



*Growing up- you kind of realize that you either can let your past haunt you, or your gonna learn from it.  
...And I've been trying to learn from it." - Leo Castillo*

**A film by Flyback Productions**  
**Directed and Filmed by Ryan Ferguson**  
www.skateordiemovie.com - FB: skateordiemovie - IG: flybackproductions

**Logline:**

Seventeen-year-old Leonardo Castillo uses skateboarding to help escape gang life and generational poverty in his Chicago neighborhood. When a gunshot wound threatens to take away his passion, Leo must face the world as an adult.

**Synopsis:**

Leo, a high school dropout, hops from job to job and home to home, the only consistency in his life is the grind to stay afloat. By age 21, Leo has seen a lot: an older brother killed by police, a younger brother wooed by gangs, an abusive mother, and a father he's never known. Through the tumult, skateboarding has been one of his only sources of solace.

But one summer day, it all changes. As he stands outside of his mother's home with a few neighborhood kids, someone begins shooting. As Leo rushes the children to cover, a bullet tears through his calf. Nerve damage from the bullet means Leo may never skate again. Through months of rehab, the irony haunts him: The very thing that had shielded him from violence was being ripped away from him by a neighborhood he couldn't quite escape. Faced with the realities of his injury, Leo begins to forge a path to adulthood. From spearheading the construction of a skatepark in his Little Village neighborhood to teaching his own after-school skateboarding class at a local high school, Leo discovers ways of turning a youthful passion into a productive future.

As Leo's story comes to life, common stereotypes fade into the complex reality of being underprivileged and at risk young person in urban America.

**Running Time:** 85 Minutes

**Media Contact:** Ryan Ferguson [Ryan@flybackproductions.com](mailto:Ryan@flybackproductions.com)

# SKATE OR DIE



***“Skate or Die is a great documentary with a positive message that will undoubtedly inspire and empower those who watch it.”***

**8/10 - Film Threat 2021**

**About the Film:**

At its heart, SKATE OR DIE is a coming of age story. It's Leo's coming of age story, but also that of a larger community that Leo represents.

Chicago is home to one of the nation's most virulent gang problems. There are over 70 gangs and approximately 70,000 gang members in Chicago. The city continues to make national news year after year for regularly having many more homicides than larger cities like New York or Los Angeles. Many kids here liken the city to a war zone. Many can't wander very far from their home without suffering severe consequences.

Like many of his peers, Leo flirted briefly with the gang life. It's easy to fall prey– the gang offers a sense of community for kids like Leo who have never known stability. The blocks are flooded with gang bangers and the drugs they ply in broad daylight. School for Leo was hardly an option. He didn't have the discipline or the support.

And while skateboarding was barely enough to help Leo reach adulthood, the question remains, will it continue to be enough? He simply seems unable to break away from the brutality of his neighborhood once and for all.

The catchphrase "skate or die" dates back to skateboarding's 1970's California roots. Nearly 40 years later, it's finally meant literally.

**Director Statement:**

SKATE OR DIE was initially inspired by a Chicago Tribune article written by producer Azam Ahmed. It is comprised of over 100 hours of footage which was captured between 2008-2013. Director/Cinematographer Ryan Ferguson, armed with a hand-held camera and lavalier mic, bootstrapped this film as a full time unpaid job over those many years. Ryan's sensitivity and "one man band" production approach created an environment where Leo felt comfortable sharing his most intimate experiences.

Editor Zeb Smith took this intimate footage and wove a character driven cinema-verite style journey. Zeb manages to show Leo growing into a young man right in front of our eyes. Often troubling, the film's pacing reveals the ways violence and poverty affect our youth and it is a stunning look at living on society's fringe.

**Film Festivals:**

San Francisco Documentary Film Festival - CA  
Paris Skate and Surf Film Festival  
Moments Film Festival - Malaga Spain  
Threadbare Mitten Film Festival - MI  
YoFi Film Festival - NY  
Big Water Film Festival, WI - Winner Best Feature



## **Production Credits:**

### **Ryan Ferguson – Director/Cinematographer**

Ryan co-founded Flyback Productions in his last semester at Columbia College in Chicago. Through Flyback, he has spent over 15 years producing, shooting, and editing videos for clients such as Ford Motor Company, Vh1, Illinois Holocaust Museum and the Cook County Juvenile Court. Ryan is a regular volunteer video professional for Poverty Alleviation Chicago. In addition to his commercial work, Ryan also has directed, shot, and edited several independent documentary shorts. Ryan's first feature film HANNIBAL TAKES EDINBURGH follows standup comedian Hannibal Buress for one month at the Edinburgh Fringe Comedy Festival. Netflix purchased the film in 2016 to rave reviews. Ryan has been a cinematographer on numerous documentaries about underserved communities including: Syl Johnson- Anyway the Wind Blows, Dear Walmart, Ringside, and Little Dresses for Africa. His current documentary in production is following a novel clinical trial for a rare fatal pediatric disease called Canavan Disease taking place at Dayton Children's Hospital. More information can be found at <https://www.curecanavanfund.org>. SKATE OR DIE is Ryan's second feature film and premiered at the 2021 San Francisco Documentary Film Festival. [ryan@flybackproductions.com](mailto:ryan@flybackproductions.com)

### **Azam Ahmed – Producer/Writer**

Azam has written for several media organizations, including the Dow Jones Newswires, the Wall Street Journal and the Chicago Tribune, who published the story that thematically inspired SKATE OR DIE. A graduate of the University of Virginia, he has lived and worked in Mexico City, Kabul, Afghanistan, New York, Washington D.C., Brussels, Belgium and Chicago, and has traveled through more than 30 countries across the globe. Azam currently is the Mexico Bureau Chief for the New York Times. SKATE OR DIE is Azam's first venture into documentary filmmaking.

### **Jason Osder – Producer**

Jason Osder is a documentary filmmaker and assistant professor at The George Washington University. He has more than 15 years of experience in media, interactive project management, and education. In 2013 he completed the feature film, LET THE FIRE BURN which, after a Tribeca Film Festival premiere, won the Independent Spirit Truer than Fiction award and earned him a place on Filmmaker Magazine's 25 Top New Faces of Independent Film. Currently, Jason is directing the investigative project, WHO KILLED ALEX ODEH? and AMERICA SELLS ITSELF, a co-production with Kartemquin.

### **Nick Nummerdor - Producer/Outreach Coordinator**

2017 Chicago Digital Media Production Fund Grantee, Nick Nummerdor is a filmmaker based in Chicago. His film, CONCRETE DREAMS, a three-piece documentary following the decade-long struggle and ultimate triumph of one woman's mission to provide a free public skatepark in Villa Park, IL recently gained distribution through Tony Hawk's RIDE Channel on YouTube. The Tony Hawk Foundation staff described it as "f\*\*\*ing amazing." Nick is a skateboarder, a former intern of Kartemquin films, graduate of Columbia College, and was an outreach coordinator for MINDING THE GAP. His best known documentary, VANNIN', played in numerous festivals worldwide and was featured on the front page Amazon Prime in 2018. His new film SLEEZE LAKE comes to streaming in 2022 after a successful film festival run. [nick@littlecabinfilms.com](mailto:nick@littlecabinfilms.com)

### **Zeb Smith - Editor**

Zeb recently received an Emmy Award in cinematography and has worked in documentary television for the past decade from many angles, including director of photography, producer, production supervisor, and editor. He has traveled around the world, filming in over 20 countries on 5 continents. At home in the US, Zebediah co-produced and edited the Sundance Documentary Fund winner WHATEVER IT TAKES, which won Audience Awards and Grand Jury Prizes at festivals across the US.

### **Theo Katsaounis - Composer**

Katsaounis has been touring the world as drummer and multi instrumentalist for Chicago indie band *Joan of Arc* for over a decade. *Joan of Arc* is represented by Polyvinyl Records and has released a string of albums since 1995 whose rich history (Tim Kinsella; Cap n Jazz) was made into a feature documentary YOUR WAR (IM ONE OF YOU) 20 years of Joan of Arc by VICE. He is a fine artist, skater, writer, cult film fanatic, & experimental video creator. He wrote and recorded a complete original score for the film, comprised of 18 original songs.

### **Timothy Edson- Sound Design and Mix**

Edson is a freelance sound professional having worked on shows such as Lovecraft Country(HBO) & Work in Progress(Showtime).

### **Ryan Shuck - Colorist**

Digital imaging technician and colorist for feature films, television, and commercials.



