

# FIRST★PERSON

## Synopsis (25 words)

Through the stories of six promising inner-city Philadelphia teens, First Person explores what happens to the dreams of low-income high school students who are disproportionately shut out of four-year colleges.

## Synopsis (200 words)

78% of low-income high school students expect to attend college. Fewer than half of them make it.

What happens to their dreams along the way?

First Person unfolds through the eyes of six promising inner city Philadelphia teens. The film opens on the first day of 11th grade, as each student embarks on the most important year of high school. Over 90 minutes, First Person takes viewers inside the challenges of pursuing college while navigating the responsibilities of family, the pressures of the streets, and the absurdity of a school system that fails to graduate almost half its students. As Steve and Macho struggle to let go of the familiar comforts of home, Fresh is overwhelmed by the weight of his family's troubled past. As Shalisa and Malikka find their aspirations increasingly difficult to hold onto, Kurtis becomes entangled in the violence that surrounds him. In following these students' divergent paths as they lead to community college and to the corner, to pending motherhood and to prison, First Person provides a deeply personal examination of how navigating the college pipeline leads to a dream deferred for far too many young people.



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**Steve** is the center of every room he walks into. He is an all-Public League center for the football team, an accomplished cook, and just about everyone's best friend. Having discovered that he can skate by on personality and charm, Steve seems content with mediocrity in the classroom and familiar safety nets at home. As he struggles to accept the looming reality of life beyond high school, Steve and his legion of supporters seek the spark that will motivate him to graduate on time and to risk pursuit of the great things everyone sees in his future.



A homebody and an introvert, **Shalisa** reveals a rich internal life and a strong desire to carve out a space for herself within the family and community that are all she's ever known. Helping to raise her three younger sisters at home and barely engaged in her chaotic school, she is running out of time to earn the high school diploma that her mother never received. With her life closing in around her, Shalisa must find a way to balance her goals for herself and her commitment to hold together the family that she loves.



**Fresh** turns his almost pathological honesty into gripping rhymes that capture the pain of growing up in a family and a neighborhood that have been torn apart by drugs. Supported primarily by his ailing grandmother - "the only person who has always had my back" - Fresh is unable to find structure in either his classrooms or the streets. He leaves school, gets his GED, and heads off for a stint in the National Guard. After a series of short-term jobs gives way to the hustle of the streets, Fresh struggles to avoid the trap of living only for today.



Motivated by his strong family but pulled by his loyalty to the streets, **Kurtis** battles daily with living two separate lives. Guided by his parents' emphasis on faith, service, and personal responsibility, he dreams of becoming an entrepreneur. As Kurtis becomes more deeply entwined in the streets' violent struggle for honor and respect, however, the life his family wants for him seems ever further away. Young and confused, Kurtis faces an escalating series of choices that he believes are his alone to make - no matter how high the stakes.



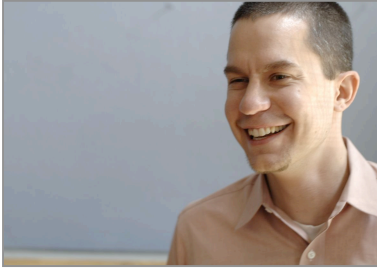
Accepted into a prestigious college prep program, **Macho** seems well on his way towards higher education. He's smart, focused, and surrounded by family who pamper and push him. As the pressures of daily life mount, however, Macho feels increasingly cut off from the "ghetto fabulous" North Philly neighborhood he knows and loves. Pushed by the promise of new opportunities but pulled by the familiar comforts of home, Macho must decide if he's ready to plunge into a new world beyond the boundaries that he's always known.



Since 7th grade, **Malikka** has wanted to be a neonatal nurse. Her determination - and the support of the strong women who form the backbone of her family and community - carry her to an elite all-girls magnet school. As Malikka sheds her shyness, she must stay focused in order to handle the rigorous academic path she has chosen. Struggling to balance school, work, and family, Malikka hopes to earn a scholarship that will help to ease the financial burden her mother must face as she tries to put three girls through college.

# FIRST\*PERSON

## Crew Biographies



**Director/Producer Benjamin Herold** holds a Master's Degree in Urban Education from Temple University in Philadelphia, where he has worked as an educator, program evaluator, policy researcher, and community organizer. Herold has published on the college-going patterns of Philadelphia public high school graduates; served on the editorial board of the Philadelphia Public School Notebook; and worked with young people of all ages to highlight the critical importance of youth voices in education, community development, and policymaking. First Person is Herold's first documentary project.

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**Lead Editor/Producer Sharon Mullally** is an Emmy Award winning independent producer/director and editor. Her most recent editorial work includes the CINE Golden Eagle (HBO Latin America)-winning documentary ROSITA and QUEEN OF THE MOUNTAIN. Recent work as a producer/director includes KNEE DEEP (2004) with Ann Tegnell, FADI FLIES A KITE (2003) and RUFUS JONES - A LUMINOUS LIFE (2002) with Barbara Attie, winner of a CINE Golden Eagle. Mullally's editorial work has appeared in the SILVERDOCS Film Festival, the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, the DoubleTake Documentary Festival, and the Philadelphia Festival of Independents.

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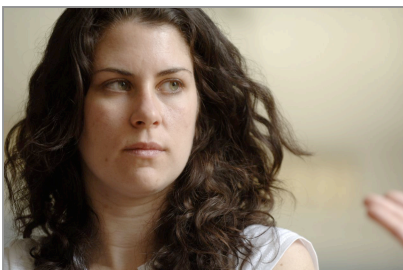
**Director of Photography Chong K. Pak** is an Emmy-nominated cameraman whose work ranges from documentary to commercials and music videos. Pak has shot award winning projects such as STAND UP (Annapolis Film Festival 2005) and ELEVATOR VIEW (Ivy Film Festival 2005). His clients include Nickelodeon, SPIKE TV!, Dixie Cup, Amp Mobile, Super 8 Motel, and Villanova University. In addition, Pak has worked with artists such as The Comas, Paper Route and Hezekiah. Samples of his work can be seen at [www.chongpak.com](http://www.chongpak.com).

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**Composer Hezekiah Davis III** is an award-winning musician whose most recent album, *I Predict A Riot*, was released in 2007 on Rawkus Records. Davis's previous release, *Hurry Up and Wait*, was released in 2005 to critical praise from Vibe, Trace, and XLR8R, among others. In addition to his own work, Davis is an acclaimed producer, having worked with artists ranging from Bilal to Musiq Soulchild to G-Unit. Davis was also the driving force behind the influential Beat Society. Also composing original music with Davis is Tony Whitfield.

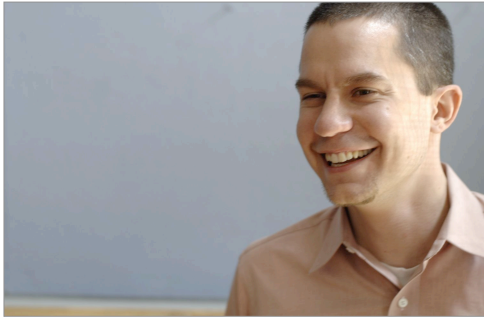
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**Producer Kate Slovich** has a Bachelor's degree in Television-Radio Production from Ithaca College, which included studies under highly acclaimed documentary producer Ken Burns. Past projects include TEDDY ROOSEVELT (Associate Producer, researcher) and MARTIN SCORSESE PRESENTS THE BLUES: THE ROAD TO MEMPHIS (Associate Producer). Slovich currently oversees grassroots community video projects as a video facilitator for Scribe Video Center's Precious Places and Community Visions video programs.



# FIRST PERSON



*Producer/Director Benjamin Herold holds a Master's Degree in Urban Education from Temple University. **First Person** is his first film.*

**"It was incredibly heartbreaking to watch as none of the students in First Person made it to a four-year college."**



***First Person** cast member Kurtis during a video diary.*



***First Person** cast member Shalisa, a student at Benjamin Franklin High School in North Philadelphia.*

## Director's Statement

People always want to know if Steve, Shalisa, Macho, Malikka, Kurtis, and Fresh are "typical" Philadelphia public high school students.

On one hand, they are anything but. They are distinguished by their remarkable perceptiveness, their uncommon candor, and by their unwavering desire to be heard. It is no simple thing to have a camera crew in your bedroom at 6 am on the first day of school or to commit to posterity video diaries of yourself being rejected from college.

On the other hand, however, these six young people exemplify the 'typical' urban teens whose lives and stories are so rarely reflected in the popular media. None were academic all-stars, but all were bright and motivated. All six students wanted to go to college, but each struggled to maintain a consistent focus on the future. And although we have come to casually expect urban teens to exhibit a heroic desire to 'make it out' of their communities, these six pursued what is in many ways a more elusive goal: finding a way to balance where they wanted to go with where they come from -- the families, neighborhoods, and friends that they knew and loved.

In the middle class suburbs I come from, students like these stumble into state schools. Life happens, and we get confused, and we mess up. But when we fall down, it seems there is a large safety net to catch us and a long line of supporters to help get us back on track.

These kids never seemed to have that luxury. When they faced the everyday struggles that urban teens confront all the time, and when they got confused and stumbled, they quickly fell behind. It often seemed impossible for them to find their way back on to the path to college. Their struggles speak to the failure of a system that is more proficient at extinguishing dreams than nurturing them. For me, it was incredibly disheartening to watch as none of the students in **First Person** made it into a four-year college. I think many viewers will share that reaction as they watch the film.

That is why the ways in which this film is used is so important. There is no shortage of documentaries about the teachers, principals, programs, and filmmakers trying to 'save' urban public high school students. Too often, these films use the lives of inner city teens as mere backdrops, choosing to instead tell the stories of outside interventions intended to help young people overcome supposed deficiencies in themselves, their families, and their communities.

It should be no surprise, then, that we seem less and less able to connect with real youth in their real life struggles. We too often fail to acknowledge the emotional dynamics or the structural forces at play in their lives, leaving them alone to navigate an escalating series of treacherous decisions. With this film, I wanted to provide a window into how urban public high school students experience the path to college. I wanted them to tell their stories in their own words and to explore this process through their own eyes. If I have done my job well, **First Person** will help the general public to understand just how rocky the path from urban public high schools on to college is, and it will also help to make that path a little less rocky for a new generation of students just getting ready to pursue their own dreams of college.

# FIRST\*PERSON Production Notes

When I first met Steve, Shalisa, Macho, Malikka, Kurtis, and Fresh, they were bright-eyed 10th graders who dreamed of going to college. I was just out of Temple University's graduate program in Urban Education. None of us had any idea that we would spend the next four years of our lives making a documentary film together.

Initially, I worked with the students as part of a research project for Temple's Young Scholars Program for promising Philadelphia public high school students. Kurtis was thriving as the youngest student in his class. Malikka had her heart set on becoming a neonatal nurse. Macho was applying for a prestigious college prep program at Community College of Philadelphia. Fresh and Shalisa were experiencing the thrill of finding their creative voices - he as a rapper, she as a writer. And Steve seemed to have the entire world at his fingertips.

As soon as I met them, I knew their stories needed to be heard by a wider audience. The statistics said that only about 55% of Philadelphia students graduated *high school* on time and that fewer than one-third of them made it on to college. But the talent, charisma, and aspirations of these six students seemed to clearly point them to college. When we started, I thought **First Person** would be an uplifting story of talented kids beating the odds. Three years later, none of them had made it to a four-year college. Only four had graduated high school.

I had always imagined we would end the film with a scene featuring students moving into their new dorm rooms, ready to embark on this exciting new phase of life. Instead, we wrestled with how to capture the bitterness and disappointment that comes with being an 18-year old struggling to hold on to a dream deferred. By the time we were putting **First Person** together in the editing room, I had come to understand the stories of these six individuals as a testament to the scope of the failure of our education system. If bright, talented, well-supported kids like these six aren't making it -- and the numbers tell us that they aren't -- then we are all in trouble.

It seemed that every month brought a dramatic new challenge for one of my students. And for every twist in their paths, there was a corresponding challenge behind the scenes of the production. Overwhelmed by life after dropping out, Fresh temporarily quit the project. After being arrested for shooting and killing another young man, Kurtis spent a year in jail and was eventually sentenced to a lengthy term in a state prison. Temple shut down the Young Scholars Program. Each turn of events threatened the project.

All the while, we lurched from one budget crisis to another, always waiting for a last-minute angel. Once, it was my in-laws, who organized a Scrabble tournament to raise production funds. Once, it was the School District of Philadelphia, who contracted with me so they could use our footage to create a teacher recruitment DVD. Money or not, we never stopped the cameras rolling. All told, our crew filmed for 28 months, generating over 200 hours of footage. We filmed in three Philadelphia public high schools (Benjamin Franklin, the Philadelphia High School for Girls, and Kensington High School for Business, Finance, and Entrepreneurs), where we fell asleep with Macho in Algebra class, observed the chaotic chemistry lab that Shalisa had never attended, and interviewed amazing teachers like Ben Franklin's Gail Lynch, who Steve still describes as his "second mom."

We filmed on the streets of North Philadelphia and Kensington, where a camera crew usually means someone got shot and we were mistaken for everything from police surveillance to the production team for "Cheaters." And we filmed in the kitchens and bedrooms of the six students, capturing everything from Steve's mom trying to wake him up on the first day of 11th grade to Fresh's ailing grandmother describing what it takes to hold together a family of five children and seventeen grandchildren on \$1,000 a month.

For the students, sharing their stories was particularly difficult when their dreams of college began to unravel. Together, we had to find ways to document these moments. We were most successful when I gave the students their own video cameras, which they used to create almost 50 hours of powerful video diary footage. Kurtis hauntingly described the violent struggle for respect being waged in the streets of North Philadelphia. Fresh gave viewers a tour of his drug-ravaged neighborhood. Malikka committed to posterity her rejection from college. Much of the film's most intimate material came from these video diaries, which ultimately make up about 15% of the film.

In the end, what kept **First Person** going was our shared commitment to reaching others. As a city and as a nation, we cannot abide an educational system that is more proficient at extinguishing the dreams of talented young people than at nurturing them. There are thousands upon thousands of urban public high school students struggling to make it. It's our collective job to help them. As Steve says, "I believe in **First Person**. We put so much of our time and heart and spirit into it. I know it's going to have an effect on the world, because these problems are global."

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# FIRST\*PERSON

## SPECIAL THANKS

- The Amaro & Rivera Families
- The Graves Family
- The McLean Family
- The Ousley Family
- The Parr & Logan Families
- The Saeed Family
- Michelle Schmitt

## THANKS

- The School District of Philadelphia
- Benjamin Franklin High School
- Kensington High School
- Philadelphia High School For Girls
- Germantown High School
- Temple University College of Education
- Community College of Philadelphia
- Pennsylvania National Guard, Cavalry 104B
- Philadelphia Civil Air Patrol
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern PA
- World Café Live
- Scribe Video Center
- Philadelphia Independent Film & Video Assn
- Philadelphia Public School Notebook
- Philadelphia Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts

## MADE POSSIBLE WITH SUPPORT BY:

- The Annenberg Institute for School Reform
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- The Herold Family
- Pennsylvania Council on the Arts/5-County Arts Fund
- Pennsylvania Department of Education
- Philadelphia Cultural Fund
- Philadelphia Foundation/YOUTHadelphia
- The School District of Philadelphia
- The Schmitt Family
- Temple University College of Education
- Wedge Medical Center

## IN MEMORY OF:

Mary McLean (1931 - 2007)

## Complete Credits

Produced & Directed by Benjamin Herold  
Co-Produced & Edited by Sharon Mullally  
Cinematography by Chong K. Pak  
Original Music by Hezekiah Davis III & Tony Whitfield

Co-Producer: Kate Slovic  
Sound Recordist: Chad Jenkins  
Assistant Editor: Aaron Schumann

### Additional Camera:

- Mario Amaro
- Robert Goodman
- Kurtis Graves
- Chad Jenkins
- Douglas McLean
- Shalisa Ousley
- Steven Parr III
- Malikka Saeed
- P. Michael Weisser

### Additional Sound Recording:

- Joe Cantor
- Justin Gray
- Juan Ignacio Nuevo
- Joseph Raicovich
- Philip Rosati
- Kate Slovic

Sound Design & Sound Mix: Pete Rydberg & John Baker for  
Maja Audio Group

Colorist: Chris Landy  
Multimedia Instructor: Brian Yetzer  
Graphics & Titling: Benjamin Herold

### Additional Graphics:

- Ransom Weaver
- Amy Yenchik

Still Photography: JJ Tiziou

Transcription: Mountain Shadow Transcription Services

### Additional Transcription:

- Elaine Mullally
- Sonya Teich

Fiscal Sponsor: Community Education Center

Legal: Ballard, Spahr, Ingersoll & Andrews, LLP

### Additional Legal:

- Teresa Brady, Esq.
- Brian Rankin

### Archival and News Footage Courtesy of:

- Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum
- The Philadelphia Daily News
- WPVI-TV Philadelphia





*A student teacher weighs in during a First Person workshop for the Pipeline to the Future Program*

**"It helped me to realize that there's more to the student than what teachers see in school. I can't wait to see what happens to the kids!"**

*—Prospective teacher*

**"First Person is a great tool for beginning the dialogue about what it takes to get to college."**

*—College access professional*

**"This presentation has made me more hesitant to generalize 'inner city students.'"**

*—Prospective teacher*

**"I love your documentary First Person! It helped me to realize that there are other kids in this big city who feel the same way about college."**

*—6th grader*



*First Person students lead a workshop at Teach for America's Summer Institute*

**First Person** has targeted three primary audiences:

- Urban middle and high school students
- Teachers, guidance counselors, & educators
- College admissions officers & college access professionals

In order to reach these core audiences, First Person has already built a strong regional outreach network founded on strong partnerships:

•With **WHYY-Philadelphia**, First Person has committed to a regional public television broadcast and regional community outreach screening series in Fall 2008.

•With the **School District of Philadelphia**, First Person has brought screening and promotional materials to over 5,000 prospective teachers through the Live, Learn, & Teach in Philadelphia Campaign and is bringing First Person to thousands of high school students through school-based Student Success Centers

•With the **Pennsylvania Department of Education**, First Person has brought screening and workshop materials to hundreds of high school principals through Project 720

•With **Teach for America**, First Person has delivered educational workshops to hundreds of new teachers

•With the **Philadelphia Education Fund**, First Person has delivered educational workshops to over 50 student teachers and participated in the 2005 Distinguished Educator Lecture Series, presenting alongside renowned sociologist Elijah Anderson to an audience of 150 education leaders.

•With eight area **colleges and universities**, First Person has been screened for hundreds of prospective teachers

•With the **Education Law Center**, First Person is supporting the Pennsylvania Education Funding Reform Campaign

In addition, First Person has initiated the **College Ambassador Project**. First Person hires young people from low-income urban communities to serve as College Ambassadors, developing a youth-centered framework for understanding the supports that low-income urban public high school students need and advocating for this vision.

In Summer 2007, First Person partnered with **WHYY-Philadelphia**, **Interactive Data Solutions**, and **The University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia** to pilot this effort. The College Ambassador Program will be expanded in 2008.

To learn more, please visit:

[www.firstpersondocumentary.org/college-ambassadors](http://www.firstpersondocumentary.org/college-ambassadors)



Education Director Eric K. Grimes leads the North Philly College Ambassadors through their Statement of Commitment

**"This presentation helped me to think about how to further incorporate student voices in program design."**

*—College access professional*

**"I can't think of a comparable documentary web project with this level of empowering and interactive storytelling."**

*—Independent filmmaker*

**"This presentation will help me to take a new approach with students in my agency, recognizing their goals and unmet needs."**

*—College access professional*



College Ambassador Khyri Henry prepares to administer a Path to Higher Learning survey at the University of Pennsylvania.

## College Ambassadors Project

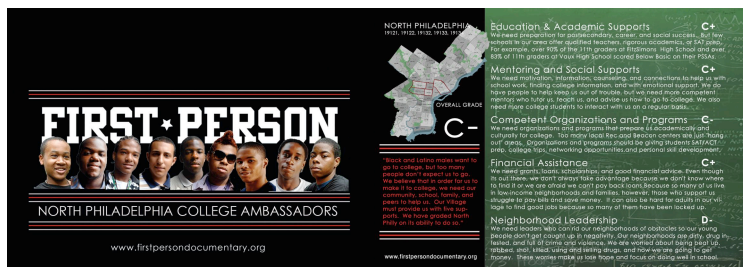
During Summer 2007, **First Person** partnered with **WHYY-Philadelphia**, **Interactive Data Solutions**, and the **University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia** to successfully pilot our new outreach effort, The College Ambassadors Project.

Through this effort, First Person hires young people from low-income urban communities to serve as College Ambassadors. The goal is to engage young people as leaders in:

- Researching and evaluating the college support network presently in place in their schools and communities
- Developing a youth-centered framework for understanding the supports low-income urban students need and envisioning a system that is aligned with this framework
- Advocating for more comprehensive, more effective college support networks in their schools and communities

Products produced by College Ambassadors include:

- Report cards grading their communities' success in providing youth with **Education & Academic Supports, Mentoring & Social Supports, Competent Organizations & Programs, Financial Assistance, and Neighborhood Leadership**



- Full reports and short videos summarizing their findings
- Interactive web applications highlighting youth perspectives and public data about their schools and communities.
- Advocacy and information-sharing with peers, policymakers, and community stakeholders

**WHYY-Philadelphia** will broadcast First Person and conduct community screenings throughout its viewing region in Fall 2008. First Person's goal is to have multiple neighborhood-based teams of College Ambassadors prepared to accompany broadcast and screenings with youth-centered advocacy and information-sharing. First Person is currently seeking funders and partners to help expand the College Ambassadors Project into communities across Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley during Spring 2008.

To learn more about the College Ambassadors Project, please visit:  
**[www.firstpersondocumentary.org/college-ambassadors](http://www.firstpersondocumentary.org/college-ambassadors)**