

An Invitation to a Unique Documentary Feature:
SUNNY INTERVALS AND SHOWERS
– Nominated for 2007 Grierson & Mental Health Media Awards –

Dear Viewer,

I write to discuss our film *Sunny Intervals and Showers*, an extraordinarily intimate profile of Dr Allan Levi and the Levi family in the year after Allan's diagnosis with manic depression (Bipolar Disorder). Both tragic and unexpectedly humourous, *Sunny Intervals* also charts the story of a small business entrepreneur intent on bringing a "revolutionary" model aeroplane to consumers. Thank you for taking time to review information about the film.

Sunny Intervals is a different type of film about mental illness that asks us to consider the contexts within which mental illness exists in society. "Expert" commentators typically found in films about the mentally ill are absent, although Allan and his wife Jackie both happen to be doctors. Instead of viewing mental illness as alien to those not personally affected, it highlights the issue of diagnosis and argues that there is a socially-determined dividing line that separates the "mad" from the "sane". The collection of behaviours we label as manic depression are therefore part of a continuum of all human experience; and the lessons of manic-depressives at the extremes of this continuum contain insights for us all about our emotions. *Sunny Intervals* does not list these insights or proscribe solutions to what are complex social issues, but personalises mental illness so that more informed and humane discussion may occur.

Both in spite of and because of recent world events, *Sunny Intervals* is essential viewing. Our focus on human rights issues related to terrorism and war is justified, but the unintended result is that the rights of vulnerable people such as the mentally ill are often compromised. Because of a few unfortunate crimes, mental illness legislation is also increasingly framed in terms of public safety rather than public health. While not an overtly political film, *Sunny Intervals* does take the view that public consensus has swung too far toward understanding mental illness as simply another form of physical illness. The treatment of the mentally ill generally, and the trends of increased psychiatric diagnosis and use of psychiatric drugs, are important social issues about which the film promotes debate.

The film's first half takes us into the privacy of Allan and Jackie's marriage, and into the closed world of a manic-depressives' support group. In the second half, we shift gears as events unfold on-screen within Allan's career and the family. Through sold-out screenings from Chicago to Prague, Allan has already become a poster-man for those who have lost their lives to mental illness and related discrimination. Others identify more with Jackie, and her selfless struggle to keep the marriage and family together.

Everyone involved with the making of our film appreciates your thoughtful consideration of *Sunny Intervals and Showers*. Any feedback you have is always welcome at any time.

With best wishes,



Jonathan Goodman Levitt
Director / Producer

SUNNY INTERVALS AND SHOWERS – Film Synopses

"I've gone from being the golden boy to the evil wizard in six months. Once you are labeled a manic-depressive, everything you say is tainted with doubt, as if it's coloured by the manic depression. In the back of other people's minds – and even in the back of your own mind – there is always this question of 'Is my behaviour normal?'"
—Dr Allan Levi

Logline (25 words): A doctor struggles to rebuild his marriage and career following diagnosis with manic depression in this surprisingly funny portrait of family life with mental illness.

Short synopsis, 50 words:

Dr Allan Levi struggles to rebuild his marriage and career following diagnosis with manic depression and suspension from work. Filmed over a year with Allan, his wife Jackie, and their three children, *Sunny Intervals and Showers* is an intimate and surprisingly funny family portrait that portrays the consequences of being—and being labeled—mentally ill.

Synopsis, < 100 words:

Dr Allan Levi was recently diagnosed with manic depression and suspended from his job as a medical school Professor. As Allan changes careers, his wife Jackie and their three children struggle to cope in this intimate and at times funny portrait of a marriage and a family in crisis. In what *Directing the Documentary* author Michael Rabiger calls "a profound contribution...that portrays the mess of family life better than any film I can remember," we experience the dramatic reality of life with manic depression – and the surprising consequences of being labeled mentally ill.

Synopsis, < 175 words:

Dr Allan Levi was recently diagnosed with manic depression and suspended from his job as a medical school Professor. As Allan changes careers, his wife Jackie and their three children struggle to cope in this intimate and at times funny portrait of a marriage and a family in crisis.

Events unfold on-screen as Allan starts a business distributing a new type of model airplane throughout England. Jackie, a doctor who met Allan while they trained in medicine together, must come to terms with the unexpected role of being a 'carer' for a mentally ill husband. But is Allan's increasingly frenetic lifestyle evidence of illness, eccentricity, or simply hard work?

Michael Rabiger, best-selling author of *Directing the Documentary*, refers to *Sunny Intervals* as "a profound contribution...that portrays the mess of family life better than any film I can remember." Through this unique and timeless film, we come to understand the dramatic reality of family life with mental illness – and also the surprising consequences of simply being labeled mentally ill.

Synopsis, < 200 words:

University lecturer Dr Allan Levi was recently diagnosed with manic depression (Bipolar Disorder) and suspended from his job at Bristol Medical School. Filmed over a year with Allan, his wife Jackie, and their three children, the film is an intimate and at times surprisingly humorous portrait of a marriage and a family.

Events unfold on-screen as Allan starts a business selling a new type of model aeroplane throughout England. Jackie, a doctor who met Allan while they trained in medicine together, must come to terms with the unexpected role of being a carer for a mentally ill husband. But is Allan's increasingly frenetic lifestyle evidence of illness, eccentricity, or simply hard work?

Michael Rabiger, best-selling author of *Directing the Documentary*, refers to *Sunny Intervals and Showers* as "a profound contribution...that portrays the mess of family life better than any film I can remember." Rather than being told what to think, viewers are given the opportunity to draw their own conflicting conclusions about the nature of truth, reality, and madness. Through this unique and timely film, we experience the often dramatic reality of living with manic depression – and also the surprising consequences of being labeled mentally ill.

SUNNY INTERVALS AND SHOWERS

SELECTED COMMENTARY AND REVIEWS FROM THE PRESS:

*****CRITICS' CHOICE in these newspapers and magazines*****

Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph, Evening Standard, Guardian Guide, Metro Life, Observer, Radio Times, Sunday Telegraph, Sunday Times, and Time Out

"A harrowing, deeply personal...heartbreaking and strangely humbling film."

– Ruth Margolis, Radio Times

"Jonathan Goodman Levitt's bittersweet documentary...universalizes Dr Allan Levi's condition by illustrating how fine a line there is between highly strung eccentricity and mental illness. But what could easily have become a tragic tale of a vulnerable individual losing everything is eventually rendered uplifting by the filmmaker's sensitivity and Levi's remarkable resilience."

– Phil Harrison, Time Out

"An indie gem – leavened by humour, it is still a sobering demonstration of the everyday exasperations of living with mental illness."

– Gabrielle Starkey, The Times

"An unusual, often bold insight into a life dominated by manic depression...The line between truth and reality suddenly becomes increasingly blurred, but the filmmaker's decision to take a non-judgmental approach allows us to make our own – possibly surprising – conclusions."

– Simon Horsford, Daily Telegraph – Pick of the Day

"It might sound unpromising, but Jonathan Goodman Levitt's brilliantly observed film about the life of a manic-depressive is gripping."

– Sunday Telegraph

"Keen to make the point that it is the diagnosis, rather than the illness itself, that affects people...some of the best insights come from fellow sufferers at Allan's support group."

– Sally Kinnes, Sunday Times – Pick of the Day

"An uncomfortable insight into the unsunny realities of mental illness."

– Philip French, Financial Times – 4 Stars

"This important documentary is almost too harrowing to watch and it is to its credit that it doesn't shy away from tackling just how difficult living with a manic depressive can be...It isn't an easy one to watch, but it is a powerful one."

– Sarah Hughes, Observer

"Sunny Intervals and Showers is a candid, painful and sympathetic portrayal of University lecturer Dr Allan Levi's battle with manic depression. Filmed with untrammelled access, Jonathan Goodman Levitt's film provides a remarkably even-handed portrayal of the pressures on both sufferers and those who live with them. It is an astonishingly honest and timely film that addresses a common but rarely discussed condition."

– BBC Storyville Commissioning Editors

SUNNY INTERVALS AND SHOWERS

WHAT THE VIEWERS, AND REVIEWERS, SAY:

"Sunny Intervals and Showers is a profound contribution...that manages to portray all the mess and backchat of family life better than any film I can remember. I cannot imagine a richer resource – other than, God forbid, living the situation oneself."

– Michael Rabiger, Jury Chair, Chicago International Documentary Festival
Professor, Columbia College & Best-selling author, *Directing the Documentary*

"Levitt's superb documentary touches the core of the all-consuming psychic beast that is bipolar disorder. It reveals how initial understanding and familial support after the disease may not prevent the "sufferer's" own continued struggle, regardless of medication and treatment."

– Dr Philip G Zimbardo, President, American Psychological Association
Professor, Stanford University & Author, *The Lucifer Effect*

"Levitt's impressive directorial debut sensitively and often humourously sheds light on this little discussed illness."

– Sheffield International Documentary Festival

"There are little details of this slice of life that will reward patience – like the drawing by one of Levi's children expressing love for 'my mad dad'."

– Chicago Reader Newspaper

"Incredibly absorbing – a riveting film. I hadn't expected to see such high drama... almost unbelievable. I am still reeling."

– Jenny Towndrow, Author, *Love and Madness*

"A touching portrait of a man of reason struggling with irrational forces within his very own core."

– Chicago International Film Festival

"A heartbreaking story in several ways – in business, in middle-age goals, in personal relationships."

– Mark Moskowitz, Producer/Director, *Stone Reader*

"The case of Allan Levi reveals the complex difficulties people who suffer from Bipolar Disorders can encounter and the inability of modern science to cope with the disease."

– One World Human Rights Film Festival, Prague

"One emerges from the cinema feeling like you have been living with this family for years – it is an epic journey, for the family, the film-maker, and the audience."

– Tinka Gordon, Producer/Director, South Africa

"The strength of this film is beyond question – that our documentary programmer immediately invited the film on viewing it is testament to this."

– Matt Lloyd, Edinburgh International Film Festival

SUNNY INTERVALS AND SHOWERS

FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT ABOUT THE FILM & THE PRODUCTION

Sunny Intervals and Showers is about changes in a family that are motivated by the father's recent behaviors and diagnosis with bipolar disorder, or manic depression. At the beginning, our main character Allan is suspended from work after his first 'high' episode. But as the film shows, it is often his diagnosis (rather than episodes of illness itself) which causes changes in how he is viewed.

The film presents mental illness as a complex and largely misunderstood social problem that colours every aspect of life. Its complexity is best underlined by the fact that Allan and his wife Jackie are both doctors: Instead of helping them cope, their difficulties are compounded by conflicts between their medical knowledge and actual experiences living with Allan's condition. How can we tell the difference between Allan's illness and his personality?

Other manic-depressives, at Allan's self-help group, offer guidance in interpreting what is happening. But for the most part, viewers are left to judge the truth for themselves, and perhaps to question how Allan's diagnosis with a mental illness is colouring their own judgments. *Sunny Intervals and Showers* therefore aims to be a more active experience than most films. Different people will often view the characters and events fundamentally differently, and then carry on heated debates after screenings.

While the film is meant to be entertaining, and even funny at times, these post-film discussions bring *Sunny Intervals and Showers* back to its origins. As a psychology researcher, I was interested in how emotions, stigma, and unpredictability impact people's identities. And manic depression (Bipolar Disorder) is a rare subject that encompasses all of these areas. When I shifted career plans from academic research to documentary filmmaking, a Fulbright Scholarship funded months of research throughout England meeting hundreds of potential 'characters.'

For many manic-depressives, experiencing statistically extreme emotions seems to lead to wisdom that is applicable in everyone's emotional life. Rather than film in hospitals, we follow Allan, Jackie and their children living otherwise normal lives, with which viewers can easily identify. For those without experience of mental illness, *Sunny Intervals and Showers* offers rare insight into a foreign world – with the intention that it would be less foreign if they later encounter it. For the many who have experienced it themselves or in their family, the film offers empathy and the hope that others will more fully understand the challenges they face.

A MESSAGE FROM ALLAN, MAIN PARTICIPANT in *SUNNY INTERVALS AND SHOWERS*

Prologue: I first met Jonathan, the Director / Originator of *Sunny Intervals and Showers*, when he came to a Bristol Self-help group for Manic Depression. At the beginning of the meeting, Jonathan mentioned he was planning to make a film about Manic Depression, and asked if he might stay and listen? After discussion, the group allowed Jonathan to join providing confidentiality was maintained. I was interested in the film that Jonathan planned, and talked more to him about it after the meeting.

I next heard from Jonathan some weeks later, when he rang to ask if we might meet. He came to Bristol, and we went for lunch in a pub and talked about various topics. He told me that he was interested in me becoming one of the subjects in the film. I did not expect this, I was also flattered and I thought it would be an interesting experience. I agreed to discuss this with my wife, Jackie, and our three children (Nicola, Simon and Anna, then 12, 9 and 7 respectively). Candid camera: My family wanted to learn more about the film and we invited Jonathan to dinner one evening. We were all interested and agreed to be involved in the film. The die was cast (and so, apparently, was the film).

The first session was at our home, and after the first few minutes the whole family seemed able to act naturally despite the camera and microphone boom. I think we all enjoyed the experience. Jonathan filmed us for a day on holiday on the Isle of Wight, and over other weekends when Eamonn and Jane came to stay, and also in Harrogate for a Model Show. We had other filming sessions at the flats of Jonathan and Eamonn in London, and at Jane's house in Oxford. The last filming session involving me was at Bath County Court.

Giving to and taking from the film: As it turned out, and none of us could have predicted this at the start, the film was made over a particularly turbulent period of my life. Both I and my family contributed to the film, and I was determined from the start that the film would be a catalogue of our real life events. However, being in the film also gave me something back. I had many conversations with Jonathan over the filming period and since, and he often had insightful things to say which I found very useful. Jackie and I discussed various events either on camera or in private, and these increased our understanding of many experiences that happened over this period and before. I am sure that I learnt more about myself and many other people over this period. I am equally sure that I still have a great deal more to learn about myself. The film was a very positive and learning experience.

Personal reflections on the past few years: There have been so many changes in my life over the past years, and I could not possibly have predicted these at the start of filming:

My Job: I am a medical doctor and a PhD doctor and had worked in the Medical School at the University of Bristol since 1986. I enjoyed my job, I found it challenging, I had built

a large research group and been successful in heart research, and had been promoted to a Reader. I lived in a large house in a village outside Bristol, I loved my wife and 3 children, and I enjoyed family life.

Then I was diagnosed with Manic Depression [Bipolar Disorder]. This caused problems at work, and after a long process at the University I finally left my position there with a financial "pay-off" 20 months after I was diagnosed, and I had been away from work for most of this time.

As luck would have it, I was already in the process of starting a business. We founded the company "ANSA Products Ltd" ("ANSA" used the first letters of: "Allan, Nicola, Simon, Anna"). Life and the future looked very exciting and with the right promotion and conditions we felt the business could be very successful. In the end, the company traded for a couple of years but made little money. We will see what the future holds for ANSA Products. I have personally found it disconcerting not to have a regular income, and for my income to be at the mercy of market demand and factors outside my control!

Epilogue: The business, in addition to unexpected difficulties in my family life, have contributed to a time of great turmoil. Life is tough out here in the real world. From now on I will never expect life to be fair. Terrible things happen, and none of us have any control over many of these. It is not just other people that awful things happen to – ask the thousands of people affected by The World Trade Centre bombings. For myself and also for my whole family, it has been a difficult. I now look forward to the future, and wonder where I will be and what I will be doing 10 years from now? I used to think that I could know, but not any more.

All I ask is to be doing a job I really enjoy, that I am happy, and that I have time and I make time for hobbies I enjoy, and also that my lovely children are happy. Of course, a large country mansion, an attractive and elegant lady partner, smart designer clothes, the Jag and the Porsche would also be some small compensation...

– Dr. Allan Levi

SUNNY INTERVALS AND SHOWERS

MAIN CREDITS

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Allan Jeffrey Levi
Jackie Addison Levi
Jane Chung
Eamonn O'Tierney
Nicola, Simon & Anna

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