

Shelby Stanger: Have you ever seen one of those movies about a professional athlete or venture that gives you the butterflies, the sense that you have to get outside right now and go for it? Today, I'm talking to Aaron Lieber, the director of a film that did that for me. A film I witnessed part of being made firsthand about surfer Bethany Hamilton. It comes out in select theaters July 12th. If you want to be a filmmaker or you're a Bethany Hamilton fan, this is a great show.

Aaron Lieber started making films of his buddies skateboarding when he was in high school. During college, he had an internship at Transworld Surf. The growing popularity of YouTube allowed him to make more robust highlight videos and surf videos. Then he found his niche making feature films about female surfers, which not many people were doing at the time. He started winning awards quickly through his work. Aaron met Bethany Hamilton, an idea for the documentary *Unstoppable* was born.

I'm Shelby Stanger, and this is *Wild Ideas Worth Living*.

Bethany Hamilton has been on the surf scene for over 20 years and she's only 29. When she was eight years old, she plays first in an NSSA competition, and she hasn't stopped competing and winning ever since. You might have heard of Bethany because her life story was turned into a Hollywood movie called *Soul Surfer* back in 2011. When Bethany was 13 years old, she was out surfing at Tunnels Beach in Kauai when she was attacked by a tiger shark and lost her left arm.

Bethany was back on her board a month later and competing only a month after that. Her incredible story isn't just about surviving a shark attack though. Bethany has remained one of the top surfers in the world. She's worked on her skills training hard to tackle competitions and big waves. She's a champion out of the water, as a mom, a wife, and so much more. It's no surprise that someone decided to make a documentary about her.

I know Aaron well and I've watched him work his tail off to make this movie. I was actually invited to be the only journalist in the boat when Bethany surfs at a place called *Jaws* in Maui. It's one of the main scenes in the film. Since then, Aaron and I have had a lot of meetings about both my podcast and him making a meaningful story and all the things that go into making a major feature film.

It was great to sit down and talk with Aaron right before the release of this film. Just so you know, I got a sneak peek and it left me at the edge of my seat hooting and hollering with some tears at the end. Before we dive into the making of this documentary and also talk to Bethany Hamilton, I wanted to go back to the beginning of Aaron Lieber's film career. I'd love for you to tell people just how you got your start as a filmmaker.

Aaron Lieber: I started just with a camera shooting my friend skateboarding and my teachers-- I got so lucky growing up my teachers in high school would be like, do you want to write a paper or make a film about a subject or whatever it was at that time in

school? Obviously, I always chose making a video. Graduate high school not knowing how to write a paper.

Got to college, got a D on my first English paper and I've never gotten a D in my life. That was a rude awakening. It was so cool to have at a young age these hand-held cameras that were a couple of hundred bucks. I'll admit that we stole final cut pro from our high school so that I could edit at home. It was [crosstalk]

Shelby: Borrowed it. You borrowed it.

Aaron: We did borrow it.

Shelby: You didn't steal it.

Aaron: We borrowed it from the school for a day so I could install it on my computer. Just was on this journey to teach myself YouTube, and those free tutorials started becoming a thing.

Shelby: How did you develop your love of telling stories through film?

Aaron: I didn't originally even have the intent to tell stories. When I'm younger, I was watching Taylor Steele films, which were high action and these Skateboard Zero films and a bunch of those types of films. I definitely obviously watched *Endless Summer* Bruce Brown and Warren Miller films as well. When you're younger, you just want to get out there and do something. My whole thing was like I want to travel and be a pro surfer, but I'm terrible at surfing. A camera was literally the lens that I could go and do these things. That was my original intent was to just make performance surf films. I just thought it was so cool. At that time, there was a market for them.

Shelby: You grew up in southern California, surfing, skateboarding and you just always loved it. Then you said you started as an intern.

Aaron: Yes, in my junior year in college, I was going to study abroad and it ended up being really expensive. I was like, "Okay, I'm not doing that." My mom was like, "Well, you should get an internship at a surf magazine." I was like, "That's a great idea, mom."

Shelby: Moms are smart. Your mom especially is pretty wise.

Aaron: Moms are the best. It's like one of those things my mom would say something to me or she says-- Even to this day, and then the initial response is like you're wrong but you know she's right, always. Just so annoying. She suggested getting an internship and I emailed a bunch of magazines and Justin Coté got back to me and I did an interview. I started as an intern at Transworld Surf when they were based in Oceanside.

As soon as I got in there, I learned what he was doing but I want to make videos.

That was the internet just started becoming a thing, so I would go to contests and make like highlight videos and recap videos before anybody else was doing that within the surf industry. Transworld Surf was so excited because they're getting hundreds and hundreds of free videos for their platform. That's how I started getting into the industry was just at the bottom.

Shelby: I feel like being an intern is one of the most underrated things you could ever do. That was the advice a journalism professor gave to me my freshman year. Go intern at your local paper, and I did and they gave me my own adventure column. I had to write a daily or weekly column about adventurers and surfers, and I literally I still do the same job today than I did at 19 years old and I got paid to do it. The cool thing about internships is, you can do anything. If you hustle, you're allowed to work on a lot of big projects. I think at any place, right?

Aaron: Yes, I think an internship is just so overlooked. That's the first piece of advice I give anybody wanting to do anything in their life. Go get an internship.

Shelby: Even if you have to work for free. [crosstalk]

Aaron: 100% you should work for free. Why are you going to get paid--

Shelby: Sometimes you get paid.

Aaron: Sure.

Shelby: [crosstalk] I'm mostly worked for free.

Aaron: If you can get paid, great, but you have no skills and knowledge at that point your life. You think you do, you're really overly confident. At 19 years old, I remember being that human, but you should just-- The opportunity-- The thing is you're getting paid in the networking that you're going to build and the resources that you have behind you. Yes, sure, it may not be monetary, but there's no way my career would be where it is now without that internship.

Shelby: You get to learn from people better than you and you could take risks and fail without a ton of consequences because you're not-- It's like if you get fired, oh well [crosstalk]

Aaron: Well, you can't even get by. Usually, you're like month long or maybe a three-month-long internship.

Shelby: That's great. Why surfing? I get it, you love surfing, but you immediately started making surf films, and then quickly transition and making surf films about women. Which a lot of guys were not doing at the time.

Aaron: I think two things. One is the ocean just has this healing and allure that you just can't-- Once you're in it, it's hard to leave. The ocean just means a lot to me and

at so many surfers and so I think that was the initial draw. My first film, *The Pursuit*, with all these up and coming 18 to 23-year-old male surfers. When I finished that film, I'll never forget I was premiering it at my college and this lady raises her hand and says, "Why are there no girls in your movies?"

I was 22 at that time and didn't have an answer. I was like, "That's a great question." What do I say? That stuck out in my head. About a year later, I got this job working for Nike and they were already making this film *Leave A Message* with all these top girls. I got really fortunate I fell into this space and met Carissa Moore and Lakey Peterson and these amazing women. Then that's, for me, the light bulb went off like, "Wow, there's this whole other space of really talented surfers that are so fun to work with and no one's doing it. Let's go."

Shelby: First of all if you're listening and you don't know these names, these women are now the top women in the world at surfing; Lakey Peterson, Carissa Moore. At that time, they were sponsored by Nike. How did you get into Nike?

Aaron: I just through the internship and the film became friends with all these other filmmakers within the industry. A buddy of mine was the guy working- a filmmaker at Nike, and he wanted to move on with his life. He's like, "Hey, I'm going to quit. Do you want to try out for this job with Nike?" Of course, I'm like, "Yes, I want that job." He quit and I came on for like a month-long period as a test trial.

After a month, they loved working with me. I stayed on with the job. Like you said, Carissa Moore is now a three-time world champ, Lakey Peterson is number two in the world right now. These girls, at that time, know we're Lakey was 15 at that time and Carissa, I think would have been 17. I really got this opportunity to work with-- Even on the male side, Gabriel Medina, Julian Wilson, Kolohe Andino. I worked with all these up and coming kids. I got this really cool landscape to see what the future is like, and I saw the women were just as interesting as the men but no one was pointing the camera at them.

Shelby: That's so interesting. Well, I always appreciate how you showcase women because I remember doing a consulting job with a surf company and the filmmakers continually showed this one girl's, every time she did a bottom turn in a thong, like that's all you saw. I was like, "I just want to see her surf, she rips."

Aaron: It was a cognitive choice for sure. If you look at any of my work, you won't see that. If a female athlete wants to wear whatever bikini she wants to wear, that's totally fine, but I'm not going to intentionally shoot her in a sexual way. I'm always going to shoot her in an athletic way. If the sexuality comes out because of who she is, fine. I'm not here to say that's right or wrong.

Shelby: Some girls like to twerk on the beach, go for it.

Aaron: The intention was to try to focus on athletic ability and give whatever I was doing in that space an elevated boost because the sexuality is going to be done by

some other photographer or some other videographer and then to be proud of that work. I have a mom and a sister and maybe I'll have a daughter someday. Again, it's not like I want to write those people off, but it's just been done a lot. How do you try to do something different? That was really important to me.

Shelby: Aaron's goal of telling stories that aren't being told is something I admire and try to do myself. The story of Bethany Hamilton's career that he tells through *Unstoppable* hasn't really been told before which is one reason it's such an enjoyable movie to watch. How did you find Bethany Hamilton? I know everybody has always known about Bethany Hamilton story, but you found a different story that you wanted to tell. Talk to me about how you met her, and how you found this story you really wanted to tell.

Aaron: I'll just brush on all of it. *Leave a Message* led to Lakey's film and Lakey Peterson, who's number two in the world right now, was the first girl to do an air and surfing competition. Then the following year, she did an air-reverse.

Shelby: Which is when you [crosstalk]

Aaron: Do you want me do it?

Shelby: No, you explain [crosstalk]

Aaron: Air-reverse is just basically going into the air and doing at least like a 180-degree turn in the air and then landing and spinning around. It ends up being a full 360. She was the first girl back-to-back years to do that. At that time, she was the youngest girl to qualify. I followed her journey on tour her first year in the struggles of being a young woman in the big leagues. I edited that film in three weeks, which was crazy, 16 hours a day. Ended up doing good, it was like number two on iTunes sports and Netflix licensed it, it did pretty good.

During that time, I went on a trip with Carissa Moore, who's now a three-time world champ, and Bethany and I first met her. Then about six months later, Bethany came on a trip with Lakey, we were finishing up Lakey's film. I think Lakey had just finished maybe top 5 in the world, and Bethany was outclassing her surfing-wise. Lakey was surfing good and I, obviously, don't want to throw her under the bus by any means. But Bethany was just throwing buckets and getting barreled. She was just surfing on a level that I didn't know she could surf at. I knew she was a good surfer but not-- I just soft pitched an idea to her. I was like, "Hey, it would be really cool if you really just show the world what a great surfer you are." I didn't pitch myself, I just told her like a suggestion like you should do this. Then eight months later, I finish Lakey's film and Bethany texts me like, "Watched it and really loved it." She's like, "Let's do something." I was like, "Okay." The original intention of Bethany Hamilton's *Unstoppable*, was really just to highlight her as an amazing athlete. That's what we started out to do and the film evolved.

Shelby: Bethany Hamilton is an incredible athlete, but most people didn't totally

know that. Most people know Bethany Hamilton from the movie *Soul Surfer* or the fact that when she was 13 years old, she lost her left arm to a tiger shark. She's been on all sorts of shows since that from the *Amazing Race* to, she's been on *Oprah*, *Ellen*, probably, the *Today* show. You're like, yes, but there is this other story.

Aaron: I would just categorize her as like she's been categorized as a survivor of a shark attack and a Christian. She's so much more than all that, and I think we all are.

Shelby: I didn't think of those two things [crosstalk]

Aaron: Those were the boxes that she's been put into.

Shelby: You're right. She was put into those two boxes because she did a lot of speaking at churches.

Aaron: This is human nature. I think a little bit to try to understand things. The boxes she was put into as shark attack survivor, surfer, for sure, but not world class athlete and a Christian. The film really tackles the idea of adaptation and perception and what it means to be a woman in 2019. Bethany wasn't really involved in that aspect of it, she's just going to be her, that's her job is to just be herself.

Through the process of making this film, she gets married, she has a kid, and there's struggles in that, and she's still an athlete. I really wanted to just be a fly on the wall in her world and give a female athlete, who has these big narratives and is well-known, the opportunity to tell her story the way any other male athlete would have. Have the cinematography, the sound, the music and all these layers that I feel like are applied to male films to a female film.

If you really take a step back and look at the space of female narratives, I can name lesson five that are good, that have been given the time and energy that they deserve. Bethany's film, if you take away the shark and you take away the faith, it's the only film that I can think of that really highlights a woman as a top-level athlete that's done in the way that those films were done.

Shelby: You wanted to make it not just a film that was just like out on iTunes the next day or that was distributed by a surf brand. You're like, "No, I want this in theaters nationwide, so everybody can see her."

Aaron: I feel like it's super important for young women to see themselves on a bigger screen and the only way to do that is to make sure it's an authentic non-branded film.

Shelby: You don't go too into the shark attack in the movie. The shark attack story has been told over and over and over again, and I don't even like hearing it or watching it. It just makes me cringe. You see it, you know it happened, whatever. How did you handle that and then the aftermath of the shark attack? How did you

handle telling that story without showing it and telling it?

Aaron: I think what I try to do through the whole process of making the film was internalize how Bethany feels about everything, and then tell the story that way. I really got to know her really well, all of her little quirks and all these different things. I think the way it's told in the film to the best of the ability is how she perceived the moment in time and how quickly she moved on and trying to do it in a way where it's still emotional, it's still an inciting incident, it's still very important to her arc as a story, as a human but it's not the only element to her in who she is. I feel like the way we did it was just it was a moment, but it doesn't define her in a negative way that maybe people want to and everyone wants to know like, "What happened? Tell us about it." You're like, "Well, imagine being in a car accident and then being asked about it for the rest of your life." That's how it's annoying. I wanted to show that angst. There is this stuff with the media in the film. I wanted to take people on an immersive journey, like you're on this journey with her. I'm the director and all this stuff, but really what I try to do is imagine if Bethany was directing her own film, what it would look like and that's the way I approached everything.

[music]

Oprah: Most believes her hopes and dreams for a superstar surfing career were gone, but Bethany was back on her board four weeks later.

[applause]

Did you ever, ever for one moment think you wouldn't go back in the water?

Bethany: I think I went through my head once or twice, but once things came clear my mind, I knew I would be back out there.

Oprah: You got clear really quickly, didn't you?

Bethany: Yes.

[laughter]

Shelby: Tell me some of the things that happened right after, like her surfing accomplishments.

Aaron: In the film, we had to pick what we could keep, but about two months after, she had lost her arm, she was on the big island competing and ended up making the finals in that event and people were in tears. It was just like this crazy moment. She got back in the water four weeks later and was competing two months later, and then she got second place at NSSA national's eight, nine months later, and then a year after that, she won it.

Shelby: Not only did she after the shark attack go on to surf and beat everybody

despite only having one arm, which by the way, there's some things with surfing that would be really hard with one arm, paddling, duck diving. Her dad had a solution that was really interesting in helping her duck dive underwater. Duck diving for those you don't know is waves come in and they're really powerful and to get through them, you have to physically put your hand down and push the board underneath the wave. To do that with one arm, I've tried and I can't do it now. After I hung out with Bethany, I just kept trying to paddle with one arm at my local break and I just flailed.

Aaron: I think it's a really great-- Because Bethany's language is action, not words. I think in life, you're faced with two choices, do or don't do. Her choice was obviously to do. I think if you lost your arm and you really loved surfing, you would just figure it out. You would just keep doing it until you figure it out. That's what she did. Sure, we have two arms so for us to try to go do it really quickly is impossible, but I actually would challenge you if you focus on it for a week straight, you would probably figure it out because you love the sport of surfing so much.

She just loved surfing to the point where it didn't matter what it was going to take, she wasn't going to give up on her hopes and dreams. I think that's just such a great lesson for anybody facing a mental issue or a physical one, whatever it may be. You have two choices. Sure, there's maybe a lot of gray area, but at the end of the day, there's two choices, yes or no.

Shelby: When we come back, Aaron talks about the making of the film and what it was like when Bethany saw it for the first time.

Summer's the best time to get out and try something new. For me, it's always something in or near the water or near the mountains. Did you know that REI offers classes and tours all over the country? From paddling to climbing, hiking, and campouts, there's something for everyone. If you're new to outdoor adventures, all skill levels are welcome to join from beginner hikers to seasoned outdoor enthusiasts. What better way to spend a weekend than whale watching by kayak in the San Francisco Bay, or taking a moonlight hike in the smoky mountains or even going on a stand-up paddle overnight camping trip in Coronado, San Diego. Did I mention that REI has access to places that you can't even go without a guide? It's a great time to sign up for a class and join REI for a new adventure. Learn more and register for classes at rei.com/events.

Making a film is no small task. Making a film about any kind of human especially where there's so many moving parts and they're continuing to evolve and their story keeps growing, well, that's even harder. Bethany and Aaron were flying all over the world to film different points of Bethany's life and trying to catch surf, hoping the surf would come together and so the competition. As the idea for the movie grew, the scale of the production grew too. Here's a taste of the film *Unstoppable*.

Speaker 2: You think you're going to surf again?

Bethany: I think? I know.

Thomas Hamilton: I looked down, her arm was gone. Heaviest moment in my life.

Oprah: Bethany was back on her board four weeks later.

Speaker 4: When she is coming back to compete, we all jaw-dropped.

Bethany: God gave me this passion to surf, and it wasn't like that passion had been taken too.

Tyler: I don't know how she does it.

Speaker 5: She trained her butt off. It takes a lot of strength and willpower to get that one success.

Bethany: It was May 31st, I started to go in labor. I've always looked forward to being a mom one day.

Tyler: I don't know how she does it.

Kelly: For her to take down two world champs, the current world champ and a six time world champ is pretty rad.

Saylor: She just makes everybody inspired.

Bethany: I didn't need easy, I just needed possible.

Shelby: I just love the interplay between Bethany as a kid, her family and Bethany as adult. She's just a badass. She charges-- I'm not going to give away the end scene because the end scene I was there for it, but I was so excited because I'm in the boat and I just remember her jumping off and I could hear in the movie me say, "Go, Bethany." It was so exciting watching it. [crosstalk]

Aaron: I'm so glad. Again, that's another intuition thing I knew I needed. I needed somebody to come in and be who you were in that space. Imagine if you weren't there, we wouldn't have had a female voice in that scene. There's these things like I didn't know they were so important til later, but I knew they were important, if that makes sense. Again, intuition--

Shelby: I just felt like I was a total obstacle on the boat because I was an extra person and there's only so many people who can go but that's good to hear. It was just so crazy to watch her in the final scene. You'll just have to watch the movie to watch it. There's already clips everywhere, you know what happens, but I'm there watching her and it's just like the waves that she's in are terrifying for anybody. Then you just watch Bethany. There there's also the footage that I didn't even know happened. That was really cool as well.

Aaron: One of the best things I heard post Jaws was from Greg Long who's a big wave surfer, champ and just legend. He just said when Bethany showed up Shane Dorian, and Ian Walsh, and Greg Long, and all the best big wave surfers are out surfing and that he said, "We got out of the water to watch the Bethany Hamilton show." He said, "He has never seen anybody show up and surf the wave so gracefully and take the lines that she took first time at that level. All these guys were so blown away by her skill set and she's smiling the whole time, which just is weird.

Shelby: Then she wanted to go back and was bummed that she didn't take any on the head. I was like, "Are you a masochist?" She is cut from a different cloth, for sure.

Aaron: Her pain tolerance level and her willingness to want to put herself in a critical position on waves, she has that X Factor that you're looking for with any top-level athlete, something you can't describe, they just have that thing.

Shelby: About a year after she had her first son, Bethany competed in the Fiji women's pro. She trained incredibly hard, making her fitness and technical skills a priority while also caring for her newborn son and dealing with everything that happens when you become a first-time mom. In this clip from *Unstoppable*, you'll hear Bethany as well as pro surfer and three-time world champ Carissa Moore, also surf journalist Chris Morrow who is at the world surf league at the time, world surf league TV announcers and pro surfer and two-time world champion Tyler Wright talk about Bethany's second heat against Tyler in the competition.

Bethany: At this point, everyone's talking about Tyler shooting for the world title.

Corissa: I was like, "I wonder what's going to happen in this round two against Tyler. Tyler has been on fire all year.

TV announcer 1: What a run for Tyler Wright, to start off the season number one in the world.

Chris Morrow: She's having the best start of her life. Right out of the gate, you've got a giant hurdle to climb.

Bethany: We're in the same heat. Again.

TV announcer 1: Who's going to win this hike?

TV announcer 2: I think Tyler's going to take it out, she's just too sharp.

TV announcer 3: I'm with him.

TV announcer 1: It's hard to go against Tyler in the form she's in at the moment.

Bethany: I'm like, "Oh my gosh, Tyler, I'm totally cheering for you. You're surfing

amazing. Win the world title, but I really want to beat you right now.”

TV announcer 1: Here goes, Bethany, talking into the barrel, finding some cover. A clean exit and looking to set out once again on the inside here. She needs an 8.9 to get herself into the lead. Here is the number, it's a nine for Bethany Hamilton.

Corissa: I wasn't ready for her to freaking throw out nines against the current number one in the world.

TV announcer 1: Well, a minute and 40 seconds to go and Tyler using priority needs a 7.44 out of this ride to take the lead. Bethany is going to get herself on another decent set wave to open face turns again. Looking strong and she tucks into the barrel, once again on the inside. And a bit of body language there to finish that right off, she feels good, stands tall, 30 seconds remaining. The wildcard Bethany Hamilton is going to take the win and move on through the round three. Tyler for just the second time in her CT career is falling out of the draw in the second round.

Tyler: Out of everyone that I can lose to, I'm ok with it. It was so close. I'm stoked for her. How she has been able to adapt and be the powerhouse that she is, is absolutely incredible. I don't know how she does it.

[music]

Shelby: I wanted to hear Bethany's take on the process of making the movie, why she wanted to work with Aaron, her goal in making the film, and what she hopes other moms especially will take away from seeing *Unstoppable*. Aaron was able to ask her a few questions for me last week.

Bethany: When we first decided to start filming, the *Unstoppable* project started off as more of a high-performance piece just because so many people knew my story, but they didn't really know much after my teen years. I'd taken my surfing to a pretty high-performance level, and I kind of just wanted to show that off. I had shot with Aaron in Indonesian who was super impressed with my surfing and he films all the best females in the world. He could recognize really good surfing.

When I first met Aaron, he seemed like a cool guy and very motivated and driven and I guess I trusted him. Ultimately to spend a lot of time with someone, you got to be able to trust them. I think as the project grew, he grew so much as a person and literally, he's like unstoppable too. He's just the most driven, quick-thinking, passionate filmmaker that I have experienced time with, and just people across the board too. He's just constantly going. I'm like, "Slow down. Rest." He also just had that perfect combination to share my story.

I wasn't drawn to meeting some big name producer who wanted to tell my story. I was drawn to someone who was unknown, and who was just going to capture me in my essence. I think Aaron did just that. Being that the film started off as more of a performance short film. Then, it turned into a feature length documentary telling my

entire life story from childhood until now, and entering into motherhood. There is so much that happened in the last 10 years that *Soul Surfer* didn't tell. As much as I loved *Soul Surfer* and how awesome it turned out, it didn't really capture me to the essence and all that I had done after my teen years. It's an extension of *Soul Surfer*, but with the real me.

I just shared a lot of raw emotions that I was facing in the film. I look back on those emotions now, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh. That was so silly and momentary." That was just how I felt, and it took time to process. I think when you first enter into motherhood, there are so many unknowns, and you just don't know what your life is going to be like after, but you also know it's going to be amazing.

I just hope to encourage moms to be the best mom they can be, but to remember to still give themselves time, to not lose their love for their passions like surfing for me. If I just stopped surfing or gave it up after becoming a mom, I just can't even imagine that. I just refuse to imagine that. Finding that balance as a mother and being just solid mom, but also remembering the things you love. I'm just hoping to spread some light to people and push them beyond.

Shelby: To make this film, you started with-- I just remembered, I saw this little Kickstarter go up, and Bethany was going to make this move with this young guy, you. It was a really cute, little Kickstarter video. It wasn't big time then. You got a ton of Kickstarter supporters. A lot of people listening want to do a Kickstarter campaign. You have a good story about pretty fast success with Kickstarter.

Aaron: Well, Bethany has a built-in audience, fans that want to support her. We had raised a little bit of money through her sponsorships, but we ran out of that quickly, so we turned to Kickstarter like, "Hey, let's try this." We set the goal of \$60,000, at that point, the idea of the film was a 15-minute film, a little bit of narrative and then action is her surfing really hardcore.

Shelby: \$60,000 is not a lot when it comes to making a film.

Aaron: No, but I wasn't going to pay myself. I was just doing it because I loved it. In four days, we hit \$60,000.

Shelby: Four days, you achieved your Kickstarter campaign, that's no joke.

Aaron: Then, we went all the way up to-- We ended up at \$116,000, which is great. Then, I had a few random celebrities reach out and just donate money behind the scenes, which is pretty intense, or not intense, but it was really cool.

Shelby: Surreal?

Aaron: Yes, it was surreal. That's a better word. It was very surreal, some random celebrities, which I won't name because they didn't want to be named.

Shelby: Was it random, or people who had interacted with Bethany?

Aaron: Totally random.

Shelby: Wow.

Aaron: One of the biggest musicians in the world.

Shelby: How interesting?

Aaron: I guess, his assistant who I dealt with, I guess I just said a he.

Shelby: It's okay. I still have no idea who it was.

Aaron: His assistant reached out. I guess he's just got a chunk of money that he just gives to causes that he likes every year. He saw our Kickstarter and just donated to it behind the scenes, and doesn't want credit, doesn't want anything.

Shelby: He's not even listed in the Kickstarter contributors.

Aaron: Not listed.

Shelby: At the end of the movie, what I liked so much is that you've listed all those Kickstarters you initially contributed.

Aaron: One thousand eight hundred people.

Shelby: That's so huge.

Aaron: They all made the film. At some level, they're executive producers at some level.

Shelby: That's really cool and especially for Bethany's fans to be part of her film. All those people are going to go see the movie, so that was really smart, too. You thought it was just going to be a 15-minute film. Then, there was a part where you're like, "No, this film is like a Hollywood film. It deserves to be as big as *Soul Surfer* was", which was, you know, Helen Hunt played her mom.

Aaron: Dennis Quaid.

Shelby: Dennis Quaid was her dad.

Aaron: AnnaSophia Robb.

Shelby: AnnaSophia Robb was Bethany.

Aaron: Carrie Underwood.

Shelby: Carrie Underwood? Yes, Carrie Underwood was in it. That was a huge cast

of characters in *Soul Surfer*. I have little neighbors. Bethany had given me a signed poster. I, one day, brought it over to my neighbor. She started crying. She's eight years old. She was just like, "I love Bethany." That's the reaction people get when they see Bethany. They're obsessed. They watch *Soul Surfer* a 100 times. People are super fans.

Aaron: Definitely.

Shelby: Why did you decide to make it a Hollywood movie rather than just this 15-minute movie?

Aaron: It was in the middle of the Kickstarter. We're raising this money. Here we go. All right. The period of fundraising is about a week done, and Bethany is not texting me back or calling me. I'm like, "What is going on? Is she mad at me? What's happening?" Then, I get a call from her assistant Becky, Adam, and Bethany. They call me and like, "Bethany is pregnant." It was just silent like that. Adam is speaking, not Bethany.

Shelby: Adam is her husband.

Aaron: Yes, Adam Dirks, Bethany's husband. Obviously, I didn't know that was coming. I just congratulated them and was super excited. Bethany didn't talk the entire phone call because she wasn't ready to have a kid, which we address in the film. I just told them, "Take two weeks. Figure it out, if you want, I can take the footage I have and make something awesome. We'll give all the money back to Kickstarter. You can take your life in that direction. Whatever you want to do." Two weeks passed, she called me, and she was like, "Let's keep going. Let's do this." That was the pivot point where I was like, "Okay, I don't know what this movie is going to be, but I know I need to follow her pregnancy now. This is going to be a much longer film than I originally intend to."

Shelby: It's going to have to be at least nine months.

Aaron: At least nine months. Wait, but longer than that because--

Shelby: She has to have a baby.

Aaron: She has to have the kid. Now, it's at least a two and a half year project, minimum. My sister had gotten pregnant just before her, so I was able to anticipate the emotional journey that she was going to go on.

Shelby: That's cool. You understood.

Aaron: I got some experience holding a kid before, which is cool. I flew out to Kauai and checked in with her every trimester basically, and just documented all that. To answer the question more, though, the "Hollywood film"-- First of all, I think

Hollywood films of people tend to be terrible.

Shelby: [laughs] At least you're honest.

Aaron: They're good in-- I think they do check the box of getting through a good message. They end up being cheesy and not factual. My goal was to make something that would scale and be as impactful, but also be true, authentic, and just emotionally deep. As the story developed, I would check off these different boxes in my head of things I was looking for. Finally, in September of 2016, I had my own personal meltdown like, "Oh my gosh, I have all this amazing footage. I am not equipped to make this movie by myself." I set out to find support in a team.

That's what I did. I met with 10 different production companies, who were all male. Through that process, I was looking across the table of other white men going, "These guys, how is their perspective any different from mine?" Then, I met through a friend Alice Gu met this lady, Carol Martori. She's had 20 years of experience editing documentaries. I met her, and she just had this presence about her that was just super special. Within the first five minutes of meeting her, I was like, "Yes, I want to work with her." Then, right after that meeting, I met my producer Penny Edmiston, who then brought in her friend Jane Kelly Kosek. I built an all-women support crew to make the movie. That was the best decision I could've made for sure.

Shelby: I remember you during that phase. At one point, you were like, "Can you help with writing?" I was like, "No." That wasn't my specialty. These women aren't super young. They're professionals that have been doing it for a while, they're seasoned.

Aaron: I think everyone is twice my age. They've been around forever. I would say, that would be the Hollywood aspect of the movie. I'm like, "Okay, I understand surfing. I am core within that space. I understand her story, but I need help making sure that I check a bunch of other boxes for the narrative arc and also, just riding the wave of, who do you speak to to get into a film festival. Or there are so many things that you have to do and hurdles and I needed help, but I wanted to make sure it was coming from a space that would feel like Bethany. Women were super important in that.

Shelby: That's great that you found them. I think there's this saying that Jim Rollins said, "You're only as good as the people you surround yourself with." You've always been about finding people that are better than you. Some people like to work with people that they can be the boss to and that are less skilled than them. I've never had much success doing that, I always like working with people better than me. It means you have to pay them, but it's hard. Any other tactics and lessons that- just mindsets that you have that you used when you found the team and made this film?

Aaron: Just to speak to that point a bit, what's the point of working with people that aren't as good as you? That doesn't make any sense. Finding what you're good at and then that's what you're going to be good at and then what are you bad at and

making sure you're hiring people that are better than you in those spaces. You still want to be good at something because obviously, we all have an ego to feed at some level.

I still feel I can edit, I can write a little bit, I can produce, I can do all these things, but I'm not going to be really good at all of them at the same time. My lead editor runs a circle around me when it comes to editing, but I still know what I want. To be able to have that creative freedom to spar with her was so fun. We had so much fun sparring, what I would call, sparring ideas but never in a negative way. It was fun. I would consider her one of my best friends now.

I would really encourage everybody to try to-- If they're starting off making films or podcasts or whatever they're doing, learn all the different jobs and then hire people that are better at them than you. That's the only way you're going to make a good project.

Shelby: Hiring people that are better than you though takes resources and investment and that's a part that I tend to be a little cheap. It's hard for me to go into my bank account and just shell out tons of money, but I've done it before and it works but it's hard. I want to talk to you a little bit about raising money because there was one point where I actually got involved and dipped my toes into, "Do I want to be an agent? Do I want to like be a sponsor agent?" Just asking for those dollars, I think one of the things I learned is I was, "Wow, it's the same amount of energy to ask for \$500 as it is to ask for \$50,000, \$500,000." Just depending on who you're talking to. What did you learn from fundraising?

Aaron: What I learned is there's obviously what you need, but trying to figure out what the other person's going to gain, whether it's a company or a private investor. That's the most important. You want to sell your story in the shortest period of words possible and what you need and then talk about them the rest of the time.

Shelby: That's the key to pitching. It's like dating, you want to make it about them and make it be beneficial to both parties. You can't be needy.

Aaron: I think the one challenge I really had is Bethany is very particular on who she'll partner with. She won't do any type of product that's got sugar in it, all these different issues.

Shelby: Huge beverage companies were probably throwing money at you and you had to say no.

Aaron: Exactly. There's two sides, part of it is, "Dang it, this could've been so much easier." But that's who Bethany is, she wants to be true to so many different things and that's rare to find in this world so challenge accepted. Kickstarter and Corkcicle and Rip Curl got us through the filming and then post-production I went and found private equity and built an LLC and just did it all professionally at that point. That

ended up being the route we had to take in order to get across the finish line.

[music]

Shelby: What was it like seeing the film on the big screen for the first time?

Aaron: I got Dolby Digital to sponsor the film. The first time I really saw it on a big screen and done was up at their headquarters and I just felt like I was going to vomit.

[laughter]

Aaron: It was so nerve-wracking because you're in this brand new state of the art facility with 10 executives and they're all watching the movie for the first time after it's been mixed. It was just very nerve-wracking, but we did a feedback screening at Red Studios, it was a two-hour film at that point. They let us use their facility and we brought in producers and editors that were all of Hollywood and narrative backgrounds to give us feedback. That was, I guess, the real first time.

In that space, actually the whole time I'm, "This movie is so bad, this movie is so bad." Pretty much for two hours. I'm like, "It's so cringeworthy." You just don't know how people are going to take it and then people really loved the two-hour cut, which is cool and our feedback was not- there wasn't much. We just need to figure out how to get it from two hours in 90 minutes, which was painful but we did it. It's like sometimes in these experiences are out-of-body experiences. It's you doing it, but sometimes it doesn't feel like you.

Shelby: Tell me more.

Aaron: It's like--

Shelby: You have a creative angel that comes through to you because I believe in that.

Aaron: A bit of that for sure. I think it's just out-of-body in the sense of I didn't even know I was capable maybe of doing this film at this scale. I listened to the podcast with Jimmy Chin and his wife and I'm like, "Man, they're so well-spoken and they just seem like they know what they're doing." I, honestly, didn't know what I was doing, I just figured it out. What I've learned, I guess, to tie to the out-of-body experience is, I have this inner feeling and I don't necessarily know, I just go where my heart and my soul kind of, "This person seems like the right person or this one doesn't."

As I listened to these other filmmakers who are seasoned, they speak in this way. I'm, "I did that." I didn't know I was doing it. I wasn't educated in that way because I have no filmmaking background, but they made these certain choices in the film and I was, "I actually made those same choices." I just did it because I felt like it was the right thing to do, if that makes sense.

Shelby: That's your intuition.

Aaron: It was my intuition, yes. That's where it's out-of-body because I'm, "How did I make all these decisions?" Looking back, I'm, "Did I do that?" It's weird at some level.

Shelby: It's so crazy because now Bethany-- She's grown so much since the making of the film. She's a mom of two boys now and Adam has grown, he's written a book, her husband. What did she think when she saw it?

Aaron: She loves it.

Shelby: What was it like watching her watch it? Were you there?

Aaron: Yes, the first time she came to my house and we did the first 15 minutes of the film and she sat like this with her hand blocking her eyes because she didn't want-- She was trying not to let me watch because she knew I was watching her. Then, once we got through some of the tougher scenes that got into her and Adam and stuff, it's just the coolest thing ever to be able to see your relationship grow with somebody and see your kid running around. She really loved all that stuff for sure. I think it's interesting too though with Bethany's and my relationship, as I had a camera in her face all the time, I definitely would find her trying to peek into my life as well.

Shelby: [laughs] Asking about girls and stuff?

Aaron: Just like, "who is this guy?" Making sure I was the person that she thought I was. There was definitely some back and forth on that, which was hilarious. It was so fun and what an honor to let anybody-- It's not easy to open your life up to a semi stranger and let them tell your story. She's such a massive figure to so many people, but I always just told her, I was, "Hey, this film is for you to showcase yourself in a way that's super dynamic and if you don't like something, we'll talk about it. If it really 100% can't be in the film, then we'll take it out." I always would remind her and that's the truth. We stuck to that all the way through. I just don't think it's fair.

My intention as a filmmaker is to try to tell hero stories while they're alive. I loved Shane McConkey's film, but how cool would it have been if that story was told while he was still here. To have that ability to work with her, but then letting her dive into it. Then now watching the feedback, all these young girls love the story and part of the reason why I love it is because Bethany's fingerprints are all over it. It was my best ability to let her tell her own story.

Shelby: The film hits theaters when?

Aaron: The film hits theaters July 12th, it will be in about 150 to 200 theaters nationwide. I really hope people show up and take their friends and I hope dads take their daughters and moms take their daughters and really young men, it's a story for

everybody. Adam, being a stay-at-home dad, I think is a really key element to the story and a modern twist on being a parent and that relationship. There's a lot for everybody. It's a good family friendly movie. It's PG.

Shelby: That is PG.

Aaron: Realistically, just because there's pregnancy and some life stuff. A lot of her fans, Bethany fans that have seen the film, said they'd like it more than *Soul Surfer* because it's really her. I really hope people show up and get to experience Bethany for Bethany.

Shelby: It's awesome. I definitely teared up in the movie. It made me cry. I didn't expect that. It was so good. I can't wait to see it in the big screen, not just on my little computer screen or TV monitor. Where can people see it? Like how do we--

Aaron: If you go to unstoppablethefilm.com there'll be a theater listing. Then as it gets closer, Fandango, you'll be able to just type in your zip code and it'll show you the theater nearest you. Fandango and all those ticket websites. It'll be in like AMCs and Regals as well as maybe some smaller theaters. It'll be in a lot of major chains. The one thing that I will know is because Dolby sponsored the film. The sound design is so amazing and our composer Chris Bowers, he did *Green Book* which won best film.

Shelby: That was your composer? That had the best music.

Aaron: Thanks. Our composer's this really talented kid. He's just turned 30, but Chris Bowers who he did Kobe Bryant's film. He went to Julliard. This kid, he worked with Kanye West and Jay-Z on *Watch The Throne* album. This kid's like just so talented. He was flying to Atlanta and shooting because his hands are actually playing the piano in *Green Book*. Then he was flying back and doing my film as well as the few others. The 90 minutes of original music and our sound designer had just finished working on *Black Panther*.

I really tried to check the boxes and make this film bigger than a documentary, but still, feel like a documentary. We call it like a featurementary.

Shelby: Featurementary. It's so good. I can't wait for people to see it. Any just parting advice to people listening who want to be filmmakers or just want to do something.

Aaron: I think just remembering that no matter how big or small the idea is to take baby steps and to not give up. If you really love it, just remind yourself, "I'm doing this because I love it." If you don't love it, like don't do it. If you're getting in the game to make a bunch of money and get rich, you probably should pick something else. I think you have choices. You can move to Wall Street and make \$1 million or more or you can pursue your passion and live this lifestyle that's really fulfilling.

My advice is to just take baby steps. Bethany's film, this has been six years right now, but I loved it. I would still do commercial jobs and all these things do at the time. A lot of people ask me, "How are you still motivated about this one idea?" It's like, "Well, the idea just keeps getting bigger. It stays exciting." Again, intuition. It's really hard to like those different moments through making the film to look at you or look at anybody and really explain what I knew in my head in a way that would be rational. You have to be a little irrational to make documentaries. You have to be a little bit crazy. You're taking a giant risk with no idea of where it's going to go.

I guess the advice is just to, again, baby steps, like, "Hey, I'm going to film this little bit and I'll have this footage and then cool." Just getting down the road with those little things. There are just so many tutorials online, be a student of the game. I am always learning, whether it's listening to a podcast to stimulate my mind or researching the new camera or there's so many other people that are better at cinematography than I am, that are better than editing. I'm always getting inspired by those people and watching more long form narrative films and stories and trying to apply that to a documentary. There's clear story arcs that have worked through history of time and you can go and look at those. If you apply those points in your story, your story will be that much more dynamic. Just have fun with it and keep going.

[music]

Shelby: Bethany's story is one that not just women, not just young girls, not just girls my age can relate to, but anyone can relate to. I'm so glad the world is going to be able to see just how badass of a human she is. Bethany's resilience, determination, kindness, and willpower, it's inspiring to say the least. There's parts where the hair on the back of my neck stood up because I was just so in awe of her skills and her gutsiness. She's amazing and she definitely was impactful for me in starting this podcast.

I'm so thankful to Aaron for making this movie, for rolling with the punches life threw at him as he was filming. Your persistence has resulted in something that's going to inspire a lot of people to pursue their dreams no matter what obstacles they run into along the way. You can go to unstoppablethefilm.com to find out where you can see the film yourself. If you do take someone you care about to enjoy it with you.

This podcast is produced by REI with the help from Annie Fassler and Chelsea Davis. Thank you so much to Aaron Lieber for sitting down to chat and making this empowering movie and to Bethany Hamilton for showing me and for showing us all that you don't need easy, you just need possible. Tune in week after next as we talk to two incredibly accomplished artists who find their inspiration in nature.

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me keep this show free. Go be wild. Go see the movie. Go be unstoppable yourself. Get outside. Remember, some of the best adventures often happen when you follow your wildest ideas.

[00:56:20] [END OF AUDIO]