



For Immediate Release

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A Father's Dramatic Video Asserts His Right to Die In P.O.V.'s "The Self-Made Man"

A Family Deals with the Darker Side of Rugged Individualism in New Documentary
Premiering July 26 on PBS

An Independent Television Service (ITVS) Co-presentation

Is it ever rational to choose death? Is it ever good? For 77-year-old Bob Stern there is little doubt. A successful businessman, husband, and father, an exemplar of the "greatest generation" that built post-war America, Bob Stern believes that taking his own life in the face of serious – possibly terminal – illness is what an all-American hero should do. So he sits down on Independence Day, 2001, and videotapes his shocking proposal – for both his wife and son who sit just off-camera, and for his two absent daughters. Bob Stern's family tries to stop him from taking his life. The intense family drama that ensues raises issues many families must face.

The Self-Made Man will resonate through the country's intensifying debate over the "right to die." At a time when state legislatures are debating "right to die" bills, the Supreme Court is scheduled to rule on Oregon's assisted suicide law, and individual cases and Hollywood films have pushed the issue to the forefront, Bob Stern's voice will be inspiring to some and troubling to others.

Susan Stern's **The Self-Made Man** airs **Tuesday, July 26, 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. This season, many of P.O.V.'s films are about men: What do they want?

Bob Stern always wanted his filmmaker daughter to make a film about someone like him: the prototypical self-made American. In **The Self-Made Man**, in a way unanticipated by either of them, Susan Stern has crafted that film. Digging through family memories and archives, she shows that the elder Stern was certainly self-made . . . and then some. During World War II, like many young men, he joined the army right after high school graduation. Once out of the service, he passed up college to get a job in order to support his mother, who was dying of cancer. By the early 1960s Bob Stern had married, had children, and made his fortune, first in steel, and then in real estate on Chicago's "Magnificent Mile."

Later in the 1960s, seeking new outlets for his energies, Bob moved the family to California and became a pioneer in solar energy. He groomed his son, Michael, from the age of 12, to join him in the solar business. In 1982, Bob Stern was the first to put solar power into the grid of Pacific Gas and Electric Co., Northern California's utility. By the early '90s, Mike Stern's Utility Power Group was one of the country's major installers of large-scale solar power systems. Stern Ranch, where Bob lived with his wife, Adele, in central California, was itself surrounded by solar panels that served father and son as a research lab. That they did not achieve all their solar dreams – for technological, economic and political reasons – hardly dampened Bob Stern's spirits. A businessman's businessman, he tinkered with other products and inventions, from the Mench Mustache Company to the Art Robot.

Bob dominated the lives of his wife, son and daughters. In fact, according to Adele, Michael, and daughters Susan and Laura, there never was much difference between businessman and family man. Bob ran the family with the same creative zest for living, tempered by an unsentimental balance-sheet mindset, as he ran his businesses. "You had to produce something to gain Dad's respect," says Susan in the film, "and whether or not he respected us was always an open question, an account yet to be reconciled."

By the time Bob sits before the video camera at the Stern Ranch on the evening of July 4, 2001, he knows exactly what he should do: calculate the cost-benefit ratio of his future prospects as a heart disease and cancer patient against the alternative of suicide. Untroubled, and even jocular, Bob at first leaves Adele and Michael – and the viewer —unsure of how seriously to take this unscripted video suicide note. But it soon becomes clear that Bob is completely serious.

But is Bob depressed? Mentally ill? Or is he, in fact, the proof that suicide can be a rational choice? He doesn't appear to be sad, overly emotional, or afraid. At 77, he expresses a great deal of satisfaction at the fullness of his life; it becomes clear that control – or rather the prospect of losing it – is the crux of Bob's cost-benefit analysis. Citing statistics, he figures that his chances of coming back from heart surgery and cancer treatments to resume a robust, independent life are slim.

What troubles Bob most is not that he might die on the operating table, but that he might become an invalid, like Michael's father-in-law, who, in a stranger-than-fiction coincidence, has had a stroke and is struggling on life support. Medical science's astonishing advances, the doctor's very assurances that there remain treatment options for Bob, paradoxically heighten his fears of an extended and unavailing struggle with death. Against this prospect, he must weight the cost to his family of taking his life. Can that cost be eased by a suicide note on video?

One wonders if Bob Stern really already had his mind made up when he began taping. Or did he make it up when his doctor calls – the tape is paused while he goes to the phone – to reassure him about the next day's heart operation, but also suggest that Bob's prostate cancer might have spread? "Bye kids; I love you," Bob says on the video, "and maybe you won't even see this tape."

The idea of a "right to die," gaining force from medicine's ability to prolong life, regardless of its "quality," is a hot-button issue now pending before the US Supreme Court and several state legislatures. The Bush administration has challenged to Oregon's Death with Dignity Act, passed in 1994, allowing terminally ill patients to receive prescriptions for lethal drugs if doctors certify the patients are rational and within six months of death. Meanwhile, some terminally ill people continue to hasten their own deaths, or be helped by their loved ones, who sometimes face criminal penalties. Among those most likely to respond to debilitating illness with suicide are elderly white men – men like Bob Stern – who most expect to be in control of their lives.

The Self-Made Man is reality footage of a sane, successful man contemplating suicide, inter-cut with his family's memories of a life lived large right through the end. Bob Stern made up his own mind about the right to die, leaving his family and others to make up theirs. Is suicide, despite cultural and religious taboos, ever right? How do we weigh the benefits and costs, above all to the patient, of ever-more elaborate systems of medical life support? And even if the patient wants to kill himself, does he owe it to his loved ones to continue to live?

"What I found out when making **The Self-Made Man** was that, far from being alone, my father was part of a trend," says Susan Stern. "It turns out that white males over the age of 85 have a suicide rate five times the national average, and as the Baby Boomers age, the suicide rate is expected to rise. I think this is something we as a society need to talk about."

"Dad would have loved the debate," Susan says at the end of the film. "A debate rages within me. Sometimes I think Dad wasn't strong enough to be weak, to get old. Other times I think he had the courage to be himself. I accept my father's choice. It was inseparable from who he was, inevitable as another day."

The Self-Made Man was produced in association with ITVS and KQED Public Television with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

About the filmmaker:

Susan Stern

Director/Producer/Writer

Susan Stern has been an investigative journalist for more than 20 years. She has written for the *Boston Globe*, *Sacramento Bee*, *San Francisco Examiner* and *Oakland Tribune*. *The Wall Street Journal* credited Stern's *Tribune* exposé of Navy base closures with "saving thousands of local jobs." Stern has also written and produced news for KPIX-TV, San Francisco's CBS affiliate.

She is married to underground cartoonist and artist, Spain. Their daughter, Nora, inspired Stern's first film, **Barbie Nation: An Unauthorized Tour**, which aired on P.O.V. in 1998. **Barbie Nation** was a favorite at the South by Southwest Film Festival, won the Golden Spire for documentary at the San Francisco International Film Festival, and has become standard viewing in college classrooms studying American culture and sexuality.

Credits:

Producer:	Susan Stern
Associate Producer:	Laura Salcido
Director:	Susan Stern
Editor:	Jennifer Chinlund
Additional Editing:	Elizabeth Finlayson, Simeon Hutner
Cinematographers:	Charlie Gruet, Andrew Black, Ines Sommer, Sarah Levy, Andy Abrahams Wilson

Running Time: 56:46

Awards & Festivals:

- Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, Raleigh-Durham, 2005 – *Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies Filmmaker Award*.
- South by Southwest Film Festival (SXSW), Austin, 2005
- SILVERDOCS Documentary Film Festival, Silver Spring, Md., 2005

Co-Presenters:



Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web and the weekly series Independent Lens on PBS. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have helped revitalize the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting www.itvs.org. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people.



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.*



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