

- Speaker 1: [00:03](#) This is the *Thank You, 72* podcast, brought to you by Wisconsin Alumni Association. This podcast salutes outstanding Badgers from every one of Wisconsin's 72 counties. It's also our way of saying thank you to the people of this state for sending their best and brightest to the University of Wisconsin–Madison.
- Speaker 1: [00:21](#) Here's your host, Todd Pritchard.
- Todd Pritchard: [00:24](#) Seeking truth, exposing injustice, sparking change. In this podcast, the story of two UW Madison alumni who used very different talents and skills to confront long-standing issues involving race and inequality. We begin with an Iron County native who you've probably never heard of before. Yet, he reshaped the pursuit of justice during many of America's most turbulent years. Joseph Aloysius Sullivan was born in 1917 in Montreal and raised in Hurley. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1938, and he took a job with the Federal Bureau of Investigation when he learned that it paid more than what he was earning after law school. Eventually named a major case investigator, Sullivan played key roles in the agencies inquiries following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Sterling Hall bombings at the University of Wisconsin, and the Kent State shootings. Sullivan's relentless pursuit of the truth served him well during the months when he investigated and ultimately solved the Mississippi Burning case — the FBI's probe into the murders of three civil rights workers in 1964. His painstaking work unlocked the secrets of a local Ku Klux Klan chapter. A confidential informant, never identified by Sullivan, passed along information from a citizen about where the bodies of three civil rights workers were buried. One of those victims was UW alumnus Andrew Goldman.
- Todd Pritchard: [01:51](#) Although Sullivan never sought public attention, it surrounded his life nevertheless. Actor Gene Hackman played him in the 1988 Academy Award–nominated movie *Mississippi Burning*. He was the role model for the lead in the TV series *The FBI*. Novelist Tom Clancy called him “the greatest lawman America ever produced.” Sullivan died of cancer in Manhattan in 2002. A *Wall Street Journal* obituary noted that the homeless who visited the soup kitchen where Sullivan volunteered were astonished to learn that the gentleman who mopped up their floors had been a top G-man. Thank you, Iron County for the relentless Joseph Sullivan who solved some of the nation's most famous crimes during its darkest hours.
- Speaker 1: [02:38](#) You're listening to the *Thank You, 72* podcast. The Wisconsin Alumni Association is honoring amazing Badgers. These

trailblazers are a positive force of change in Wisconsin and around the nation. For more amazing UW Madison alumni stories, visit thankyou72.org. That's thankyou72.org.

- Speaker 1: [02:57](#) Now, the story of another UW grad whose work today shines a bright light on long-standing issues of race and equality in our time. Once again, here's Todd Pritchard from the Wisconsin Alumni Association.
- Todd Pritchard: [03:09](#) It started with a simple letter. That letter contained a stunning revelation. It started a decade-long deep dive into modern day segregation, racism, and injustice. It is the story of heartbreaking loss, but it's also a story of hope. *Southern Rites* is told through the photographs and documentary produced and directed by our guest, 1997 grad, and award-winning visual storyteller and filmmaker, Gillian Laub.
- Todd Pritchard: [03:38](#) Gillian, welcome to the podcast. Gillian, we're going to talk about *Southern Rites* and "rights" in this case is spelled R-I-T-E-S. We're gonna talk about that in just a moment, but first, tell us your story. Where did you grow up and how did you come to the University of Wisconsin–Madison?
- Gillian: [03:54](#) So, I grew up in West Chester which is about 60 miles north of Manhattan, and I always heard about the University of Wisconsin from a cousin of mine. He was my father's first cousin who my father greatly admired. I would hear stories about Madison, Wisconsin, and his days there. He graduated high school when he was 16, and he was quite a character on the campus here. When I came to visit, it was not during winter, the winter months. It was quite a tease because it was on a gorgeous, gorgeous autumn weekend, and I just fell in love with the campus. I wanted to experience something different than the east coast.
- Todd Pritchard: [04:47](#) So you graduated from the University of Wisconsin, you got a degree in comparative literature, and then you went on to study photography at the International Center for Photography in New York. What was that like? What was that experience about?
- Gillian: [04:59](#) So, when I was here I've always been in love with storytelling and my degree, I realize that I'm not a good writer and I've always been really in love with photography. I remember my high school graduation I got a video camera. If you saw what it looked like, you'd laugh. I used to go around campus interviewing people. So, I always knew that I really wanted to,

you know, my life to be in visual arts after I graduated Madison, but I think that Madison gave me the foundation for storytelling and narrative. Then I went on to study photography afterwards. That's when I knew I was dedicating my life to storytelling through photography and filmmaking.

- Todd Pritchard: [05:59](#) So in 2002, you were working as a freelance photographer at *Spin* magazine, correct?
- Gillian: [06:05](#) In 2002 I was a freelancer for many different magazines. *Spin* magazine was one of the magazines that I worked for.
- Todd Pritchard: [06:14](#) So that magazine received a letter from a high school student in Mount Vernon, Georgia, which is a small community about 150 miles southeast of Atlanta. What was that letter all about?
- Gillian: [06:26](#) So the letter was really a cry for help. Anna Rich, she had, her outlet — this was pre-internet — so her outlet to the outside world of her small town were magazines, and one of her favorite magazines was *Spin* magazine, and she was outraged because certain stories that they were telling seemed insignificant compared to what she was experiencing in her hometown, which was the fact that there were segregated homecomings and proms. She wasn't allowed to take her boyfriend to her prom because he was black and she was white. So, the letter was sent to *Spin* magazine as a cry for help for somebody to please come tell her story and share what's going on in her town. Actually, the person who received the letter is also a Madison alumni.
- Todd Pritchard: [07:20](#) Oh really?
- Gillian: [07:21](#) Yes.
- Todd Pritchard: [07:21](#) Wow.
- Gillian: [07:22](#) Yes. Dana Adam Shapiro. He was an editor at *Spin* magazine and he's who received her letter.
- Todd Pritchard: [07:29](#) So what was the reaction when you guys saw this letter?
- Gillian: [07:32](#) He called me up and said "We have to go down to Georgia and tell this story!" So, spring time, the prom had since passed and the next segregated event to cover was fall homecoming events, and that's when we went down and covered the segregated homecomings.

Todd Pritchard: [07:53](#) This is not 1950 or 1960 we're talking about. We're talking 2002.

Gillian: [07:59](#) Correct.

Todd Pritchard: [08:00](#) That must have been just stunning.

Gillian: [08:02](#) It was pretty surreal, and I felt pretty naïve because I just landed in this town and what was happening there felt so normal to the people there, and for me I felt as if it was so foreign. You know, this is something that I'd studied in history books. This is not something that's actually still going on in our country, and why does it feel so normal? There was a ballot that kids voted for the white prom queen and the black prom queen and that was just normal and okay. When the floats were passing for the homecoming parade, there was the white nominee waving next to the black nominee and that was okay and they were smiling. It felt, it was jarring. It haunted me.

Todd Pritchard: [08:57](#) There was completely separate courts. I think the picture that I saw that was in your documentary was there was even little boys and girls who were like was like the court were ...

Gillian: [09:09](#) Yes.

Todd Pritchard: [09:10](#) Black and white.

Gillian: [09:11](#) It was, there was, it wasn't a separate court. The court was together, but they had a white and black representative for each class and ultimately a white and black queen won. Now, the crowns were handed out from first graders, and the first graders were also racially segregated. So they're teaching first graders about race at such a young age. So, there's a black first grader whose handing the crown to the black queen, and the white first grader is handing the crown to the white queen.

Todd Pritchard: [09:45](#) Tell us about the people you talked to, the photographs you took at that moment. What was that like?

Gillian: [09:54](#) You know, when I first arrived, I was, I spent most of the time with Julie and Anna, the sisters who were really the town activists. They were just outraged and so happy that somebody cared enough to come down to their town and tell this story. I was really there on my first trip to document what I was seeing. I didn't have the time to spend talking to people, and that's exactly why I knew I had to continue coming down and spending time and really getting to know the community

because it was just two days of really just watching and observing. I just knew that there was so much more that I wanted to know and understand, and that's what kept me coming back down.

Todd Pritchard: [10:49](#)

How often did you go back then?

Gillian: [10:51](#)

Oh my goodness, I can't even count the amount of trips that I've made. I actually should go back and really figure out the duration of what it would all add up to, but my trips back and forth lasted, you know, it was over a decade.

Todd Pritchard: [11:14](#)

So, the photographs you took throughout this time period, where did they go, what happened to them?

Gillian: [11:18](#)

After 2002 when I had first learned about Montgomery County, I had embarked on a project in the Middle East that kept me there for the next five years, and I dreamed about coming back to Montgomery County and really spending time because I knew that, you know, I didn't have to go far to really find an important story in my own backyard that needed to be told. So, in 2008 I called the school and asked when the proms were. The receptionist said "Which prom? The black folks' prom or the white folks' prom?" I said, "Both, either, all of them." She said "The white folks' prom is this weekend and the black folks' prom is in two weeks." So I called my editor at the *New York Times Magazine*, where I contribute to, and I said I have to go down and photograph. They're still having segregated proms. This story has to be told.

Gillian: [12:24](#)

I went down, and to make a long story short, I was basically chased out of town because mothers had recognized me from 2002 and told me to go back to where I came from. They slashed my tires and threatened me, basically. I felt completely defeated, but in that short time that I was there, I met two girls who appear in the photographs and in the film. One girl, her name is Kiki, and she was so excited, I saw this beautiful adorable girl jumping up and down, super excited in a parking lot, and I asked her why she was so excited. She said she's gonna be the first black girl to go to the white folks' prom because her really close friend had invited her last minute because his girlfriend broke up with him. I said, oh my God, I have to follow you getting ready. This is historic. So, later that evening when I was in my hotel room, my T-Mobile cell phone did not work there so she called my motel, and on the other end was Kiki hysterical crying and she was disinvited to the white prom because Dylan's mother did not feel comfortable

with him taking Kiki. So she was hysterical crying and she said, "Please come back to my prom in two weeks." I said absolutely, I will be there.

- Gillian: [13:53](#) So, although I was chased out of the white prom, I did return two weeks later for the black prom, and I was welcomed with open arms. So, it was then that I realized how I had to keep going and how important it was to really tell this story. So, I returned a few times without my camera just to talk to people so I could explain what I'm doing and I could let them get to know me, so I wasn't just that girl who photographed the segregated homecomings for *Spin*. So, that's when I photographed the and started interviewing families and students in 2009 from the white prom and the black prom. That appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* as a photo essay in a multimedia piece, which then caused national outrage and was the catalyst for the proms to integrate the next year.
- Todd Pritchard: [14:57](#) So, that community must have been just turned upside down at that point.
- Gillian: [15:01](#) Yeah, there was, you know, the phone calls I got and the messages I got and hearing what was going on sounded like it was in a state of disarray.
- Todd Pritchard: [15:18](#) What kind of reaction were you getting?
- Gillian: [15:18](#) You know, it was mixed because the students from, that were grad ... the black students who were graduating in 2009, first they were very scared to talk to me. They had me promise that I wouldn't, the photographs and interviews would not be published until after they graduated. They were scared if they spoke to me that they wouldn't graduate. So, keeping quiet was something that they were used to. It was a big deal for them. They felt really, really, really proud that they were part of this change. That was exciting, and I was so happy for them. They would call me, you know, with all these different updates. They felt so, so, so proud. The *New York Times* was really amazing because of course they said that they wouldn't publish it until after they graduated.
- Gillian: [16:19](#) On the other hand, the white community was not very happy with me. The calls that I got were pretty upsetting. There just came a time that my husband was like you just have to stop answering the phone in the middle of the night. It's just, it's not healthy. It felt bad. It felt really bad. I felt, I felt bad because I know what it's like. They did open up to me, and I don't think

that they were prepared for how the public was gonna respond to them and their beliefs. So, I felt guilty in the sense that they were getting a lot of backlash for sharing their story with me, but on the other hand I also, in the larger picture, said, you know, it's ... it's painful for change to happen, and this is part of that. So, I kind of kept my eye on the big picture, and in the end change did happen, so it was okay.

- Todd Pritchard: [17:34](#) Were you surprised that they were surprised?
- Gillian: [17:39](#) Yes. I was surprised because those were their words, and I was surprised that they, their shock and awe did surprise me. Yeah. It did.
- Todd Pritchard: [18:01](#) And what was their justification for having a segregated —
- Gillian: [18:05](#) *Tradition* was the word that kept on being repeated and repeated. You know, it's not broken, we don't need to fix it.
- Speaker 1: [18:16](#) A traveling exhibit of photographs from *Southern Rites* is on display at the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin–Madison until May 12, 2019. You can also view Gillian's photography by visiting southernritesproject.com. That's southernritesproject.com.
- Speaker 1: [18:32](#) Now, back to our interview with visual storyteller, documentary director, and producer Gillian Laub and your host Todd Pritchard from the Wisconsin Alumni Association.
- Todd Pritchard: [18:42](#) Gillian, the attention your photographs brought to Mount Vernon forced that community to integrate their prom in 2010. So, you went back after those photographs were published to this small town in Georgia. What were you going back to do?
- Gillian: [18:58](#) So, I always knew that the proms were a symptom of something larger. A larger story about race, and I wanted to explore that. There was another, Kiki who was one of the students that I talked about, I got to know her really well and her father was running to be the first African American sheriff. Years before, when he was going to run, he got death threats. So now he was running, and he had a huge support system, and the community seemed to be very confident that he was gonna win. So, I really wanted to go back and document how things were changing and progressing in Montgomery County. I also knew that the photographs alone, you know there were so ... I loved the voices and I loved moving pictures, so I wanted to incorporate

film and video in this project. So, that's when I started to film as well in 2010 when the proms were integrated.

Todd Pritchard: [20:01](#) This is your first documentary?

Gillian: [20:02](#) Yes.

Todd Pritchard: [20:03](#) That must have been daunting.

Gillian: [20:04](#) Yes. It — it was. I did not know what I was doing in the beginning. It was a very steep learning curve.

Todd Pritchard: [20:13](#) Well, it's magnificent. So, you learn fast. So, as you went back to the community, you started filming. What was that like? Obviously a totally different medium. One ... the documentary is amazing. The — the beginning of it where you are confronted I believe it's by a sheriff's deputy who's trying to grab the camera out of your hand, was, like, so jarring.

Deputy — clip: [20:40](#) Hey ...

Gillian — clip: [20:40](#) Oh, okay.

Deputy — clip: [20:41](#) What news or paper are you with?

Gillian — clip: [20:42](#) What?

Deputy — clip: [20:44](#) What newspaper are you with?

Gillian — clip: [20:46](#) [screams] Oh! Hey, hey! [screaming]. Run, run, run, run, run!

Deputy — clip: [20:50](#) Get yo ... [This 00:20:50].

Deputy — clip: [20:52](#) Shut up! This is our property.

Gillian — clip: [20:52](#) It's my property! It's my property!

Deputy — clip: [20:52](#) You've got problems. You've got problems ...

Gillian — clip: [20:52](#) Okay, I'm sorry.

Todd Pritchard: [20:56](#) The fear that I heard in your voice as he was trying to ... I'm sure you faced a lot of that as you tried to put this on film. How did you deal with that?

Gillian: [21:07](#) Oh, I left town. I mean I was terrified. I just drove straight to the airport.

Todd Pritchard: [21:12](#) And what gave you the guts to come back?

Gillian: [21:18](#) Good question. You know I have to say if I had children then, like I do now, I don't know if I would come back. I was relentless, and I also kind of felt if they're gonna chase me away, that means they have something even more to hide. So, this is even more important. I just — I felt, I became very close with Kiki's father who is the chief of police, and I felt like they were my second family there, and he had my back and he would protect me. So, after a lot of deliberation back and forth, I felt like, okay, I'm ready to go back.

Todd Pritchard: [22:03](#) So as you are filming this documentary, suddenly there's a tragic turn. One of the former students that you photographed, who was then 22 years old, had graduated, African American man by the name of Justin Patterson, is shot and killed by a white man, 62-year-old Norman Nesmith.

911 operator: [22:30](#) What did you do Mr. Norman?

Norman Nesmith: [22:33](#) I hate to say it, but I shot him.

911 operator: [22:35](#) You think you shot him?

Norman Nesmith: [22:36](#) Yeah.

911 operator: [22:38](#) You don't know who it was, Mr. Norman?

Norman Nesmith: [22:41](#) It was just a black boy.

911 operator: [22:42](#) It was a black boy?

Norman Nesmith: [22:44](#) Yeah.

911 operator: [22:45](#) Is he still there?

Norman Nesmith: [22:46](#) No, he hit the woods.

911 operator: [22:48](#) He hit the woods?

Norman Nesmith: [22:49](#) Yeah.

Todd Pritchard: [22:51](#) Suddenly your plans have completely changed and this town is gripped by this shooting.

Gillian: [22:59](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd Pritchard: [22:59](#) Tell me about that.

Gillian: [23:00](#) Yes.

Gillian: [23:01](#) So, I got a text from Kiki. Justin was Kiki's high school boyfriend. He was her first love. I got a text from her that he was shot and killed. She said murdered. So, that he was murdered by an older white guy. You know, everyone jumped to conclusions, of course, this is you know an older white ... you know, she sent me pictures of him. We were all looking on his Facebook. It was this older man on his Harley. You know, we just assume this older white redneck man killed Justin, and I got to know the Patterson family throughout my time in Montgomery County, and it was just devastating. It was devastating because they did not feel like they were gonna get justice. Everything took a turn because now what they were going through and what was gonna happen was most important and paramount to anything that I was doing before. It seemed as if all of the racial tensions and racial undertones that I was feeling all played out in what happened next.

Todd Pritchard: [24:21](#) Norman Nesmith goes to jail for one year — 365 days. I thought one of the most gripping moments was when Justin's mom was in court during the plea bargain hearing that the county had come up with the plea bargain for this one year, she made an impassioned plea to the judge for justice.

Justin's mom: [24:56](#) This man will never know what he has done to my family. No one would ever get me to understand why it was necessary to kill my son. A person is dead, and it may not mean anything to some of you, but it was my son, and it means everything to me.

Todd Pritchard: [25:18](#) When I was watching the documentary it was — the pain was almost too much to bear. I mean I cannot imagine...

Gillian: [25:26](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd Pritchard: [25:27](#) What that family was going through.

Gillian: [25:28](#) Yeah, it was pretty heartbreaking. I actually just talked to her today because Justin would have been 30 years old today.

Todd Pritchard: [25:35](#) Oh my gosh.

Gillian: [25:36](#) It's his birthday.

Todd Pritchard: [25:38](#) And how is she doing?

Gillian: [25:39](#) You know she is doing better. She had to move away. It was just too painful for her to stay in the community, so she moved to Tennessee, and she's rebuilding her life. You know, I have to say that with all of the, you know, the trauma that went on, I do feel like the children and the young — the youth is what kept me hopeful and what continues to keep me hopeful, and that is what kept me going. It's exciting to see what they're doing with their lives, and they give me hope.

Gillian: [26:24](#) Change takes a long time, and it does feel like baby steps, but I do think things are changing. I mean just to go back to in 2002 to have a biracial couple, they would never even walk down the street together. Now you see mixed children all over in the community. So, just in that superficial example is where you see change, but of course, you know, it's slow to come.

Todd Pritchard: [26:57](#) So, you directed this film. You produced this film. And, in part, you had help from Grammy Award-winning musician John Legend. How did that come about?

Gillian: [27:08](#) Oh, well, really great timing and great luck. Cause at the time, you know, I realized making a film is quite expensive. Much more so than photography, and we needed finishing funds. So, we had a private fundraiser and somebody who works with John was at the fundraiser and saw parts of the film and said, "John Legend just started this production company and he cares a lot about social justice. I think that he would really, that this film would really resonate with him." We were very, very lucky that it did.

Todd Pritchard: [27:49](#) Gillian, thank you so much for being on the podcast. You know, you are truly a living example of the Wisconsin Idea. You came here, you learned. You came to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. You went out in the world and you changed the world.

Gillian: [28:05](#) Oh, wow. That I — I don't know what to say. I feel embarrassed.

Todd Pritchard: [28:11](#) You did.

Gillian: [28:11](#) I don't know. [laughs]. I hope I helped in some way.

Todd Pritchard: [28:17](#) Well, you made a huge difference in that community, and I think you changed a lot of people's lens that they're looking through on race and injustice. And your piece, and your documentary and your photography is just amazing.

- Gillian: [28:31](#) I'm really thrilled to have this show open here. It means a lot to me, and I think that the goal of this work is really to share the stories so students can see also what one voice, using your voice, and what one voice can do to change. If it weren't for that brave high school girl, none of this would have happened. So, I think it's really important for students to be empowered by that and to see that and also to see what's going on in our country.
- Speaker 1: [29:06](#) The HBO documentary *Southern Rites* will have a Madison debut screening on April 16, 2019, at 6 p.m. in Union South on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus, followed by a Q & A with Gillian Laub along with producer and UW grad Lisa Heller. You can also see the film by visiting southernritesproject.com.
- Speaker 1: [29:27](#) Thanks for listening to the *Thank You, 72* podcast. The Wisconsin Alumni Association brings you stories of amazing Badgers. For more podcasts, visit thankyou72.org. That's thankyou72.org.