



For Immediate Release

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P.O.V.'s "Omar and Pete" Offers Powerful Portrait Of Crime, Punishment and Redemption in America, September 13 on PBS

**Struggles of Two Ex-convicts Reveal Innovative Re-entry Programs
Battling Stubborn Cycles of Poverty and Addiction**

It's no wonder that America's most-watched television dramas draw their material from the country's chronic "war on crime." Reduced to its most sensational elements, the criminal justice system is a fount of melodramas featuring violation, heartbreak and retribution. But beyond the snarling punks and streetwise cops of fictional lore is a far more prosaic - and yet far more suspenseful - story of ordinary people struggling to free themselves of poverty, addiction, and the legacies of broken families. As shown in award-winning filmmaker Tod Lending's new film, **Omar & Pete**, they struggle ultimately to free themselves of the dehumanizing cycle that takes them from crime on Baltimore's streets to prison and back again.

With extraordinary cooperation from the Maryland Department of Corrections (MDOC), as well as from the subjects themselves – Leon Omar Mason and William "Pete" Duncan – Lending has crafted an intimate portrait of two men, battered but not beaten after lifetimes of crime and prison, seeking the inner strength to turn their lives around. **Omar & Pete** also provides an insider's view of innovative efforts in Maryland, and nationally through such organizations as Outreach Extensions, to build the social and community support that will allow more Omars and Petes to succeed. But the reality in **Omar & Pete** is as stark as the one facing the film's subjects: without that inner strength, support systems are of little avail.

Tod Lending's **Omar & Pete** will have its national broadcast premiere **Tuesday, September 13, 2005** at 10 p.m., concluding the 18th season of public television's P.O.V. series. (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.

Oscar®-nominated and Emmy award-winning filmmaker Tod Lending has crafted a feature documentary that does not flinch from the achingly personal and socially charged challenges facing newly released prisoners, especially if – like Omar – they have spent long or multiple terms in prison, have been addicts, and are returning to poverty.

When we first meet Omar, he's incarcerated in the Maryland Transitional Center prison, just six weeks shy of completing 10 years for armed robbery. At age 47, he has spent his last 30 years in and out of prison – never longer than six months at a time on the outside. Like many of those in prison with him, he had for years simply accepted prison as a part of his life. His real focus had been his drug addiction, whether in jail or not. But this time is different for Omar. With the perspective of age, he grieves for a life bereft of family, community, and self-respect. He's tired of drugs controlling him, tired of the dehumanization of incarceration. Most telling, he's caught the older inmate's fright of dying in prison.

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What's also different is that Omar has found Islam and has been using it in jail to discipline himself. He's also volunteered, as part of his parole, for Maryland's Re-entry Program, which seeks to create a more successful model for helping long-term and chronically recidivist prisoners re-enter society. As his release dawns, Omar is determined, and brimming with confidence and plans. He also has support from an extended family of siblings and nieces, especially from his sister, Sharon, who are ready to welcome him back.

Interestingly enough, when Omar moves into a transitional house, he ends up rooming with Pete Duncan, who is not only a neighborhood running buddy from "back in the day," but shares a virtually parallel 30-year history of street crime and incarceration. If anything, Pete was more insistently recidivist than Omar – he never spent more than three months on the outside until his last release. "I was the guy either selling you drugs or robbing you," he tells a group of soon-to-be-released inmates, "and it didn't matter if I was in prison or out on the street." Now a record 10 months free and sober when Omar comes to the house, Pete takes on a heartfelt if somewhat querulous mentoring role. Pete has a grizzled, not always clearly articulated, determination to stay out of prison, yet expresses many doubts and cautions. Omar is upbeat and confident – and very articulate.

Omar's confidence seems well-placed. He works multiple jobs and starts two small businesses, which, though they fail, demonstrate his drive and imagination. When he marks six months of freedom, there's a celebration across his supporting network of family and professionals, including caseworkers LaTonya Johnson and Marshall Collins and parole agent, Kimberly Lewis. It is, for Omar, a climax in his effort to show he can make it. Shortly after, he relapses into drug use.

Omar gets another chance in detox, but the Re-entry Program workers make it harshly clear he's risking jail. Pete, meanwhile, wrestles with feeling he's played too much the approving friend and not enough the disciplined counselor with Omar. He also reveals his doubts about Omar's readiness: he's too confident, makes too many big plans, and is a little too proud. Pete knows staying clean is a grinding battle of small and daily victories that requires vigilance, humility, and realism.

The film seems to bear Pete out, and explains the sharp skepticism of Omar's caseworkers, as Omar goes through renewed efforts, new high points, and two more drug relapses. In his defense, Omar points out that his lapses don't involve other crimes besides drug use, and that he is sincerely working to treat the "disease" of his addiction. But the caseworkers and counselors, from their own experience, know the problem isn't Omar's sincerity. The problem is that Omar, like many addicts, has become a master of self-deception. He is so practiced and even glib at producing the words and attitudes needed to get what he wants that he has difficulty knowing who he is when the spotlight of counselors and family looks away – and difficulty therefore finding within himself the reason to stay clean and sober.

Maybe Omar hasn't yet reached "bottom." Or, maybe he reaches it when, after the third relapse, he is sent back to prison for another 19 months. On re-entering the prison he so lately left with so much bravado, visibly seething with shame and anger, Omar for the first time demands the filmmaker stop shooting. It's a heartbreaking moment.

Pete, meanwhile, marks two milestones. He gets a job as a community health counselor and moves out of the transition house and into his own place with a new girlfriend. The two are clearly excited to build new lives for themselves. Pete can't help but be full of smiles, but he also remembers to repeat his mantra: vigilance, humility, realism. Omar emerges from prison in time to watch his friend receive an award at a dinner given for ex-convicts who have stayed out of prison. Pete, now three years out, gives a characteristically modest speech.

Omar is no longer quite the same man we first met in the film. Though still committed to treating his addiction, his confidence and optimism have been replaced by a new defensiveness and a feeling

he's been victimized by the very people who have been working to help him. He's tired of "being told what to do" and decides to go more his own way. Is this the self-deceiving Omar moving off toward his addict's doom? Or is there hope that Omar will finally take responsibility for his recovery?

"By humanizing prisoners and the complex challenges they face in re-entering society, we wanted to challenge common public perceptions of people like Pete and Omar," says director/producer Tod Lending. "We also want viewers to understand that more than the fate of the individuals is at stake, and to comprehend the individual, family, and community pathways that can lead to social change."

Omar & Pete is funded by grants from The Child and Family Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. Mac Arthur Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, and The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

About the filmmaker:

Tod Lending

Tod Lending is an Academy Award®-nominated and national Emmy Award-winning producer, director, and writer whose work has aired nationally on all the major networks as well as on HBO and PBS. His documentaries have also won awards at film festivals and been televised in Europe and Asia. Lending's feature documentary, **Legacy**, a critical success at the Sundance Film Festival, was also nominated for an Academy Award® in 2000, and went on to air on both Cinemax/HBO and PBS. Lending also wrote, produced, and directed the award-winning **No Time to Be a Child**, a three-part documentary series, co-produced with Detroit Public Television, that aired nationally on PBS. Lending is the recipient of numerous other awards, including a national Emmy for Outstanding Children's Special, a Casey Medal for Meritorious Journalism, CINE Gold Eagle, Golden Apple, the New York Festival World Medal, and the Innovation in Documentary Award. He is the founder and president of Nomadic Pictures, a film and television company based in Chicago.

About the people in "Omar & Pete":

- **Latonya Johnson** continues to work as a case manager for the Maryland Re-entry Partnership.
- **Marshall Collins** continues to work as an advocate for the Maryland Re-entry Partnership.
- **Neville Thompson** continues to work as a case manager for the Maryland Re-entry Partnership.

Credits:

Producer/Director: Tod Lending
 Cinematographer: Slawomir Grünberg
 Editor: Jan Sutcliffe
 Music Composer: Sheldon Mirowitz

Running Time: 86:46

Festivals:

- San Francisco International Film Festival
- United Nations Association Film Festival
- Chicago International Film Festival



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.***