

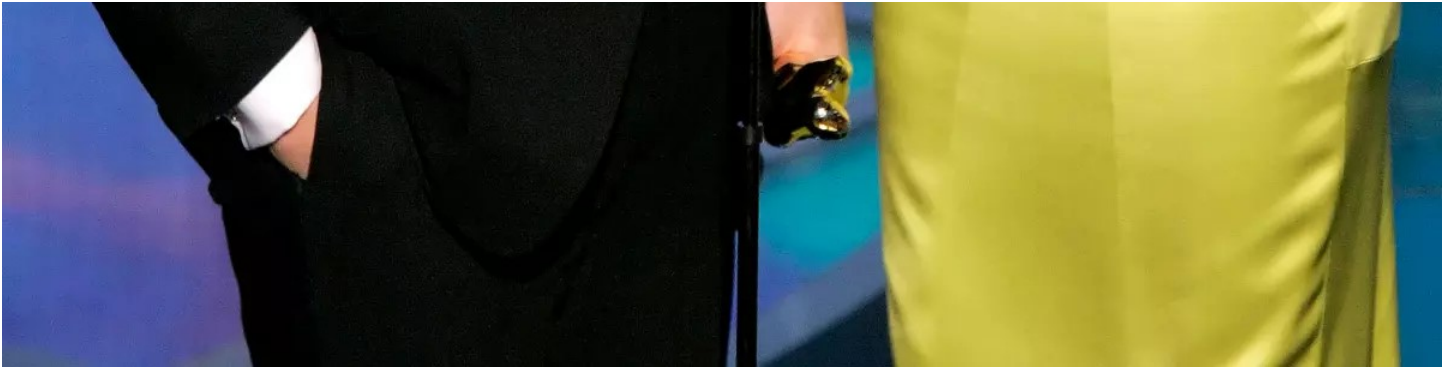


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AWARDS

# Oscars flashback: Documentaries about children prevailed 20 years ago





Ross Kauffman, left, and Zana Briski won Oscar gold for their work on “Born Into Brothels” in 2005. (Mark J. Terrill / Associated Press)

**By Rande Dawn**

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The documentary Academy Award categories have an unusual history dating back to the early days of America’s involvement in World War II, and many of the nonfiction shorts and feature films vying for recognition back then reflected the nation’s preoccupation with combat. The first documentary Oscar was awarded in 1942 to a Canadian short called “Churchill’s Island,” with special awards given to two features. The following year, doc features and shorts were combined and largely created by various government organizations. By 1946, as Hollywood and the rest of the country emerged from WWII, there simply weren’t enough qualifying feature documentaries to even run the category.

Things have changed quite a lot since then, with documentaries growing in popularity and tackling a wide array of topics. Twenty years ago, both doc winners focused on the lives of children in difficult and desperate situations.

## Passages from India

Filmmakers Ross Kauffman and Zana Brinski broke through big with their winning doc feature “Born into Brothels: Calcutta’s Red Light Kids,” about the children of sex workers in the red-light district of the Indian city. They continued the tradition of dual winners in the category; before their win, the last solo feature winner was Jon

Blair for 1995's "Anne Frank Remembered."

As was the style for many categories at the 2005 Oscars, all the nominees were onstage together as their names were read aloud, in this case by Leonardo DiCaprio. "They marched us onto the stage behind a large wall, and when it finally pulled away my fellow nominees, and I stood there like deer in headlights," remembers Kauffman.

During his speech, he held the award and noted, "Tom Hanks was right; this thing is heavy." Briski, who like Kauffman was a first-time nominee, added, "A little gold man, just what we always wanted."

"Walking around L.A. with an Oscar in hand was surreal and unbelievably fun," Kauffman says today. "As my first film as a director, I didn't fully grasp the weight of that moment, but each year I appreciate it more."

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#### MOVIES

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Most of the other nominees had received their first (and only) nomination. "The Story of the Weeping Camel," about a Mongolian nomadic family struggling to get a baby camel to thrive, came from Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni. Morgan Spurlock's "Super Size Me" examined the fast-food industry and his health as he ate nothing but McDonald's for one month; he [died in 2024](#) from cancer. Filmmakers Lauren Lazin and Karolyn Ali tracked the life of late rapper Tupac Shakur in "Tupac: Resurrection." And filmmakers Kirby Dick and Eddie Schmidt were nominated for "Twist of Faith," about a man confronting sexual abuse by a Catholic priest. Kirby would go on to be nominated again in the category for 2012's "The Invisible War" with Amy Ziering.

## March to freedom

The role of children was also critical in telling the story of documentary short winner, “Mighty Times: The Children’s March,” about youth protesting against segregation in Birmingham, Ala., during the early 1960s. The award went to Robert Houston and Robert Hudson, filmmakers previously nominated for a short about Rosa Parks two years earlier.

They accepted the award while standing onstage with their fellow nominees from presenter Natalie Portman. “I don’t know about many of you, but I’ve been sitting in a bathtub since I was 8 years old practicing this Oscar speech,” said Hudson.



### MOVIES

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They were up against Gerardine Wurzburg’s “Autism Is a World,” about the inner world of an autistic woman; Wurzburg had previously won a trophy for a 1992 short (with Thomas C. Goodwin). First-timers Hanna Polak and Andrzej Celinski were nominated for “The Children of Leningradsky,” about societal problems in post-Soviet Russia. Hubert Davis and Erin Faith Young, also first-timers, were tapped for “Hardwood,” about Davis’ relationship with his Harlem Globetrotter father. Also nominated: Oren Jacoby and Steve Kalafer for “Sister Rose’s Passion,” about a nun who explores antisemitism in the Catholic Church. It was Jacoby’s first nomination, but Kalafer already had two under his belt: once for a 1998 animated short followed by recognition for a doc short a couple years later.

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