



# LIVING DOWNSTREAM

A documentary film based on the acclaimed book by  
Sandra Steingraber, PhD

Feature-Length Film: 85 minutes

Format: High Definition

Copyright: 2010

[www.livingdownstream.com](http://www.livingdownstream.com)



## FIRST RUN FEATURES

The Film Center Building

630 Ninth Ave. #1213

New York, NY 10036

(212) 243-0600 / Fax (212) 989-7649

Website: [www.firstrunfeatures.com](http://www.firstrunfeatures.com)

Email: [info@firstrunfeatures.com](mailto:info@firstrunfeatures.com)

**“Handsomely photographed and powerfully argued. . . . Steingraber's scientific cool and unflagging sense of mission make for an arresting portrait of a self-styled modern-day Rachel Carson.”**

- Ann Hornaday, *The Washington Post*

## **Synopsis**

Based on the acclaimed book by ecologist and cancer survivor Sandra Steingraber, PhD, *Living Downstream* is an eloquent and cinematic documentary film.

This award-winning film follows Sandra during one pivotal year as she travels across North America, working to break the silence about cancer and its environmental links. After a routine cancer screening, Sandra receives some worrying results and is thrust into a period of medical uncertainty. Thus, we begin two journeys with Sandra: her private struggles with cancer and her public quest to bring attention to the urgent human rights issue of cancer prevention.

Sandra is not the only one who is on a journey—the synthetic chemicals against which she is fighting are also on the move. We follow these invisible toxicants as they migrate to some of the most beautiful places in North America. We see how these chemicals enter our bodies and how, once inside, scientists believe they may be working to cause cancer.

Several experts in the fields of toxicology and cancer research make cameo appearances in the film, highlighting their own findings on two pervasive chemicals: atrazine, one of the most widely used herbicides in the world, and the industrial compounds polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Their research further illuminates the issues at the center of Sandra's work.

At once Sandra's personal journey and her scientific exploration, *Living Downstream* is a powerful reminder of the intimate connection between the health of our bodies and the health of our air, land, and water.

### **THE BOOK THAT INSPIRED THE FILM**

Title: *Living Downstream: An Ecologist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*

Copyright: © 1997, 2010 by Sandra Steingraber

Published by: Da Capo Press

For single copies: 1-800-343-4499

For bulk discounts: 1-800-810-4145, ext. 5000

“Beautifully spare, almost lapidary prose . . . . The poet’s focus on the particular serves Steingraber exceedingly well, enabling her to build a devastating case for the probable environmental causes of cancer.”

*-Chicago Tribune*

## **Living Downstream**

When Sandra Steingraber, PhD was diagnosed with bladder cancer at the age of twenty, she asked, Why me? As a biology major, she felt compelled to search for an answer in the medical libraries. This led to an early interest in the connection between her environment and her health. Years later, with the help of a post-doctoral fellowship from Harvard University, Sandra undertook a four-year investigation into the links between synthetic chemicals and human cancer. During this time, she went back to her hometown of Pekin, Illinois, in search of her ecological roots. This work became the basis for her acclaimed book, *Living Downstream: An Ecologist’s Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*.

Published in 1997, *Living Downstream* was the first book to bring together toxics-release data—finally made available under right-to-know laws—and newly released cancer registry data. Sandra is also the first to trace with such compelling precision the entire web of connections between our bodies and the ecological world in which we eat, drink, breathe, and work.

*Living Downstream* has won praise from international media, including The Washington Post, Publishers Weekly, The Lancet, and The Times (London). Over the years it has been used enthusiastically by educators, health care professionals, and activists.

Since its original publication, the scientific evidence has been growing, and so, to coincide with the documentary adaptation, Da Capo Press released the second edition of the book in April 2010. The updated science in this exciting new edition strengthens the case for banning poisons now pervasive in our air, our food, and our bodies. Also in this edition, Sandra shows that investing in green energy helps prevent cancer, since synthetic chemicals linked to cancer come mostly from petroleum and coal. Just as the first edition inspired the film, the film inspired Sandra’s writing of this new second edition. Readers and viewers will enjoy the creative connections between these works.

## THE FEATURED EXPERTS

### **Sandra Steingraber, PhD**

Author of the book *Living Downstream*

Dr. Sandra Steingraber is an internationally recognized authority on the environmental links to human health. She holds a doctorate in biology and a master's degree in creative writing. Called "a poet with a knife" (*Sojourners*), Sandra is the author of the volume of poetry *Post-Diagnosis* and coauthor of *The Spoils of Famine*, a book on ecology and human rights in Africa. Her memoir, *Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood*, explores the intimate ecology of pregnancy and was selected by *Library Journal* as a best book of 2001. In her newest book, *Raising Elijah: Protecting Our Children in an Age of Environmental Crisis*, Sandra demonstrates through everyday moments how closely the private, intimate world of parenting connects to the public world of policy making.

For her work on *Living Downstream*, Sandra received the biennial Rachel Carson Leadership Award from Chatham University, the Jenifer Altman Foundation's first annual Altman Award, and was named a *Ms. Magazine* woman of the year. She also received a Hero Award from the Breast Cancer Fund and the Environmental Health Champion Award from Physicians for Social Responsibility—Los Angeles.

Sandra has served as an adviser to the California Breast Cancer Research Program, provided Congressional briefings, and lectured on many college campuses. Currently, Sandra is a columnist for *Orion* magazine and a scholar in residence at Ithaca College in Ithaca, New York. More information about Sandra is available at <http://www.steingraber.com>.

### **Tyrone Hayes, PhD**

Biology Professor, UC Berkeley

Since his childhood, Dr. Tyrone Hayes has been fascinated by amphibians and the influences that environmental changes have on their development, growth, and reproduction. A graduate of Harvard University, Dr. Hayes has published more than forty papers and 150 abstracts and has given more than 300 talks. Presently, Dr. Hayes' work in the lab and field is focused on the effects of pesticides on amphibians and the role of this threat in amphibian declines. Among other awards, Dr. Hayes has received both the Distinguished Teaching Award and the Distinguished Research Mentoring of Undergraduates Award from the University of California, Berkeley, the Jenifer Altman Award for Integrity in Science (Jenifer Altman Foundation), the Rachel Carson Memorial Award (Pesticide Action Network), and the President's Citation Award (American Institute of Biological Sciences). Dr. Hayes was also named an Emerging Explorer by the National Geographic Society.

### **Rachel Carson**

Biologist and Author of *Silent Spring*

Rachel Carson graduated from Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University), studied at Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory, and received her master's in zoology from Johns Hopkins University. She worked as a government scientist and science editor for fifteen years in the US Bureau of Fisheries (now the US Fish and Wildlife Service). Carson wrote three popular books about the ocean before writing *Silent Spring*, the book that is credited with launching the modern environmental

movement. She died of breast cancer in 1964, but not before testifying before the United States Congress on the potential problems caused by the broadcast spraying of chemical pesticides.

**Stéphane Lair, PhD**

Veterinary Professor, University of Montreal

Dr. Stéphane Lair is the director of the St. Lawrence beluga whale pathology program, which has been in operation for over twenty years. His work focuses on major marine ecosystem changes that result from diverse factors, including the overexploitation of resources, increased industrial activity, and climate change. Dr. Lair sees marine mammals as “signal” species. By studying the health of these animals, he hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the St. Lawrence and other marine habitats.

**Linda Birnbaum, PhD**

Director, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences

Dr. Linda Birnbaum oversees a budget that funds more than 1,000 research grants. She is the author of several hundred peer-reviewed publications, book chapters, abstracts, and reports. A board certified toxicologist, Dr. Birnbaum has served as a federal scientist for thirty years, nineteen of which were with the US Environmental Protection Agency. Dr. Birnbaum has received numerous awards, including the Women in Toxicology Elsevier Mentoring Award, the Society of Toxicology Public Communications Award, the EPA’s Health Science Achievement Award and Diversity Leadership Award, and twelve Science and Technology Achievement Awards.

**John Spinelli, PhD**

Senior Scientist, BC Cancer Agency

In addition to his position at the BC Cancer Agency, Dr. John Spinelli is also a professor at the University of British Columbia’s School of Population and Public Health, and an adjunct professor in Simon Fraser University’s Department of Statistics and Actuarial Science. Dr. Spinelli’s research focuses on the identification of environmental and genetic risk factors for cancer. He conducts and collaborates on a large number of epidemiological, statistical, and clinical research projects and has authored over 150 peer-reviewed publications addressing various aspects of health research and statistical methodology.

**George Woodwell, PhD**

Founder and Director Emeritus, Woods Hole Research Center

Dr. George Woodwell is an ecologist with broad interests in global environmental issues and policies. Prior to founding the Woods Hole Research Center, he was founder and director of the Ecosystems Center of the Marine Biological Laboratory and a senior scientist at Brookhaven National Laboratory. Dr. Woodwell was also a founding trustee and continues to serve on the board of the Natural Resources Defense Council. He is a former chairman and a founding trustee of the World Resources Institute, a founder and honorary member of the board of trustees for the Environmental Defense Fund, and former president of the Ecological Society of America. Dr. Woodwell is the author of more than 300 major papers and books on ecology.

## THE PRODUCTION CREW

The documentary film *Living Downstream* is a production of The People's Picture Company (The PPC). The PPC is an independent documentary production company that creates entertaining and educational films that compel thought, encourage discussion, and inspire change.

### **Chanda Chevannes**

Producer and Director

Chanda Chevannes is a documentary film producer and director. She has been the driving force behind a variety of documentary-based projects, from the point-of-view films to educational videos. Chanda specializes in complex, multi-layered films that are artistically rich and socially meaningful. She is passionate about using film as a tool for public education and social change and has received awards for her work in the categories of non-violence, public health, and social issues. *Living Downstream* is her third creative documentary and her first feature-length film.

### **Nathan Shields**

Producer and Editor

Nathan Shields is a producer and editor in both film and television. He has edited over twenty documentaries and dramatic programs for countless production companies. These projects have ranged from factual entertainment series, to social issues documentaries, to comedic short films. They include the webisodes for the sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, the biopic *The Four Seasons of Isadore Sharpe*, and the documentary series *The Naked Archeologist*. Nathan is a graduate of Sheridan College and the founder of The People's Picture Company.

### **Benjamin Gervais**

Director of Photography

Benjamin Gervais is a director of photography and a camera systems engineer. Ben has worked behind the camera for over ten years, most recently in the role of 3D engineer on Martin Scorsese's *Hugo Cabret*. He has shot several documentary films and has fulfilled the role of camera operator on a wide range of projects, including feature films, television series, and commercial productions.

### **J.R. Fountain**

Sound Designer and Re-Recording Mixer

J.R. Fountain has been working in the Toronto film and television industry for over ten years. In that time, he has fulfilled many roles in audio post production. His work has been nominated for several awards, including a Gemini (Canada's version of the Emmys), and multiple MPSEs. In 2008, J.R. shared in the Best Sound Design award from the Giant Screen Cinema Association for his work on the IMAX film *Wild Ocean 3D*. J.R. is the founder of Big Room Sound.

## REVIEWS and PRAISE for LIVING DOWNSTREAM



WINNER 2013 Gracie Award for Outstanding Documentary

“...an absolute must-see. Excuse my clichés, but *Living Downstream* is powerful, it is inspiring, it is moving, it is – quietly, like our hero – a tear-jerker. And, upon seeing it yourself, you are likely to make similar exhortations to your friends and family.”

Don Schwartz, *CineSource Magazine* (05/07/10)

“...powerful...haunting.”

Catherine Porter, *Toronto Star* (05/19/10)

“...a deftly interwoven examination of how cancer is experienced, treated and understood...forceful, reasoned and visually impressive.”

Tom McSorley, *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (10/01/10)

“... a great documentary film.”

Greg Skinner, *Chicago Journal* (10/21/10)

“*Living Downstream* is a convincing and necessary documentary... a movie you’ll want to watch... A few pitch-perfect moments provide all the emotional force you would expect from a “cancer movie,” minus the unpleasant tang of emotional manipulation.”

Ali Gadbow, *Missoula Independent* (03/04/10)

“...easy to watch and hard to forget.”

Evan Moore, *The Free Press* (Columbus OH) (08/27/10)

“... the film is at times intimate, at other times shocking, and occasionally tragically humorous.”

Jamie Kelly, *The Missoulian* (03/05/10)



## Living Downstream

**An American ecologist probes the effects of chemical industry polluting water supplies, while battling cancer.**

Witness Last Modified: 01 Nov 2012

Sandra Steingraber is an American ecologist whose books reach thousands of people. Diagnosed at an early age with cancer, she joined a long line of patients in her family - only, Sandra was adopted.

She embarked on a quest to find the link between cancer and the environment and to campaign against the chemical industry contaminating water supplies.

### Filmmaker's view

I first read Sandra Steingraber's book, Living Downstream, when I was just out of high school. I read it ravenously, was deeply moved by it and then put it on my bookshelf.

From the first chapter I felt that it was so cinematic that it would make an incredible film. And, although I knew that I wanted to be a filmmaker, I had never made a film before and it did not occur to me to make this film myself.

I returned to the book a couple of years later as a student in film school. Again, I read it, was even more moved and educated by it - and placed it back on my bookshelf.

A couple of years later, while working for a well-respected documentary production company in Toronto, I picked up the book - and fell in love with it all over again.

I saw in it all the things that would make for a great film: a compelling character, a lyrical tone, beautiful visuals, and a focus on the human cost of cancer.

After reading the book for the third time, I did not put it back on my bookshelf.

Instead I placed it on my desk and worked up the nerve to call Sandra. I found two or three different phone numbers for her and left tense messages on them all. We exchanged emails, had a few in-depth phone conversations and, after a bit of convincing, Sandra agreed to participate as a subject in the film.

It was several more years until the film was financed. In the intervening years, I read the book three more times. Sandra moved and her father died. I married, lived in Africa with my husband and fell pregnant. Time was moving on and life was changing for us both. But the promise of the film was a constant presence in our lives.

We finally began principal photography in July 2008. Initially, one of my biggest worries about the film was whether its story would have enough immediacy. In the book, Sandra tells her own story retrospectively. She was 20 when she was diagnosed with bladder cancer. Today, she is 50. How relevant would a 30-year-old cancer story be? What is the reason to discuss a diagnosis that happened a lifetime ago?

But what I discovered in working with Sandra is that cancer never really leaves you - even when you are 'cured'. She told me once that she thinks about cancer every day and will for the rest of her life. Fifty to seventy per cent of bladder cancers recur, so Sandra's thoughts and worries about her health are not unwarranted. Hers is not a story that happened 30 years ago. Hers is a story that is happening every day.

During filming, we had a glimpse into this reality. A week after our crew filmed Sandra's annual cystoscopy - a procedure in which a tube is inserted into the bladder to screen for cancer - Sandra received a call from the nurse in her urologist's office. The urine sample that had been taken during the procedure had been analysed and found to contain abnormal cell clusters and blood. With that phone call, Sandra was catapulted into a period of ambiguity known as watchful waiting. She was not certain of her health: she was neither a cancer patient, nor was she 'free and clear' of the disease.

I spent a lot of time wondering how the story would end. As a filmmaker, I want to be able to see the final frame of the film. Would Sandra go for a series of tests and then be declared healthy again? Or would she become yet another bladder cancer patient to experience a recurrence? As Sandra continued through her period of watchful waiting, I too was watching, and waiting.

But as I talked to Sandra more during this time, I realised that there can never really be an ending to this story. As storytellers, we filmmakers look for satisfying ways to end our films. It is nice to have a feeling that everything has been wrapped up before the audience leaves the theatre. But I realised that I had an opportunity to communicate a larger reality with this film. That is: if you are a cancer survivor, nothing is ever really wrapped up. Even when the test results come back normal, there is another test to be done again the following year. Sandra will visit her urologist for her cystoscopies every year. She will worry every time. She will think about cancer every day for the rest of her life.

I have learned a lot during the course of filming - about Sandra, about cancer and about myself as a filmmaker. I have watched Sandra's book transform from the page to the screen, in my hands and the hands of my crew. And, in a way, this project has come full circle.

Filmmaking and writing are very different endeavours. We have worked hard to capture something new with this film, and to maintain all the lyricism, beauty and humanity of the book. I hope we have succeeded.

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<http://blogs.indiewire.com/sydneylevine/women-to-watch-chanda-chevannes>

