

Worth a Shot

FIRST PERSON DOCUMENTS SIX CITY KIDS' ATTEMPTS TO ATTEND COLLEGE.

BY CASSIDY HARTMANN

Take any six 10th-graders from this city's public high schools who want to go to college. How many of them will actually make it there? That's the premise of the documentary *First Person*, which premieres at the Philadelphia Film Festival Sunday.

Educator and education policy researcher Ben Herold's debut documentary follows a group of bright kids—two girls and four boys—through their final two years of high school, as they attempt to forge a path toward higher education.

"If you look at most other films about inner-city public education or read stories about it, it's usually told from the perspective of an outsider who's coming in and trying to save the kids, or about kids who want to leave the community behind and go on to better things. That just wasn't where these kids were coming from," says Herold, who met his six subjects because they were involved in Temple's now-defunct Young Scholars Program.

Herold knew that for many public high school students in Philly, college seems unattainable. He decided the best way to illuminate the problems with our current system, and to help other kids navigate the path, was to make a film from the perspective of the kids themselves.

"I realized there were a lot of people like me who want to understand why things are as messed up as they are, and then you get involved and you become part of the problem," he says. "You wind up 10 years down the road replicating all these things that haven't worked for eons. A big part of that is not really fully understanding where kids come from."

Herold spent a year planning the film and getting to know his six subjects and their families. During that time he gave the kids cameras, and organized workshops to teach them basic filming skills.

"It was more for me," he laughs. "They're far more technically proficient than I am; they got it right away."

After raising enough money to get the project going, Herold and his crew—which included Emmy-winning editor/producer Sharon Mullally and Emmy-nominated director of photography Chong K. Pak—began the two-year shoot, following the kids periodically at school, at home, at work

Six pack: The *First Person* cast, with director Ben Herold (third from right), gather around a photo of Kurtis Graves, who was incarcerated before production ended.



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and on the street.

Herold and his crew then whittled down 250 hours of footage—50 of which came from video diaries shot by the students themselves—to the 90-minute film. The results are a real and at times heartbreaking portrait of the obstacles facing inner-city students trying to make it. Too often "making it" just means surviving.

"We're going to make sure [the film] reaches educators and kids and their parents," says Herold. "If I have to go knocking on doors and showing it or doing it through schools—that will happen."

He says if *First Person* reaches a more general audience through venues like the Philadelphia Film Festival, that's icing on the cake.

"If you read the paper any day of the week, there are stories about schools, jobs, crime—and people are just desperately trying to understand what's happening in Philadelphia," he says. "I think this film will help them."

Herold has already set up numerous outreach programs in conjunction with the production—one of which, the College Ambassadors Project, hires young people to mentor high school students and help them get to college. Philadelphia Academies Inc., the career-oriented educational nonprofit headed by the city's first lady Lisa Nutter, has also teamed up with Herold to organize a fundraising event at World Cafe Live after the film's premiere. Proceeds from the event

will go to Philadelphia Academies Inc. and a trust fund to help the film's six subjects pay for college. None of them has made it to a university yet.

"You have these great kids and none of them end up in a four-year college—the real story is why," says Herold, who adds that the kids have become like family over the course of the four-year project. "That's what I hope people walk away with—why is this happening?"

And why is it happening not just to these six, but to thousands and thousands of kids?" ■

First Person World Premiere and Benefit Concert

Sun., April 6, 9:15pm. International House, 3701 Chestnut St.; Concert: Sun., April 6, 11pm. \$5 (free with festival ticket). With Ursula Rucker, DJ Dozia + Lisa Nutter. World Cafe Live, 3025 Walnut St. 267.765.9700 ext. 701. www.phillyfests.com

>> Q&A: Lisa Nutter



Established in 1969, the nonprofit Philadelphia Academies Inc. now operates 17 career-oriented centers that enroll about 8,000 public high school students in the city every year. When one of those students, Steven Parr III, became involved with the *First Person* production, Academies president **Lisa Nutter** saw it as a great opportunity for collaboration. Nutter will host the concert fundraiser after the film's premiere.

Why did you decide to get involved with the film?

"It's real. What these kids did was they made the story human. That's what I really like about it. That's why I think the film as a piece of advocacy is really strong."

Were you surprised by anything you saw?

"No, I wasn't. I was distressed by it because a lot of it was affirming. The part that upsets me most is most of the kids in the film did everything we asked them to do, yet they didn't all graduate. And these are all kids who had self-identified as wanting to go to college. That's a system problem—when you have a set of kids who can see the future with you, but you haven't put in the kinds of supports they need to get there. And I don't mean just a school system problem. I mean all the systems put in place to support young people aren't working."

What should be done to help?

"We don't have a good way of connecting the different youth-serving systems in Philadelphia—the school district with

human services, with juvenile justice. There are people working on that. When these systems begin to communicate, it will help us understand why a young person is this way or that way, what challenges they're bringing to the school. I also think one of the things we could be more clear about is, we don't just expect you to graduate and consider postsecondary education; we need you to graduate and consider postsecondary education. That's a very different message."

What can people do to help kids succeed?

"There are a number of organizations that do mentorship work in high schools. That's certainly one avenue. Hosting kids as interns is a really powerful way to build a relationship. I'm also a real advocate of people taking care of their own kids—so start at home."

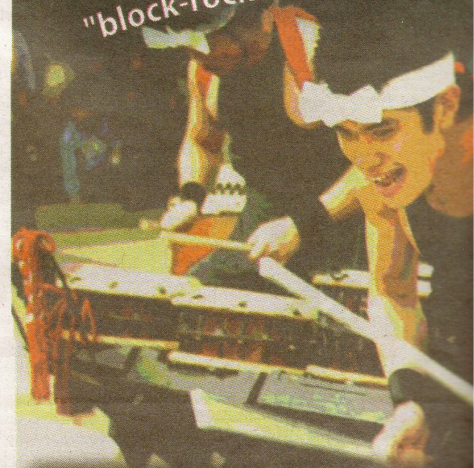
Do you think your husband's goals of doubling the number of Philadelphians with bachelor's degrees in the next 10 years and cutting the dropout rate in half are realistic?

"Not only do I think they're doable, I think we don't have an option. These are goals that are achievable, but we're really going to have to stretch to achieve them. I think stretch goals are really critical. Otherwise you just get settled into the status quo. In a community where we have the largest concentration of institutions of higher learning, I need to understand why we can't pool our resources and figure this out." ■

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