

DIRECTING DYSLEXIA

Inspired by her own child's learning differences, Emmy Award-winning producer Anna Toomey just directed her first feature film revealing the way New York City's public school system fails children with reading difficulties. **BY PAUL ADLER**



Anna Toomey and scenes from her directorial debut, *Left Behind*.

Anna Toomey knew what makes a great documentary long before she decided to direct one herself. For two decades, she produced acclaimed programs for ABC News including *Good Morning America*, and worked on projects ranging from *The Beatles Anthology* to *The Gun Fight*, which investigated the NRA. After grappling with her son's struggles with dyslexia and the lack of support from New York's public school system, the Larchmont resident was inspired by mothers enduring similar struggles to create her own documentary about the subject, *Left Behind*, which hit area theaters in January and has already screened in festivals from London to Woodstock. We caught up with Toomey, who discussed her new film, its inspiration, and what lies ahead.



couldn't read and we didn't know why, and the public school he attended was not very helpful in evaluating him or helping us to understand what he was going through. When I recognized how challenging it was for a child who is dyslexic, and that it affects 20 percent of the population, it really made me question why there are not more resources within the



Tell us about the documentary.

Left Behind follows the six moms on their journey to open the first public, dyslexic school in the Bronx. The film looks at the lack of evaluation and support for children with reading struggles, both in New York City and across the country, as well as the consequences of not educating these children. We found that 50 percent of people in jail are dyslexic, so this film really asks why that

a producer who's also from Larchmont, named Chris Farrell, whose daughter is dyslexic. He had a connection to Larry Mullen [Jr.], and, as we talked to Larry, we discovered that his son is dyslexic, too. So, Larry was very interested in the topic, and after looking at early cuts of the film he became involved.

How do you hope this film impacts viewers?

This film has been a labor of love for me, both professionally

My real hope is that we can make a huge difference for so many kids with this film, and I hope to make many more after this, on different topics.

What motivated you to make *Left Behind*?

I had been working at ABC for so long—which I absolutely loved—but I was yearning to delve deeper with my own projects. So, I took a leap of faith and decided to leave ABC to start my own production company. My son had been diagnosed with dyslexia when he was about 6 years old. He

public school system. I started talking to other families, both in New York City and across the country, and found an article about six women who were trying to start the first public dyslexia school in the Bronx. I called one of the women, talked to her for about two hours, and said, "I'd love to follow your story."

is. As a journalist I had to ask, what happens to those who are not being evaluated, not diagnosed, and not getting proper support?

Larry Mullen Jr. of U2 created music for the film. How did that come about?

When I first looked into this story, I started working with

and personally. This is my first independent film as a director, and I've learned so much. My real hope is that we can make a huge difference for so many kids with this film, and I hope to make more on different topics. I didn't know where *Left Behind* would end up, and I'm so thrilled that it is resonating with people across the globe.

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