

## TRUE LIVES

A New Limited Series from the Producers of *P.O.V.*

### For Immediate Release

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### A HEALTHY BABY GIRL

*With warmth and courage, DES daughter Judith Helfand turns the camera on herself and her family to tell a story about wonder drugs and rude awakenings (It's even funny.)*

Documentary Distributed by American Public Television  
Available for January – December 2005 Scheduling

In 1962, after one miscarriage, Florence Helfand, a suburban Long Island mother of two young sons, became pregnant. To help her carry this baby to term, her doctor prescribed a popular anti-miscarriage drug called diethylstilbestrol (DES). All Florence wanted was a healthy baby girl, and she had every reason to believe that DES was the best pre-natal care money could buy. Instead, DES compromised her only daughter Judith's future and threatened their relationship in ways she could never have imagined. At 25, Judith Helfand was diagnosed with DES-related cervical cancer. Battling personal grief, corporate power, and her mother's guilt, she turns the camera on herself and her family as she explores the drug's tragic legacy in what *Newsday* called "a devastatingly sad, funny and all-embracing work."

**A Healthy Baby Girl**, winner of a George Foster Peabody Award, will air on public television stations as part of *True Lives*, a series presented by American Public Television and American Documentary, Inc. *True Lives* is a new programming initiative from the producers of *P.O.V.*

From 1947 to 1971, doctors prescribed DES, a synthetic estrogen, to millions of pregnant women to prevent miscarriage. Some early scientific studies questioned the drug's usefulness, finding it to be carcinogenic to laboratory animals and ineffective in preventing miscarriage and by 1970 doctors had identified a rare form of vaginal cancer in some young women exposed in utero to DES.

## **TRUE LIVES/A HEALTHY BABY GIRL 2**

The Food and Drug Administration issued an advisory against its use during pregnancy in 1971, but for millions of DES sons and daughters, the damage was done—with health effects including malformed reproductive organs, infertility and cancer.

After being screened regularly during her teens and early 20s, Helfand had thought her worries were over by 1990. After the age of 25, she had been assured her chances for developing DES-related cancer were minimal. That same year, Helfand volunteered to help make a film about the drug. The filmmakers insisted that all DES-exposed crew members get an updated DES screening, so Helfand went for what she thought would be a routine check-up. Instead, she was diagnosed with potentially lethal DES-related clear-cell cancer of the cervix. “I thought I was safe, but you never outgrow your exposure,” the filmmaker recalls. “I was furious, angry, depressed, hurt, and completely overwhelmed. I could not wrap my brain around what was happening to me.”

Two weeks later Helfand had an emergency radical hysterectomy. She went home to recuperate at her parents’ home in suburban Merrick, Long Island, and the healing process began. Refusing to confine the tears, rage, laughter and hope to family dinner table conversations, Helfand decided to address the issues head-on by making her own film—a spirited and stunningly intimate video diary.

**A Healthy Baby Girl** follows the filmmaker over a five-year span, documenting tense moments, tender conversations and everything in between. Determined not to be silenced by her DES exposure, and aware that she had to “get on with life,” Helfand takes viewers from a bittersweet family conversation about *shiva*, the Jewish ritual for mourning, out to scenes of DES daughters lobbying in the halls of Congress, and back home to her nephew’s *bris*, the Jewish ritual and celebration for a baby boy. “I think that the best thing about being human is that we have the capacity and the wherewithal to laugh in the face of tragedy,” the filmmaker says. “Every time we were able to laugh or even engage in some dark humor, it made me believe that our humanity was more powerful than DES exposure and we would find a way to deal with this.”

Intensely intimate and at the same time heartbreakingly universal, **A Healthy Baby Girl** eloquently addresses the ways in which Helfand’s DES exposure affected not only her own health but also the health of her relationships with the people around her and, ultimately, how toxic exposure affects all of us. “This is a story about what happened to me and my family and my mother and our relationship,” she says, “and what happened inside our house, in the kind of suburb that millions of people live in. The kind of place where everything looks okay—until it isn’t.

“I made this film to remind my mother that this was not just our private tragedy,” Helfand continues. “I wanted to explore chemical exposure in the context of the relationships we hold most sacred and translate what is often a statistical abstraction into an urgent reality. We are all vulnerable to the long

## TRUE LIVES/A HEALTHY BABY GIRL 3

term threat of hormone mimicking chemicals; whether you were exposed in-utero to DES, or live near a dioxin emitting medical waste incinerator or are working with cancer-causing chemicals on the shop floor, or are exposed to agricultural pesticides. Since its initial release in 1997 I have worked in collaboration with the environmental health movement to actively use the film as a precautionary tale – reminding manufacturers, public health officials, policy makers, faith based institutions and other institutional decision makers that the health and safety of this generation and the next must be placed well above the ‘bottom line.’

“At the same time, I can say with love, respect and the utmost certainty that via this whole experience – from caring for me when I was ill, to letting me film our innermost pain and loss, to working with me to bring the film to the public, to laughing with me in the face of heedless corporate power, my mother has taught me all I need to know about parenting, motherhood and continuity.”

**A Healthy Baby Girl**, a film by Judith Helfand, was produced in association with the Independent Television Service (ITVS).

### About the Filmmaker:

Judith Helfand defines herself as a filmmaker/organizer and has worked as a documentary producer and educator for the past ten years. She co-produced and co-directed **The Uprising of '34** with veteran documentarian George Stoney. The film was broadcast nationally on P.O.V. in 1995 and was voted one of that year's ten best documentaries by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Helfand's film **A Healthy Baby Girl** was in competition at the 1997 Sundance Film Festival and received a Peabody Award for Excellence in Journalism and Public Education.

**Blue Vinyl**, the 2002 "toxic comedy" co-directed and co-produced with Daniel Gold, is a sequel that picks up right in front of her parents' blue vinyl house, and was broadcast nationally on the HBO series *America Undercover*. Accolades include the 2002 Excellence in Cinematography Award, an IDA nomination for Best Documentary, a Nice Modernist award from *Dwell* Magazine, the 2002 Environmental Messenger of the Year from the Environmental Grantmakers Association, a 2002 EPIC Award from the White House Project, and recent Emmy nominations.

Helfand co-founded Working Films, a nationally recognized organization dedicated to leveraging the power and prestige of documentary to economic, social and environmental justice. With the success of **Blue Vinyl**, she and her filmmaking partner Daniel B. Gold formed a production company, Toxic Comedy Pictures, to create projects with a social conscience and a sense of humor. They are currently in production on **Melting Planet**, a feature documentary about global warming and human nature. Helfand is a full-time professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Department of Undergraduate Film and Television.

### Credits:

Producer/Director	Judith Helfand
Editor	Tricia Reidy
Associate Producers	Melanie Kent/Alice Maurice
Writers	Judith Helfand/Irena Klepfisz
Outreach Director	Pamela Calvert
Original Score Composers	David Krakauer/Frank London

## **TRUE LIVES/A HEALTHY BABY GIRL 4**

Music  
Sound

Paul Morrissett/Alicia Svigals  
The Klezmatics with David Krakauer  
Gautam Choudhury/Judy Karp

Cara Mertes is the Executive Producer of *True Lives*. The series is produced by American Documentary, Inc. Major funding for *True Lives* is provided by the Tides Foundation.

### ***American Public Television***

For 42 years, American Public Television (APT) has been a prime source of programming for the nation's public television stations. APT has more than 10,000 hours of available programming including *Discovering the Real World of Harry Potter*, *Globe Trekker*, *Muhammad Ali: Through the Eyes of the World*, *Nightly Business Report*, *Rick Steves' Europe*, *Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home*, *Ballykissangel*, *Brian Jacques' Redwall* and *Sinatra: The Classic Duets*. APT is known for identifying innovative programs and developing creative distribution techniques for producers. In more than four decades, it has established a tradition of providing public television stations nationwide with program choices that enable them to strengthen and customize their schedules. For more information about APT's programs and services, log on to [www.aptonline.org](http://www.aptonline.org).

### ***American Documentary, Inc.* ([www.americandocumentary.org](http://www.americandocumentary.org))**

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. Through two divisions, *P.O.V.* and *Active Voice*, and additional initiatives, AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, on-line and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

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