

EPIPHANY



How to make an ordinary life an extraordinary experience

'A story about conquering fear, being among sharks and reinventing life at every turn, while navigating an autistic family through life as a mother and a photographer.'

Contact

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SYNOPSIS

LONG VERSION (292 WORDS)

Epiphany is a true story about love, autism, nature, passion, fear, determination, perseverance and making daunting choices in life. Ellen Cuylaerts, mother and award winning internationally renowned wildlife photographer, is afraid of water but sets out to conquer that fear over and over again to help the environment.

Early in her marriage, Ellen — master in history and education, former Cisco engineer, and e-commerce founder — is trapped between the peculiar situation her children and husband are and the mainstream expectations of social peers. Fighting an exhausting battle, mainly against ignorance and prejudice, she finds relief in a piece of paper: the diagnosis of autism in her husband and two children. Armed with evidence and facts, she can start educating her surroundings. Although making remarkable progress with her loved ones, she realizes along the way that the core issue would never disappear: society will not accept nor understand ‘being different’. Thus Ellen and her husband Michael decide to move away from their busy social life and settle down at the other end of the world, close to nature: Grand Cayman.

Living near the ocean, Ellen starts diving and pursues her old passion, photography, though this time underwater. Early on she understands the power of images and social media to bring environmental awareness to the public. As such emerges her mission to show the public the in-depth beauty of sharks and her battle to refute the allegation that sharks are a danger to humans.

In search for the “key” to communicate with people affected by autism, she discovers similarities with animals in the wild. Could that key help her to navigate her loved ones through society? Will it allow her to connect to those large predators she welcomes in front of her lens?

MEDIUM VERSION (118 WORDS)

Epiphany is the story of award winning and internationally renowned wildlife photographer Ellen Cuylaerts on her journey to conquer her fear for water and sharks. Witness how she takes every hurdle on her path while, as a mother, guiding her two children and her husband — them having high-functioning autism spectrum disorder — through the complicated social world in life.

Being determined to find the “key” to communicate through the barriers caused by autism, she discovers people affected by autism show a great likeness to animals in the wild. Epiphany will tell you what Ellen discovered and how she applies her knowledge towards animals too, allowing the beholder of her artwork to feel the inner soul of the animal.

SHORT VERSION (40 WORDS)

Follow Ellen from overcoming her fear for water to becoming a shark advocate and defender. A real life story about conquering fear and protecting endangered animals, seen through the eyes of a wildlife photographer and mother of an autistic family.

THE TEAM

FRANS DE BACKER ~ LAND UNIT DIRECTOR | STORYLINE EDITOR



Frans De Backer is a documentary filmmaker who's heart lies with the oceans.

Started in 1988 as a Lighting Cameraman, he traveled the world making documentaries and travel programs for the Belgian national networks. During these travels, he was always drawn to the sea and to water in all its forms. His passion for the oceans turned him into an avid diver and underwater filmmaker, sharing the wonders of the aquatic realm.

After moving to the Cayman Islands in 2012, the ocean became an even bigger part in his life, and his work as a filmmaker is now completely dedicated to the conservation of the marine world. Bringing awareness and education about the fragile underwater ecosystem has become his primary goal and passion.

MICHAEL MAES ~ UNDERWATER & AERIAL UNIT DP | PRODUCER | EDITOR | POST PRODUCTION



Michael Maes is a wildlife filmmaker, specialized in big animals and animal behavior. His portfolio (both underwater and topside) covers the polar regions, temperate waters and the tropics. He has a passionate interest for polar bears and Arctic whales.

Though stemming from a past in IT, he passionately diversified to cinematography in 2012. His work has been broadcast on national television, Nat Geo Wild, Outside Television and received recognition at various international film festivals.

Michael recognized the impact of storytelling through pictures and film and uses this platform to create awareness of the remarkable wildlife realm to the broad public. At the heart of his films is showing people the beauty and fragility of this blue planet, from the depths of the warm waters to the white vastness of the polar regions. Michael produces films with integrity, serving to both educate and inform the general public about environmental issues dear to him.

Michael was part of the Arctic expedition "Elysium – Artists for the Arctic". This scientific expedition; documenting the effects of climate change; sailed under 'Flag 101' of the renowned Explorers Club.

In 2015 Michael was inducted as cinematographer in the Ocean Artists Society, an organization uniting artists worldwide to raise awareness and protect the marine environment through art. Michael is also a founding Navigator of the Central Caribbean Marine Institute, a leading scientific research centre in the Caribbean focusing on coral reef restoration, research on coral resilience, and ocean education.

ELLEN CUYLAERTS ~ WRITER | ASSISTANT DIRECTOR | TALENT | LOGISTICS

Ellen Cuylaerts relocated from Belgium to the Cayman Islands in 2009. She studied history in Antwerp & Leuven and got her master in modern history and education.

She home schools her 2 gifted teenagers and decided to take up scuba diving in June 2011. Soon she became a Master Scuba Diver and took up her childhood dream photography and combined it with the wonders of the underwater world.

After diving a few months she signed up for a workshop on the island with renowned underwater photographer & marine biologist Dr. Alex Mustard and decided to use the skills she learned to spread the awareness and contribute to the conservation and preservation of the fragile marine environment.

Her basic concern is the decay of the oceans by pollution, over-fishing, the brutal act of shark finning and dolphin and whale slaughtering.

If images can contribute to achieve goals in conservation of marine life and education about the importance of our oceans, that's Ellen's drive to shoot images that capture hearts and the will to act before it's too late.

Ellen received already numerous awards for her pictures and was the 2013 world champion in the yearly online underwater photo competition 'underwaterphotography.com. June 2014 & again 2015 she became first and second in the United Nations' first World Oceans Day Photo Competition (category interaction and seascapes). She was inducted in the Ocean Artists Society.

2015 Ellen was accepted a Fellow Explorer in the NYC Chapter of the would renowned & exclusive Explorers Club.

ERIC BETTENS ~ MUSIC COMPOSER

Eric Bettens, musician and composer, is a true music lover. A subtle blend of electronic and acoustic sounds sometimes embellished by sounds captured in Nature, the works he composes not only bring the admiration of the public and professionals alike, but have also won numerous awards.

Q AND A

↳ **What was your inspiration for the documentary?**

⦿EC: Growing into my underwater photography, at a sudden moment I realized I could contribute so much towards raising awareness and education. I felt I came home and could fulfill my mission! It got me around the world, meeting like-minded people and making a difference towards guarding oceans and earth for future generations!

↳ **How did you come up with the story?**

⦿EC: When Michael and I attended a fundraiser in Orlando back in 2013, we bid on a 'shark feeding course' by Cristina Zenato. It was Michael's intention to film Cristina — who is probably the most recognized shark advocate around the world — at work. Due to difficulties scheduling the shoot I realized we might had to let go of plan A — filming Cristina — and build a story around an 'average' housewife, mother of two autistic children, afraid of water, fearing sharks; in short: me. As the viewer can relate to such a person, it would be a perfect angle to tell him or her the story about the threats sharks face caused by mankind. I started drafting a script on the plane the next day.

↳ **Were you confident you would conquer your fears so those close encounters with the sharks could be filmed?**

⦿EC: No I wasn't. To a certain extent there was 'film pressure' as those encounters, especially the last ones, were crucial to the story. But Michael reassured me not to worry. Should I have chosen not to do certain dives, it would have added a different angle to the story.

MM: I never doubted for a second Ellen wouldn't be able to do it. Her love for wild animals and conservation transcends her personal comfort. However I always told her not to go in the water if she didn't feel confident about it.

↪ **How long did the actual production take?**

MM: The actual shooting happened in 2014-2015, during some 18 months. Add 6 months to that for post production and you're at about 2 years.

↪ **Where was it shot?**

MM: Bahamas: Cat Island and Grand Bahama – Cayman Islands: Grand Cayman – Mexico: Isla Mujeres – USA: Orlando – Belgium: Antwerp and the North Sea coast.

↪ **How did Frans De Backer join the team?**

MM: Frans used to be a hired cameraman for the Belgian national television. That's how he came to Cayman in 2011 to film us for an episode on a program "Till the moon and back" (by Annick Ruyts) about couples living abroad. As Frans is an excellent cameraman and visual storyteller, shares our love for the ocean and he already knew us as a family; the choice to hire him was a pretty obvious one.

↪ **Are the scenes scripted and acted?**

MM: Epiphany is a vérité documentary. Apart from a few scenes on the post-dive-accident of Ellen (we had no original footage of that), everything is filmed as the events occurred. Nothing has been acted or staged. Even the interviews are cut as they were shot, which sometimes shows.

↪ **What is your favorite scene in the film?**

MM: By and large the final scene where Ellen stands tall, circled by sharks, after she successfully ended her shark feed. To me that scene is the epitome of owning your life. It is the ultimate proof a hurdle can stop you or you can decide to choose a new path. Ultimately it's up to yourself.

↪ **What was the most difficult scene to shoot and why?**

MM: I think that would be the first close-up in the shark feeding sequence. I didn't know what to expect and was too enthusiastic getting in the water, that I forgot to double-check with Cristina (Zenato – shark feeder/instructor) what my boundaries were, where I would get off limit. So the first time I saw a cool close-up opportunity, I started wondering “darn, I forgot to ask how close I can get to Ellen”. So I kinda shuffled timidly, closer and closer to Ellen, peeking at Cristina through the corner of my eyes, waiting for some kind of signal I had to back off. That signal never came, which I still consider a huge honor, knowing how well Cristina controls her environment.

↪ **The interviews of the protagonist are shot center frame against a black backdrop. Why this unusual choice?**

EC: The predominant black in the interview reflects the autism in the documentary. It isolates the core of the message, eliminating all distractions. It is a good visualization on how autism affects your life.

↪ **What format did you shoot and what gear did you use?**

MM: Frans made a very clever choice for his topside B-Roll shots, the Sony Z100. I got the Canon 1DCs as underwater cameras and for the main topside filming. The shotgun was a stereo Sanken CMS-10 and lavaliers from Sennheiser. I added a Helix gimbal in the mix so that Frans could shoot his shots on the rocking boat more steady.

↪ **What can an individual do for marine conservation?**

EC: Checking out this list of 10 pointers at National Geographic would be a good start: <http://ocean.nationalgeographic.com/ocean/take-action/10-things-you-can-do-to-save-the-ocean/>

PRODUCTION STILLS

Shark feeding at Grand Bahama

Michael Maes – Cristina Zenato – Frans De Backer



DP Filming a tiger shark at Grand Bahama (Michael Maes)



Children first time in the water with sharks

Margaux Maes – Max Maes



Underwater DP gives a briefing for the upcoming shark-encounter

Michael Maes – Frans De Backer – Ellen Cuylaerts

Not everyday one gets a 101 class of a former underwater photography world champion

Margaux Maes – Ellen Cuylaerts



Reviewing dailies on the flybridge (Michael Maes – Ellen Cuylaerts)



DP filming an oceanic white tip shark at the surface at Cat Island (Michael Maes)



REVIEWS • NEWS • QUOTES

"EPIPHANY IS PERSONAL, POWERFUL AND DIRECT. THIS FILM SHARES A RARE INTIMACY ABOUT REALIZATION AND THE REALITY OF THE SEA AS A THREAD OF LIFE AND LOVE WITHIN A FAMILY."

~ David Doubilet and Jennifer Hayes | Contributing Photographers, National Geographic

"THIS STORY IS SO INSPIRING AND HEARTFELT"

~ Jim and Jamie Dutcher | Publicists, National Geographic — Founders of Living with Wolves

"WE THOUGHT IT WAS AN INTERESTING AND PROFESSIONALLY MADE FILM"

~ Howard and Michele Hall | Underwater IMAX Filmmaker Icons

"EPIPHANY IS MORE THAN A DOCUMENTARY FILM. IT'S A TESTAMENT TO ONE FAMILY'S QUEST TO REDEFINE "ORDINARY" — AND TO LIVE BOLDLY IN THE EXTRAORDINARY."

~ Cathryn Castle | Executive Editor, Dive Training Magazine

"A PROFOUNDLY MOVING TALE THAT WILL MAKE YOU LOVE PEOPLE AND SHARKS IN EQUAL MEASURE"

~ Mark Rovner | CEO, Sea Change Strategies

"A LABOR OF LOVE AND A QUEST FOR SELF DISCOVERY, EPIPHANY TRANSPORTS YOU INTO THE OCEAN DEPTHS WHICH REVEAL UNEXPECTED UNIVERSAL TRUTHS ABOUT OUR HUMAN CONDITION. A PEARL OF A FILM TO BE TREASURED."

~ Patty Elkus | International Ocean Advocate

"A GREAT STORY STARTS"

~ Florian Guthknecht | Director & Filmmaker, Bavarian Broadcast

"I WAS COMPLETELY BLOWN AWAY BY EPIPHANY, SUCH A PURE, TRUE AND WONDERFUL STORY, STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART"

~ Dirk Mertens | Director, Visit Flanders

HOW TO MAKE AN ORDINARY LIFE AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE

EPIPHANY



"SO INSPIRING AND HEARTFELT"

- JIM & JAMIE DUTCHER | PUBLICISTS, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



MAESTERPIECE PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS EPIPHANY A FILM BY MICHAEL MAES MUSIC BY ERIC BETTENS STORY BY ELLEN CUYLAERTS
EDITED BY FRANS DE BACKER AND MICHAEL MAES DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL MAES EXECUTIVE PRODUCER MICHAEL MAES CO-DIRECTOR FRANS DE BACKER