

FILM

Shining a spotlight on a neglected vow

Documentary asks why children are hungry in such a wealthy nation

BOX OFFICE

What: Four Feet Up

Where: Movie Monday Theatre, Eric Martin Pavilion, 1900 block Fort Street

When: Monday, Nov. 23, 6:30 p.m.

Admission: By donation

Info: 250-595-3542

MICHAEL D. REID
Times Colonist

Twenty years after the House of Commons pledged to end child poverty in Canada by 2000, a National Film Board documentary being screened in seven Canadian communities is a harsh reminder of how parliamentarians have broken that promise.

Written and directed by celebrated documentary photographer/filmmaker Nance Ackerman, *Four Feet Up* is a heart-wrenching and unsentimental portrait of a family struggling to overcome economic hardship and a legacy of dysfunction.

Her film's focus is on Isaiah, a bright and sensitive eight-year-old — one of an estimated one million children living below the poverty line in Canada — who is starved as much for opportunity as for necessities many of us take for granted.

It's cruelly ironic that the trailer this youngster and siblings Ethan, Sissy and Noah live in with their loving mother Jennifer is in the Annapolis Valley, the

idyllic Nova Scotia bread basket where "food falls off the trees."

Four Feet Up, being presented as a special Movie Monday event in Victoria, is also being screened this week in Wolfville and Mahone Bay, N.S., Toronto, Montreal, Fredericton and Winnipeg. Significantly, it will unspool on Nov. 24 in most of those communities.

"It will be 20 years to the day they made the promise," said Ackerman, who in a symbolic gesture also started and ended her year-long shoot on that date. She was determined to chart Isaiah's progress, for better or worse.

"I thought, 'If he's happy and having a great time at school, OK, let's shoot that,'" Ackerman, 48, said. "But if his life is slow-moving, then it's just going to have to be a slow-moving film. I said, 'As long as the NFB is OK with that.'"

Her 46-minute film took shape after she wrapped *Cottonland*, her Gemini-nominated NFB documentary probing addiction to the prescription painkiller OxyContin in the aftermath of Glace Bay's economic and social collapse. Producer Annette Clark's observation that child poverty had become a "forgotten issue" inspired her.

"I'd just come off this film about drug abuse and economic and cultural despair and I was thinking 'I don't know if I can handle

this,'" recalled Ackerman, who agreed on condition it wouldn't be a documentary top-heavy with statistics and talking heads.

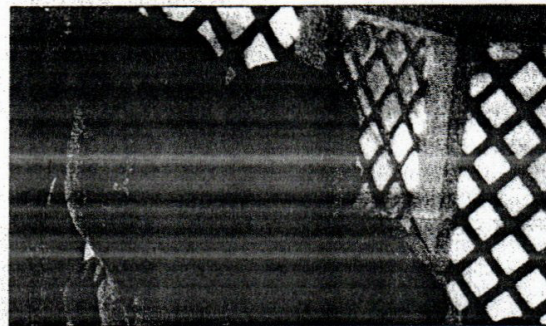
She wanted to explore the issue through an intimate portrait of an impoverished child in the abundant valley where she lives.

It was Debbie Reimer, a social worker who works with families in crisis, who brought Isaiah into Ackerman's life.

"Debbie burst into tears and said, 'I have your child. He's beautiful and magical and intelligent,'" she recalled.

She considers it a blessing Isaiah's family was so accepting, and that Jennifer's husband Frank, a former OxyContin addict with anger management issues behind him, trusted her after seeing her respectful treatment of addicts in *Cottonland*.

"Nothing fazed them," said the mother of three. "Within minutes of walking



NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA

Producer Nance Ackerman with Isaiah, whose life is the focus of her documentary, *Four Feet Up*.

in the door I was like a fly on the wall."

Considering some of the family's emotional and domestic baggage — notably Isaiah being haunted by memories of children's services workers taking him away from his family — getting such access seems miraculous.

A self-described "artist," Ackerman is best known for the photographs

she has taken around the world for 20 years and featured in publications such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *National Geographic* and the *New York Times*.

"I try hard to ensure most of what I touch will hopefully make a difference," she said, and *Four Feet Up* is no exception.

Her objective, she said, was to "connect the dots" and raise awareness of a

problem that is often ignored.

With so many children still going to bed hungry in one of the world's richest countries, she isn't done with this issue.


Inspired by her three-year filmmaking experience, Ackerman and her partner Jamie Alcorn, who co-wrote and performed the film's original music with her, are launching *The Anniversary Project*, an interactive web component.

They drove across Canada to gather evidence of children living in poverty as part of the multimedia initiative. It incorporates a visual diary, a music video featuring Coco Love Alcorn, her partner's niece who wrote a child poverty anthem, and Broken Promises, a photographic portrait of 20 children, one for each year since 1989.

Donations of cash and items for local food banks will be accepted at Monday night's screening.

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