

COMPLACENT NATION
Documentary Proposal
Marisa Holmes

In the spring of 1962 a small but committed group of organizers gathered in Port Huron, a town about forty miles north of Detroit, Michigan. Intent on developing a new vision for democracy, the group deliberated on social issues and forms of dissent. The result was the founding document of *The Students for a Democratic Society* (SDS).

American youth had come of age in a society, which they believed to be democratic and just, but were coming to the realization that 'the system' was flawed, and so sought methods of changing it. *The Port Huron Statement* outlined the premise of SDS, the core values it embodied, and a commitment to participatory democracy through direct action. Inspired, students across the country began joining the organization, creating chapters on campuses, and connecting with other self-identified *radicals*. As an impetus for 'The Movement,' SDS played a pivotal role in a decade of defiance.

Throughout the 1960s the group grew extensively as members addressed inherent injustices of 'the system.' Poverty, race relations, and institutional interventions were central to the discussion as was the War in Vietnam. Everyone knew someone, a brother, friend, classmate; all were at risk of being drafted. No longer could youth ignore their government; no longer could they be silent. The war had hit home.

Students took to the streets, flooding their universities in protest. The war machine was all too pervasive and youth felt an obligation to stop it. In mass protests, direct actions, and soapbox speeches, they found their collective voice advocating for peace and justice.

Unlike the 1960s, the current political climate is one of passive discontent. Elected officials are no longer trusted, corruption is common, and government bureaucracy is ever expanding. Individuals assume they are unable to effectively participate in the process and resign themselves to apathy. While they may be engaged in the issues, youth often do not recognize their part in 'the system' and submit to the status quo.

It would appear unlikely for a social movement to form under such conditions, yet SDS has re-emerged. Adhering, more or less, to the principles of *The Port Huron Statement*, the organization has set out to re-evaluate its structure and a dialogue has been opened. The 'system' SDS fought against in the 1960s is still prevalent, and even more oppressive. Today, there is working class poverty, de facto segregation, increasingly invasive surveillance, and an unpopular escalating War in Iraq.

SDS recognizes these concerns and is attempting to address them in a systematic manner. Organizing on a local, regional, and national level, members are creating their own vision for democracy. However, a movement cannot move forward without examining its past, and SDS has a rich history.

Youth apathy cannot serve as an excuse for the lack of student involvement. There are opportunities for change and always have been. Too often society suffers from collective memory loss. Citizens forget they have power in a democratic system; they forget they can make a difference and have had an impact in the past. America has a radical history and youth, in particular, must be aware of it. In SDS there is a rare opportunity to educate, enlighten, and inspire the creation of a peaceful and just world.

The re-emergence of the movement is a sign that perhaps apathy is fading and youth are taking a stand.

As an independent filmmaker it is my responsibility to chronicle the new SDS and place it into context. Social movements tend not to be covered by mainstream media outlets and SDS is no exception. A true historical account will only come from grassroots sources and individual experience. Taking this into consideration, I began to contact past SDS organizers and many were willing to help including Alan Haber, Carl Davidson, Paul Buhle, and Bill Ayers. Current members in Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and New York have also been enthusiastic supporters including Pat Korte and Jessikah Rapsheke, the co-founders of the new SDS.

Over the next six months I plan to follow SDS as it develops region by region. Covering group meetings, conventions, and direct actions, I will present a fresh perspective. Embedded in the group, I'll reveal the personalities behind the protest and provide a first hand account. Mass protests and direct actions will be covered from the ground and emphasize youth involvement. Adhering to a DIY, cinema verite aesthetic, *Complacent Nation* will exude an aura of underground culture and political dissent. This does not, however, imply a lack of structure.

The following segments are to be included: the port huron statement, system of oppression, women and minorities in SDS, organizing strategies, education and protest, FBI and CIA surveillance, the war machine, the fight for peace and justice, the use of underground media, and SDS in relationship to other movements. All aspects are to be viewed from the perspective of older and younger SDS members. Interviews are vital to the piece and will serve as a structural component as will archival material. There are a number of institutions able to provide this supplementary footage, namely *The Library of Congress, Chicago Historical Society, The Labadie Collection and Newsreel Collective*.

Although some research has explored SDS, a comparative piece has yet to be produced. *Rebel with a Cause*, a collection of interviews with past SDS members, is purely nostalgic as they delve into anecdotes and personal experience. *The Weather Underground* focuses on one marginal group, which eventually split from SDS. While both are significant contributions, neither provide a current youth perspective. Radical dissent is not something relegated to the 1960s, it is an ongoing intergenerational quest for peace and justice in a world fraught with war and hate.

Complacent Nation will provide an essential study of SDS, thus educational institutions will be targeted for marketing in addition to using underground methods. AK Press, in particular serves as a model organization for distribution, as they have supported 'social issue' films in the past. SDS concerns youth relationships, culture, and political involvement and so is emblematic of generational struggles. The current generation of SDS must come to terms with the past and look to the future. We must choose between complacency and action.