

HEIGHTENED SCRUTINY

A Film by Sam Feder & Amy Scholder



KEY IMAGES

89 minutes | English | Color | USA | 2025

Website: heightenedscrutinydoc.com | [Instagram](#) | [Bluesky](#)

World Premiere at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival



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LOGLINE

Fearless civil rights lawyer, Chase Strangio, battles at the Supreme Court for transgender adolescents' access to life-saving healthcare, confronting not only the legal system but also a media landscape that distorts public perception and threatens the fight for trans rights.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Heightened Scrutiny follows Chase Strangio, ACLU attorney and the first out trans person to argue before the Supreme Court, as he fights a high-stakes legal battle to overturn Tennessee's ban on gender-affirming care for transgender youth (*United States v. Skrmetti*).

The film exposes the dangerous role of mainstream media in fueling anti-trans legislation, uncovering how biased coverage drives hate, endangers lives, and threatens democracy itself. With insights from journalists like Jelani Cobb, Lydia Polgreen, and Gina Chua, and activists like Laverne Cox, the story dismantles anti-trans disinformation and highlights its devastating real-world impact.

As SCOTUS prepares to rule on the case, *Heightened Scrutiny* reveals the fight for bodily autonomy as a fight for the soul of democracy, offering a powerful call to action against bigotry and injustice.

LONG SYNOPSIS

An actively unfolding story of resistance follows an ACLU lawyer and a group of journalists and activists responding to anti-trans backlash in real life communities and workplaces, while revealing mainstream media's shocking complicity in rolling back hard-won trans civil rights. The story's central participant is Queens, NY-based ACLU attorney, father, cat lover, Chase Strangio. *Heightened Scrutiny* follows the full arc of an epic legal battle Chase must strategize and fight—a 2023 Tennessee state law banning gender-affirming medical care for transgender youth (*US. v. Skrmetti*)—with a consequential decision expected by June 2025. The heat is on Chase, as the first out trans person to argue a case before the US Supreme Court. The outcome will determine the future of legal bodily autonomy for everyone. High stakes—democracy, truth, and justice—drive a story that will hinge on SCOTUS's limitations of constitutional protections against government discrimination on “the basis of sex.”

As Project 2025 menaces us all, Chase lucidly illuminates the destructive role of mainstream media's continuing anti-trans bias. This irresponsible coverage drives legislation and has real life impacts. At one level it means his own child's NYC school district is infiltrated by anti-trans hate groups. At another it is driving life-threatening bans on access to healthcare, a coordinated attempt to eradicate trans people nationwide. Rhetorically it is dishonest and distorted as well as public panic-inducing. A supporting ensemble cast of veteran journalists like Gina Chua, Jelani Cobb, and Lydia Polgreen, along with activists like Laverne Cox dismantle the logic and impact of anti-trans disinformation in mainstream media. Cumulatively, *Heightened Scrutiny* demonstrates that this bias normalizes suspicion of trans lives. It's a shocking retreat from celebratory coverage of trans visibility back in 2014. Offering incisive informed resistance to a spate of fierce backlash, *Heightened Scrutiny* reveals mainstream media's complicity in unleashing the American far right's takeover of democracy and traces the fight against anti-trans legislation all the way to the steps of the US Supreme Court.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

From Sam Feder, Director of HEIGHTENED SCRUTINY

When it comes to transphobia, I tend to have thick skin. That changed in February 2023 when the Daily Wire's Michael Knowles exclaimed at CPAC that "transgenderism must be eradicated from public life entirely." The camera panned across an exuberantly applauding audience.

A month later, a senior crew member confided in me, "I don't think kids know if they are trans. I didn't know my sexuality until puberty; how can they know themselves?" Seeing my confusion, she continued: "It's a trend; it's not safe; and what about parental rights?" Her talking points—which had once been confined to right-wing news outlets—were now front page stories in the mainstream media. My colleagues, once my strongest allies, had joined the likes of Knowles in questioning the legitimacy of trans healthcare. Perhaps even more concerning, they felt empowered by the coverage they were reading to speak with authority.

When DISCLOSURE premiered at Sundance 2020, the world seemed to be embracing the rise of transgender visibility. DISCLOSURE celebrates how far we've come but warns us that progress is often met with backlash. Nothing could have prepared me for what we are facing today. We are at a critical juncture where trans people are grappling with relentless and escalating attacks—from state legislatures enacting harmful laws to members of Congress denying basic dignity, such as Sarah McBride's access to a bathroom in the Capitol. As I looked into these legislative attacks, I was disturbed to find that my one-time allies were not the only ones repeating the anti-trans logic gracing the front pages of mainstream news sources. Lawyers, judges, and legislators were also including these troubling talking points in their briefs, opinions, and laws. I knew that I needed to extend DISCLOSURE's warning to respond to this emergent crisis for the trans community, but I didn't want to create a film that simply diagnoses the problem. I wanted to tell a story about the ways we fight back and protect one another. *Heightened Scrutiny* is an urgent response to this moment, and a call to action.

The Supreme Court is currently deliberating an historic case, *United States Vs Skirmetti* — this could determine whether trans youth in Tennessee and beyond will have access to life-saving healthcare. Central to this fight is Chase Strangio, the first out trans lawyer to argue before the Supreme Court. As he points out, there is a direct link between the increasingly anti-trans tenor of mainstream media coverage and the threat to trans existence through legislation and court rulings. With the Trump administration making its disdain for trans people painfully clear, this case may represent one of the last guardrails protecting trans youth from sweeping attacks on their rights and humanity. The outcome will not only impact lives in Tennessee but could define the legal landscape for trans healthcare and rights across the country at a time when those protections are most urgently needed.

This film is not just a reflection of the challenges we face but also a call for increased media responsibility, a testament to the power of solidarity, and a roadmap for how the Supreme Court's decision by June 2025 will undoubtedly shape the larger conversation around trans rights and bodily autonomy. Structurally, I aim to strike a delicate balance between intentionally resisting the tropes of a character study and honoring Chase's contribution to this historical moment. I make this choice because I believe stories of a singular hero overshadow the work of community and put unnecessary pressure on the individual.

The decision by the Court, expected by June, won't change the heart of this film or its purpose. I made this film as a historical record of our fight and to give audiences a clearer understanding of the hidden harm perpetuated by mainstream—supposedly liberal—media. Much of the coverage around trans lives is biased, contributing to a dangerous environment where discriminatory legislation thrives. This bias has a direct, devastating impact on trans people across the country. *Heightened Scrutiny* chronicles our actions during a dark period, showing future generations that we refused to be silenced.

I am no longer able to sustain my thick skin in the face of the pervasive transphobia of these times, and I no longer want to. Instead, I want to add my voice to the chorus of those pushing back against the tide that—whether explicitly or implicitly—calls for the eradication of trans existence. No matter the Court's decision, the core message remains: we will continue to care for and protect each other. They cannot legislate away our spirit. Our humanity is not up for debate.

FILMMAKERS



Sam Feder (Director/Producer) is a Peabody Award-nominated film director and writer. Sam's films explore the intersection of visibility and politics along the lines of race, class, and gender. Sam directed the award-winning Netflix Original documentary DISCLOSURE (2020) and the widely acclaimed documentary KATE BORNSTEIN IS A QUEER & PLEASANT DANGER.



Amy Scholder (Producer) has produced two highly acclaimed feature films: MY NAME IS ANDREA, directed by Pratibha Parmar; and DISCLOSURE, which premiered at Sundance 2020 and was released by Netflix Originals. She is a literary editor-at-large for City Lights Books.



Paola Mendoza (Producer) is an award-winning filmmaker, best-selling author, and cultural organizer. She has spearheaded some of the most transformative movements of the last decade, including the Women's March, Families Belong Together, and Trans Prom.

FILM PARTICIPANTS

Chase Strangio is the Co-Director of the ACLU's LGBTQ & HIV Project. He litigates trans justice cases in state and federal courts across the country including most recently at the United States Supreme Court in United States v. Skrmetti, a challenge to Tennessee's ban on medical care for transgender adolescents.

Jelani Cobb is the Dean of the Columbia Journalism School, a staff writer at The New Yorker, and a frequent contributor to MSNBC.

Lydia Polgreen is an opinion columnist at the New York Times.

Gina Chua is a Singaporean journalist serving as the executive editor of the media startup Semafor.

Laverne Cox is an Emmy-nominated actress, documentary film producer, and prominent equal rights advocate.

HEIGHTENED SCRUTINY Screen Credits

A Film by Sam Feder & Amy Scholder

Director

Sam Feder

Producer

Amy Scholder

Producer

Sam Feder

Producer

Paola Mendoza

Editor

Emelie Mahdavian

Assistant Editor

Nancy Nguyen

Director of Photography

Martin DiCicco

Director of Photography

Mariam Dwedat

Music

Jonathan Sanford

Executive Producers

Laverne Cox

S. Mona Sinha

Bill & Ruth Ann Harnisch

Lisa Freeman

Sara Hinkle

Contributing Producer

Charlotte Cook

James Costa

Danielle Benedict

Jake Casey

Consulting Producer

Gina Chua
Muna Mire
Alberto Cairo

Assistant Director

Laura Klein

Production Coordinator

Lauren Greenhall

Camera Operator

Emir Fils-Aime

First Assistant Camera

Madeline Rivera

Digital Imaging Technician

Madeline Rivera
Khadijah Wilson

Additional Camera

Derek Howard
Maksim Axelrod
Lauren Mendoza
J. Bennett
Chris Wairegi
Whitney Shefte

Chief Lighting Technician

Omar Nasr

Key Grip

Alex Blum

G&E Swing

Agustina Biasutto

Production Sound

Wesley Grant

Additional Sound

Amelia Palmer
Jim Choi
Aisha Hallgren

Production Design

Violet Overn

On-Set Dresser

Leda Seda

Art Assistant

Alexis Blake

Make Up Artist

Judy Chung

Robert Reyes

Hair Stylist

Dee Tranny Bear

M Alsondo

Production Assistant

Griffin Garnett

Mariales Diaz

Claire Seaton

Production DEI Support Specialist

S Leigh Thompson

Still Photographer

Lily Baldwin

BTS photographer

Griffin Garnett

Gretchen Wylder

Driver

Gretchen Wylder

Post Production Producer

Eurie Chung

Motion Graphics & Title Design

And/Or

Creative Director

Kelli Miller

Motion Designers

Sam Pickett
Emily Tinklenberg

Post Production Services

Dungeon Beach Brooklyn

DI Producer & Online Editor

Jeff Sousa

DI Colorist

Shanna Maurizi

SFX Editor & Re-recording Mixer

Tim Korn

Dialogue Editors

Jennifer Ruffalo
Olivia Lewis

Researcher and Data Lead

Sam Rabiyah

Research Assistant

Samson Dittrich

Research Consultant

Thomas Page McBee

Legal Services

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Mark A Vega, Esq.

Clearance Counsel

Donaldson Callif Perez
Dale Nelson
Jacqueline Swett

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John Eddow, CPA
Kayvan Abselet, CPA

Payroll Services

Media Services, a Cast & Crew Company

Sales Agents

The Gersh Agency
Jay Cohen
Julien Levesque
Frank Wuliger

Publicity

Acme Public Relations
Nancy Willen

Digital Media Producer

Bryce Kirchoff
Eleven Thirteen Collective

Archival Materials

Democracy Now!
Pauli Murray Foundation

Additional Materials

Supreme Court of the United States
'On the Basis of Sex' / Focus Features, Participant Media, Robert Cort Productions,
Alibaba Pictures / Mimi Leder
New York Times
'Real Time with Bill Maher' / Bill Maher Productions / HBO
'Gutfeld!' / Fox News
'Megyn Kelly Show' / Devil May Care Media
'Tucker Carlson Tonight' / Fox News
'Fox News Tonight' / Fox News
'GBN Live' / GBN News
'The Girl and the English Teacher' / NBC News
'Fox and Friends' / Fox News
The Telegraph
'60 Minutes' / CBS News Productions
Wall Street Journal
'The Five' / Fox News
Reuters
The New Yorker
Daily Wire
Forbes
The Atlantic
CPAC
Hollywood Reporter
MSNBC

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Brooklyn Camera Collective
Heavy Woods Brooklyn
Ready Set Inc.
The Dazey Phase
Trans Journalists Association
NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists
American Civil Liberties Union

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