

No fairy tale endings for students in 'First Person'



Kurtis Graves, one of six promising Philadelphia public high school students featured in "First Person," an independent documentary film produced and directed by Benjamin Herold. — CREDIT: P. MICHAEL WEISSER

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The 17th Philadelphia Film Festival will traverse the globe with a 13-day showcase of 246 films from 49 countries, 11 World Premieres, 12 North American Premieres and 45 East Coast Premieres.

One of the more provocative films screening will be "First Person," an

independent documentary film following the lives of six promising Philadelphia public high school students trying to make it to college.

The "First Person" debut will take place Sunday at 9:15 p.m. at International House (3701 Chestnut St.) as part of the 2008 Philadelphia Film Festival.

"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 this 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 of its students.



Malikka Saeed, one of six promising Philadelphia public high school students featured in "First Person," an independent documentary film produced and directed by Benjamin Herold. — CREDIT: JJ TIZIQU

In following these students' divergent paths as they lead to community college, 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.

"When I first met these six young people, their talent, charisma and aspirations all clearly pointed them to college," says producer/director Benjamin Herold. "I figured 'First Person' would be an uplifting story about talented kids beating the odds."

However, three years later, only four of the students had graduated high school, and none had made it to a four-year college.

"The big surprise was that none of these six students, who were all motivated, promising, talented, energetic and all had a plan, none of them made it to a four-year college. You had four that graduated high school, one who dropped out and got his GED, one who ended up in prison with 20-40 years for third degree murder, so it really covered the gamut of experiences that young people face."

Despite the film's "heartbreaking" outcome, says Herold, "First Person" is a powerful testament to the need to expand opportunities for Philadelphia youth. "Their experiences are a testimony of what's happening with public education," noted Herold.

Civic leaders like Philadelphia First Lady Lisa Nutter have embraced the film as a vehicle for rallying the public around the importance of helping Philadelphia public high school students make it to college. "First Person" is about young people who have done everything we've asked of them," says Nutter. "Their voices and perspectives lay the groundwork for a comprehensive community-wide plan that can change outcomes for all youth who dare to dream."

Nutter will be hosting a benefit concert immediately following the screening at 11 p.m. at World Café Live, 3025 Walnut St. featuring spoken word artist Ursula Rucker performing with The Back2Basics Band and other artists. For more information on the 2008 Philadelphia Film Festival and to purchase tickets, call (267) 765-9700, ext. 4 or visit www.phillyfests.com.