

The Berkshire Eagle

Berkshire International Film Festival to premiere 'Admission Possible' documentary highlighting Mount Washington college counselor



Volunteer college counselor Bill Short, left, sits with Lewis Lopez, a student under his guidance at New York City's Humanities Preparatory Academy, in this still from the documentary "Admission Possible," which will have its world premiere at BIFF.

BOWIE ALEXANDER

By Matt Martinez, The Berkshire
Eagle May 20, 2026

MOUNT WASHINGTON — For Bill Short, a career pivot to college counseling came from a promise to his father.

It was made over 25 years ago, when Short was still working in marketing positions for the Walt Disney Company, Warner Bros. and other entertainment companies as part of the proverbial first act of his career. At that time, Short's father was mentoring his nephew, who was growing up with a single mother; when his father took ill that year, he asked Short to continue in his stead as the nephew progressed into young adulthood.

Short agreed, taking a full year off work when his nephew was a junior in high school to devote his time completely. Soon, he found himself dabbling in a new field

that captivated him, particularly for the difference it made in his nephew's life at a time when he was "lost" and needed to see something new about himself.

"When we fell into the college process, I saw his whole life kind of change," Short said. "It was incredible — he just came alive. We started visiting schools, we started thinking about his future and all, and one day I just said, 'Oh my gosh, could you have a career doing this?'"

Short went back to school soon after, taking courses at the University of California, Los Angeles to pursue an education in the school's college counseling program. He started his college and career counseling business, [The Short List](#), in 2001, which continues to operate on Main Street in Great Barrington.

In college counseling, Short found a fulfilling new turn in his work — his previous efforts were "exciting and all," he said, but this was more meaningful for him personally.

"Every day, I leave, and I know somehow it matters that I was there," Short said. "That's what I enjoy about this work."

But it also didn't take long for him to realize that not everyone has the same access to those resources — that the families most in need of these services often couldn't afford them. That's what led him to the [Humanities Preparatory Academy](#), a public high school in Manhattan specializing in college placement, which needed a college counseling program to supplement the efforts already being led by social workers.

That was in 2003, and as Short recalls, it was only supposed to be a two-month volunteer assignment; soon enough, he realized that he couldn't leave the students he had been working with. He stayed through the end of the year, then returned again the next year, and the next year, until he had somehow strung together 23 years — and counting — at the school.

"I quickly saw that these kids, with a little guidance, a little mentorship, somebody who would listen, somebody who could believe in them, just started seeing possibilities that just weren't there for them ... prior to somebody taking the time to just be with them," Short said. "That's what motivates me to keep going back, and I have seen their lives completely go in directions that I don't know they would have ever imagined."

Now, the world will get to see Short's work as it unfolds in a new documentary, set to receive its first screening just half an hour from his home in Mount Washington.

The documentary "[Admission Possible](#)" will make its world premiere at the [Berkshire International Film Festival](#), 11:45 a.m. May 30, charting the lives of seven students under Short's guidance as they seek to become first-generation college graduates in the wake of the pandemic and Supreme Court decisions disrupting race-conscious affirmative action admissions and student loan debt forgiveness programs.

The film focuses on the students' challenges and triumphs through the lens of co-director, producer and director of photography [Bowie Alexander](#), who followed them for a

full school year as they began going through the college admissions process.

Alexander was with the students every step of the way, inside and outside of school, capturing their home lives as the students themselves sought to distill their upbringings into application essays. Throughout, viewers get clued in on excerpts from the essays coupled with scenes that bring them to life; in the case of featured student Lewis Lopez, we see him working alongside his father, a building superintendent, as he discusses the ways his new infant brother has changed his perspective for the future.



Volunteer college counselor and Mount Washington resident Bill Short, third from the left in a blue jacket, poses with students from Humanities Preparatory Academy during a college visit, in this still from the documentary "Admission Possible."
BOWIE ALEXANDER

The first viewing of the film was even enlightening for Short, who walked away with a new appreciation for the resilience of the then-teens because of its focus on their personal lives. Knowing their worlds more acutely made him even more impressed by their belief in themselves, he said, as the film shows everything — "the good, the bad and the ugly" that they experience as they work toward their dreams.

"I don't see them when they leave the school," Short said. "I don't know what's in that household. I don't see them talking to each other as friends, discussing what the issues are and what's important and where their fears are and where their challenges are — there are so many things in this film that, when I saw it for the first time ... I just said, 'Oh my gosh, I never saw that side of this at all.'"

A FRUITFUL DINNER

By the time the documentary was filmed, Short had been interested for

some time in the prospect of making a movie about his work to highlight the struggles, but just like any idea, it remained speculative until it found its way to a person who could realize it.

Enter [Cynthia Wade](#), Academy Award and Emmy Award-winning documentarian, who just so happened to be seated at a long table next to Short at a "[Dig and Dine](#)" dinner event when Great Barrington's Main Street was being renovated back in 2015. Wade and Short swapped stories about their respective careers over a meal and kept in touch over the ensuing years.

and color-coded the footage with a series of graphs to start building rough cuts for each of the film's characters alongside editor Sasha Friedlander.

Eventually, those narratives were interwoven into a cohesive narrative for the final film to put a face on an issue that affects millions.

"[A documentary is] usually about a social issue — not always, but usually — and you want to embody that issue with compelling characters, so that the audience is really dropped into a specific place and time, and they get attached to the characters," Wade said. "Through the characters, and through the characters' eyes, they're learning about the issue but they're not even aware ... because they're just in the characters' lives."

As the filmmakers prepare for its premiere, Wade noted the importance of the film's message at a time when resources and institutions in higher education face constant uncertainty. In a moment where people might feel overwhelmed or powerless by the mounting issues in the country, Wade said Short's story was a reminder that individuals can make a difference in their communities. "What I love about documentaries is that it's always about the quiet hero that you don't know is the hero — the everyday hero,"

Wade said. "...Here's somebody in the community who you've seen around town, has been at events — has always supported BIFF, for instance — has gotten their coffee next to you, but on a weekly basis, year after year, has been making this tremendous difference for these students."

As the documentary reaches more eyes, the hope is that more "everyday heroes" might find inspiration.

"I was hoping that people might see there's a possibility even for them to get involved," Short said. "You don't have to be a college counselor ... could you volunteer? Is there somewhere in your community, is there something that you can do where you can give an hour a day, once a week — whatever it is — to help out?"

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