

Film

'A Thousand Cuts' spotlights Filipino journalist Ressa

By Ryan Pearson

Maria Ressa says she didn't take Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte seriously when he declared four years ago that "corrupt" journalists weren't "exempted from assassination."

"In 2016, it was really, really laughable. And I thought, 'Oh, doesn't matter.' I laughed," said the country's most well-known journalist and leader of the independent Rappler news organization.

Grum reality set in as Ressa was arrested and thrown in jail, targeted in a series of criminal cases and convicted this summer on libel and tax evasion charges seen widely as attacks on press freedom. She now faces six years in prison.

"A Thousand Cuts", a new documentary from Filipino-American filmmaker Ramona S. Diaz, tracks Ressa's dual life in recent years. She's seen smiling while accepting international media awards and praise from the likes of George Clooney, then grimly facing down online harassment, legal action and real world threats for Rappler's reporting on extrajudicial killings in Duterte's drug war.

The film argues that Americans should learn from the recent history of the Philippines, where social media has helped to divide the country and critical press outlets are regularly lambasted by the president. ABS-CBN, the country's largest TV network, was shut

down by the government's telecommunications regulator in May.

Promoting the film in a Zoom interview from her home in Manila, Ressa shook her fists and laughed with dark humor – "Urgh! Angry!" – about what she called her "war of attrition" with the government. She's pleaded not guilty and is appealing her convictions.

"You don't know how powerful government is until you come under attack the way we have. When all the different parts of government work against you – it's kind of shocking," she said. "I can't wait to really write this – because I can't write at all right now, because then I would be in contempt of court."

Facebook has become the center of the internet for most Filipinos, and Rappler utilized it to grow rapidly as a startup news site. But the film shows how Duterte's populist campaign harnessed the platform to spread its message and target Ressa and other journalists.

Protests

Duterte supporters live-streamed protests at the Rappler office, and death threats flooded the comments alongside red heart emojis. Disinformation on the social media platform exacerbated the problem, she said.

"Social media, the tech platforms have created a system where

lies laced with anger and hate spread faster than facts. And it has placed people like me at risk," Ressa said.

Ressa began wearing a bulletproof vest because of threats. She is seen in the film repeatedly pleading with Facebook representatives to delete violent posts or cut live streams. Last month, she grew frustrated watching Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and other tech leaders speak before the US Congress.

"For the tech giants, it's willful blindness, willful ignorance, willful arrogance – because people like me are feeling the impact of the decisions they make," Ressa said.

Diaz, who spoke from her home in Baltimore, hopes her film can help protect Ressa – and other independent journalists.

"It's a global story," she said. "There are very many Marias around the world. And that's why it's key to keep the story of press freedom ... and the importance of independent media alive."

Even during a pandemic shutdown and under court-ordered restrictions, Ressa is doing her part.

"Part of the reason we've survived the last four years is because I haven't stopped talking," she said. "That's the best strategy so far to deal with a government that wants you to shut up. Don't shut up!" (AP)

Variety



This image released by HBO Max shows Seth Rogen in a scene from 'An American Pickle', which hit HBO Max last week. (AP)

Film

Docu explores suicide, depression among athletes

Sports stars open on 'Weight of Gold'

By Amanda Lee Myers

Athletes Stephen Scherer, Jeret Peterson and Kelly Catlin have two things in common: They all reached their dream of becoming Olympians, and they all died by suicide.

Olympians are known for pushing their bodies to the extreme but much less understood are the mental and emotional rigors paving their road to greatness. Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian in history, says he had suicidal thoughts even at the peak of his remarkable swimming career and calls depression and suicide among Olympic athletes an "epidemic".

Phelps is opening up about his mental health struggles in "The Weight of Gold", a new documentary that premiered last week on HBO. The film explores depression and suicide among the world's top athletes and what should be done to address the problem.

Other high-profile Olympians including speed skater Apolo Anton Ohno, snowboarder Shaun White, skier Bode Miller, hurdler Lolo Jones and figure skater Sasha Cohen also detail their own struggles in the film.

"It was important for me for the American public to see, 'Hey, you have celebrated these athletes and it's been amazing that you've done that'. But it's not all what you think it is," said Ohno, who has won two gold, two silver and four bronze medals.

Like Ohno, the vast majority of Olympians spend most of their childhoods competing in their given sport. As they progress, competition becomes the main focus of their lives before family, friends, school or fun.

For years they work toward that goal for what amounts to a competition that lasts minutes or mere seconds. The difference between winning and losing can be a fraction of a second, and millions are watching.

And then, it's over. Either for another four years or forever, depending on the athlete and the sport.

"It does define you, and you lose your human identity," said Jeremy Bloom, a three-time world champion skier and two-time Olympian. "That's where it becomes dangerous. Because at some point, we all lose sports. We all move on. We all retire or the sport kind of shows us the door because we age out. And then we're left to redefine ourselves."

That becomes the breaking point for some athletes.

Bloom's friend, aerial skier Jeret "Speedy" Peterson, killed himself in 2011 just a year and a half after winning a silver medal. He was 29.

To Bloom, Peterson had always seemed like "the happiest guy". Except the night Peterson knocked on his door at the Olympic Training Center in Lake Placid around 2005.

"He was in tears. I've never seen him cry. He's like, 'I just need to talk to you'." Bloom said recently from his home in Boulder, Colorado. "He really opened up to me about some of the mental struggles that he was having with."

But Bloom said he was not equipped at all.

Support

"I had no idea the things to ask, the things to say. I just felt like he was having a bad night," he said. "And I wish I could go back to that moment and know what I know now and be able to be a better support for him ... And so I said, 'Well, I better educate myself, better get smarter about it, and I better start talking about it because that's what Jeret would want me to do.'"

Phelps, a co-executive producer on "The Weight of Gold", said the need for change also is what drove him to speak up. He and other Olympians are calling on the International Olympic Committee and the US Olympic & Paralympic Committee to do much more to address the problem.

Phelps said the first step is "treating people like humans" instead of something on an assembly line.

"We're just products," the 35-year-old Phelps said

from his home in Scottsdale, Arizona. "It's frightening. It's scary. And it breaks my heart. Because there are so many people who care so much about our physical well-being but I never saw caring about our mental well-being."

In a statement to The Associated Press, the IOC said it "recognizes the seriousness of the topic" and assembled a team of international experts to review scientific literature on mental health issues among elite athletes in 2018, resulting in a mental health working group. The committee said the topic has been discussed more openly at forums and panels in recent years and that the IOC has launched a series of webinars to help athletes cope with COVID-19, and plans other initiatives, including a helpline.

Bahati Van Pelt, chief of athlete services with the US Olympic & Paralympic Committee, said in a statement that the organization has "recognized we can improve".

"In 2019, we took the important step of creating a dedicated athlete services division – separating athlete care and mental health services from high performance – to differentiate these services and ensure athletes can access resources and assistance without concern or hesitation," he said. "We also created a mental health task force comprised of athletes and experts together to inform our work and help us improve athlete health and well-being."

He said the committee has broadly expanded services, including more mental health officers and counseling, and is committed to keep mental health a top priority.

While some athletes have commended the changes, others like Ohno and Phelps feel like there's much more to do.

"Clearly there's a need for better resources because Olympic athletes are dying," said "The Weight of Gold" Director Brett Rapkin. "They have this incredibly unique psychological journey they go on and it needs to be paired with appropriate resources to handle it. Those things clearly aren't there." (AP)

LOS ANGELES: Anthony McCartney, The Associated Press' West Coast entertainment editor who as a reporter covered the legal aftermath of Michael Jackson's death and many celebrity trials, has been appointed the news cooperative's global entertainment and lifestyles editor.

AP deputy managing editor Sarah Nordgren made the announcement.

"McCartney has been a leader in entertainment coverage since joining the AP," Nordgren said. "His experience in entertainment spans court coverage, awards shows and far beyond."

"His expertise and skill in driving great journalism in entertainment position him perfectly for his new role."

McCartney, 41, will be based in Los Angeles, the first time the job has been based there. He will lead a team of more than 40 text and visual journalists in New York, London, Seoul, Nashville, Tennessee and Los Angeles.

He has served as West Coast entertainment editor since 2017, overseeing film, television, celebrity and awards season coverage, as well as breaking news.

McCartney, who joined the AP in Tampa, Florida, in 2007, was previously the news cooperative's celebrity courts reporter, which included coverage of criminal cases against R&B singer Chris Brown, Mel Gibson, record producer Marion "Suge" Knight and several high-profile celebrity divorces and deaths. He has also covered the Academy Awards and the Grammys and other major events and reported on the celebrity happenings at the 2016 Super Bowl. (AP)

□ □ □

LOS ANGELES: Five high school juniors, residing everywhere from Lake Worth, Florida, to Saratoga, California, have been named National Student Poets.

A partnership between the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the nonprofit Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, the student poet program was launched in 2011, with winners contributing to community programs and poetry events and performing their work everywhere from Lincoln Center to the White House. Winning applicants each represent a different region and are chosen

based on creativity, dedication and promise.

This year's poets are **Isabella Ramirez**, from Lake Worth; **Ethan Wang**, from Katy, Texas; **Manasi Garg**, from Saratoga; **Madelyn Dietz**, from St Paul, Minn.; and **Anthony Wiles**, from Sewickley, Pennsylvania. Each receives a \$5,000 cash award.

"Now more than ever, we look



McCartney Nordgren

to a rising generation of creative leaders to demonstrate the power that poetry and the literary arts have to inspire, galvanize, and unite communities," Christopher Wisniewski, executive director of the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, said in a statement Wednesday. (AP)

□ □ □

MINNEAPOLIS: A Minnesota man sold the 1957 Chevy pickup he drove for 44 years for \$75, the same price he paid decades ago.

Bob Sportal of Prinsburg handed over the key last month to the grandson of the man he bought the truck from, KARE-TV reported.

Sportal was in his early 20s when he bought the rusty pickup

from a retiring farmer. He drove the truck to work every day at a local grain elevator until he retired five years ago.

Sportal kept driving the truck but decided to sell it to **Tom Leenstra**, grandson of the late **John VanDerVeen**, who originally sold the truck to Sportal. "It's like riding with my Grandpa again," Leenstra said. (AP)