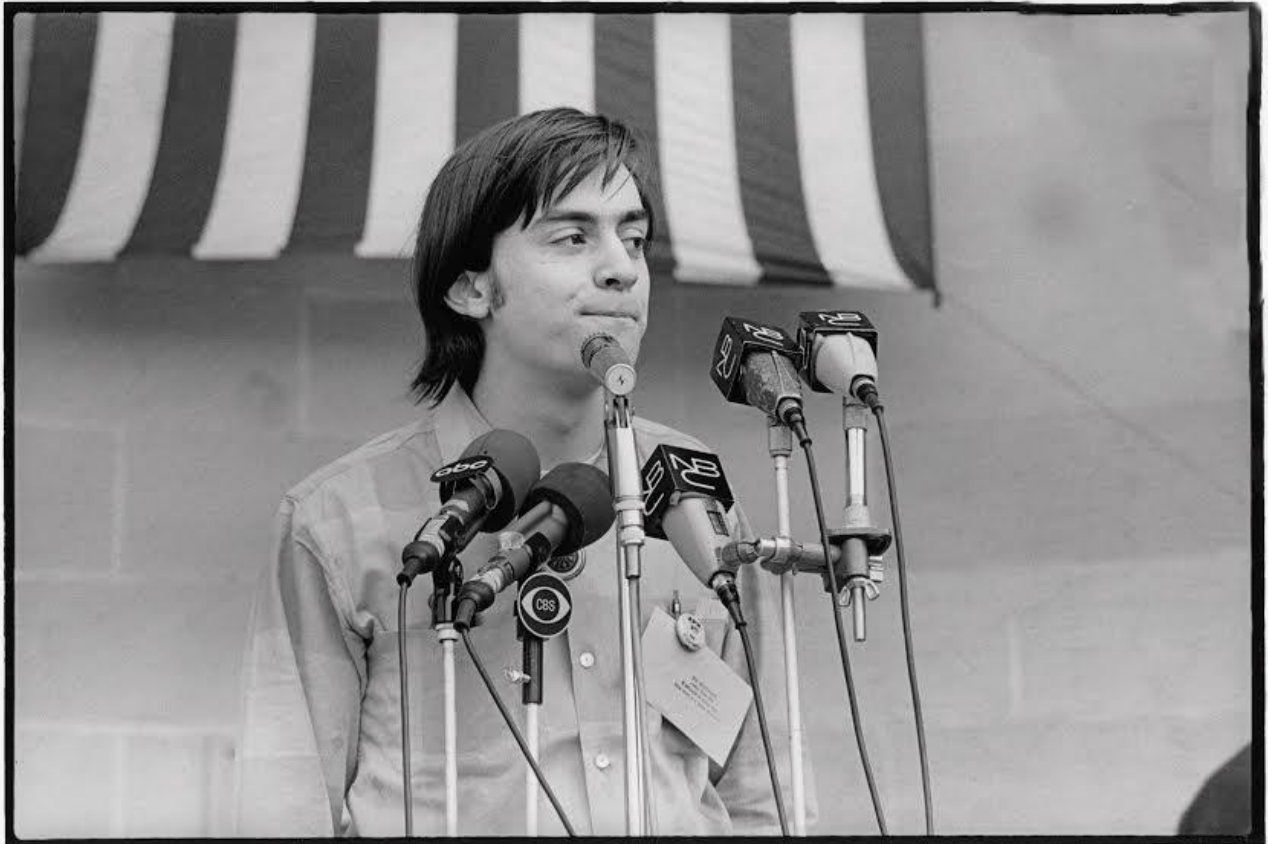


Left on Purpose

Directed by Justin Schein
Co-Directed by David Mehlman



An Eden Wurmfeld Films/Shadowbox Films Production

Audience Award Winner – DOCNYC
Audience Award Winner – Woodstock Film Festival
Best of Fest Winner – Astra Film Festival
Best Documentary Winner – Florida Film Festival

Educational Sales Inquiries:

Sarah Feinbloom
Sarah@gooddocs.net
415-310-0290

WWW.LEFTONPURPOSE.COM

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SYNOPSIS

“I’ve been making documentaries for twenty years,” says filmmaker Justin Schein in the beginning of the documentary feature film *Left on Purpose*, “and I’ve never been so captivated or so troubled by a film subject as Mayer Vishner.”

Justin first met and filmed Mayer for his Sundance documentary *No Impact Man* and felt that Mayer’s extraordinary life as an activist and Yippie deserved a closer, more intimate look. For *Left on Purpose*, Justin and co-director David Mehlman set out to make a short film about Mayer’s experiences past and present—beginning at the center of the optimistic peace movement of the 1960s and spiraling down into a life of increasing isolation.

Justin’s initial interest was in Mayer’s activist youth. “From as early as I can remember, I was fascinated by the Yippies,” Justin says. “They were fearless and funny. They delighted in the absurd as a tool for revolution. I grew up in the 1980s—in a era of political indifference—and I always looked back at the 60s with wonder.”

But midway through filming, Mayer tells Justin that his time has passed and that his last act will be to commit suicide—and he wants it on camera. Justin is thrown completely off balance, left to decide whether to turn off his camera or use it in an attempt to keep his friend alive. *Left on Purpose* is a feature length documentary that confronts the growing issues of depression, isolation, and aging through an intense character-driven story of the relationship between filmmaker and subject. It provides a rare cinematic look at what it means to be a friend to someone in pain, and beautifully explores the dilemmas of boundaries, morals, and responsibilities.

Over the many hours that Justin spends filming in Mayer’s small, cluttered apartment of 35 years in the heart of Greenwich Village, he is slowly made aware of the darkness that has taken hold of Mayer’s mind; he sees just how much Mayer has isolated himself, slowly cutting out his close friends and family. “I’m holding on by my fingernails,” Mayer says. “I’m dying of loneliness. I’m dying of lack of human contact. And I don’t want to do this anymore.” He announces that his time has passed and that his last act will be to commit suicide—and he wants it on camera. Justin is thrown completely off balance, left to decide whether to turn off his camera or use it in an attempt to keep his friend alive.

Thus begins the weighty dilemma that the filmmakers are faced with. Justin tries to figure out what has happened to Mayer in all the years since the 60s; he tries to convince Mayer that he has a lot to offer, that he cares about so much and can continue to make a serious contribution to society. He remembers Mayer and his comrades as charismatic, influential, and full of life as they worked to change the country. “The truth is that I don’t speak the language anymore,” Mayer says. “Having to fill me in slows people down.”

Mayer rallies for support from his longtime physician, Robert “Red” Schiller. “I don’t understand how it becomes an ethical issue, whether or not I’m in pain,” Mayer says. “These discussions about people handling...end-of-life decision making,” Red says, “in many ways, this isn’t medical, but it involves a medical intervention, and part of the medicalization of this involves determining your

capacity to make decisions. If you choose to end your life prematurely, that's evidence of an illness that medicine is supposed to treat." Mayer resists, telling Red, "My life is totally out of control, and it's time to go." Ultimately, Red refuses to participate in helping Mayer die.

Justin speaks to his close confidantes, notably his wife, Eden Wurmfeld, and his father's doctor, Dr. Diane Meier, who specializes in palliative care. He tells them that he doesn't feel equipped to help in any real way, but that he can't stay behind the camera and watch Mayer kill himself. Still, he doesn't feel he can tell Mayer that he should live his life in pain. Mayer's friends, as well, are unsure of how to handle the situation. "Mayer and his friends are fiercely dedicated to guarding their right to free will," Schein says. "And maybe more than anything else, the movement had been about protecting that right. If this is what Mayer wants, they're not going to stand in his way. But where does that leave me?"

Left on Purpose: a film by Justin Schein and David Mehlman; exec produced by Doug Liman and produced by Eden Wurmfeld.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It's true—some will say that I caused the death of Mayer Vishner. That by telling his story, I gave him permission to take his own life. Others—his doctors and his close friends—tell me that the filming kept him alive, giving him a reason to carry on. Sadly, I believe that both are correct...I extended Mayer's life while ensuring his death.

I first met Mayer when I was shooting the documentary *No Impact Man*—the story of a family trying to live in New York City with no environmental impact. Mayer was the only member of the local community garden growing vegetables. In his words, the other gardeners were bourgeois flower growing narcissists. Mayer was a true Greenwich Village character, and to him, everything was political. A lifelong radical, he grew up resenting the 1950s post-war conformity he was born into and then switched his focus to the fight against the draft and the Vietnam War. Mayer wasn't content to just march—he organized, strategized, and made his home in the activist community. One of the original Yippies, he was mentored by the legends—Abbie Hoffman, Paul Krassner, and Dave Dellinger. But unlike many, Mayer never stopped protesting. He never stopped fighting with the world.

The mantra of Mayer's youth was "never trust anyone over 30." When I met him, he was pushing 60 and struggling with a world in which the revolution never came. I proposed a documentary profile and he opened his life to me. As our friendship solidified, it became clear that Mayer was engaged in serious battles with depression and alcohol. It was six months into filming when he confided to me that he was preparing for his "last political act"—his suicide. Suddenly, this was no longer a short documentary profile—it was life and death.

I had never before been faced with the tragedy of a potential suicide victim, and I was in no way equipped to handle it on my own. I went with Mayer to his physician and psychiatrist and witnessed as he tried to make the case for his own death to them. Knowing that he was in the care of professionals was essential to my continuing with the project. But I had become part of the story. We'd become close and I didn't want him to die, but I also understood that he was in tremendous psychic pain. To force him to live in that pain also seemed cruel. The film he wanted me to make had a sad ending, yet the act of filming was keeping him alive. I was stuck.

I did some research and learned that, although Mayer suffered in his isolation, he was in no way a rare case. The suicide rate for men Mayer's age has increased almost 50% in the past decade. His generation, the baby boomers, a generation that has had such an impact on the way they'd lived, were now choosing, more and more, to take this unconventional outlook to the way they approached death. As Mayer said: "My suicide is part of a lifelong quest for agency for the species and for myself. And as we grow older, more and more baby boomers will feel the way I do."

It is my hope that *Left on Purpose* can serve as a point of departure for discussions of the issues at the heart of the film that are so often spoken about in hushed tones—if at all. How do we care for a loved one who doesn't want to live? What does it mean to help someone in pain? There are no easy answers, but it is important to ask the questions.

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FILMMAKERS' NOTES

Suicide is a tragedy that is never simple and straightforward. For Mayer, I believe there were a number of factors that came together to make ending his life a viable option. Perhaps the most operative factor was his lifelong depression. As a young man he persevered through the difficult times, aided by a close working relationship with his psychiatrist and the support of the community he found in the anti-war movement. By the mid 1970s, the war ended and Mayer's therapist died in a car accident, leaving him without the support system on which he had so depended. Unmoored, Mayer began to rely more on self-medicating through drugs and alcohol; providing temporary "anesthesia," but leading to a cycle of depression and dependence that lasted until his death.

Psychologists have long regarded suicide as being contagious — that is, it is a behavior that is prone to being copied or imitated. Quite a few people in Mayer's life made the tragic decision to end their own lives. In the late 1970s Mayer's friend and legendary troubadour of the anti-war movement, Phil Ochs, succumbed to his mental illness and alcohol addiction. More impactful in Mayer's trajectory perhaps was the well-known photo taken in 1971 of young Mayer sitting between Yippie founder Abbie Hoffman and *High Times Magazine* founder Tom Forcade. Mayer referred to that photo as "two suicides and a procrastinator," as both Forcade and Mayer's close friend and mentor Hoffman took their lives. Hoffman's first wife, as well as his daughter—both of whom Mayer knew well, also killed themselves. I believe that the suicide of these people he was so close to made his decision a real possibility.

Similarly, I believe that Mayer's politics, while not the cause of his decision to end his life, were clearly a contributing factor. As stated in *Left on Purpose*, Mayer looked at everything from a political perspective. Mayer defined himself through his freethinking and his rebelliousness. (There was a time when the Hippies in San Francisco tried to "rebrand" themselves as "freemen.") The fact that suicide is a taboo of church and state no doubt made it more than a personal act for Mayer and turned it into a statement.

Lastly, Mayer also felt an increasing sense of isolation in this age of ever advancing technology. Thought he did still have friends who cared about him deeply, he felt unequipped to be part of the changing social justice movement that had previously so defined his life but that now relied on digital communication. Mayer prided himself on being an organizer. Greenwich Village was just that—a community of people who met in the park, at the bars, clubs and churches. As the age of email and Twitter advanced, Mayer felt more and more disconnected.

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FILMMAKER BIOS

Justin Schein | Director/Cinematographer

Justin has been shooting and directing character-driven, social issue documentaries for more than 20 years. As a cinematographer, he has shot on more than 60 films internationally for broadcasters including the BBC, The Discovery Channel, and PBS. His film *No Impact Man* premiered at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival and has screened throughout the world. Justin received his master's degree in Documentary Film and Video Production from Stanford University and went on to found Shadowbox Films with fellow graduate David Mehlman in 1998. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife, filmmaker Eden Wurmfeld, and their two children.

David Mehlman | Co-Director/Editor

David was supervising editor of the 2007 Oscar-winning short subject documentary *Freeheld*, which also won a Special Jury Prize at Sundance. He edited and sound designed the 2005 Academy Award-winning animated short documentary *The Moon and the Sun*. Recent film and television credits include *Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory* (Oscar and Emmy nominee), *Iconoclasts*, *My So-Called Enemy*, *IFC Media Project*, *Small Town Security*, *Chuck Jones: Memories of Childhood*, and MTV *True Life: I'm a Gun Owner* and *I'm a College Baller*, which he directed, produced and edited. David received a master's degree in Documentary Film and Video Production from Stanford University. He founded Shadowbox Films with Justin Schein in 1998.

Eden Wurmfeld | Producer

Eden has been making both fiction and documentary films since 1994. She produced the award-winning indie hit *Kissing Jessica Stein*, which was acquired by Fox Searchlight, bringing it to hit box office success. She went on to produce *Puccini For Beginners*, which premiered in competition at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival. Eden's first documentary effort, the critically acclaimed ITVS *Sunset Story* aired nationally on PBS Independent Lens in 2005 and won the jury award at the Tribeca Film Festival as well as the audience award at the LA Film Festival. *No Impact Man* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2009, and is currently in worldwide distribution. Eden's other documentary credits include *My So-Called Enemy* (PBS) and *Romeo Romeo* (FilmBuff).

Yael Bridge | Co-Producer/Assistant Editor

Yael has made several award-winning films. Her work has screened at festivals worldwide, including Slamdance, Big Sky, DOC NYC and Full Frame. She holds an MFA from Stanford University in Documentary Film and Video Production and an MA from the New School in Media Studies. She teaches film and works as editor, producer, and director.

Doug Liman | Executive Producer

Doug is a director/producer with a solid track record for creating both commercially successful and critically-acclaimed movies, including *Swingers* (1996; starring Vince Vaughn), *Go* (1999; starring Katie Holmes and Timothy Olyphant), *The Bourne Identity* (2002; starring Matt Damon and Chris Cooper), *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2005; starring Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie), *Jumper* (2008; starring Samuel L. Jackson and Hayden Christensen), *Fair Game* (2010; starring Sean Penn and Naomi

Watts) and his sci-fi action thriller *Edge of Tomorrow/Live Die Repeat* (2014; starring Tom Cruise and Emily Blunt). Liman has also directed cutting edge commercials for the likes of Nike, Levi's, and Playstation. He developed and produced several television series, including *The O.C.*, *Covert Affairs*, and *Suits*. Liman serves on the board of the Legal Action Center and the Arthur Liman Public Interest Program at Yale Law School.

David Mansfield | Composer

David is an award-winning film and television composer. His score for the A&E mini-series *Broken Trail* was nominated for an Emmy. David's first film score was for the controversial epic *Heaven's Gate*, which led to a four film collaboration with director Michael Cimino and a Golden Globe nomination for *Year of the Dragon*. Other long-standing relationships are with Mexican auteur Arturo Ripstein, and Maggie Greenwald (*The Ballad of Little Jo* and *Songcatcher*). His score for Ripstein's *Deep Crimson* won Best Musical Score at both the Venice and Havana Film Festivals. David is also a world-renowned musician, and came to national attention at age 19 as part of Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue. His credits read like a veritable who's who of popular music, from the late Johnny Cash to Sting, and most recently, with Bobby McFerrin as part of his "SpiritYouAll" project.

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SUBJECT BIO

**Mayer Vishner | Subject
Activist and Former Journalist**

Mayer Vishner was born to a comfortably middle class family in the Bronx just after the end of World War II. It was a time of great hope and prosperity in America, but Vishner wasn't born for comfortable 1950s triumphalism: his decade was the revolutionary 1960s.

It didn't take long for Vishner to find his place in the heart of the 60s counterculture: In 1965, at the age of 16, Vishner took a bus down to Washington, DC to join his first political protest against the war. He soon began volunteering at the War Resisters League, organizing anti-draft protests and counseling young men about their options in evading the draft. He wrote articles about the movement for WIN, the magazine of the New York Workshop in Nonviolence, and found many mentors in the peace community, including Dave Dellinger, David McReynolds, Grace Paley and Norma Becker.

Though Vishner suffered from what would now be diagnosed as clinical depression, the strong ties to the community of activists of which he was a part gave his life focus and meaning. These ties—to 1960s luminaries like Ed Sanders and Paul Krassner—put him near the epicenter of many of the events that came to symbolize the era.

Vishner became a core member of the newly formed Youth International Party (The Yippies), which was founded by Krassner, along with Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Jim Fouratt, and others. Their plan was to shift the momentum of the hippie movement toward the political goals of ending the war and fundamentally changing society. They were known for using humor, sarcasm, and street theater as tools to question authority—grabbing the attention of the press and the imagination of the youth culture.

By 1971, the Pentagon Papers were published in the *New York Times* and the tide of public opinion had shifted against the war, and the movement that had been the focus of Vishner's life began to splinter. Abbie Hoffman was arrested on charges of selling cocaine in 1973 and went underground to avoid arrest. Vishner became the chairman of his defense committee.

By this time, the dreams of the 1960s were frayed and many lost hope and left the revolution for straight jobs, "selling out." But not Vishner: he worked socially-minded jobs and continued protesting causes like nuclear weapons proliferation and the Rockefeller drug laws.

In the mid-1980s, Vishner was flown out west by his old friend Jay Levin, then the publisher of *LA Weekly*, to become managing editor and help turn the paper around. By all accounts, Vishner's two years there were largely successful—but he also began drinking heavily and ultimately was fired. Not long after, he returned to his native New York City, where he held various jobs. Alcohol and drugs remained a struggle for him, but he also became involved in the sustainable food movement, becoming an original founder of the Laguardia Corner Gardens, where he would eventually meet Justin Schein and participate in the feature documentary *No Impact Man*.

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MORE INFORMATION

- Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the US for all ages; homicide ranks 16th.*
- In 2013, there were 41,149 deaths by suicide in the United States.*
- There is one death by suicide in the US every 13 minutes.*
- Suicide among males is four times higher than among females. Male deaths represent 79% of all US suicides.*
- The highest increase in suicide is in Mayer Vishner's demographic: males 50+ (30 per 100,000).*
- Only half of all Americans experiencing an episode of major depression receive treatment.**

* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

**National Alliance on Mental Illness

It is our hope that this film will help start a discussion about this pressing issue.
National Suicide Prevention Hotline; open 24/7: 1-800-273-8255

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CREDIT LIST

Featuring Mayer Vishner
Director Justin Schein
Co-Director David Mehlman
Cinematographer Justin Schein
Editor David Mehlman
Executive Producer Doug Liman
Producer Eden Wurmfeld
Co-Producer Yael Bridge
Original music by David Mansfield