

# Walk with Me

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## The Trials of Damon J. Keith



ELECTRONIC PRESS KIT

# Official Synopsis

*Walk With Me: The Trials of Judge Damon J. Keith* tells the story of ten extraordinary years, four groundbreaking cases, and one unconventional federal judge, whose rulings forever changed the face of civil rights in the United States.

It may be the greatest story you never heard.

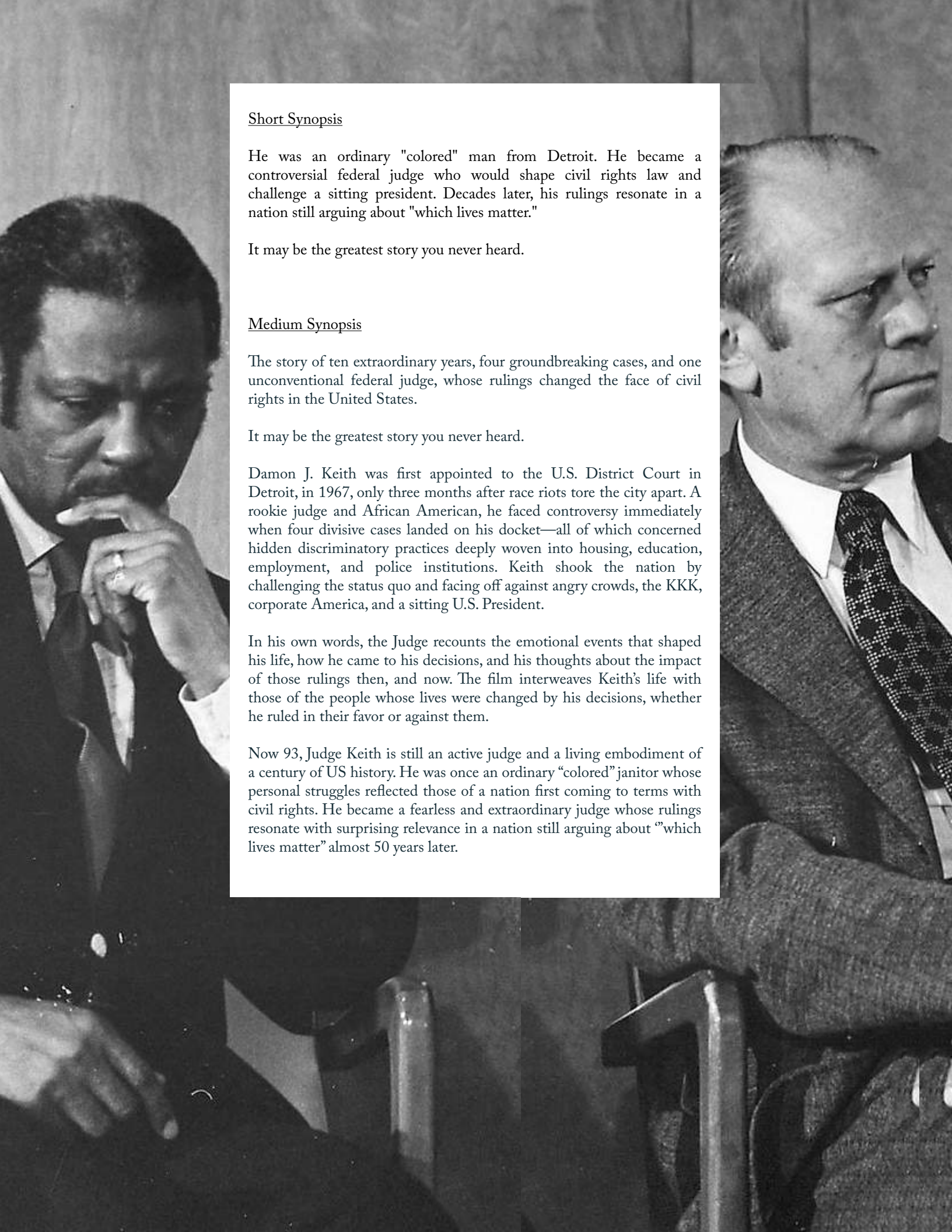
Judge Damon J. Keith was first appointed to the U.S. District Court in Detroit, in 1967, only three months after race riots tore apart the city. A rookie judge and an African American, he faced controversy almost immediately when, in an unusual confluence of circumstance, four divisive cases landed on his docket—all of which concerned hidden discriminatory practices that were deeply woven into housing, education, employment, and police institutions. Keith shook the nation as he challenged the status quo and faced off against angry crowds, the KKK, corporate America, and even a sitting U.S. President.

As Judge Keith was reshaping civil rights at the local level, his rulings began setting precedents for change across the nation. Ultimately, the Supreme Court upheld every one of his decisions. There would be no going back.

*Walk With Me* is deliberately structured as a tapestry, rather than a chronicle, in order to create balance between an intimate portrait and interesting legal history. In his own words, the Judge recounts the significant emotional events that shaped his life, how he came to his decisions on these groundbreaking cases, and his thoughts about the impact of those rulings then, and now. The film interweaves Judge Keith's life with those of his colleagues, his contemporaries in the struggle for civil rights, his daughters, and most movingly, the people whose lives were changed by his decisions, whether he ruled in their favor or against them.

Now 93, Judge Keith still serves on the US Circuit Court of Appeals; a living embodiment of nearly a century of US history. He was once an ordinary "colored" man; a janitor whose personal struggles reflected those of a nation first coming to terms with civil rights. He became a fearless and extraordinary judge whose rulings resonate with surprising relevance in a nation still arguing about "which lives matter" almost 50 years later.





### Short Synopsis

He was an ordinary "colored" man from Detroit. He became a controversial federal judge who would shape civil rights law and challenge a sitting president. Decades later, his rulings resonate in a nation still arguing about "which lives matter."

It may be the greatest story you never heard.

### Medium Synopsis

The story of ten extraordinary years, four groundbreaking cases, and one unconventional federal judge, whose rulings changed the face of civil rights in the United States.

It may be the greatest story you never heard.

Damon J. Keith was first appointed to the U.S. District Court in Detroit, in 1967, only three months after race riots tore the city apart. A rookie judge and African American, he faced controversy immediately when four divisive cases landed on his docket—all of which concerned hidden discriminatory practices deeply woven into housing, education, employment, and police institutions. Keith shook the nation by challenging the status quo and facing off against angry crowds, the KKK, corporate America, and a sitting U.S. President.

In his own words, the Judge recounts the emotional events that shaped his life, how he came to his decisions, and his thoughts about the impact of those rulings then, and now. The film interweaves Keith's life with those of the people whose lives were changed by his decisions, whether he ruled in their favor or against them.

Now 93, Judge Keith is still an active judge and a living embodiment of a century of US history. He was once an ordinary "colored" janitor whose personal struggles reflected those of a nation first coming to terms with civil rights. He became a fearless and extraordinary judge whose rulings resonate with surprising relevance in a nation still arguing about "which lives matter" almost 50 years later.



## Director's Statement

In 2014 I had the occasion to meet Judge Damon Keith when I was hired to produce film-based promotional work for his biography *Crusader for Justice*. Not knowing anything about the Judge, I planned to skim through the biography so I would have some idea of whom I would be talking to when I met him. The skim turned into an all night read. When I finished the book around 5:00am, my first thought was that this story should be made into a movie. My second thought was that a story this interesting and significant must have already been made in a movie. To my surprise, it hadn't. My next thought was that Judge Keith would probably not be as dynamic a character as the book depicts.

Our first meeting proved otherwise.

The Judge was 91 years old when we met. He was (and still is) serving on the US Court of Appeals of the 6th Circuit. Affable, charismatic, and a gifted story teller, we connected despite the gaps in our ages and the obvious fact that he was not only a witness to a century of US history, he had shaped that history and had left a lasting impression on it, in the form of judicial rulings that changed civil rights law in America. I was a merely a filmmaker. Yet, when I asked him if I could make a film about his life and work, his answer was "Jesse, I'm not sure I'm worthy".

I responded, "Trust me. You are."

And so began a project that, two years later, culminated in the feature length documentary film, *Walk With Me: The Trials of Judge Damon J Keith*. The film explores the personal and professional experiences of the Judge's life, told in his own words, and how these infused the decisions he made in five extraordinary cases. His rulings, all of which were upheld by the Supreme Court, are still law today, at a time when ironically, we once again face divisive racial issues that have us questioning, "which lives matter".

Damon Keith's perspective is invaluable in the national dialogue we are having today. He represents the voice of a generation that is rapidly slipping into history and a time when law was literally black or white; when our headlines were populated with the names Martin Luther King, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Charles Hamilton Houston and Damon Keith - each playing a specific role in the mosaic of the civil rights movement. Unlike many of his contemporaries who have passed away, we were able to record Damon Keith's story on film, preserving a portion of civil rights history as told directly by someone who created and influenced it.

Our first objective was to record his testimony and create a dynamic, engaging feature length film. Our next objective was, and continues to be, to get this story in front of as many different kinds of audiences as possible. We have the added bonus of having Judge Keith with us to further enlighten and inspire live audiences. This is why, from the start of this project, we specifically had a film festival tour in mind. I hope to pass on the same sense of awe and level of intimate conversation that I felt when I first met Damon Keith.

Jesse Nesser

Director & Producer

*Walk With Me: The Trials of Judge Damon J. Keith*





## Jesse Nesser - Director & Producer

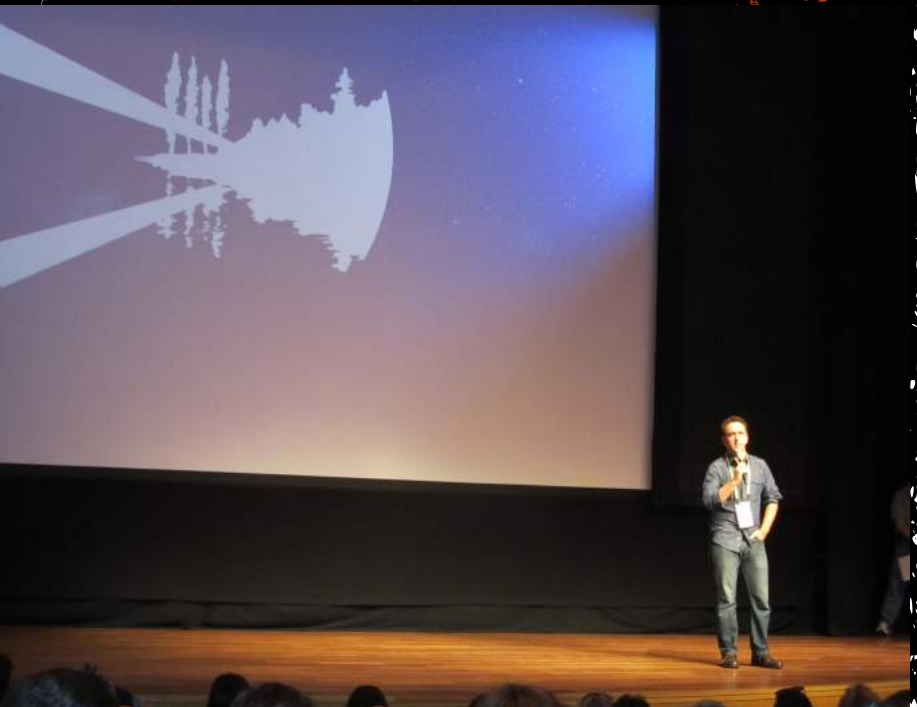
Walk With Me: The Trials of Damon J. Keith is Jesse's third feature length documentary. His film work has taken him to the Big Sky Country of Montana, the poverty of Haiti, the iconic South of France, the villages of Tanzania, and into the streets and Federal Courthouse of Detroit. His movies are diverse in story and locale, but all explore, in different ways, a very common human experience: the way in which decisions often made with the best intentions don't always lead us where we think we are going, but can result in remarkable outcomes.

Jesse has a dual degree in political conflict and documentary film. He grew up in several European countries, allowing him to experience a wide range of cultures. He learned from an early age to see the world from different points of view, and cites this as an influence in deciding to pursue documentary film. His work includes freelance directing and editing on diverse projects for the National Endowment for the Arts, Marlboro College, The National Science Foundation, The Southern Vermont Therapeutic Riding Center and Mitlas Productions. Currently Jesse is producing short films for the SAY Detroit Foundation in Detroit, Michigan, The Have Faith Haiti Organization in Port Au Prince, Haiti, and Hospice of Michigan. He recently completed a series of film featurettes for Harper Collins Publishers showcasing musicians including Tony Bennett, Burt Bacharach, Darlene Love, Wynton Marsalis, Phredley Brown, Paul Stanley (KISS) and Roger McGuinn (The Byrds) who were featured characters in author Mitch Albom's latest book, The Magic String of Frankie Presto.

Jesse directed two previous feature films, The Ranch for Kids, and Tanzania.

The Ranch for Kids chronicles the hope and heartbreak of American parents who have adopted orphans from overseas, only to discover the children have severe psychological and behavioral disorders that were not disclosed by the foreign orphanages. These children now threaten the stability, and even the lives, of their families. The Ranch For Kids screened at the 2015 Trail Dance Film Festival. The film won Best Documentary Drama at the 2014 Costa Rica International Documentary Film Festival.

Tanzania, follows affluent, naïve and idealistic students from several countries arriving in Africa expecting to change the lives of impoverished villagers, but discovering instead that it is, in fact, their own lives that end up most changed by the experience. Tanzania screened in France.







## Meet Our Executive Producers

**Mitch Albom** is an author, playwright, and screenwriter who has written seven books, including the international bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the bestselling memoir of all time. Albom also works as a columnist and a broadcaster and has founded seven charities in Detroit and Haiti, where he



**Edsel B. Ford, II** is a Consultant of Ford Motor Co. Mr. Ford is the Owner of Pentastar Aviation LLC. (formerly Daimler Chrysler Aviation) and the majority owner of Marketing Associates, a Detroit based marketing services organization. He served as Vice President of Ford Motor Company since 1993 and served as its President and Chief Operating Officer from May 1991 to 1998. He joined Ford Motor Company in January 1974 and spanning 25 years, he held a wide variety of management positions with Ford Motor Co. Mr. Ford is very active with many other organizations including the National Advisory Board of The Salvation Army, Detroit/Wayne County Airport Commission and Henry Ford Health System.



**Faye Nelson** is vice president, Public Affairs and president of the DTE Energy Foundation for DTE Energy, a Detroit-based diversified energy company involved in the development and management of energy-related businesses and services nationwide. Nelson earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Mercy College of Detroit and a law degree from the University of Detroit School of Law. She is also a member of the State Bar of Michigan, Wolverine Bar Association, Life Member of the Sixth Circuit Judicial Conference, and the Economic Club of Detroit.





### **Reuben Aaronson - Director of Photography**

Reuben Aaronson, whose distinctive work has been nominated for both Emmy and Academy Awards, reflects a wide variety of experience that now totals over thirty-five years. Reuben has traveled the world to shoot and direct award-winning films about the human experience for National Geographic, Discovery, HBO, PBS and many others. From Academy Awards to Emmys, Aaronson's work is consistently recognized for its beauty and sensitivity. His films include *Inside the Vatican*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Hotel Terminus* with the latter winning the Academy Award for Best Documentary.



### **Matan Rubinstein - Music**

Matan Rubinstein is a composer, pianist and electronic musician, making music in a variety of contexts and venues from works for orchestra and chamber groups (with and without electronics), to Jazz Orchestras and combos, as well as projects for dance, film, television and interactive media. Among his notable credits as bandleader are the Modular Music Ensemble, a Nine-piece Genre-bending group, and Sade, for a small group of improvisers, both dedicated to performing his original compositions. Originally from Israel, Matan has lived and worked in Brooklyn, NY and Madison, WI, where he received a doctoral degree from the University of Wisconsin in music composition. He now lives with his wife and three daughters in the Pioneer Valley in Western Massachusetts. Matan is on music faculty at Marlboro College.



### **Paul Turner III - Research**

Paul A. Turner III is a Wayne State University Juris Doctor Candidate and Wayne Law Promise Scholar. Paul graduated from Michigan State University (MSU) with degrees in Public Policy Studies, Political Science Pre-Law. Paul served as a Congressional District Liaison for a sitting member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

### **William Hauge - Consulting Editor**

Hauge is a documentary editor acknowledged for his work on independent films. Oscar-nominated for *Hoop Dreams*—which is widely considered to be one of the best documentary films of all time—and Emmy-nominated for *Assassinated* on TBS, he has edited approximately one hundred films, including over thirty hours for television network broadcast including PBS.

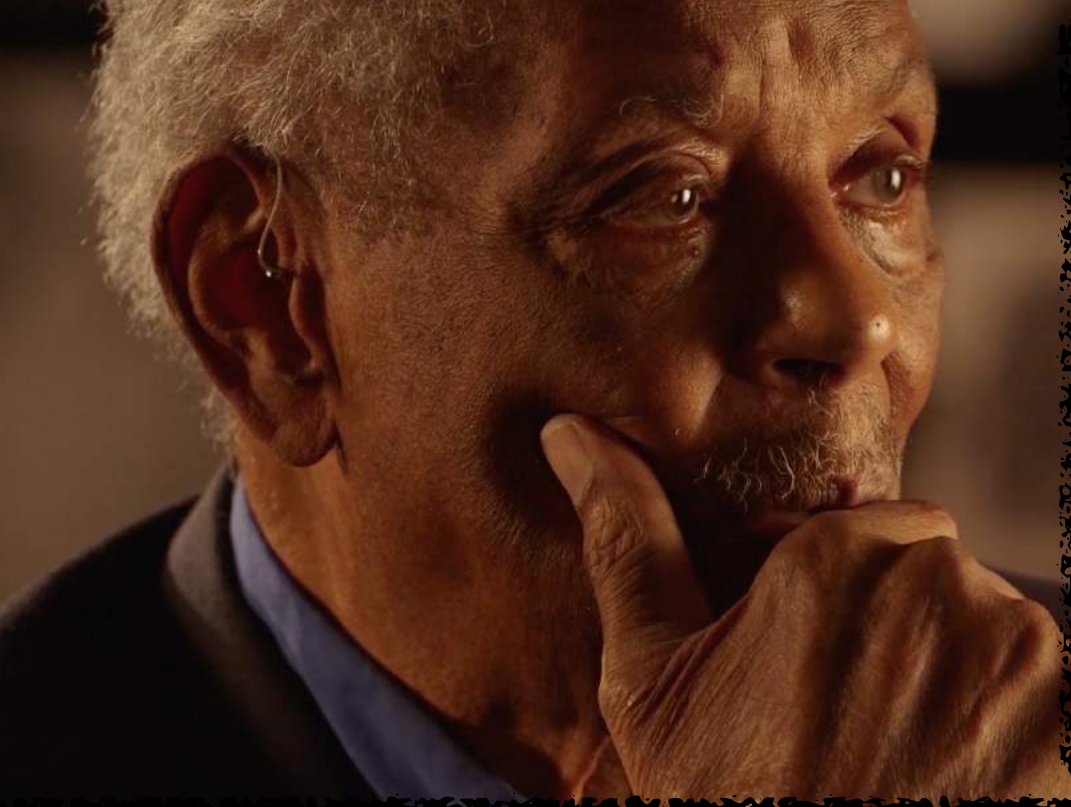




# *The Judge Who Told Nixon 'No'*











## CREW

DIRECTOR	Jesse Nesser
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS	Mitch Albom Cynthia & Edsel Ford II Faye Alexander Nelson
PRODUCERS	Patrick Lane Sally Davis Jack Rossiter-Munley Jesse Nesser
CO PRODUCERS	Marc "Rosey" Rosenthal Samantha Cheirif
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY	Reuben Aaronson
TECHNICAL DIRECTOR	Douglas Trevethan
MUSIC	Matan Rubinstein
EDITOR	Jesse Nesser
EDITING CONSULT	William Haugse
RESEARCH	Paul Turner II
ASSIST. CAMERA	Marcus Lovell
COLOR	Matt Barth Riot Film Productions
SOUND EDIT & MIX	David Stringer Sound Investment Studios
PRODUCTION COMPANY	Overseas Cowboy Films



## DETAILS

COUNTRY	USA
PROD. COMPANY	Overseas Cowboy Films
RUNTIME	104 Min
SHOOT FORMAT	HDV, RED, PRO-RES
RATIO	16:9
EXHIB. FORMAT	DCP, Blu-Ray, Mov.
WEBSITE	<a href="http://www.thedkdoc.com">www.thedkdoc.com</a>
TRAILER	<a href="https://vimeo.com/126497016">https://vimeo.com/126497016</a>





## DAVIS v. CITY OF PONTIAC



### DAVIS V. PONTIAC

In 1970, after finding that Pontiac, Michigan intentionally located new schools to continue de-facto segregation, Judge Keith orders the first-ever busing case of the north. His ruling is met by mobs of angry mothers, townsfolk and even the KKK.



## GARRETT v. CITY OF HAMTRAMCK



### GARRETT V. HAMTRAMCK

In 1971, Hamtramck, a predominantly Polish town uses urban renewal plans to target and uproot a small minority of black residents from their homes. Judge Keith faces off against an angry city council in what would become the longest housing dispute in U.S. history - one that continues to this day.



All Pontiac schools  
must be integrated  
U.S. judge decrees

WE WANT WHITE  
TENANTS IN OUR  
WHITE COMMUNITY

## THE CASES OF

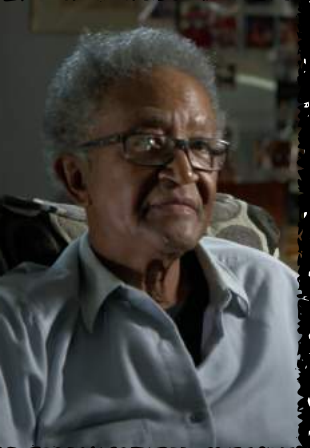
### Walk with Me

The Trials of Damon J. Keith



### STAMPS V. DETROIT EDISON

In 1971, Detroit's largest electric company, Detroit Edison is charged with racial discrimination, particularly in their hiring and promotion practices. While the fact that a major corporation was discriminating surprised no one, the evidence that was uncovered shocked everyone - leading to an unprecedented ruling by Judge Keith that echoed in boardrooms across the country.



### BAKER V. CITY OF DETROIT

In 1975, a group of white police officers attempt to overthrow the city's affirmative action program when black officers with lower test-scores are chosen for promotion in the interest of racially balancing the force.



In one of the first defense claiming "reverse-discrimination," Judge Keith is put in the unique position of determining whether *white* police officers are being discriminated against.

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

## STAMPS v. DETROIT EDISON



## BAKER v. CITY OF DETROIT





# PRODUCTION NOTES

## Pre-Production

Pre production on the film began in January 2014. This started with research, preliminary interviews with the Judge, and making the story telling decisions that would distill 91 years of experiences into a focused, yet comprehensive and engaging hour and a half film. It was decided early on to structure the film around the judge walking through places that had significance, while telling his story, in his own words. There would be no narrator. Further, the film would focus on the 5 most significant cases of his career. These came at him when he was a young judge and new to the bench. Making it all the more interesting, they all turned out to be groundbreaking issues that set legal precedents still in place today, and which give the film relevance and resonance.

We kicked off an ambitious fundraising campaign, specifically targeting corporate foundations. Not a small consideration was also the fact the Judge was 91, and despite impeccable health, we wanted to be sure he remained in good enough health to both tell his story, and see it brought to the screen. There was no time for grants or crowd-funding.



We were delighted when Ford Motor Company and DTE both signed on as Presenting Sponsors. The Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan and Delphi became Participating Sponsors. Thanks to their generosity, we were able to raise enough money for production, and also enough to get us through the hard editing (Initial edit) in post production. For this film, not having to pause to raise more money was crucial, not only from a creative perspective, but in keeping Judge Keith's confidence and faith in this project alive.



## Production

Something very interesting happened when we advertised key positions on the production team. We were inundated with applications from extremely experienced and talented individuals who simply wanted to be a part of this project, out of respect for Judge Keith's legacy. Among the people who came together: an Emmy winning cinematic veteran of National Geographic, an exceptionally talented recent graduate from University of Michigan, and an American-history exhibit producer from the Smithsonian. The different ages, skills, perspectives and talents coalesced into a small team that took advantage of everyone's strengths. One of the most challenging aspects of filming was constructing a shooting schedule that could keep up with Judge Keith. Many forget that as an active judge, he goes to work five days a week, and off to Cincinnati to hear cases on the Appellate Court. We went where he went, tried to keep up.

We focused first on his personal story: growing up poor in Detroit, his service in a segregated army during WWII, his mentorship by Thurgood Marshall at Howard University and his attempt to quell the violent 1969 race riots - all experiences that would later inform his time on the bench. We felt it was important to physically experience, and convey visually, the places that changed Judge Keith's life trajectory one way or another, ultimately leading him to the federal judiciary. So we went with him to Howard University in Washington DC, to the farm where he married the love of his life in Richmond, Virginia, to the bus where his friend, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat and even to the bathroom in the Detroit News, where as a janitor studying for the bar examination in 1950, he was told by a white reporter that there would never be a black lawyer in Detroit and that he should "keep mopping."

Filming the Judge concluded with an 8 day "master interview" covering hours and hours of stories from his life, and his decision making process in the five cases that would forever change America.

## Post-Production

Post production is, arguably, the most creatively challenging aspect of making a film. Here was where we had to take over 90 years of story, and tell it in 90 minutes. After reviewing 100+ hours of footage we structured the movie around what had become obvious in the filming--we could not tell Judge Keith's professional story without understanding his personal journey. The finished movie moves easily between the two, and one of the things we hear most often from people who have seen the film is that they feel very connected to the human side of the story. We didn't want this to be a dissertation on civil rights law, but rather, a personal story about how life's experiences affected a man whose rulings would now infuse the life experiences of generations to come.

To accomplish this, it was time to bring on new people whose very specific skills could elevate our footage to the highest standard of film. These included:

An award winning composer to write an original score.

A Detroit-based colorist as well as a sound editing/mixing team to fine tune the technical aspects of the film.

A motion graphics designer to bring old newspaper headlines and archival photos to life.

The Academy Award nominated editor of Hoop Dreams, Bill Haugse, to consult as we neared a final cut.

The end result is a film of which we could not be more proud, and which we hope will inform, delight and inspire viewers of all ages.

