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For downloadable images, visit pbs.org/pressroom

For the program companion website, visit pbs.org/independentlens/horse-boy

***THE HORSE BOY TO AIR NATIONALLY ON THE PBS SERIES INDEPENDENT LENS
ON TUESDAY, MAY 11, 2010 AT 10 PM***

How Far Would You Travel to Heal Someone You Love?

(San Francisco, CA) — In *The Horse Boy*, filmmaker Michel Orion Scott chronicles Rupert Isaacson and Kristin Neff's very personal odyssey as they struggle to make sense of their child's autism and find healing for him and themselves in the unlikelyst of places. Harrowing and exhilarating, *The Horse Boy* will air on the Emmy® Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* on Tuesday, May 11, 2010 at 10 PM (check local listings).

Raised in rural Texas, Rowan Isaacson was diagnosed with autism in April 2004, at age two and a half. The previously charming, animated child ceased speaking. He retreated into himself for hours at a time, screamed inconsolably for no apparent reason, flapped his arms, and babbled. For the Isaacsons, as for so many other parents, autism seemed to have snatched away their child's soul.

A complex condition that dramatically affects social interaction and communication skills, autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability today. With more children diagnosed with autism each year than with cancer, diabetes, Down syndrome, and AIDS combined, it is estimated that cases of autism could reach four million in the next decade, in the U.S. alone. While theories on its origins abound, there is no consensus in the medical community on either cause or treatment.



Scenes from The Horse Boy, coming to Independent Lens May 2010.

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Rowan's parents, Rupert Isaacson, a human rights worker, author, and former professional horse trainer, and Kristin Neff, a psychology professor, sought out the best medical care for him. But orthodox therapies had little effect on Rowan.

Then came the day Rowan ran away from his father, got through the fence of their neighbor's horse pasture, and in found himself amongst the hooves of the horse herd. Rupert had stopped riding since Rowan's autism had kicked in, thinking it unsafe for his son to be around horses. Now he froze, heart in mouth, praying Rowan wouldn't get trampled. Instead, the herd's boss horse, a notoriously grumpy old mare named Betsy, pushed the other horses away, bent her head to Rowan, and began to lick and chew with her lips: the equine sign of submission. Rupert had never seen a horse voluntarily make this obeisance to a human being before. Something direct, something beautiful, was clearly passing between boy and horse.

So Isaacson began to ride with Rowan on Betsy everyday, and Rowan—amazingly—began to talk, to engage with the outside world. Rupert asked himself, was there a place on the planet that combined horses and healing? He did some research: the country where the horse was first domesticated, where the nomadic horse life is still lived by most of its people, is also the one country where shamanism—healing at its most raw and direct—is the state religion. Mongolia.

What if he was to take Rowan there, thought Rupert, riding on horseback from shaman to shaman? What would happen?

The Horse Boy follows Rupert, Kristin, and Rowan through the summer of 2007 as they traverse Mongolia on their quest. From the wild open Steppe to the sacred Lake Sharga, and deep into Siberia, they are tested to their limits individually, as a couple, and as a family. They find their son is accepted, even treasured for his differences. In a world steeped in mystical tradition and hardscrabble reality, Rowan makes dramatic leaps forward, astonishing both his parents and himself.

The film also includes interviews with some of the foremost experts in the field of autism including **Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen** (cousin of comedian Sacha Baron-Cohen) of Cambridge University; anthropologist and researcher **Roy Richard Grinker** of the George Washington University; and **Dr. Temple Grandin**, who is a professor of animal behavior at Colorado State University and who herself has autism. She is also the author of *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*, and, more recently, *Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals*.

The Horse Boy is part travel adventure, part insight into shamanic tradition, and part intimate look at the autistic mind. In telling one family's extraordinary story, the film gives voice to the thousands of families who display amazing courage and creativity in the battle against this mysterious and heartbreaking epidemic every day. Above all, it gives insight into how, in life's darkest moments, one can find the gateway to joy and wonder.

To learn more about the film and its subjects, visit the companion website for *The Horse Boy* at pbs.org/horse-boy. Get detailed information on the film, watch preview clips, read an interview with the filmmaker and explore the subject in depth with links and resources. The site also features a Talkback section where viewers can share their ideas and opinions.

Key Subjects

Rowan Isaacson

Diagnosed with autism at age two, Rupert has been in both orthodox and alternative therapies for the past several years. Possessed of an uncanny ability to communicate with animals, he has much to teach us.

Rupert Isaacson (Producer)

An ex-professional horse trainer, Rupert is a writer and journalist as well as human rights advocate for tribal peoples. His books include *The Healing Land – the Bushmen and the Kalahari* (Grove Press), *The Wild Host – History and Meaning of the Hunt* (Rowan Littlefield), and many others. He is also founder and director of the Indigenous Lands Rights Fund (www.landrightsfund.org)

Kristin Neff

Rupert's wife and Rowan's mother, Kristin is a tenured professor of psychology at the University of Texas. A practicing Buddhist for more than 10 years, she is well known for her research into the Buddhist concept of self-compassion (www.self-compassion.org) and its correlation with positive mental health. She and the rest of the family live in the country outside Austin, Texas.

About the Filmmakers

MICHEL ORION SCOTT (Director/Cinematographer)

Scott spent most of his youth exploring the thick wooded areas of central Texas where he was born and raised. The son of a cowboy father and a Jewish hippie mother, his life has always reflected his eclectic upbringing. After earning a degree in film from the University of Texas at Austin, where he also studied modern dance, Scott took on a diverse range of projects ranging from set construction and design on Hollywood features to abstract experimental work and documentaries.

Scott soon began to search for ways to use his career in film to deepen his relationship with the earth. *My Father in the River*, the first film that began this journey, took him to the heart of the Bolivian rainforest, where he worked with the indigenous Mosen Indians of the region, using them as actors, extras, and crewmembers in a truly collaborative effort.

Since that project, Scott has been studying and drawing inspiration from the study of wilderness survival through indigenous skills and crafts and has recently created promotional films for companies such as The Indigenous Land Rights Fund, Sol Education Abroad, and MAPAJIO, an indigenous rights organization and ecotourism company.

Intrigued by the study of science and politics, Scott continues to explore the ways that ancient knowledge and wisdom can inform and advance the current state of society. He draws much of his inspiration from the study of native cultures, indigenous crafts and a desire to connect with the root of humanity through wilderness studies. *The Horse Boy* marks Scott's debut as a feature film director.

RUPERT ISAACSON (Producer)

Isaacson was born in London in 1967 to South African parents. He has worked as a journalist and human rights activist in Africa for many years. In addition to writing for the British and American press, Isaacson has authored several guidebooks to Africa and India as well as the nonfiction books *The Healing Land: The Bushmen and the Kalahari Desert* and *The Wild Host: The History and the Meaning of the Hunt*. The first tells the story of his time spent living with the San Bushman hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari Desert, and their traditional healers; the second is an account of man's relationship with hunting. His book *The Horse Boy* was published by Little Brown in the U.S. in May 2009. He lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife Kristin Neff and their son Rowan. *The Horse Boy* is his first film.

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About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 PM on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about a unique individual, community, or moment in history. Presented by the Independent Television Service (ITVS), the series is supported by interactive companion websites and national publicity and community engagement campaigns. Further information about the series is available at www.pbs.org/independentlens. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts. The series producer is Lois Vossen.

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