

# Jonathan Saruk '94

## Filmmaker & Multimedia Journalist

Fifteen-hour days, traveling, and working in conflict-ridden areas are all in a day's work for Benchmark alum Jonathan Saruk '94. But as a photojournalist, documentary film maker, and production company partner, Jonathan says he wouldn't have it any other way.

Armed with the confidence and determination he learned at Benchmark, Jonathan found success at Salisbury School in Connecticut, Trinity University in San Antonio, and NYU, where he earned an MA in print journalism. While interning as a reporter at the *New York Daily News*, Jonathan spent a lot of time with newspaper photographers, which sparked his early interest in editorial photography. "From there, I began to focus more on visual journalism and experimenting with video," he said.

After earning a certificate in photojournalism and documentary photography at the International Center of Photography, Jonathan gave up his apartment and hit the road to take pictures—continuing a globe-trotting streak that had previously included a French immersion program at the University of Grenoble and a semester at the University of Copenhagen.

At first, Jonathan was based between Malmö, Sweden, and Kabul, Afghanistan, and spent several years taking photos for news sources documenting active war areas—often while embedded with the military. Though sometimes dangerous work, he believes that "documenting what

is going on in regions of conflict is of utmost importance" so that others can see what is happening in these regions.

After capturing "compelling imagery from conflict zones," Jonathan spent the next two years photographing Kabul's daily life, offering a different perspective on Afghan life. Using this work, he compiled and published *The Forbidden Reel*, a photographic monograph about the movie theaters in Kabul, which was published in 2014 and selected as one of the year's best photography books by *Time Magazine*.

In 2012, he also took a leap into documentary film, which eventually led to the creation of Fox Tale Films, a Swedish-American production company. Today, Jonathan serves as a partner in the company and heads up Blake Street Films, the firm's Malmö-based partner.

While his demanding schedule often takes him away from home, Jonathan loves his work, especially "getting to travel and meet people from all walks of life" and "the challenge of storytelling with a camera and the logistics of producing." And his hard work has paid off: his videos have been published on many networks, such as the *BBC* and *EuroNews*, while his photography has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Newsweek*, among others.

More than 20 years since Jonathan last sat at a Benchmark School desk, he still fondly remembers the school and the impact it has had on



his life. Arriving as an "active child who was behind in reading ability," his parents hoped that "Benchmark's environment and teaching methods could be beneficial" to him. And beneficial it was! "What stands out most to me when I think back on my Benchmark experience is the level of support I received—both through my greatest successes and my most difficult moments. The faculty at Benchmark was indispensable, and...I was very fortunate to be a student there."

Jonathan believes that the practical skills he learned at Benchmark such as problem solving, reading comprehension, and note-taking, coupled with finding a balance of pursuing his interests, helped him to become successful. "Benchmark instilled a level of confidence and determination to succeed that I probably would not have found anywhere else," he said. "Certainly these characteristics, along with perseverance, are invaluable for an adult pursuing a professional career."

Today, Jonathan lives in Malmö with his wife and three children (ages 6, 4, and 3). "It has been a fantastic experience living abroad, but not without challenges," he said. While it took several years to become integrated into Swedish society and learn the language, he said it has "become home...and we intend to stay here for the foreseeable future."

With exciting projects on the horizon, Jonathan is enthusiastic about the future. "My advice is to find something you are passionate about and trust your instincts," he said. "It gets easier."

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—Jonathan Saruk '94, Outstanding Alumnus '10

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