

WESTPORT COUNTRY PLAYHOUSE

NEWS RELEASE

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Free Screening of Westport Weston Family YMCA's Award-winning Documentary on Friday, June 9 at Westport Country Playhouse

“Below Surface,” a film about a multicultural, multigenerational Aquafit class, will be followed by a discussion on the “healing power of community”

The Westport Weston Family YMCA (WWFY) will present a free-of-charge screening of “Below Surface” at Westport Country Playhouse on Friday, June 9, at 7 p.m. The award-winning, 19-minute documentary short, filmed in and around the WWFY’s pool, reveals the healing power of community through an unlikely subject---a YMCA Aquafit class.

A panel discussion will follow the film with Patty Kondub, WWFY veteran AquaFitness instructor; Mary Lake Polan, “Below Surface” executive producer; and Judith Bookbinder, “Below Surface” producer; moderated by Tracey Knight Narang, Tony Award-winning producer and a playwright.

Admission is free by registering at: <https://tickets.westportplayhouse.org/6125/6126>

Produced in 2022, the documentary short gathers numerous moving stories of a multicultural and multigenerational WWFY Aquafit class to demonstrate how kindness and caring for others, combined with exercise, can be an antidote for grief, stress, and physical illness. The heartwarming honesty of the participants is a reminder of the power in supporting one another.

“The Y’s healthy living programs, including Aquafit, a water-based cardio and conditioning class, serve and strengthen our community by keeping participants of all ages and abilities active, strong, and connected in spirit, mind and body,” said Anjali McCormick, CEO, WWFY. “The relationships developed in the pool and on deck between staff and members bring joy, belonging, and a sense of achievement with each class. This was especially true during the pandemic.”

McCormick added, “We acknowledge the courage and generosity of our members who shared their stories in the film and are grateful they are a vibrant part our community.”

Featured in the film are Mary Lake Polan, Patty Kondub, Joan Evon, Dick Rauh, Betty Auber, Dick Auber, Barbara Rose, Althea Seaborn, Will Burnie, Brian Ference, Bill Ference, Nor Smitbol, Linda Abou Saab, Sharif Abou Saab, Ruth Sherman, Anne Banks, Nathalie Fonteyne, and Madeline Lee.

“Below Surface” won the grand jury and audience choice awards at the 2023 Gasparilla International Film Festival, and was a 2023 official selection at the Sarasota Film Festival, American Documentary

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Film Festival, Palm Beach International Film Festival, San Luis Obispo International Film Festival, Sunscreen Film Festival, and Independent Film Festival Boston.

The film is directed by Lukas Hauser; produced by Judith Bookbinder, Mary Lake Polan, Frank Bennack, and Wade Lew.

Director Lukas Hauser said, "Aging in an increasingly fractured and isolated society is a core problem of our times. But a solution reveals itself in an unlikely place: your neighborhood YMCA pool. Although I had never seen a water aerobics (or 'Aquafit') class before I started working on this short documentary, within hours of the start of filming in Connecticut, I realized this subject was filled with surprises.

"The secret traumas discovered among the class participants turned out to be both unique and universal," Hauser added. "By sharing them, I hope 'Below Surface' inspires people to consider potentially life-saving activities like Aquafit — and the communities they engender — or at least understand how beneficial ongoing human connection is for everyone, all lifelong."

Hauser, partner at McConnell/Hauser, has edited several HBO documentaries as well as 100 L'Oréal Paris Women of Worth films. "The Black List," featuring Toni Morrison and Chris Rock, which he edited, won an NAACP Image Award and screened at the Sundance Film Festival. Hauser has an MFA from Columbia University.

The film's executive producer is Mary Lake Polan, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H., clinical professor, Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences, Yale University School of Medicine. Dr. Polan specializes in reproductive endocrinology and infertility and hormonal issues related to gynecology patients and menopause. She received her bachelor's degree from Connecticut College, and her Ph.D. in molecular biophysics and biochemistry and her M.D. from Yale University, where she completed her residency in obstetrics and gynecology, as well as her Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility Fellowship. Dr. Polan received her MPH from the Maternal and Child Health Program at the University of California, Berkeley. After serving on the boards of several public and private companies as well as participating in the scientific advisory boards of private life sciences companies, she became a managing director of Golden Seeds, an angel investing group that invests in women-led companies.

Producer Judith Bookbinder is currently a creative consultant after being the VP of creative communications at Hearst. During her 27-year tenure at Hearst, she produced hundreds of short-form videos, many that were created in collaboration with McConnell/Hauser. She also had the opportunity to produce a full-length documentary about Hearst, "Citizen Hearst," for the company's 125th anniversary. She worked on that film with Academy Award-nominated director Leslie Iwerks. Bookbinder started her creative career as a graphic designer in 1972 and had her own design firm before joining Hearst in 1994.

Associate producer Wade Lew is currently the associate director of creative strategy at Hearst. Over the past three years, he has produced dozens of videos, websites and campaigns for Hearst and its nine divisions. Prior to his career in media and communications, Lew worked in international relations and studied comparative political, economic and social structures at the London School of Economics and the Elliott School of International Affairs.

More information on "Below Surface": <https://www.westportplayhouse.org/show/below-surface/>
Film trailer: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oltDQ9RIP1su6Z1fzFShLxz4ne00XBzd/view>

The Westport Weston Family YMCA is a cause-driven organization that strives to be a welcoming and supportive environment for all. Its purpose is to strengthen the foundations of the community through actions and programs. WWFY believes that to bring about meaningful change in individuals and communities it must be focused and accountable. At the WWFY, the success of its cause is measured by how well it serves communities in its three areas of focus: Youth Development, Healthy Living, and Social Responsibility. For more information, visit: <https://westport.org/>

To register for free-of-charge admission to "Below Surface," go to <https://tickets.westportplayhouse.org/6125/6126> or call the Playhouse box office at (203) 227-4177, toll-free at 1-888-927-7529, or visit Westport Country Playhouse, 25 Powers Court, off Route 1, Westport.

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