

The logo for the PBS series "Point of View" (POV), consisting of the letters "POV" in a white, bold, sans-serif font on a black rectangular background.

For Immediate Release

Contacts:

Cynthia López, 212-989-7425, clopez@pov.org, 646-729-4748 (cell)

Cathy Lehrfeld, 212-989-7425, clehrfeld@pov.org

Neyda Martinez, 212-989-7425, neyda@pov.org

P.O.V. online pressroom: www.pbs.org/pov/pressroom

Inner-City Teacher's Belief in Students Defies Odds In P.O.V.'s "The Hobart Shakespeareans"

Rafe Esquith's Inspirational Elementary-School Teaching Methods
Profiled in New Documentary Premiering September 6 on PBS

*A co-production of Mel Stuart Productions, Inc.,
P.O.V./American Documentary, Inc. and Thirteen/WNET New York*

Imagine the sight and sound of American children, ages 9 through 11, performing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Henry V* – and understanding every word they recite. Imagine them performing well enough to elicit praise from such accomplished Shakespearean actors as Ian McKellen and Michael York, and to be invited to perform with the Royal Shakespeare Company in England. Such a spectacle would be highly impressive in the toniest of America's private schools. But what if the kids were recent Mexican and Korean immigrants attending a large Los Angeles inner-city public school in one of America's toughest neighborhoods?

That is the astonishing story told by the new documentary **The Hobart Shakespeareans**, which discovers how one man's uncommon commitment and resourcefulness have opened up worlds of opportunity for his "disadvantaged" students – and perhaps have demonstrated a way forward for America's beleaguered public education system.

The Hobart Shakespeareans, from acclaimed director Mel Stuart ("Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory," "Wattstax"), has its national broadcast premiere on **Tuesday, September 6, 2005** at 10 p.m., as part of the 18th season of public television's P.O.V. series. P.O.V. continues on Tuesdays at 10 p.m., through September 13 on PBS stations nationwide. (Check local listings.) American television's longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television's premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films.

The Mexican and Korean children crowding Los Angeles' sprawling Hobart Boulevard Elementary face daunting odds. Their neighborhood in the heart of Central Los Angeles is better known for crime than for opportunity. They grow up in low-income households. Their school, typically for public education in poor districts, is under-funded and overcrowded. Most of their parents do not speak English. No one is giving these kids educational perks, like class trips and intensive tutoring. And no one is expecting any but the smartest and luckiest to rise beyond the limitations of their environment. No one, that is, except Rafe Esquith.

The Hobart Shakespeareans finds fifth grade teacher Esquith has very strong – some might say, uncompromising – ideas about educating today's children of immigrants. He has developed a renowned if unusual battery of methods, challenging those who would expect less from immigrant children. The one thing Esquith insists on is expecting the best from these kids, no matter what their backgrounds are, and he backs up that expectation by giving them the educational resources to defy the odds. "I fear something for these children," Esquith says. "And it's not gangs; it's not drugs.

What I fear is that they're ordinary. I don't want my students to be ordinary; I want them to be extraordinary because I know that they are."

With that abiding faith – and passion – Esquith leads his fifth graders through a rigorous core curriculum of English, mathematics, geography and literature. But he goes further, creating a real-world learning environment. The film shows how it works: students must apply for a job, such as banker, office monitor, clerk, janitor, police officer and many others. Each child receives a monthly "paycheck" in a classroom currency. They correspondingly pay rent to sit at their desks – the closer to the front of the room, the higher the rent. Students can make extra money by getting good grades and participating in extracurricular activities; they can also be fined for breaking class rules or getting poor grades. The classroom motto is "Be nice, work hard. There are no shortcuts." Esquith also inspires them with cross-country trips to learn history first-hand – and to experience a world of opportunity beyond the troubled confines of Central L.A.

The pinnacle of achievement for the students each year is the performance of a play by Shakespeare; during the year of filming, the play was *Hamlet*. Lest anyone think these kids might be performing adolescent skits, think again. Esquith's students perform full-length, unabridged versions, and spend the year studying the plays so that they understand every word and allusion; they arrive at class at 6:30 a.m. and don't leave until 5 p.m. in order to do so.

In **The Hobart Shakespeareans**, student Alan Avila plays Hamlet, Brenda De Leon is a breathtaking Ophelia, Damien Mendieta is Polonius and Lidia Medina is Gertrude, and each testifies to the impact of Esquith's class. Avila, a former problem student, tells us his favorite book is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* "because it holds a mirror to our nature...shows us how humans really think." "It was easier to memorize lines than to learn character," opines Mendieta like a veteran thespian. And Medina says, "This is the best thing that's ever happened to me, performing and showing what I've worked for in front of all those people!"

The efforts of the "Hobart Shakespeareans" have drawn the attention and help of such renowned actors as Michael York and Ian McKellen, who, fresh from playing the wizard Gandolf in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, sends quite a ripple of excitement through Esquith's fifth graders when he visits. But he is clearly as delighted with them as they are with him. And it's easy to see why – these students embrace Shakespeare as one of their own. York calls the Hobart Shakespeareans "one of the great Shakespeare troupes" in Los Angeles.

That's where some controversy accrues to Esquith's methods. What's he doing teaching Shakespeare – or other "dead white men" such as Mark Twain – to Mexican and Korean kids in Central L.A., anyway? Shouldn't he be teaching them something more relevant to their lives? The class, it turns out, also reads *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. But Esquith is an unreconstructed humanist. In the first place, he feels he should teach what he loves. He also believes that seizing the universal human element in seemingly disparate material is a key to learning, and to a wider world of knowledge and achievement. Rather than favoring the kids' disadvantages, Esquith wants to turn these liabilities on their heads. "If a 10-year-old, who doesn't speak English at home, can step in front of you and do a scene from Shakespeare," says Esquith, "then there is nothing that he cannot accomplish."

Beyond controversy are the results of Esquith's multi-faceted program. An uncommon number of former Hobart Shakespeareans have moved on to attend top colleges and universities throughout the country. "I have students at Harvard, at Yale, at Swarthmore and UCLA," says Esquith. "My younger students were invited to give a performance at the U.S. Supreme Court, and my older students to give a performance at the Globe Theatre in London. It was the greatest day of my teaching life."

At first, Esquith and his wife, Barbara, funded his program out of their own pockets and with prodigious expenditures of their time and energy. Today, donations from major corporations and private individuals cover the cost of the class's extra-curricular activities. None of these funds are used to supplement Esquith's salary as an inner-city school teacher.

Some say that Esquith's successes are the product of a singular sense of mission, and therefore not examples broadly applicable to an education crisis in which poor kids in poor schools fall ever farther behind. But what Esquith has proved, albeit through singular sacrifice, is that with the best educational tools – tools that society could provide if it wanted – any kid can succeed. That, for Rafe Esquith, is the American dream.

"With all my thrilling experiences in the movie business, this was a wonderful film to shoot," says producer/director Mel Stuart. "We can see these kids blossom and open up. It's a testament to the powers of art and to the difference one thoroughly committed person can make."

The Hobart Shakespeareans has been funded by The Estate of Joanne Toor Cummings, Northrop Grumman Corporation and The Miller Family Foundation.

About Rafe Esquith:

Rafe Esquith grew up in Los Angeles and attended the city's public schools. A 1981 graduate of UCLA, Esquith has taught fifth grade at Hobart Boulevard Elementary in L. A. for over 20 years. His efforts to give disadvantaged kids a better chance at the American dream have earned him the Walt Disney American Teacher Award for National Teacher of the Year, *Parents* magazine's As You Grow Award, and Oprah Winfrey's Use Your Life Award. Characteristically, he has donated his award money to the nonprofit fund he has established to support the work of the Hobart Shakespeareans. In 2003, he received the National Medal of Arts. He is the author of *There Are No Shortcuts: Changing the World One Kid at a Time*, and is currently working with the NEA to help put Shakespeare in 10,000 American classrooms.

About the filmmaker:

Mel Stuart Director/Producer

Born in New York, Mel Stuart exchanged his musical aspirations for filmmaking after graduating from New York University. In 1954, he began doubling as assistant editor for an ad company and special assistant to avant-garde filmmaker Mary Ellen Bute. Stuart later served as main film researcher for Walter Cronkite's breakthrough series, **The 20th Century**. In 1960, he joined the David Wolper Organization where he produced and directed dozens of documentaries, including **The Making of the President, Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, Four Days in November** and **Wattstax** (which will be rebroadcast on P.O.V. on August 9, 2005). He also directed features including **Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory** and **If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium**. Since 1977, Stuart has been an independent producer and director. His documentary credits include **Man Ray: Prophet of the Avant-Garde** and **Billy Wilder - The Human Comedy** for PBS. His television work includes the dramas **Bill, The Triangle Factory Fire, Ruby and Oswald**, and the 12-hour miniseries, **The Chisholms**. In 2002, St. Martin's Press published Stuart's "Pure Imagination: The Making of Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory."

Stuart has been the recipient of four Emmy Awards, a Peabody award, and an Oscar® nomination for his work. He has served as President of the International Documentary Association (IDA). Stuart is currently producing a one-hour television special, **Still Perfect – 20 Memorable Photographs**, and a series on living American poets. Over the years he has made over 180 films.

Credits:

Director/Producer: Mel Stuart
Editor/Cinematographer/
Co-Producer: Alex Rotaru
Additional Photography: Damani Baker, Chad Baron, Jerry Henry, Mel Stuart
Associate Producers: Tamara Blaich, Chad Baron

Running Time: 56:46

Awards & Festivals:

- WorldFest - Houston Film Festival 2005 – *Special Jury Award*
- Newport Beach Film Festival 2005 – *Outstanding Achievement in Filmmaking: Documentary*

Co-Presenters:



Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Stage on Screen*, *Secrets of the Dead*, and *Cyberchase* – as well as the work of Bill Moyers – to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, Thirteen reaches millions of viewers each week, airing the best of American public television along with its own local productions such as *The Ethnic Heritage Specials*, *The Thirteen Walking Tours*, *New York Voices*, and *Reel New York*. With educational and community outreach projects that extend the impact of its television productions, Thirteen takes television “out of the box.” And as broadcast and digital media converge, Thirteen is blazing trails in the creation of Web sites, enhanced television, CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMs, educational software, and other cutting-edge media products. More information about Thirteen can be found at: www.thirteen.org.



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and now in its 18th season on PBS, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running series on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary- issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through September, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought over 220 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. It also produces a Web site for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through community-based and educational applications, focusing on involving viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov houses our unique *Talking Back* feature, filmmaker interviews and viewer resources, and information on the P.O.V. archives as well as myriad special sites for previous P.O.V. broadcasts.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films. *Youth Views*, P.O.V.'s youth engagement program, expands these efforts by working directly with youth service organizations.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Educational Foundation of America, the Ford Foundation, PBS and public television viewers. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television station including KCET/Los Angeles, WGBH/Boston, and WNET/New York. Cara Mertes is executive director of P.O.V./American Documentary, Inc.



Support for P.O.V. is provided by Starbucks Coffee Company. Starbucks has a rich tradition of supporting the arts and independent film and celebrates the fact that numerous points of view can be discussed over a good cup of coffee. Starbucks is committed to offering the highest quality coffee in grocery stores nationwide.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.americandocumentary.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, on line and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback, to educational opportunities and community participation.

TAPE REQUESTS: *Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.*



Support for P.O.V. is provided by Starbucks Coffee Company.

