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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Subject Profiles

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.
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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.
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. Its 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 a much more common, and in many ways 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.

Where I come from, students like these stumble into state schools. Life happens, and we middle class students 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. It was incredibly disheartening to watch as none of the students in First Person made it into a four-year college.

There is no shortage of documentary films about the teachers, principals, programs, filmmakers, and various others 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. After working with Philly teens for years as an educator, organizer, and researcher, I came to realize that many, many adults like myself rarely understand what is happening behind the scenes when our students are making important choices about their educational futures. With this film, I wanted to provide a window into how regular urban public high school students experience the path to college. I wanted them to tell their stories in their own words and to explore what this process looks like through their 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 treacherous for a new generation of students just getting ready to pursue their own dreams of college.
SPECIAL THANKS
• The Amaro & Rivera Families
• The Graves Family
• The McLean Family
• The Ousley Family
• The Parr & Logan Families
• The Saeed Family
• Michelle Schmitt

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• Germantown High School
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• Community College of Philadelphia
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• Philadelphia Independent Film & Video Assn
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• 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 Slovich
Sound Recordist: Chad Jenkins
Assistant Editor: Aaron Schumann

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

Additional Sound Recording:
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• Justin Gray
• Juan Ignacio Nuevo
• Joseph Raicovich
• Philip Rosati
• Kate Slovich

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

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• Amy Yenchik

Still Photography: JJ Tizio
Transcription: Mountain Shadow Transcription Services
Additional Transcription:
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• Sonya Teich

Fiscal Sponsor: Community Education Center
Legal: Ballard, Spahr, Ingersoll & Andrews, LLP
Additional Legal:
• Teresa Brady, Esq.
• Brian Rankin

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• Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum
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Outreach

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
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

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