An Interview with Fenell Doremus

On the 30th anniversary of the 1995 heat wave that led to the deaths of 739 people in Chicago, we sat down with former Kartemquin staffer and board member, Fenell Doremus, to talk about the film she produced with director and producer Judith Helfand, *Cooked: Survival by Zip Code*, and the continued impact the film has had.

KTQ: From your vantage point as producer of the film *Cooked: Survival by Zip Code*, to what do you attribute the film's lasting impact?

FD: I wish I could say that this film feels like history, but unfortunately it remains as timely today as it did in 1995. When we premiered on PBS in the summer of 2020, the maps we used in the film to illustrate the overlapping disasters of poverty and racism through things like school closures, lack of access to jobs, lack of access to healthy food, high rates of chronic illness, and of course the 1995 heat wave deaths, look like the same map of the Chicago neighborhoods hit hardest by COVID deaths. So the questions we raise in the reframing we offer in *Cooked* are sadly as relevant and urgent today as they've ever been.

One interesting effect of making a film that uses a heat disaster as a gateway into the deeper disaster of systemic poverty and racism is that every time it gets hot in Chicago, people want to talk to us. There's a kind of nostalgia around the summer of 1995 and Chicagoans love to share their "how I got through it" stories. Our role as the filmmakers is to hook people with the heat - just as we do in the film - and then urge them to look at the harder questions that the heat wave exposed. That's where the real conversations begin.

KTQ: From that unique vantage point, is there a Behind the Scenes or "Making Of" moment that you want to share?

FD: I could write a book about the "Making Of," but for the purposes of this interview, I'll just say what an incredible honor it was to collaborate with so many talented Chicago filmmakers in and around the Kartemquin orbit. One of the most important decisions we made was to bring *Cooked* in as a Kartemquin co-production. Tackling such a complex story needed the thoughtful sensibilities of Gordon Quinn as executive producer and creative advisor, the editorial vision of David Simpson, and the steady guidance of Justine Nagan and Tim Horsburgh, who helped us

usher the film into the world when we were too exhausted to see our way forward. As with all collaborations, there are too many people to name, but suffice it to say, like so many great Kartemquin films, the kitchen table at 1901 served as the stage for many moments of deep camaraderie while making *Cooked* that helped to shape the film in ways we'll be forever grateful for.

KTQ: Since its premier in 2019, the film has been screened globally and continues to be a popular selection, particularly among university audiences. Beyond its reach, what are some of the successes the film has achieved? Is there an outcome or impact you're especially proud of or that's been particularly meaningful

FD: I started working with Judith in 2008. At that point, Mayor Daley had been running Chicago for 19 years and I believe at the time I counted 27 Chicago alderpeople serving prison time for corruption. So, as the Chicago half of the production team (Judith Helfand is from NYC), it didn't feel entirely unreasonable for me to feel a bit paranoid actively questioning anyone connected to City government at that time, about the City's delayed response and Mayor's blatant disregard for the victims of the 1995 heat wave. It didn't stop me, but I did keep a close eye on my property tax bill ;)

While Mayor Daley eventually acknowledged the tragedy of the heat wave, implementing a "heat emergency plan" and creating an Office of Emergency Management, he failed to confront the deeper and ongoing crisis of poverty and racism in the City that kills people of treatable disease at higher rates than other parts of the city, every day. This reality was brought to stark relief by a *New York Times* article revealing a 30-year life expectancy gap between Chicago's neighborhoods, Englewood and Streeterville.

By our premiere in 2019, two mayors on from Daley, there was a growing progressive caucus in the City Council, and Cook County's Commissioners, including now-Mayor Brandon Johnson, officially declared racism a public health crisis. Since taking office four years later, the City has codified the Offices of Equity and Racial Justice and Environment and Sustainability, and the mayor's campaign was centered around an ambitious anti-poverty plan. These are baby steps, and not all fully realized, but they signal meaningful movement in the right direction.

This year, on the 30th anniversary of the Heat Wave, the City held a commemorative event featuring a screening of the 20-minute version of COOKED, introduced by the Mayor after a moment of silence for the victims and a panel discussion featuring community organizers from the areas of the City most affected by both the heat and what we have coined, the "slow motion disaster" of racism and poverty. Finally, two days after the City's event, the Department of Veterans Affairs held a military service for Emilio Aguirre, one of the heat wave unclaimed victims buried in an unmarked grave for the past 30 years – an act inspired by a veteran who watched COOKED.

So in a way, it feels like we've come full circle - from fearing how the city might respond to the film to being a part of the conversation we hoped to spark.