

LAUNCH

A DOCUMENTARY FEATURE



Each year, students gather from all over North America to compete in the First Nations Launch, a rocket competition in rural Wisconsin developed by NASA and the Wisconsin Space Grant Consortium and sponsored by industry heavy hitters like Blue Origin, Sierra Space, GE Aerospace and US Space Force with the mission to nurture underserved Native American talent in the aerospace industry.

LAUNCH follows the students over the course of a three day weekend as they troubleshoot designs, oversleep alarms, underestimate time to launch, overcome inevitable last minute obstacles and ultimately - find community.

The event has launched more than just community - it's also launched careers and brought innumerable Native American talent into the aerospace world. Considered one of NASA's diamond programs for the last 16 years, this will be its last.

Funding the program has always been an uphill battle, but under the current administration, the path for financing is closed.

But the young Native men and women don't see their story ending with the program. Both at the event and back on their campuses and at their reservations, what emerges is a story of resilience. This community is not new to adversity. And more than one student has already set in motion plans to find a way to continue this life-changing program in spite of this setback.



FIRST NATIONS LAUNCH



For 16 years, Wisconsin has been host to the First Nations Launch (FNL), which began after a group of students from The College of Menominee Nation (CMN), with no prior knowledge of rockets, successfully competed in rocket contests sponsored by NASA and the Wisconsin Space Grant Consortium (WSGC). Referred to in the press as “The Little Rocket That Could,” they asked “if we can do it, why can’t other tribal colleges do the same thing?”

Now, sixteen years later and having served over 104 tribes, NASA considers FNL one of Kennedy Space Center’s Diamond programs. American Indian student groups from tribal colleges and universities, as well as state and private universities from all over North America come together to compete in several challenge categories, network with their peers from other tribes and communities and meet with Native American mentors and leaders in aerospace.

Every year, much more than just rockets are launched; barriers are broken, opportunities unfold and careers begin- thanks to FNL.



SYNOPSIS



LAUNCH is a feature documentary that follows several teams from various tribes over a three day weekend in Kenosha, Wisconsin where they launch rockets that they have spent six grueling and intense months building nearly a mile high into the sky. But their success will be bittersweet, as they celebrate with the bittersweet knowledge that after this weekend, the NASA backed program will shutter.

First time rocketeers will compete alongside experienced teams in challenges that range from introductory to advanced engineering. For some students, this is their first time away from their homes, family and tribe. It's a chance to dip a toe into a career path they may not have had any exposure to. While others are already on a rigorous academic track, determined to be a part of humanity's expansion into space.

The teams come from all over and represent a diversity of indigenous tribes and cultures from Hawaii, Canada, Washington, California, Kansas, Illinois, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Massachusetts, Arizona, Colorado and more. Some of the students attend two-year tribal colleges that have little to no STEM programming or technical support. While others are at four-year state universities or private universities like MIT.

The students are not just engineers - some are focusing on biology, environmental science, business, or communications. One young woman's focus is on studying the cultural burning practices of her people and how to apply those native traditions to modern land management. These students share a common passion for their American Indian cultures. But finding someone on campus who looks like them can be difficult.

Other minority students encompass 29% of students in higher education. Native American students count for about 1% of those. And to get to that 1%, these students sometimes face tremendous barriers. The profundity and exhilaration of being surrounded by other native students at FNL cannot be overestimated.

The students, tackle building a rocket that will launch a payload, sometimes from scratch. They also manage the various egos and personalities on their teams, learn project management and develop presentation skills. They plan their futures and share their hopes and dreams while navigating the realities of their home life and overcoming personal challenges.



SYNOPSIS

We are with the students as they burn the midnight oil on the nights before the launch. We see them fail and reiterate. Learn and grow. And in the end, what emerges is truly remarkable: teams helping each other at the last minute, sharing resources.

This is a competition like no other. There is no cut throat elimination. These teams see each successful launch as a win for all.

Yes, there will be awards. Some will win, others will not. There will be frustration and disappointment and elation and giddiness. They will launch their rockets nearly a mile high. Some of the rockets will completely fail, maybe even the favorite to win. An underdog team might pull off a hail mary and outperform them all.

But as the competition wraps up, we will see the experience through the eyes of these young American Indian men and women. And perhaps the audience will come to understand a different way of approaching problem solving, science, collaboration and space exploration.

LAUNCH provides the perfect lens through which to examine how western culture has traditionally dismissed native knowledge and how important this perspective is in our present moment. It is a celebration of Native American talent. It is an often hilarious portrait of young people taking on a dream. And it is a sensitive exploration of the circumstances that have molded this incredible class of young Native Americans.





After launch weekend, we follow up with our teams at their homes and reservations, getting to know them in a more personal space. We meet their families, and gather wisdom and stories. We explore the students' hopes and fears in interviews and verité.

And as the current administration seeks to impose financial restrictions on universities that don't comply with their ideologies, we will be filming when the students return to school this fall, uncertain as to what awaits them.

Already, campus womens' and other affiliation centers have been shut down. Some of our students have already been notified that their research programs have been cut. Others have had their Native affiliated scholarships revoked. This fall, will the schools look at all like the ones they left behind? Will the Native American Dorm where so many of our Stanford students lived still be open? Will the campus pow-wow at KU still be supported?

We are with this remarkable group of resilient young men and women as they pack up and get back to school - and to work; assessing the new landscape and developing an alternative path to building rockets and creating a future that includes them. Because, as more than one student shared, they aren't going to let this moment and these measures stop them from reaching for the stars.

CASTING

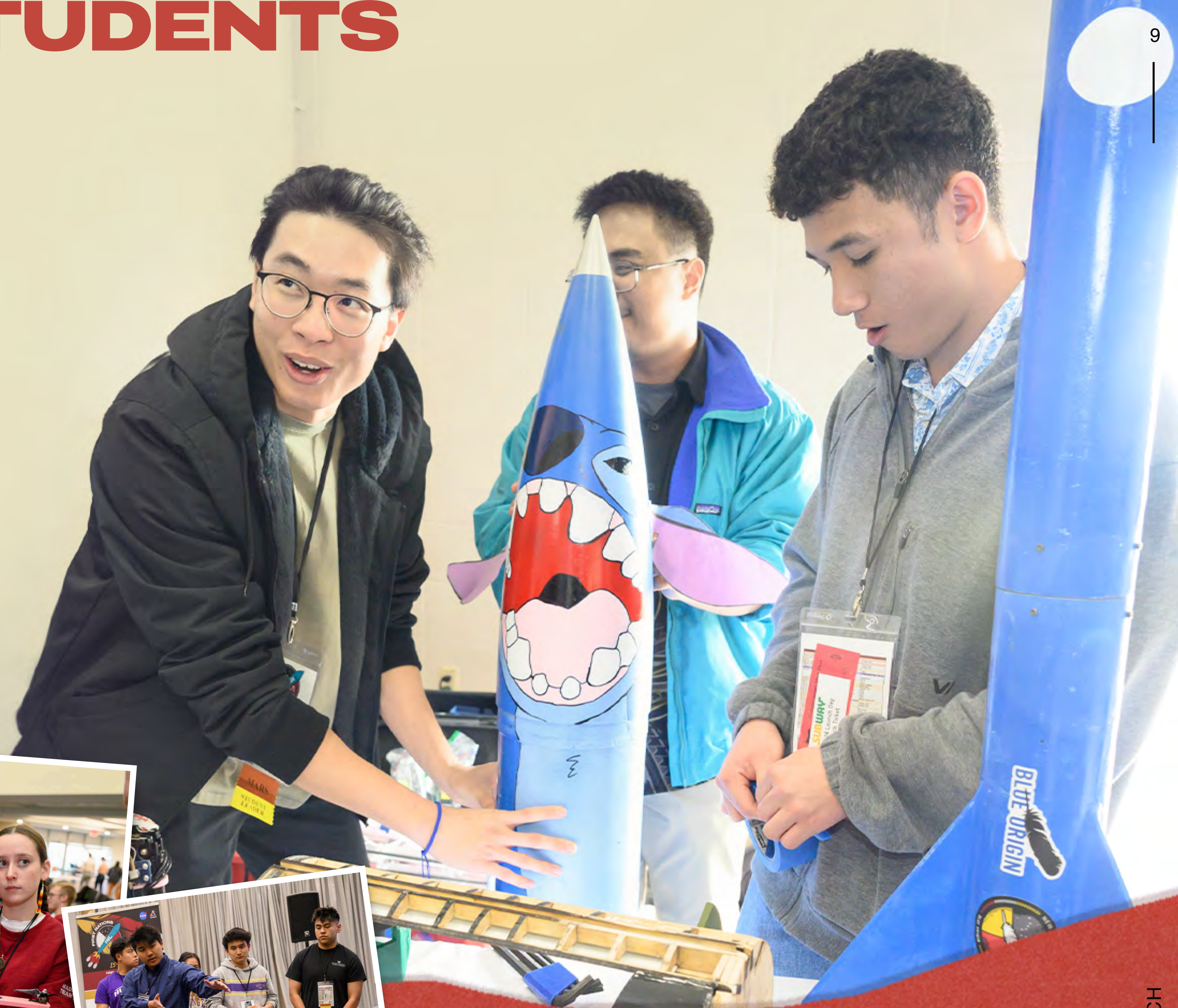


CASTING - THE STUDENTS

The students are the heroes of this film. With the help of our partners at First Nations Launch along with the FNL mentors, we identified 5 teams to follow. We looked to cast a diversity of experience within teams, following first timers as well as seasoned competitors.

We also kept an eye to diversity in the type of learning institutions, tribes, geographical locations, both urban and remote areas, on, near and far from reservations, as well as in gender and personality type. The American Indian community is a rich tapestry of diversity that the film will represent and celebrate.

During launch weekend, we also kept an eye to any standout teams that weren't identified early that warranted further filming.



CHARACTERS



**THE
NEWBIES**



**THE
ROCKSTARS**



**THE LOVE
STORY**



**THE FAN
FAVORITES**



**THE
MACGYVERS**



THE FAN FAVORITES

The **UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS JAYHAWKS** will return again this year. Featuring members of the Wichita, Muskogee, Makah, Navajo and Kickapoo Nations, this team debuted in the 2024 competition. Now they have increased their numbers and are determined to take a win home for the Jayhawks. On campus, they are fighting for womens' rights, teaching middle schoolers how to build rockets, and conducting experiments to complete their dissertations. Should be a busy year!



THE NEWBIES

The team from **STANFORD** comes with "absolutely zero" rocket experience, but a ton of brain power and enthusiasm! Most of the team lives in the Native American residence on campus and represent several nations including Navajo, Yupik and Athabaskan. The project leader, an avid skateboarder and the dorm RA has recruited the team from scratch. Their passion is evident and their lack of experience doesn't seem to worry them - they will succeed through sheer force of will, and probably a lot of all-nighters. When they are not trying to figure out how to build a rocket, they are working on getting their pilots license and building indigenous language generative AI models, among other things.

CHARACTERS



THE LOVE STORY

The team leads at **NORTHWEST INDIAN COLLEGE** are a Romantic Comedy waiting to be written - representing the Navajo Nation they met at FNL a decade ago and now have a nine year old child together who has already met three astronauts thanks to the program! Every year since meeting, they've brought a team to Wisconsin to compete in the launch while back at home they work furiously to create an aeronautical engineering program from scratch on campus in order to accommodate and nurture the growing interest in the field that their students express due to the FNL program. What a love story.

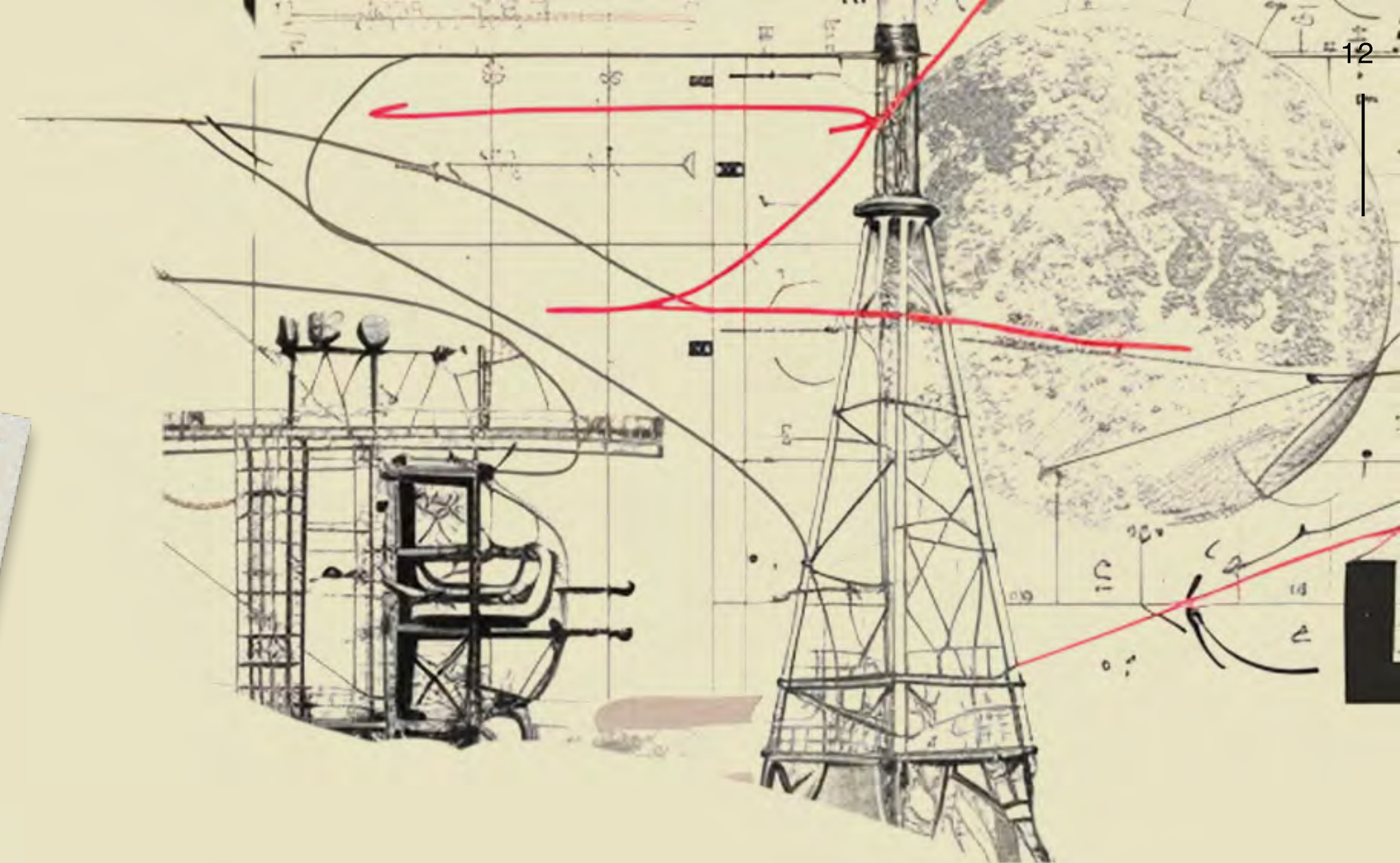


THE MACGYVERS

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT BOULDER brings together kids from the Chickasaw and Navajo Nations: an aspiring aerospace engineer, a mechanical engineer and one young man who just switched his degree to law and will be the first generation college graduate of his family. Some of the students on this returning team are coming back for the ice cream, some for the rockets, and some because they just love to connect with their community and build relationships. We hope to spend time with these students at the university as well as go home with the team's lead designer where his father is a police officer for the Navajo Nation and his mother a public health servant for her tribe.

CHARACTERS

THE ROCKSTARS

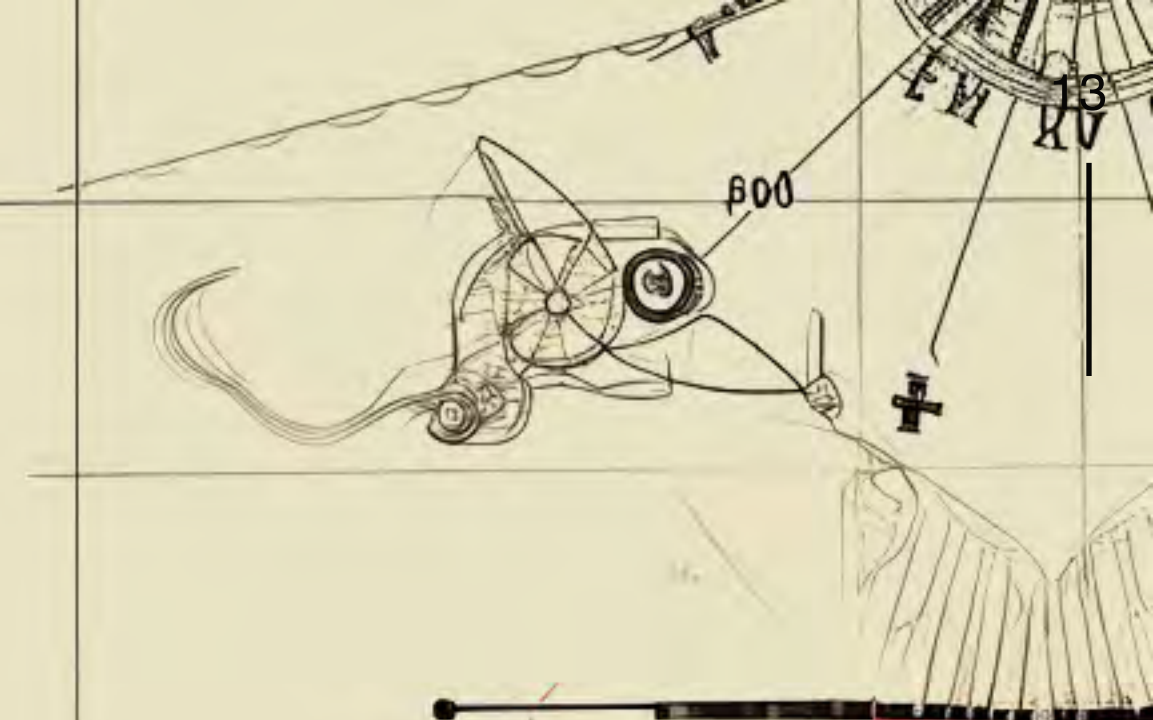


Every year, **QUEENS UNIVERSITY** from Kingston, Ontario rolls two busloads deep with indigenous students representing several Nations. And they are historically the team to beat. Ironically, last year the team saw their rocket dive head first three feet into the ground. This year, their team lead is determined to put her team back on top. The current tensions between politicians will not get in the way of these young people traveling down to be with the North American indigenous community. As we follow the students over the summer and through the fall, we imagine the unfolding politics will be an interesting backdrop for this community just on the other side of Lake Ontario.

CASTING - THE PROFESSIONALS

It takes a legion of passionate adults to pull off the FNL, most of them volunteers. Some of them work on the launch year-round to plan the challenges, awards, events and recruiting - all of that in addition to maintaining full time jobs in the industry. FNL has worked tirelessly to recruit Native American talent in the aerospace sector; they want the students to see themselves in these mentors as much as possible. Engineers from NASA, JPL, Boeing, Blue Origin, Space Force, Tripoli and more come back year after year, inspired by the students and invested in their success.

And these mentors have great stories and big personalities. They are there to troubleshoot the snafus with the teams, inspect the safety of the rockets, hype the students up when they are discouraged and produce a drill or any other myriad of tools in the middle of a nature preserve from thin air when things fall apart. Which they do.



POSSIBLE CHARACTERS

Along with the students, heroes on the ground would include people who come together year after year to put on the event, judge the rockets and share their expertise, providing guidance and insight as the students navigate the complexities of rocketry. Some of these men and women were once student participants themselves.

THE ALUM



**MARK
ABOTOSSAWAY**
Ojibwe

FNL Project Assistant
Structures Engineer

Blue Origin

THE HERO



**JOHN
HERRINGTON**
Chickasaw

Astronaut

First enrolled member
of a Native American
tribe to fly in space

THE SAGE

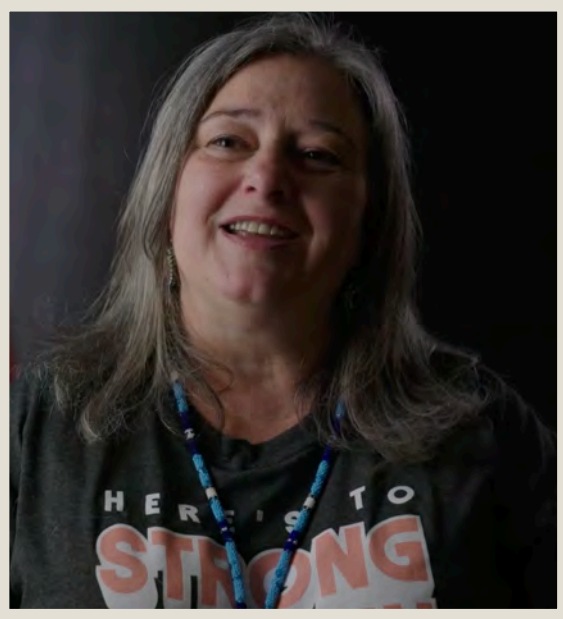


**AARON
YAZZIE**
Diné

Engineer

NASA Jet Propulsion
Laboratory (JPL)

THE OG



**JENNIFER
MORRIS**

Social Science
Instructor

College of
Menominee Nation

THE CHAMPION



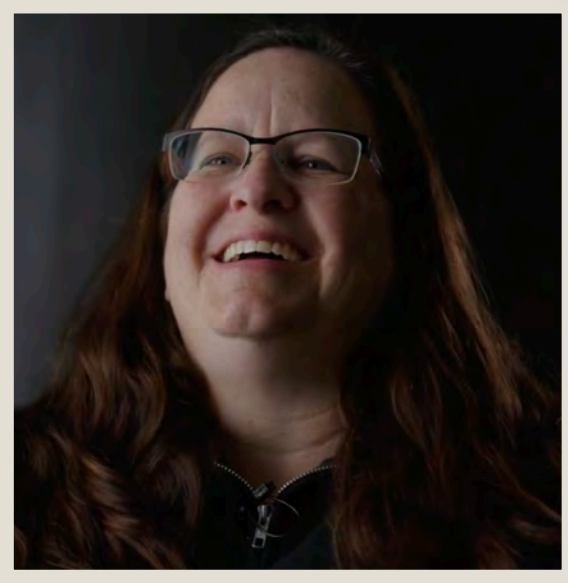
**JAMES
WOOD**

Osage, Loyal
Shawnee

Chief Engineer

NASA Launch
Services Program

THE AMBASSADOR



**MELANIE
HOWARD**

Kanehsatake
Mohawk

Director

Indigenous Futures
in Engineering

Queen's University
Canada

THE FIX IT GUY



**FRANK
NOBILE**

Safety Launch
Coordinator

Tripoli Rocketry
Association



AUDIENCE + ACCESS

15

LAUNCH is a feel-good, crowd-pleasing, inspirational story about young people pushing themselves outside of their comfort zones to pull off innovative, complicated engineering challenges, sometimes against all odds. Dedicated, driven, smart and charming, they are heroes to root for and admire. The film appeals to all ages and is family friendly along the lines of Science Fair, Boys State and Keepers of the Game.

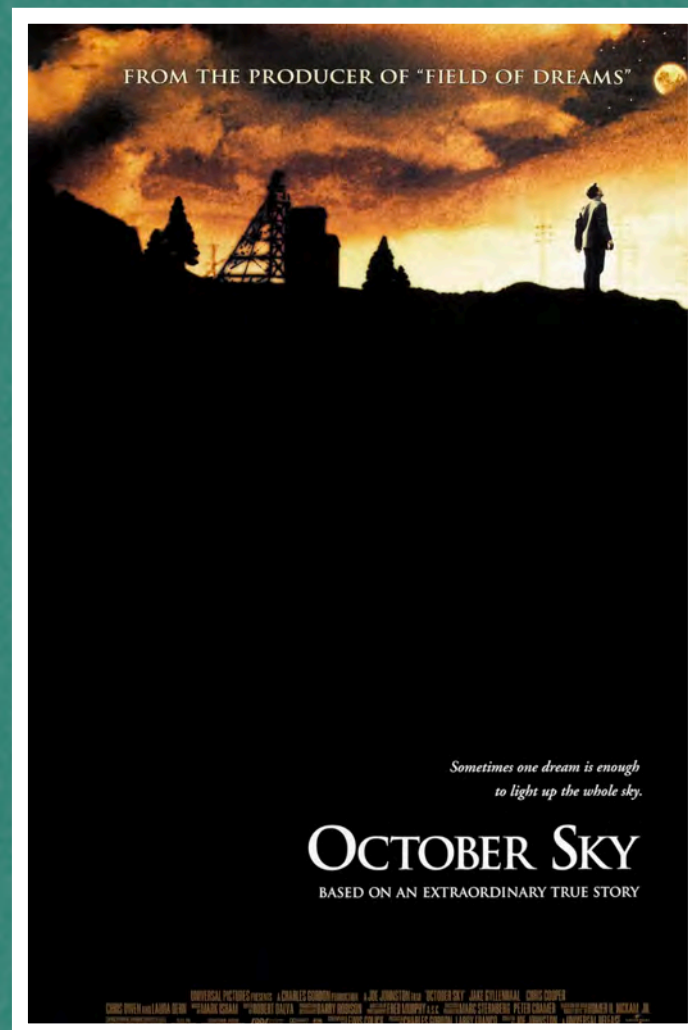
Beneath the competition story, runs a social one that celebrates American Indian heritage, culture, language, knowledge, philosophy and problem solving. Organic to our pre-interviews were stories of the mandatory Indian Schools whose goal was “to kill the Indian, save the man.” Access to education for the American Indian community is not just bogged down in politics and resistance, but also stained by this generational trauma, along with lack of opportunity and support. We expect to touch on this in the film, as well as touch on the under-developed pipeline to higher education opportunities for Native American youth and the pressing need for programs like FNL that illuminate career paths that were previously unknown or unavailable.

LAUNCH is a story that inspires and illustrates that if we nurture it now, our future is in good hands.

September Club has exclusive access to create a long form documentary film (or series) in collaboration with First Nations Launch and the Wisconsin Space Grant Consortium. Both are enthusiastic about the opportunity and will assist in casting as well as navigating NASA and other key relationships.



LAUNCH



The true story of Homer Hickam, a coal miner's son who was inspired by the first Sputnik launch to take up rocketry against his father's wishes.



Nine high school students from disparate corners of the globe navigate rivalries, setbacks, and hormones on their quest to win the international science fair. Only one can be named "Best in Fair."



Members of an all-Native Girls Lacrosse Team try to prove the game is their rightful inheritance, putting more than just a championship on the line.



One thousand 17-year-old boys from Texas join together to build a representative government from the ground up.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

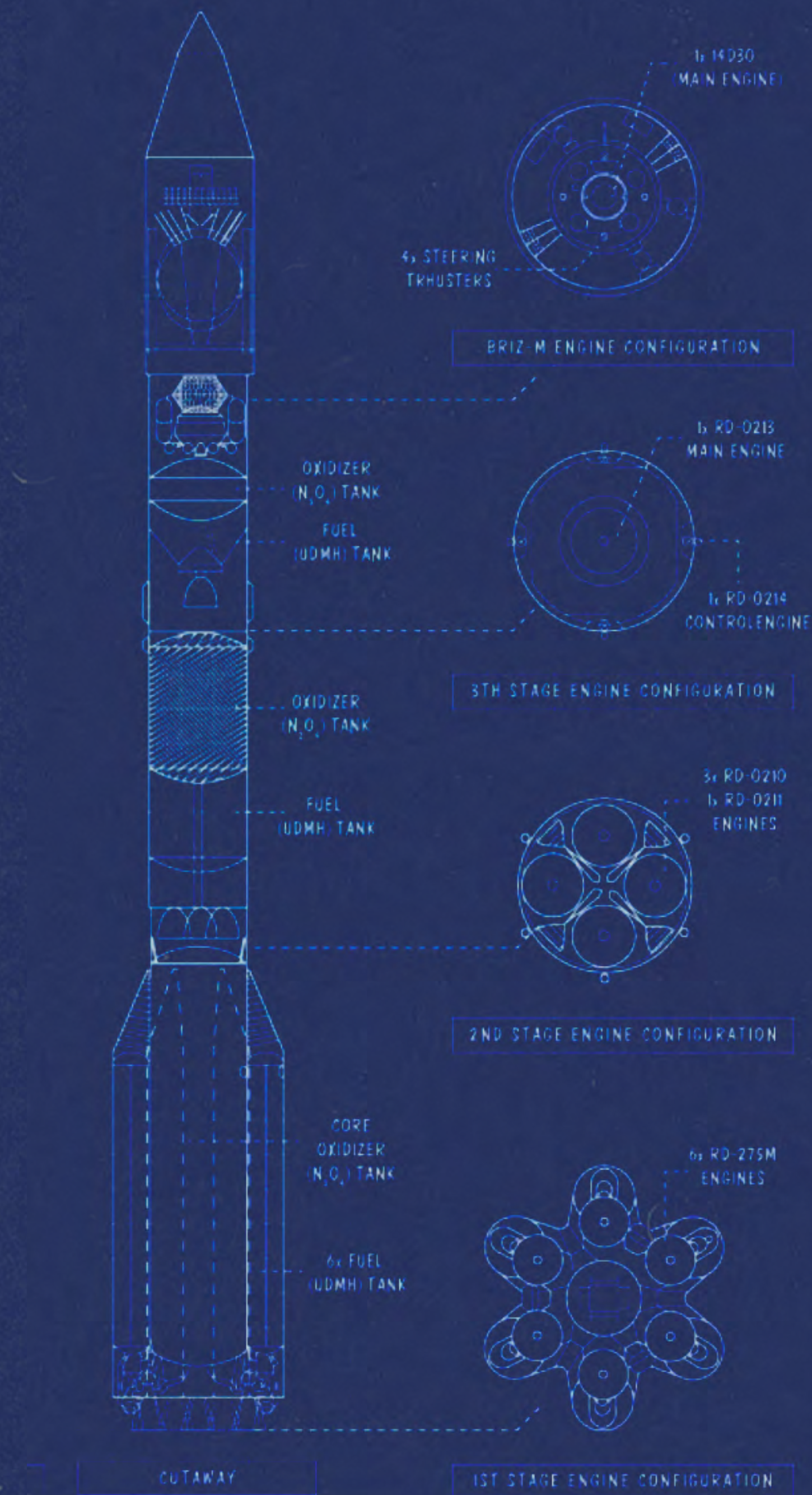
CDR John B. Herrington

CDR John B. Herrington is a retired Naval Aviator, test pilot, aquanaut and astronaut. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Applied Mathematics from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, a Master of Science degree in Aeronautical Engineering from the Naval Postgraduate School and a PhD in Education from the University of Idaho.

As an aviator, he has flown over 5000 hours in more than 30 different types of aircraft. As an aquanaut, he commanded the sixth NASA Extreme Environment Mission Operations (NEEMO) mission, spending nearly 264 hours underwater.

As an enrolled citizen of the Chickasaw Nation in Oklahoma, NASA considers CDR Herrington to be the first citizen of a Federally recognized tribe to fly in space. As an astronaut, CDR Herrington flew aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour on the 16th assembly mission to the International Space Station. During his mission he traveled over 5.6 million miles, accumulating over 330 hours in space, including performing three spacewalks totaling nearly 20 hours.

Following his retirement from the Navy and NASA, CDR Herrington worked in the commercial space sector before embarking on a 4,300 mile bicycle ride across the United States, from Cape Flattery, WA to Cape Canaveral FL, stopping at Indian reservations and NASA Explorer Schools to share his story of motivation and mentorship with Native American youth. At age 52, he entered the University of Idaho and earned a Doctorate in Education, investigating the factors that motivate and engage Native American students to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics.



EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

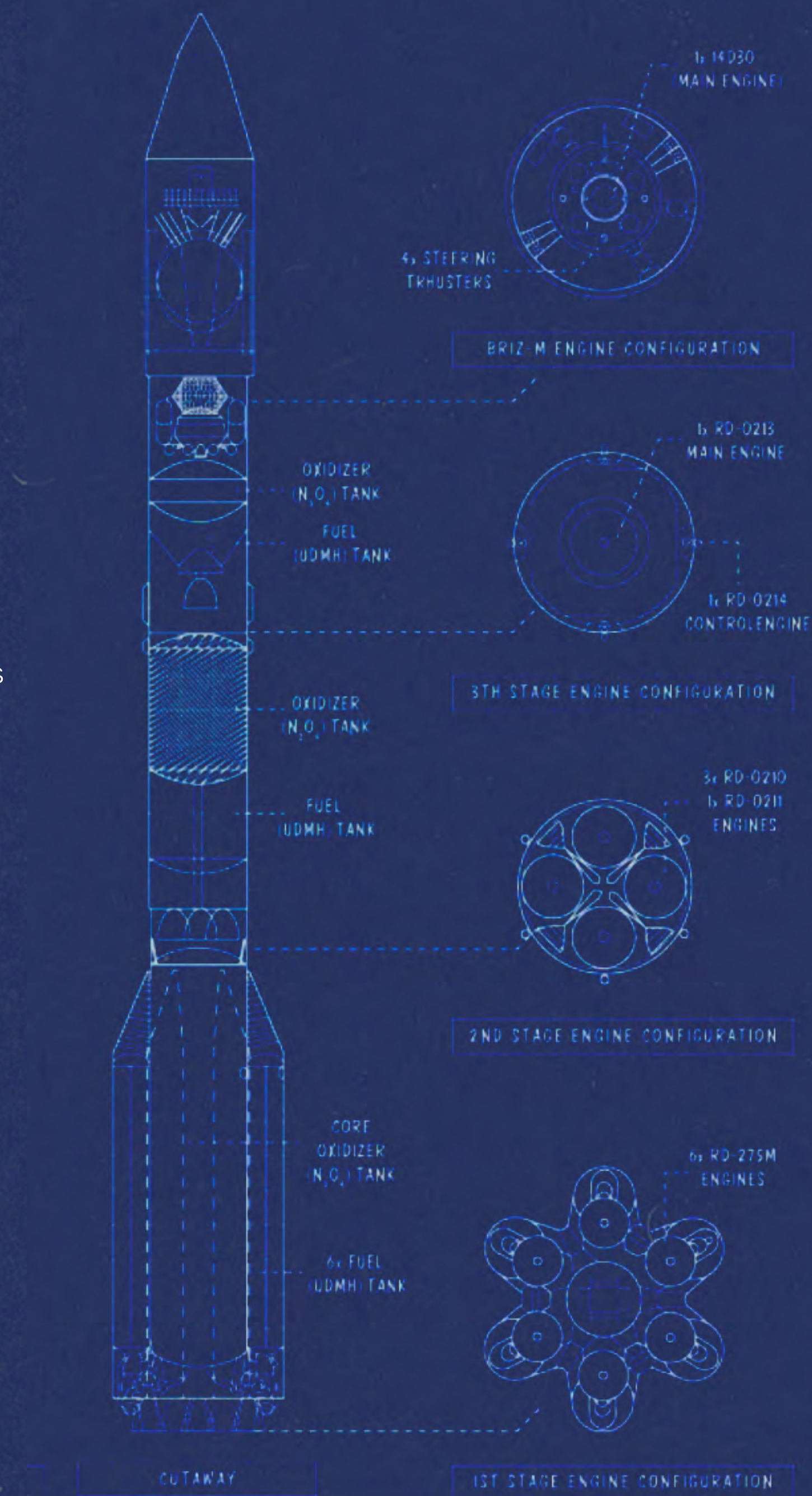
Jeremy Coon

Jeremy Coon produced and edited NAPOLEON DYNAMITE (Sundance Film Festival, 2004) which has become one of the most profitable and culturally impactful indie films in history. Jeremy also produced, edited and directed A DISTURBANCE IN THE FORCE, which premiered at the 2023 SXSW Film Festival and was one of the best reviewed documentaries of 2023.

Additionally he produced and edited THE SASQUATCH GANG, and directed and produced the acclaimed feature-length documentary RAIDERS! THE STORY OF THE GREATEST FAN FILM EVER MADE which premiered at the 2015 SXSW Film Festival and was released theatrically by Drafthouse Films.

Barry Poltermann

Barry is a producer, director and editor, primarily working in documentary whose most recent project is editing the narrative feature WILDCAT for director Ethan Hawke, which premiered at The 2023 Telluride Film Festival and starred Maya Hawke and Laura Linney. Prior to that, he edited the 6-part docu-series THE LAST MOVIE STARS for director Hawke and Executive Producer Martin Scorsese (Cannes, 2022). He has edited numerous acclaimed feature films, including AMERICAN MOVIE (Sundance Grand Prize Winner, 1999), THE POOL (Sundance Jury Prize Winner, 2007), RAIDERS! THE STORY OF THE GREATEST FAN FILM EVER MADE (SXSW, 2015), JIM & ANDY – THE GREAT BEYOND (Venice Biennale, 2017) and I AM NOT ALONE (Toronto, 2019 Audience Award for documentary at TIFF, DocNYC & AFI Fest).



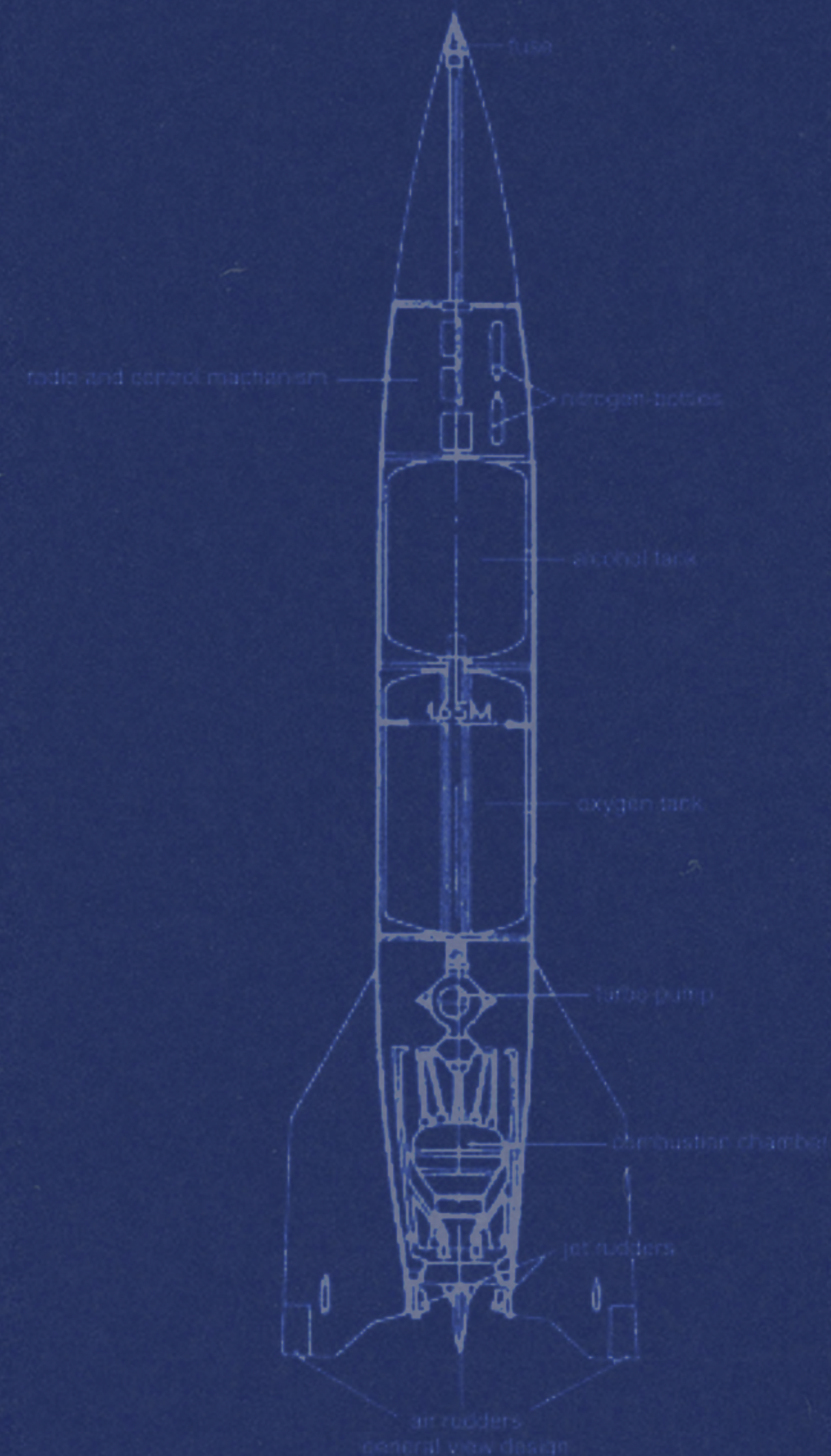
DIRECTORS

Manny Marquez

Manny is a member of the Choctaw Tribe of Oklahoma whose most recent documentary feature is MAKE PEACE OR DIE, which follows a Marine Corps veteran's return from Afghanistan where his unit lost 17 fellow soldiers. The film was produced for PBS Independent Lens and will be released later this year. His first feature documentary, PSYCHOPATH, is currently being developed into a scripted feature by Academy Award winning director Marshall Curry. Manny's short documentary, OPERATION ALLIE, premiered at the prestigious Big Sky Film Festival and played festivals across America. He has done an extensive amount of branded documentary work and is also known for his documentary inspired music videos.

Casey Suchan

Casey began her career producing documentaries on the history of Hip Hop for Quincy D. Jones' III's QD3 Entertainment, including the seminal documentary on the history of break dancing, THE FRESHEST KIDS (2002); the platinum selling Tupac Shakur documentary, THUG ANGEL (2002); and the critically acclaimed BEEF (2003) and BEEF II (2004), exploring the evolution of MC battles from verbal one-upmanship to street warfare. In 2006 Casey directed and produced the documentary ROCK THE BELLS, a behind-the-scenes look at how a young concert promoter beat the odds to reunite the Wu-Tang Clan for their final performance with O.D.B. The film premiered at The Tribeca Film Festival and was picked up for distribution by Warner Brothers. Recently Casey directed THE ANIMAL PEOPLE — a feature documentary for Executive Producer Joaquin Phoenix about a precedent-setting case brought against the activist organization "Stop Huntington Animal Cruelty USA" and in 2020 finished work as lead director on MAKE/SHIFT — a CLIO and Webby award-winning documentary sponsored by WP (WordPress) Engine about marketing in the digital age.



PRODUCERS

Denise Roberts McKee

Denise is a founding member of September Club, heading up Operations and overseeing its development initiatives. She has acted as a post-production supervisor for September Club on numerous editorial projects for clients such as Netflix, HBO and BBC Films. She has also produced documentary projects for marketing clients, such as the CLIO award winning documentary Make/SHIFT. Previously, Denise served as COO for About Face Media managing development and production of documentary content initiatives for brands including Disney, Abbott Labs, JP Morgan, Verizon and 3M. Prior to joining About Face, Denise co-founded the San Francisco based companies LimeLife, Inc., a publisher of mobile media for women, and Stunt Puppy Entertainment, an independent game developer focused on the children's market. Denise oversaw all production, financials and acquisition of new business development, focusing on licensor driven content for such entities as Time-Warner, NBC Universal, Bravo TV New Media, Rachael Ray, Disney/Buena Vista Games and Atari/Infogrames.

Christine Bolz

Christine is the Program Director for First Nations Launch, an Artemis Student Challenge. Through her leadership, First Nations Launch grew into an international program, gaining support from NASA, the Canadian Space Agency, Boeing, Blue Origin, Arcadis, GE Aerospace, Raytheon, Sierra Space, and the U.S. Space Force. Previously, Christine was a freelance journalist for Ruth Ratny's REEL Chicago, a Chicago-based online industry trade publication, Pioneer Press, WLS-TV and WKRS Radio. She worked with Emmy-award winning author and producer, Lars Ullberg, and Applied Creative Training, LLC creating bio-terror attack and pandemic training videos for California and Alameda County Public Health Departments. Christine contributed to "VAX," a PBS documentary exploring vaccine efficacy. She served on the Winthrop Harbor, IL, School District Board of Education for 16 years. Christine's faith and commitment to people is her inspiration for bringing stories to life.

EDITOR

Matt Prekop

Matt recently completed works as a lead editor on the Netflix productions of MELTDOWN: THREE MILE ISLAND, and MURDER AMONG THE MORMONS. He also worked as a supporting editor on Ethan Hawke's acclaimed docs-series THE LAST MOVIE STARS. Previously to that, he was a lead editor on the 8-part Netflix series THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MADELINE MCCANN which premiered in 2019 and in 2020 edited the branded documentary Make/SHIFT, produced for WP Engine.

With the help of FNL, the filmmakers plan to enlist the support of several indigenous elders and professionals from different tribes to act as an advisory resource. FNL has served over 104 tribes during its history with a sensitivity to unique cultures and experiences, and the film will share this thoughtful approach.

We hope to lean on the resources and knowledge this team provides both in terms of topics to cover in the film as well as how best to explore and share these stories with a sensitivity to the nuances of tribal history, perceptions and concerns. This will include feedback and advice throughout the life of the project, from pre-production through post.



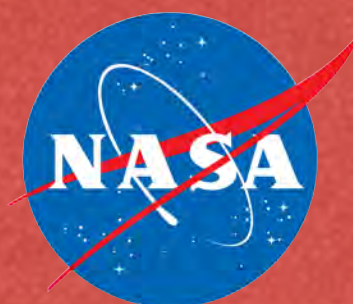


SEPTEMBER CLUB

SEPTEMBER CLUB IS AN EDITORIAL
DRIVEN PRODUCTION COMPANY THAT
SPECIALIZES IN DOCUMENTARIES —
FROM FEATURE FILMS TO DIGITAL
SHORTS & DOCU-SERIES.

FOUNDED BY PRODUCER/EDITORS
JEREMY COON ([NAPOLEON DYNAMITE](#))
AND BARRY POLTERMANN ([AMERICAN
MOVIE](#)), OUR WORK INCLUDES
ACCLAIMED DOCUMENTARY PROJECTS
SUCH AS [THE LAST MOVIE STARS](#),
[MURDER AMONG THE MORMONS](#),
[WHIRLYBIRD](#), [BOYS STATE](#) AND
[JIM & ANDY](#).

SEPTEMBER.CLUB



Partner



LAUNCH

A DOCUMENTARY FEATURE

