

CAPTURING THE FIRE

PRESS KIT



ONE LINE SYNOPSIS

A photographer risks her life to document the devastating Australian bushfires that burnt her family home to the ground.

ONE PARAGRAPH SYNOPSIS

As a photographer by trade, capturing the extraordinary comes naturally to Louise Coghill – so when a bushfire ripped through her semi-rural property in Gidgegannup, her first instinct wasn't to take shelter, it was to pick up her camera. This instinct initially offered a filter in which to process her terror, until that filter disconnected her from the real danger she was facing, and placed her directly in harm's way; forcing her to re-evaluate the importance she places on taking the perfect picture. This short documentary seeks to raise a larger thematic discussion about the all-consuming dedication artists often have to their work, but ultimately how photography can be used as a powerful tool to tell stories, and ignite national discussion surrounding the consequences of climate change in Australia.



STORY SYNOPSIS

When Louise Coghill saw the first plume of smoke begin to rise behind her parents property, she could never have predicted that in less than four hours, it would become a wall of flames, swallowing everything in its path. A photographer by trade, Louise has travelled the world documenting everything from the nomadic wanderers of Mongolia, to base life at Mount Everest. Capturing the extraordinary comes naturally to Louise, so when her family home in the semi-rural Western Australian town of Gidgegannup became engulfed in flames, her first instinct wasn't to take shelter, it was to pick up her camera.

We follow Louise as she returns to her family home for the first time since it was demolished, retracing her steps, and exploring her decision to pick up her camera that day. How it initially offered a filter in which to process her terror, until that filter disconnected her from the real danger she faced and placed her squarely in harms way.



STORY SYNOPSIS

Louise clutches the steering wheel as she drives through the winding roads that lead to Koorungal Valley in Gidgegannup. An hour drive outside of Perth, this small town is settled amongst Australian bushland, which makes each house impossible to see from the road due to its density of tall trees and shrub. In this area of Gidgegannup, the sun flickers through leaves, birds are everywhere, and the rolling hills lead up to properties that have nothing but vast, intensely green farmland around them. Louise drives in silence, until she reaches a crossroad that separates the green trees from the black ones. Louise takes a left turn into the black trees, and we enter a ghost town where all that remains are piles of twisted wreckage, burnt out belongings, rubbles and ash.

As Louise reaches the summit of her driveway, she looks down and sees the empty space where her childhood home was once. A flattened expanse of construction sand, a green pool filled with ash, and a blackened and cracked pergola, with melted plastic swaying in the breeze. Louise looks over everything - her eyes searching the emptiness. She grips the straps of her camera - as if for support, and then sharply inhales, as if she's going to say something -



STORY SYNOPSIS

Click - she takes a photograph. She isn't ready to talk yet, but she can use her camera. She takes a couple of wide shots of the expanse of sand which was once the house her Father built. The property has a beautiful view of rolling hills, as far as the eye can see. After a long silence, she points to the horizon, 'that's where I saw the first plume of smoke, just over that ridge.' The very first photograph that Louise took that day appears on screen, it shows the rolling hills we see before us, but in this picture they are untouched by fire - still green and luscious, filled with life, kangaroos and birds. In the far distance there is a white burst of smoke, which comes up suddenly and then slowly drifts across the blue sky.

Living in country Western Australia means that bushfires aren't unexpected, they happen all the time, and they've happened here before. Louises' parents were always so diligent with their fire plans, she never really truly felt at risk. The morning of the fire, the family spent their time preparing the house, a routine practice done many times over the years whenever there is a DFES warning in the area. They hook the hoses up to rain-water tanks, hose down the vulnerable edges of the property, fill the bath with water. It was only natural for Louise to pick up her camera that day, she saw it as a good opportunity to show people how country folk prepare a house on a day where there is a fire risk. Of course, it turned out to be much more than that.



STORY SYNOPSIS

At 3:30pm the winds changed, and suddenly Louise and her family were in the fires path. It was that moment that Louises' Mum told her that she should get in her car and leave, but the idea of leaving her parents and her home when she could stay and help protect it, seemed out of the realms of possibility. Louise had another motive too, she wanted to keep taking photographs. As the fire came closer and burned through more bushland, Louises' Dad climbed onto the roof and began filling the gutters with water. Louise followed him up with her camera around her neck.

From this vantage point, Louise took photographs of the action in the sky, something that felt almost instinctual to her. We see a photo of a helicopter making its way through the thick grey smoke, the sun glowing ominously behind it. With each photograph the helicopter gets closer and closer to the camera, until suddenly it is swallowed up by the smoke and disappears. We see planes dropping fire retardant onto the hills of her property, only hundreds of meters away. Even at that point, Louise felt certain that the fire would't hit them.



STORY SYNOPSIS

Louise explains that as she stood on the roof taking photographs, she felt one step removed from the danger of the fire as it burned its way towards their property. Instead of assessing risks and worrying about what may happen, she focused all her energy into scoping the horizon for the next plane, so that when it crossed her lens it would be framed perfectly. Her camera became a filter between her and the real world.

Suddenly, she heard her Dad yell - and she ran, camera in hand, to the front porch. An unfathomable sight was before her. A wall of flames coming through the trees out the back of their property, headed directly for the house. Her Dad was running, not away from the flames but towards it, with the hose in his hands. A photograph appears on screen; it's no longer just smoke that fills the frame, we see the unmistakable lick of fire, glowing through the trees. This was the moment that Louise realised that the fire was no longer a vague threat in the distance, it was here, and it was coming straight for her. That feeling of denial was ripped away, and she felt weak at the knees and unable to hold herself up.



STORY SYNOPSIS

Even as the reality of the life-threatening situation hit Louise, she still found herself running towards the fire, just like her Dad. But instead of a hose, she was clutching her camera. We see a series of photographs as Louise gets closer to the fire, and you can tell that the stakes are suddenly much higher. They aren't as perfectly framed as the ones before it, there is a movement to the image, a sudden urgency. Her photographs capture the moment the fire surrounds the property, as every branch of the nine-meter-tall gumtrees become drenched in flames. She captures a wave of red embers as they spray through the carport.

Even when embers started to fly, landing on her head and melting her hair and burning her scalp, she couldn't stop taking photographs. She knew the importance of capturing this moment, not only on the impact it may have on her career, but in that moment she grasped the importance of documenting what was happening to her home and her family. She knew it was an important story to tell the world, and as a photographer this was the way she could tell it.



STORY SYNOPSIS

As the heat become so unbearably acrid it started to burn her eyes and throat, and the fire took flight above the house, Louise knew it was time to put down her camera and retreat to safety. Louise and her Mum ran to her childhood bedroom and waited. They knew that if they had prepared the house adequately, the fire should pass around them. From the bedroom window they watched as a huge gust of wind carried a wave of embers over the roof, igniting a huge wall of flames as it hit the fresh oxygen on the other side. We see photographs on screen through the window; the interior of the house is completely in tact, but eerily dark, and through every window is a wall of red, the flames completely engulfing everything in sight. Louise and her Mum held each other and waited, in complete silence except for their rapid, terrified breaths. Until Louises Mum yelled - 'it's in the roof!' The air conditioning vent in the bedroom explodes with fire.

Standing on the clearing of land where her bedroom once was, Louise admits it's hard for her to remember what unfolded once the fire made its way inside of the house. Memory loss and trauma are commonly connected; a natural survival skill humans often develop to protect themselves from psychological damage. What she does remember is trying desperately to find a pocket of air so she could breathe. The smoke so thick and oxygen-less that it burned her oesophagus, suffocating her slowly. Louise doesn't remember which direction she ran, but she does remember how strange the ceiling looked as if began to fall, the fire washing through the house like liquid. She doesn't remember where her Dad was, but she does remember believing that they were all going to die. She remembers her Mum hugging her close.



STORY SYNOPSIS

As Louise and her Mum ran blindly through the burning house, Louise remembers hearing someone yell, 'get in the pool!' Louise followed these instructions, diving straight in, fully clothed, shoes on. Her Mum helped her put a shirt over her head, creating a pocket of air. As soon as Louise sucked oxygen back into her lungs, she could finally think straight, and she knew if she could breathe, she would make it through this. Together, Louise and her Mum sought refuge in the pool; they silently watched as their house became completely enveloped in flames, yellows, oranges and reds, exploding out of the windows and doors. The house that held so many memories, gathered over their lifetimes, disappearing before their eyes.

With the clarity of oxygen in her airways, Louise swam to the edge of the pool and grabbed her camera - resuming her photography from the safety of the water, just metres away from their burning home. Louises' photograph appears on screen, thick black smoke obscures so much in the frame. We see a photograph of Louises' Mum treading water in the pool, with a flannelette shirt over her head, the sky is sepia, the house glows in the background. We see a silhouette of a person escaping the house, the smoke so thick it's difficult to make them out. On closer inspection we see its Louise's Dad - he has a breathing apparatus on his face, and the box of precious belongings in his hands.





STORY SYNOPSIS

During this time, Louise had a split within her. On one side of her brain, she was terrified, experiencing extreme panic and couldn't believe what was happening around her. But on the other side of her brain, she knew that very few people have experienced this moment, and she needed to take photos and document this once in a lifetime insane moment. For Louise, it became a need to capture it so she felt she had some control over the situation, and that it all wasn't happening for nothing. She could use it, to raise awareness about fires in her country, about the personal impact that global warming is having on families all over Australia.

The family waited in the pool for forty-five minutes, hoping the fire would pass. When a gust of wind came through the property, revealing a patch of blue sky, Louise knew that it was finally over. "Is anyone here?" Yelled a strangers voice. It was a fireman, he'd made his way to the property and told them their only opportunity to leave was now. Louise and her family go into their car that miraculously survived and followed him through the smoke and burning trees, out of the haze and into the safety of the main town. At the side of the road, Louise takes a photograph of her Dad, smiling ear-to-ear, covered in ash and soot.



STORY SYNOPSIS

Back at the property which is now reduced to sand, Louise explains that in a way, physically watching everything burn in front of her eyes put the destruction into its context. This was a place she loved, a place that was important to her and her family, one that held memories, but it was just a place, and they had survived it. Louise and her parents lost everything they owned, but they escaped with their lives.

After Louise risked her life to capture the fire, she has spent time reevaluating the importance she places on taking the perfect picture. In the immediate aftermath, it troubled her how far she was willing to push it, but now she feels differently. Photographers all over the world put themselves in extreme environments, risking their lives for their art; and for very good reason. Whether they are documenting an otherwise invisible war, or capturing a starving child, to open the eyes and hearts of those living thousands of miles away - photographs have the power to provoke change. They tell a story that is otherwise unseen.



STORY SYNOPSIS

On the day of the fire, Louise was able to step outside her fear to capture something much more important. Photography is a method of storytelling for Louise, what she captured was a story about her family, but it's also the story of many others in Australia. She was putting into the visual medium, something a lot of people within Australia have experienced and never been able to share. The photos, she says, showcase an important lesson about the impact of global warming on our country. That lesson is - It's easy to ignore the changing weather in our climate, until it's burning down the world around you, and then you have no choice but to listen.

As Louise stands at the summit that looks over her childhood home, now an absent hole charred with black, she reflects on the choice she made that day to stay and take photographs of the fire. Though she lived through unspeakable horrors, her photos have power. They have the power to connect to those Australian's who have experienced it first hand, and they have the power to heed a warning to those Australian's who feel one step removed from the reality of global warming in their country. Louise had the choice to leave that day, but instead she chose to stay and capture the fire.





DIRECTORS STATEMENT

Louise Coghill and I, Frances Elliott, (co-writer/director/producer) were high school best friends, and growing up I spent a lot of time on Louises' property in Gidgegannup. As teenagers, having free rein to explore the bushland on our own was a kind of magic. We would traverse the fields, swim in the pool, and climb to the highest point of the hills with her brothers to shoot potato guns into the wide expanse of bushland below. After high school, Louise and I decided that we both wanted to go to film school, and together we completed a Film and Television course, before she stumbled upon her true passion, photography, and I mine, documentary filmmaking. Although we drifted apart (Louise began travelling the world taking photos, and I began making feature documentaries at home), Louise always held a special place in my heart, and we regularly kept in touch.

Decades later, I was sitting on my couch one night when my Mum called me to tell me there was a fire in Gidgegannup, burning through properties, and she asked me check on Louise. When I texted her to ask if she was okay, her reply shocked me - 'The house is gone. We are safe.' At that time, I had no idea that Louise and her parents had sheltered in the pool as their house burned. Louise was still experiencing extreme adrenaline and shock from the experience, and the information came in dribs and drabs. They were there, they had watched the house burn down, everything was gone, she had taken photos.

A few weeks later, Louise came to me and asked for feedback on an essay she had written to accompany her photo series, and it was only then the extent of what she experienced became clear. For Louise, her intention for the photos was clear - she wanted them to tell a story. The photos were astonishing - and I flicked through them like a storybook, goosebumps covering my body, panic rising up my spine. The photos were like nothing I had ever seen before, they seemed to be a glimpse into an apocalypse. I sent her essay and the photos to my collaborator, Samantha Marlowe (co-writer/director/producer) and we both agreed - her story and her photos would make an amazing documentary.



LOUISE COGHILL

FRANCES ELLIOTT

DIRECTORS STATEMENT

We approached Louise with the idea, and she immediately agreed - she wanted her story to reach as many people across Australia as it could. We pitched the short documentary to the ABC, who immediately green lit it to be a part of their national show ABC Artworks, which showcases artists in Australia, with a focus on their motivations on creating art.

When filming the documentary, we wanted to let Louise tell her story while embedded in devastating aftermath. Walking through the now flattened property, she has the benefit of hindsight and distance to accurately reflect on the events that unfolded on that day, and how they affected her life. We juxtapose this devastation with the fire photos, which appear on screen in chronological order, as she slowly walks us through the events - first the smoke, then the denial, then the wall of flames. Her photographs are used as the main storytelling tool within the film, and seek to showcase to the audience the intensity of the fire, and the intensity of the situation our country faces in the midst of global warming.

The narrative through line of the film is focused on Louises photography journey throughout the fire. Her initial decision to stay and take photos, and how the lens offered her a filter in which to process her terror, until that filter disconnected her from the real danger she was facing, and placed her directly in harm's way; forcing her to re-evaluate the importance she places on taking the perfect picture. Finally, she realised the greater purpose of the photos and why she felt it was so important to risk her life to take them - they were a powerful tool to tell her story, and ignite national discussion surrounding the consequences of climate change in Australia.

As directors, we are hugely passionate about telling stories that spark positive societal change. We are drawn to human interest documentaries that explore the world of human emotion alongside factual events, placing discovery, connection and empathy at the core of our values when making films. Capturing the Fire perfectly fit into the category of documentary that we seek to create, and we saw it as an opportunity to push Louises' message onto the national and international stage.





DIRECTORS BIOGRAPHY

Frances Elliott and Samantha Marlowe met in 2011 while working as editors in the Channel 9 newsroom, completing their time in news by being flown to Sydney to accept 'Best News Editor' and 'Runner Up Best News Editor' for Channel 9, the first females to do so in West Australian history. Frances Elliott has a background of film and television, with over ten years experience in behind the scenes direction of drama and factual content, while Samantha Marlowe has a decade of experience in journalism and documentary, and a passion for forming deep and long lasting friendships with her subjects, which translates to the empathetic telling of human stories on screen. While working together in the newsroom, the pair recognised the cohesion of their talents and unity of ambitions, joining forces to create deep access documentaries that drive positive societal change.

Together, the pair have wrote and edited hundreds of hours of broadcast television, including 7Mates Desert Collectors, ABC's Kidnap Case Files and the Discovery Channels Outback Car Hunters. Off the back of this success, Frances and Sam were dually selected as the directors' attachments for multimillion dollar documentary Under the Volcano, which went on to be officially selected for SXSW Film Festival, and made it to #1 on iTunes.

Under their parent company Rush Films, the pair wrote and directed the short documentary The Beeman, which was officially selected for multiple academy accredited festivals internationally; including AMDocs in Palm Springs and Short Shorts Film Festival Asia in Tokyo. The documentary also secured a nomination for 'Best Documentary Short' at the 2018 ATOM Awards, and took out the big gong 'Best Documentary Short 2020' at local film festival WA UNLOCKED.

In their biggest achievement to date, Frances and Samantha spent six years writing, directing, editing and co-producing their first feature documentary Girl Like You, which was selected for the AIDC Factory pitch and subsequently commissioned by the ABC as broadcast hour released on ABC iView, and a feature airing on ABC's main channel. Early into it's international festival run, Girl Like You has been officially selected for Raindance Film Festival in London and CinefestOZ, and won 'Best Documentary Feature' at the WA Screen Culture Awards.



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ENVELOPE AUDIO & ARTLIST

THE FILMMAKERS WOULD LIKE TO THANK
LOUISE, DEBBIE & PETER COGHILL

PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING COMMISSION
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AN F&S FILMS PRODUCTION
[F&S FILMS LOGO]

