

1. How did “House Family” come about?

I first learned that Hillhouse Coach Catrina Hawley-Stewart was leading her team to championships while raising her sister's 3 children in an article written by Lori Riley of the Hartford Courant. That led to my version of the story for WFSB TV.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxFf0EhQdrY>

Upon meeting Catrina she exuded a warmth that was unforgettable and I confirmed this in getting to know her in subsequent years. Heading into the 2011-2012 season her team was on a quest for a fourth straight state championship and its top player Bria Holmes was one of most highly rated in the country - drawing recruiting interest from most of the top college programs, including UConn. The timing seemed right to document the season ahead.

2. What drew you to Bria Holmes and Catrina Hawley-Stewart as subjects of House Family?

Catrina is a former honorable mention high school All American and Division 1 player at Providence College. She could be coaching in college now but has chosen instead to both stay committed to her players at Hillhouse and stay in New Haven to raise her late sister's 3 children while drawing a modest paycheck for her work at Hillhouse High School as coach and in-school suspension teacher. She is a maternal figure to dozens of kids, driving them thousands of miles in her personal car and providing them adult guidance that is often lacking in the inner city.

Bria Holmes is one of the best girls high school basketball players Connecticut has ever seen. As her mother Carol reveals in the documentary, her recruitment became overwhelming. So many recruiting letters that that mailman became "mad". I would watch Bria on the court before her senior year and see a woman among girls. It was a stark contrast to Bria's soft spoken, shy personality off the court. That dynamic intrigued me as a storyteller.

3. The documentary captures moments that are truly endearing and memorable. Is there one particular scene that stands out as a favorite of yours?

The state tournament quarterfinal game with city rival Career Magnet is one that comes to mind. Career had defeated Hillhouse in all 3 games between the teams in the regular season. The odds of Hillhouse winning the fourth meeting were made steeper with the team's second best player, Colleene Smith, on the bench due to a knee injury suffered the game before. This quarterfinal would be decided in overtime after a dramatic twist at the end of regulation.

4. What role did the city of New Haven play in the making of this film?

While Bridgeport, Hartford and Waterbury could all make arguments, I contend that New Haven has historically been the top basketball city in Connecticut. The Elm City gained particular notoriety in 1973-1974 when Hillhouse's chief city rival, Wilbur Cross, finished the season undefeated and ranked #1 in the nation in the Washington Post's high school basketball poll.

In more recent decades (with the advent of Title IX) girls basketball has been on the rise and Hillhouse's program has been the star team in the city. First under the coaching of Willie Boyd then later Sabrina Breland, Kermit Carolina and Catrina Hawley-Stewart.

New Haven was a natural city to choose to do a basketball documentary. The city's very real problems with violence and homicide make the positive things the high school sports teams in the city accomplish all the more challenging to do.

5. What challenges did you face making this film?

As a long time storyteller on local and regional television, but a first time documentary filmmaker it was a learning process. I shot about ninety percent of the footage myself and in retrospect there are things I would have done differently in terms of anticipating crucial moments as they happen and pursuing certain storylines over others as you humanize the characters in the film. Some of the film is reliant on game footage, which of course is unscripted and happens only once. There are no reshoots in these situations, that keeps you on your toes. You need to have your eyes and ears intensely open at all times.

One other challenge was gaining the trust of the coaching staff, the players and the Hillhouse community. I was, at first, a stranger in a community that is predominantly African-American. As an outsider I needed access that would only come after being around enough, seen enough, to prove my genuine interest and commitment in sharing the team's story.

6. What kind of personal takeaway did you get from this film?

I have the utmost admiration for what Coach Catrina Hawley-Stewart is doing. Catrina's coaching and guidance has led to dozens of young women advancing to college on basketball scholarships. For those of us from the suburbs it is hard to understand and appreciate the challenges a coach in the inner city faces until you observe someone like Catrina firsthand. I am proud to say we remain good friends.

Sadly, we tend to hear about our inner cities on the news only when there is a shooting or similar crime. I see House Family as a way to add depth and context to New Haven's story by focusing on one slice (girls high school basketball) of this multi-faceted Connecticut city.

7. What do you want people to take away from this film? What makes it important?

I want them to feel that sports matters. Being part of a team, a family (a "House Family"), can make a crucial difference in a young person's life. That seems especially true for Hillhouse's Colleene Smith who acknowledges in the film that without basketball she'd probably be on the streets getting into trouble with her friends. Instead she's now enrolled at Illinois State University - playing basketball on scholarship - her education paid for. (A bonus scene updating Colleene's story and pursuit of a Division 1 scholarship appears in the special Game Time show that will follow the Friday November 28th 8pm debut of House Family)

I also want people to know that there are stories behind the homicide victims we hear about superficially in the media. Such as 2011 shooting victim TJ Mathis, Bria Holmes' mentor. His connection to Bria is featured in the documentary and no shoot was more poignant for me than having TJ's mom Renae Kennedy escort me to the cemetery TJ is buried in to shoot footage of his gravestone.

It's easy to dismiss life in the inner city as vastly different from the seemingly safe, suburban life many of us enjoy. But the truth is life is precious everywhere, in all communities. That is a truth reinforced late in the film with Hillhouse's loss to a suburban community that would go on to win the state championship. A community that itself would suffer unspeakable violence and loss of life 9 months after the championship game win.

(note: that community is Newtown)

8. Do you think Geno still regrets not signing Bria Holmes?

Great question. As a proud New Englander who is perhaps parochial to a fault I would love to have seen Bria Holmes been offered a scholarship by UConn. As the state's first female McDonald's High School All American and this season the Big 12 Preseason Player of The Year at West Virginia University it's hard to argue that Bria doesn't have the talent to play for her state university. There may have been some other character traits Geno Auriemma was looking for from Bria out of high school that she didn't yet display. He'd be the guy to best answer that.

Of course his program has been just fine without Bria ,winning national championships the past 2 seasons. Then again wouldn't it be great to see an in-state kid and likely future WNBA first round draft pick excelling in a UConn uniform?