

LEAVING NEVERLAND

Press Kit

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page 3-4	Final Press Release
Page 5	Synopsis
Pages 6	Episodic Synopses
Pages 7-9.....	Q&A with director Dan Reed
Pages 10	Dan Reed's biography
Pages 11	Credits

PRESS RELEASE: TWO-PART DOCUMENTARY LEAVING NEVERLAND DEBUTS MARCH 3 AND 4 ON HBO

The two-part documentary *Leaving Neverland* explores the separate but parallel experiences of two young boys, James “Jimmy” Safechuck, at age ten, and Wade Robson, at age seven, both of whom were befriended by Michael Jackson. They and their families were invited into his wondrous world, entranced by the singer’s fairy-tale existence as his career reached its peak.

Through gut-wrenching interviews with Safechuck, now 37, and Robson, now 41, as well as their mothers, wives and siblings, *Leaving Neverland* crafts a portrait of sustained abuse, exploring the complicated feelings that led both men to confront their experiences after both had a young son of their own.

James Safechuck was a child actor from Simi Valley, Calif. In 1986, when he was eight years old, he landed a role in a Pepsi commercial alongside Jackson. Immediately taken by Safechuck, Jackson became a cherished family friend within months.

Wade Robson was an amateur child dancer from Brisbane, Australia. In 1987, the five-year-old was granted the opportunity to meet Jackson backstage at his Brisbane show after winning a dance-alike contest. In 1990, Robson’s mother, Joy, followed up with Jackson, who invited the whole family to his home for the weekend, where their friendship was formed.

Jackson inserted himself into the families’ lives in separate but similar ways. His approach was gentle but deliberate, often manifesting as nothing but affection for the child. He became their most trusted friend, mentor and confidante, separately expressing his love for both boys, while slowly isolating them from their families.

Many of their most salient memories during this time involved visits to Jackson’s Neverland Ranch, just north of Santa Barbara. Both men describe how it was a child’s dreamland filled with games, amusement park rides, exotic animals and an endless supply of candy and junk food.

These visits soon began to include overnight stays, where Jackson would sleep in the same bedroom as his young guests, away from their parents. Both Robson and Safechuck describe how what began as innocent sleepovers led to intimate contact. Robson was seven years old when the abuse started; Safechuck was ten. Soon, as Safechuck recalls painfully, nearly every “special” place at Neverland was marked by a sexual encounter.

In 1991, with Jackson’s encouragement, Robson’s mother moved her son and daughter Chantal to Los Angeles to help advance her son’s career as an entertainer. This decision pulled the family apart, leaving Robson’s father, older brother and grandmother behind in Australia. In the film, Robson’s siblings speak about how distant they became as Jackson grew closer to Robson and their mother.

From the beginning, Jackson impressed upon Robson and Safechuck that they had to keep their sexual contact a secret. Robson recalls believing Jackson when he told him they would both “go to jail for the rest of our lives” if anyone found out.

As both boys reached adolescence, they found they were no longer in the same “privileged” position, no longer the object of Jackson’s seemingly undivided attention. However, they

kept their secrets and their loyalty to him, bound by the complicated emotional attachments forged in abuse. In the 1990s, when others accused Jackson of abuse, Safechuck and Robson were urged by Jackson to defend him. Both vehemently denied to their parents and to the public that Jackson had ever been inappropriate with them.

Robson became one of the most successful young choreographers of his generation, working with *NSYNC and Britney Spears at the height of their careers. But his success was tinged with sadness and depression. Safechuck, an aspiring film director and rock musician, also faced bouts of depression and addiction.

Both eventually married and had sons of their own. As their infant sons grew, their emotional turmoil mounted as they struggled to make sense of the past, revealing how the ripples of sexual abuse can manifest themselves decades later.

Finally, facing emotional crises, both men reached a point where they were willing to speak the truth to their family members. In the film, their families describe when Robson and Safechuck opened up for the first time, as they understood the damage that remained long after the physical abuse stopped. Then, they began to confront their trauma, trying to understand their complex memories and heal the fractured relationships within their families. Now, after years of therapy, both men have decided to speak out and tell their stories.

The documentary recently had its world premiere in the Special Events section at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival. Among the early critical raves for the documentary, Rolling Stone described it as “hard to watch, tougher to ignore, impossible to forget...a portrait of bravery,” and the Hollywood Reporter called it “harrowing, complicated and heartbreaking,” while Variety hailed the documentary’s “devastatingly powerful and convincing testimony.”

SYNOPSIS

Documentary Special: 2 x 120-minutes or 2 x 90-100-minutes (92 and 95-minute parts)

Short Synopsis

As one of the world's most celebrated icons, Michael Jackson represents many things to many people—a pop star, a humanitarian, a beloved idol. When allegations of sexual abuse by Jackson involving young boys surfaced in 1993, many found it hard to believe that the King of Pop could be guilty of such unspeakable acts. In separate but parallel stories that echo one another, two boys were each befriended by Jackson, who invited them into his singular and wondrous world. Seduced by the singer's fairy-tale existence and enthralled by their relationship with him, both boys' families were blind to the manipulation and abuse that he would ultimately subject them to.

Long Synopsis

When allegations of abuse by Jackson involving young boys surfaced in 1993, many found it hard to believe that he could be guilty of such unspeakable acts. ***Leaving Neverland*** explores the experiences of two young boys, James Safechuck, at age ten, and Wade Robson, at age seven, who were both befriended by Jackson. They and their families were entranced by the singer's fairy-tale existence as his career reached its peak.

Director Dan Reed states, "If there's anything we've learned during this time in our history, it's that sexual abuse is complicated, and survivors' voices need to be listened to. It took great courage for these two men to tell their stories and I have no question about their validity. I believe anyone who watches this film will see and feel the emotional toll on the men and their families and will appreciate the strength it takes to confront long-held secrets."

Through gut-wrenching interviews with Safechuck and Robson, now in their 30s, as well as their mothers, wives and siblings, ***Leaving Neverland*** crafts a portrait of sustained abuse, and explores the complicated feelings that led both men to confront their experiences after both had a young son of their own. Playing out against the backdrop of our collective experience, the film documents the value of breaking silence, even when it implicates a powerful and revered figure.

EPISODIC SYNOPSIS

Episode 1

In 1986, Jimmy Safechuck, a child actor from Simi Valley, California meets Michael Jackson on the set of a Pepsi commercial. Immediately taken by Safechuck, Jackson becomes a cherished family friend within months.

1987, Brisbane, Wade Robson, an amateur child dancer, is granted the opportunity to meet Jackson after winning a dance alike competition. In 1990 Robson's mother, Joy, followed up with Jackson, and the whole family is subsequently invited to Jackson's home for the weekend, where the friendship was formed.

Episode 1 follows Jimmy, Wade and their families as they are seduced by the singer's fairy-tale existence and enthralled by their relationship with him. Both boys' families blind to the manipulation and abuse Jackson ultimately subject them to.

Episode 2

At the beginning of Episode 2, James and Wade reach adolescence and find they are no longer in the same "privileged" position, no longer the object of Jackson's seemingly undivided attention. However, they keep their secrets and their loyalty to him, bound by the complicated emotional attachments forged in abuse, leading them both to defend Jackson in 1993 and Wade again in 2005 when allegations of child molestation emerge.

As they grow older their emotional turmoil mounts as they struggled to make sense of the past, revealing how the ripples of sexual abuse can manifest themselves decades later.

Finally, facing emotional crises, both men reach a point where they are willing to speak the truth to their family members and begin to confront their trauma, trying to understand their complex memories and heal the fractured relationships within their families.

Q+A WITH DIRECTOR DAN REED

Q: *You are no stranger to controversial subjects in your documentaries, as you have made films about child predators, terrorists, and international politics. How did you approach the subject matter of this film, which takes place in the world of pop culture and celebrity?*

A: Well, the first point is, that this is not a film about Michael Jackson. It's about two very ordinary families whose paths crossed with Jackson's, and the incredible aspirations that he represented. The families fell in love with those good things, not understanding the long-lasting impact this relationship would have on their children and families. In my storytelling, I don't choose to criticize Jackson directly, or comment on his actions, motives, or reasons why. I've left it quite neutral, deliberately. But make no mistake, the story is one of a criminal sexual predator.

I wanted people to understand that when a child is groomed by a predator, it's a very complex relationship. The parents are manipulated. It's all very gentle, and often manifested as love to the child. The families still hang onto the mentorship, love and attention that Jackson brought into their lives, and find themselves grappling with the contradictions of their relationship. ***Leaving Neverland*** is about both what Michael Jackson gave to them, and what he took away.

The focus of the documentary is deliberately narrow. I did interview former detectives and prosecutors from the two principal investigations into Jackson, but I realized that the families' telling of the story was so complete already. The changes within the family – mothers and sons, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives – become the echo chamber of the story. You feel like you are inside the family, and I felt that interviews from the public sphere would break that spell and place us back on the outside.

Q: *What did you bring from your previous filmmaking experience that helped you find the focus of this documentary?*

A: I come from a world of war zones and crime and undercover work, places where I must show the hidden drama, the inner workings and the realities of the things that people don't see in the headlines. These are the kinds of events that fill us with horror but are often portrayed in a very simplistic way by the 24/7 news media. Making the documentaries about terrorist attacks for HBO, for instance, I used extraordinary archival material and many months of exhaustive research to create a detailed account, told through intimate personal stories, of world events that people think they already know about.

In many of my more recent films, these stories are in the past tense, and this is really about the drama of the interview, the human face and voice, which I treat with great care. You get a kind of intimacy in the account and the testimony, and the relationship with the interviewer, and that's something I've fallen in love with – the power of testifying, the power of speaking out. The ability of a subject being able to say, "I'm not just going to repeat the official version, but my version, with all of the rich complexity of my own experience."

Q: *It's also quite an ambitious way to tell the tale – really limited to archival footage and a small number of sit-down interviews with family members, told in two 120-minute parts.*

A: It's four hours long because it's a story that takes four hours to tell in a way that makes it fully understandable in all its complexity. We're involving our audience in the lives of these families and trying to get them to understand all the complicated family dynamics that evolved over years. Why was it the mothers never realized? How could this have gone on

for so long? Why didn't Robson or Safechuck tell anyone? And why have they decided to speak about it now, after denying it for so long? The answer to all of that is made plain in the film, but you need to watch the whole thing. So much of it is in the nuance of individual behavior, relationships, and of the bonds between people. You must go on the journey of these relationships to see how all this went down in detail. We are asking people to dedicate some time to best understand and process this extraordinary testimony.

Q: *What was it like working with Safechuck and Robson, whose stories are incredibly complex as they sort through their contradictory feelings for Michael Jackson?*

A: I interviewed them in February 2017, before I interviewed anyone else. Prior to interviewing them, I was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt, but not ready to accept anything at face value. As a journalist and a filmmaker with 30 years' experience, I approached them with a degree of skepticism, until I knew I could have some confidence, and that what they said was consistent and entirely credible.

I interviewed Robson first. He's been on television many times, and he is a very good storyteller – very sharp. We quickly struck up a comfortable relationship speaking very candidly and emotionally about everything. I interviewed him for three days, and my instinct very early was that he was telling the truth. Still, I challenged every aspect and detail of the story, looking for corroboration, interrogating every detail and looking for internal inconsistencies in his account. Then I began to understand what he had been through. I realized – and this was a shock – that from the age of seven he had been very much in love with Jackson, and that this sincere love for his abuser had shaped much of his future behavior. Wade was very precise, composed and confident. He had already talked about the abuse once in public in an interview with Matt Lauer, but this was the first time he spoke about it in so much detail. And it's really the detail that opens the way to understanding his story.

With Safechuck, however, it was the first time he had ever talked to a journalist in his life. His story was completely unheard, and you could really sense him feeling his way through the two days of interviews. You can see from the tone of his testimony that he's trying to find words, trying to come to terms with the memories, the conflicting feelings of admiration and horror, and it's a lot more tentative. You can really feel the inner turmoil. The two subjects complement each other very well, and they're perhaps the most remarkable interviews I've ever done because of that.

Joy and Stephanie, their mothers, were not initially eager to share their story, but they showed a tremendous amount of courage, willing to open up about the mistakes they made. They provide the most essential context for the story of their sons' sexual relationship with Jackson, of which they were entirely unaware, although it happened right under their noses. Now that they have seen the film, I think they get a sense of how powerful it is to witness someone speaking the truth. They've said that they hope their courage can help others speak up, giving permission to other victims and parents who have been fooled by sexual predators.

Q: *Jackson is so ubiquitous as a cultural icon that despite the detail with which the film supports the stories told by James Safechuck and Wade Robson, there are likely to be those who want to overlook, minimize or even ignore the claims of those who have accused Jackson of predatory behavior.*

A: During my research, I spoke to one veteran California investigator who had been involved in more than 4,000 child sexual abuse cases, including the 1993 LAPD investigation into Jackson. He claimed that the star's MO "fit the true pattern of a pedophile." Safechuck and

Robson describe the classic, step-by-step playbook: you insert yourself into the family so that you can ultimately isolate and separate the child. You charm the parents, usually flattering the mother while keeping the father at a distance until you can substitute yourself – remember, Robson talks about wanting Jackson to be his “real father.” Privately, with the child, you undermine the parents, particularly the mother, which Jackson did to both boys, encouraging them to blame their mothers as their marriages started to fall apart. You become everything to the child: father, brother, mentor, then sexual abuser. The child is overwhelmed and can’t reach out and connect to the things that had previously formed their identity. The veteran detective also pointed out that it’s not unusual for victims to stay silent until many years after the sexual abuse has ended, once emotional and behavioral problems begin to surface.

DAN REED BIOGRAPHY

Dan Reed's films, including HBO's *Terror* tetralogy, combine exhaustive investigation with character-led storytelling and a cinematic sound and picture. Reed's credits include double BAFTA-winning *The Paedophile Hunter*, docudrama *Shooters*, featuring a cast of real-life underworld gunmen; the frontline war documentary *The Valley*; and the multi-camera money-laundering sting *From Russia with Cash*. Reed has also directed prime-time detective fiction on BBC and ITV. He runs a production house, AMOS Pictures, in London.

CREDITS

Running time:

LONG VERSION:

Part 1: 116'07"

Part 2: 116'13"

SHORT VERSION:

Part 1: 92'08"

Part 2: 95'33"

LEAVING NEVERLAND

Produced and directed by Dan Reed

Film editor: Jules Cornell

Assistant producer: Marguerite Gaudin

Cinematographer: Dan Reed

Composer: Chad Hobson

Music producer: Steve McLaughlin

For HBO Documentary Films: executive producers, Nancy Abraham and Lisa Heller. For Channel 4: commissioning editors, Daniel Pearl, Tom Porter and Dorothy Byrne.