generations of women in her family had been poor, single, teenage mothers.

**TIFFANIE JOHNSON**, 17, is a white low-income teenager from Belle Chasse, where hidden pockets of poverty create high incidences of teenage pregnancy among white teenagers strikingly similar to the patterns of early pregnancy and motherhood found among many young women in the Desire Housing Development. Tiffanie became a mother at 16. Pressured by her family, she quickly married the father of her child. Her husband, Lee, feels too young to be married and wants out. Tiffanie struggles to keep the marriage afloat, but she must bear the major brunt of rearing her child and providing financial support. Driving to one of her two part-time jobs, with one hand on the wheel and the other on a sandwich, she declares, "I am going to be somebody. I have a lot of potential."

**PEGGY WANG** is a sharp contrast to her parents' assertion that the Chinese are conservative and "don't really talk about sex." The "Americanized" Peggy speaks comfortably about her questions concerning contraception and sexual decision-making. After revealing that she is still a virgin, 16-year-old Peggy asserts that concrete college and career plans prevent her from having sex and that if she did get pregnant, she'd "have an abortion like that." She goes on to break taboos as she interviews female classmates about their sexual desires.

**TRACY MORTON**, 16, is a white student at the Isidore Newman School. As the film's themes of desire and choice move from the tableau of sexuality to gender roles and aspirations, Tracy's story begins to emerge. The daughter of a homemaker mother and lawyer father, Tracy is expected to be a superwoman who combines both parents' achievements. Coming from a background of affluence and opportunity, Tracy has more options, yet she feels devoid of independence and internal power.

17-year-old **KIMECA ROGERS** asks hard questions of the filmmaker, prompting her to reveal that she herself was pregnant as a teenager and had made the difficult decision to choose abortion. Face to face, Julie and Kimeca realize that although they have something in common, they made very different



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# Desire

choices. Breaking the stereotypes of poor, unwed women having babies to get on welfare, the Desire girls, like many Desire residents, are adamant in their religious and cultural beliefs against abortion.

Watching DESIRE, one can witness the girls grow as a result of the challenge to become filmmakers. Several of the teenage mothers go from exploring obsessions with boys and romantic notions of being taken care of by men, to accepting the reality that they will have to support themselves and their children alone. And the affluent girls reveal that they are at risk as well, making brave videos about the pressures that lead to alcohol and drug use as well as problems with self-esteem and body image. One young woman creates a video diary piece in which she reveals that she is struggling with her sexual identity. She thinks she is bisexual.

As the girls grow more comfortable and empowered as collaborating filmmakers, they challenge Gustafson's premise that young women's choices are shaped by forces beyond their control. Kimeca tells her peers: "Miss Julie asked my teacher the dumbest question: 'Do teenage girls have choices?'" The question sets off a vigorous debate in which the young women move beyond the starting point of the film -- early sexuality and its consequences--to explore the factors that influenced their choices, the impact of their educational and material opportunities, and their futures as women.



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November 17, 2005

## Desire

A Teenage Girls Documentary Project production of a film by Julie Gustafson. Produced by Gustafson, Tim Watson.

Directed by Julie Gustafson, the Teenage Girls Documentary Project.

By **JOHN ANDERSON**

**Desire -- the same New Orleans neighborhood where Tennessee Williams' streetcar ran -- is at the epicenter of Julie Gustafson's gripping, insightful and absorbing five-year project chronicling a group of teenage girls whose economic circumstances may vary, but whose impulses make them kin. Given the timelessness of the material, docu should have a long life on festival, educational and cable outlets, although theatrical is, at best, a longshot.**

Top-flight editing and a pace that never falters help "Desire" movingly tell the stories of its five subjects: two young women from the Desire housing project, two from a prestigious New Orleans high school and one single mother from the working class burb of Belle Chase. Their ambitions are varied -- the two from Desire would like to remain childless; one hopes to enter the military; neither wants the life their mother lived. The girls from the upscale school have arguably higher aspirations, although sex, money, image and the general turmoil of the adolescent female are never far from the surface.

In revealing facts about her past, ostensibly in the hope of making her relationship with her subjects more intimate, helmer Gustafson becomes a character in her own movie. Still, one wishes, at critical points in the film, that she would ask her subjects straight out why they think they've done the things they've done, or why the past keeps repeating itself. That she doesn't leaves a bit of hole in the fabric of the film.

But the docu nevertheless has real drama and sadness --a feeling of opportunity knocking and getting no answer. Docu was made before Hurricane Katrina captured everyone's attention, and not just in New Orleans. But the city isn't really the point of "Desire," a film far more interested in how best-laid plans can turn to dust.

Camera (color, DV), Gustafson, Tim Watson, Isaac Webb, Melissa Thompson; editors, Gustafson, Aaron Walker, Watson. Reviewed at AFI Los Angeles Film Festival, Nov. 12, 2005. Running time: 84 MIN.



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