

Telling the Story of a Secret Bullet Factory

It was happenstance that Laurel Fairworth found herself at the Ayalon Institute. A few years ago, she promised her dying mother that she would visit Israel. On a 2012 Federation mission of 15 buses, hers was the only one that went to the secret bullet factory.

"I remember thinking, 'this will be boring,'" she said. "But as soon as I walked in, I felt my mother. And I thought to myself, 'oh my god, this has the makings of a documentary.'"

A TV reporter for 20 years and *Today Show* producer for the last decade, Fairworth, who also owns a PR/marketing firm, recognized that the Ayalon Institute was a story worth telling and is now creating a movie that she is hoping will make it to the 2016 film festivals.

Built on Kibbutzim Hill that was established outside the city of Rehovot in 1933 as a facility to train groups for kibbutz life, "Ayalon Institute" was the code name for the clandestine underground munitions plant that today is a national museum. In 1945, the Haganah approached an incoming group of kibbutzniks with the task of building an underground factory to prepare for the imminent war against the Arabs. They took on the task, and an underground factory the size of a tennis court was built 24 feet below ground. They hid two secret entrances with an operating laundry at one end to cover the noisy machinery and a working bakery at the other to disguise the factory smells.

The factory manufactured more than five million bullets over a period of three years right under the noses of the British, who had a military training base within walking distance. The 45 people working in the secret bullet factory had to maintain absolute secrecy. The secret was kept until SPIHS, led by Shlomo Hillel and Yehuda Dekel, worked to preserve the original factory, and then opened it as a visitors center to the public.



Wendy Ross Photography

When Fairworth discovered that a handful of the bullet factory workers were still alive, "that's when I decided to make this documentary," she said.

Fairworth first discovered JNF because she wanted to partner with an organization that was benefitting Israel. When she learned that JNF was involved with SPIHS in preserving heritage sites, including the Ayalon Institute, she knew JNF was the obvious choice to be the film's fiscal sponsor. She raised enough money to go back to Israel and shoot two interviews. One was with Shlomo Hillel, former Speaker of the Knesset, Minister of Police, and Minister of

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Internal Affairs, who worked in the munitions factory and currently serves as president of the SPIHS, which manages the site. The other was with Yehudit Ayalon, who at age 19 worked 10-hour shifts in the factory and even took its name as her own. The timing was opportune because Yehudit passed away the night before Fairworth returned to Israel to conduct

further interviews with other members.

"That's part of what makes this project so compelling," said Fairworth. "Besides how important what they did is, and the guile and gumption they exhibited, it's important to complete this project before it's too late."

Fairworth also recently interviewed two battalions of IDF soldiers, because "I wanted to show why it would resonate today," she explained. "These soldiers told me that this story was an inspiration to them. They felt part of a bigger cause; that they were standing on the shoulders of others who had come before them.

"I found that pretty inspirational: what these people did 70 years ago is still remembered and still making an impact. It's nice to give these last survivors their due. There are so many heroes who contributed to Israel surviving its infancy and becoming what it is today."

Fairworth is currently raising the additional funding needed to finish the film. Further down the road will be some significant milestones: the 70th anniversaries of the establishment of the bullet factory in 2017, of the State of Israel in 2018, and of the war's end and the bullet factory's closing in 2019. She plans to gift a copy of the film to the museum and to the State of Israel and hopes to take the film on a 'Jewish Heroes' education tour to synagogues, interfaith groups, and universities with the hope of spreading tolerance. Learn more about her project at ayalondocumentary.com.



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JNF and SPIHS are currently working together on a huge development plan for the site, including upgrading of the entrance hall, installing an elevator at the site, and much more. The updated hall will include a new state-of-the-art video and sound system, improved seating accommodations, and interior graphics that will assist in telling the story. Visitors will watch Fairworth's movie in the upgraded movie hall before they start the tour.

Reflecting on the project, Fairworth marveled, "Visiting Israel changed my life. Everything was so sweeping and historic and inspiring," she said. "I couldn't believe how deeply I fell in love with it."