

*BEV Pictures Presents a Participant Media and Non Sequitur Production*

# PRESSURE COOKER

A documentary by Jennifer Grausman & Mark Becker

**99 minutes, Color, English, Not Rated, 35mm flat**



**FIRST RUN FEATURES**  
The Film Center Building  
630 Ninth Ave. #1213  
New York, NY 10036  
(212) 243-0600/Fax (212) 989-7649  
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Audience Award, Berkshire International Film Festival

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BEV Pictures

Emily Woodburne, Emily@bevpictures.com

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### **LOGLINE:**

*PRESSURE COOKER* captures a moment in time, as high school seniors - on the brink of adulthood - battle for achievement against a backdrop of uninspiring opportunities, with a determined and irreverent mentor leading the way.

## **DIRECTORS' STATEMENT:**

A few months into filming *PRESSURE COOKER*, we began to discover where the story was taking us. We had been filming since the beginning of the school year, and as we shot in a verité style, we had been trying to let the subtext of the film be revealed to us through the process. Neither of us were particularly interested in making a film only about the plot – that is, whether or not any of the kids we were following would earn a culinary arts scholarship to college and get out of Frankford.

We realized this: We had access to a powerful moment in time, when a family – a surrogate family – was forming in the classroom, with Mrs. Stephenson as the ever-watchful mother figure. Her kitchen was a loud, chaotic, and oddly nurturing home base for these kids, replete with discipline and dysfunction. This realization contributed to our shooting and editing philosophy for the rest of the production. Erica, Dudley, and Fatoumata strive throughout the year knowing that they have a teacher whose force of will is aimed squarely at them. This comes through in Mrs. Stephenson's inimitably blunt no-boundaries manner. Her kids don't want to fail themselves, and they don't want to fail *her*.

It was clear to us that we wouldn't want to delve into the obvious notions about our failing urban public schools, because what we witnessed was a more subtle subject matter, which required us to be attentive to this fleeting moment in the lives of Erica, Dudley, and Fatoumata. There were subtle but powerful connections between their family lives and their classroom family, and we wanted to connect those worlds elegantly in the film. This approach would allow us to tell the story without turning our film subjects into generic symbols of their milieu. Their lives were too rich and nuanced to treat them with a common social-issue approach. Ultimately, for us, it was a feverish and emotionally intense year spent with Mrs. Stephenson, Dudley, Erica and Fatoumata, and the film is a testament to this experience. By the time the door closes on Room 325 in the last scene of the film, we hope the viewer can share that sense.

## **PLOT SYNOPSIS:**

There's a force-of-nature behind the door to Room 325 at Frankford High School in Philadelphia. Her name is Wilma Stephenson and she teaches Culinary Arts. Infamously blunt, Mrs. Stephenson runs a "boot camp" at Frankford, disciplining her students into capable chefs and responsible students. Behind her tough-talking exterior is a teacher, who cares passionately about getting the best out of her students and making sure they receive the opportunities – including scholarships to top programs – that will help them escape the meager minimum-wage job opportunities of Northeast Philly.

Wilma Stephenson has taught at Frankford for 40 years, long before Culinary Arts became part of the school's curriculum. She can be cantankerous, and she knows it, but she will do anything for the students who get with the program and show true promise and the hunger to succeed. Those who fall short of her discipline will not be missed; many will drop out before the first week is over.

*PRESSURE COOKER* documents Mrs. Stephenson and those students committed enough to surrender themselves to her enlightened despotism through both semesters in Culinary Arts. By the end of the school year, 13 of her students will have made it through the gauntlet. These seniors aspire to scholarships that can enable them to escape the status quo of Northeast Philly and move on to a future of more opportunities. Mrs. Stephenson spells it out on the first day of school by telling the newcomers that 11 members of last year's class earned over \$750,000 in scholarships, a staggering amount. At a school where over 40% of students don't even make it to their senior year, Ms. Stephenson's class stands in stark contrast. She offers these kids her version of the American Dream: You choose a realistic goal. You work hard. You work the system. You get out of Northeast Philly.

At the end of their school year, there is a one-day scholarship competition, where top Philadelphia chefs judge the students' skills and talent. But, in the end, the scholarships are even more dependent on the kids' capacity for sustained drive throughout their senior year. Can they endure the stressful challenges wrought by their home lives – having to hold minimum-wage jobs after school, and acting as surrogate parents to their siblings – while still finding the motivation to wake up at 6AM to get to Mrs. Stephenson's class early enough to master their crepes and tourn e potatoes...

## **THE STUDENTS:**

**ERICA GAITHER:** Erica has been responsible for raising her blind and physically disabled younger sister for years. She sees her life as a foregone conclusion unless she takes action to extricate herself from this routine of taking care of others and neglecting herself. For the past few years, Mrs. Stephenson has been her mentor in both culinary arts and in life.

**TYREE DUDLEY:** Dudley, the all-state football star, has good reason to believe he will earn an athletic scholarship, but realizes that an injury could easily deter his plans for the future. He is devoted to Mrs. Stephenson and juggles football, cooking and the expectations of his single mom.

**FATOUMATA DEMBELE:** Fatoumata came to the U.S. from Africa (four years prior) without knowing a word of English. Now, she maintains a 4.0 grade point average despite minimal encouragement from her father, who only counts on her to perform house chores. Her daily routine has been drudgery – cooking, cleaning and waiting on her family, and she desperately wants to be much more than that.

## **WILMA W. STEPHENSON:**

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, culinary arts teacher Wilma Stephenson attended Cheyney University where she received a Bachelor's degree in *Home Economics*. She went on to earn two Masters degrees: *Human Behavior and Development* at Drexel University and *Computer Science* at Philadelphia College of Textiles & Science. A lifelong student, Mrs. Stephenson has also taken classes towards degrees in *Multicultural Education* and *Deaf Education*, as well as numerous courses in *Culinary Arts*.

Mrs. Stephenson has been teaching at Frankford High School for the past 40 years, and began the Culinary Arts Program in 1999. Since beginning the program, more than 53 of her students have received scholarships to attend culinary schools as well as four-year and community colleges. All told, her students have received more than \$3,000,000 in scholarships.

Passionate about her profession, Wilma credits her parents and grandmother with teaching her how to cook. Early in life, she and her three older sisters would help prepare family meals. As a teenager, Wilma worked as a cook in people's homes in order to earn money for college.

In addition to her work as a culinary arts teacher, Mrs. Stephenson is the Frankford cheerleading coach. The team has won the Philadelphia Public League Championship for 8 years in a row.

Wilma was married to Dr. Paul L. Stephenson for 39 years (he recently passed away) and has two grown daughters – Ann Marie, a gastroenterologist and Jennifer, a sociologist. She adores her new granddaughter Kendall Marie.

## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION:**

### **The Beginning**

After meeting Wilma Stephenson and gaining her cooperation, Jennifer Grausman secured permission for filming from the Philadelphia Board of Education and Frankford High Principal Richard E. Mantell, who generously allowed them access throughout the entire 2006-7 school year. Shooting began on September 7th, the first day of school, and continued through graduation day in June.

During the early stages of production, Jennifer began to consult with documentary filmmaker Mark Becker, who signed on to edit the film. By midway through the production he had become a collaborating director and one of the cinematographers as well. Explains Jennifer:

“Since it was my first documentary, I wanted to bring an editor on early in the process so that he or she would help inform the shooting. As soon as Mark began editing, he immediately became my collaborator - looking at the footage we had in order to determine together what kinds of scenes we still needed in order to make the film narrative work. Mark is also a cinematographer, and during the school year, when it became clear that we needed the flexibility of being able to shoot at a moment’s notice, shooting took precedence over editing.”

Another key member of the *PRESSURE COOKER* team was co-producer Myna Joseph. Jennifer explains, “Myna helped with the logistics of planning shoots as well as doing production sound. But more importantly she was invaluable as a thoughtful person on location, and we worked together to develop the conceptual aspect of the documentary.”

### **Fear of Flipping Burgers**

Instead of focusing on the risk of poverty for kids growing up in depressed neighborhoods, *Pressure Cooker* delves into the desire to overcome mediocrity in education and opportunity. Jennifer explains: “What drives all of Mrs. Stephenson’s kids is the fear of working at Kmart and fast-food chains in dull minimum wage jobs for the rest of their lives.”

Mark adds: “One cannot sum up a so-called ‘urban’ neighborhood with statistics about single parenting and gang violence. Erica, Fatoumata, Dudley, and their friends take pride in their artistry in the kitchen: They want to be chefs and own their own businesses. Their lives and their aspirations belie easy presumptions about low-income families.”

### **Filming in Mrs. Stephenson’s Classroom**

Shooting in Mrs. Stephenson’s classroom was not always easy. Jennifer explains: “Mrs. Stephenson’s first priority was her students and during stressful times in the classroom she would yell at us or threaten to kick us out.” Adds Mark: “It felt like Mrs. Stephenson

had a successful method of operating – a blunt and exacting way of working – and she didn't turn this mode off for anyone. Not for other teachers. Not for us. At times, both Jennifer and I felt like high school students ourselves: not wanting to get in trouble with Mrs. Stephenson. Once she actually expelled us for a couple of weeks. And more than once, we drove down to Philly not knowing if we would be let back in the classroom.”

Jennifer: “Interestingly enough, now that the film is finished and Wilma has seen it, she says she doesn't even remember us being there, except for a couple of occasions towards the beginning of the school year.” Mark adds: “It's funny to us because we are battle-scarred from the experience. But she watched the film, and didn't quite understand how we got the footage we did: I think that's a testament to her focus on her kids.”

Mrs. Stephenson was not the only challenge. As Mark remembers: “Try making an appointment with high school students...we were stood up on numerous occasions.” Continues Jennifer, “That actually helped determine our main characters – in addition to being incredibly charismatic on camera, Erica and Dudley were interested in the process. And although Fatoumata was shy at first, after spending time getting to know her off camera, she was eventually our rock: the one student who would always return my calls and meet with us. And when Wilma shut us out of the kitchen, Fatoumata was our lifeline – letting us know what was happening in Philly. Ultimately, the energy we invested in filming her paid off, as her storyline is the most emotional.” Mark adds: “Fatoumata was more remote at the beginning of the process, but she undergoes real growth in Mrs. Stephenson's class and ends up having the most transformative character arc.”

### **The Story: A Surrogate Family**

Jennifer: “We knew that there was an obvious plot structure: Dudley, Erica, and Fatoumata are ambitious kids, and they needed to do well enough in the classroom to earn scholarships so that they could afford to go to college and get out of Frankford. Their whole year with Mrs. Stephenson was consumed by this goal. But the story we were witnessing in the classroom was much more interesting than the superficial plot. Ultimately, we were witnesses to the formation of this surrogate family in the classroom, with Wilma as the mother figure.”

Mark: “We worked hard to make a documentary that was kinetic and true to the drama in the subjects' lives, but we also wanted the film to reveal more than whether or not the kids get their scholarships. We witnessed these really compelling kids that wanted much more than was being offered by their neighborhoods, and by the public school system. And we saw this transformative teacher that understood how to channel the tides of their ambitions. From an editing perspective, the structure of the film was given to us by the students' senior year, but it was the tension between the lives at home and the classroom family that inspired the narrative choices.”

Mark began the editing process by cutting 40-50 scenes to work with as building blocks. Jennifer explains: “We made an initial list of scenes and once those were edited, we

began working on a paper cut together. After that, we would go back and forth between Final Cut and our bulletin boards with index cards - reworking the structure, with the goal of doing justice to the classroom experience.”

Mark: “There are literally thousands of decisions you make on a documentary, from production through post-production. It's an exhaustive task to make those 90 minutes feel like an organic entity that just unfolds naturally. We worked hard to get great scenes and access, and in the process ended up with a ton of footage. But our goal was not to depict every high-school moment, as much as to make a film that was faithful to our sense of the crazy year inside that classroom. We worked with the footage, with sound design, with our composers, and basically with all the tools at our disposal, but with one goal in mind: to represent the lives of Dudley, Erica, and Fatoumata with a fullness and honesty. They were incredibly generous with us; they gave us access to their worlds; and we felt a tremendous responsibility to resist turning them into reductive symbols or archetypes.”



## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS:**

### **Jennifer Grausman**, Director and Producer

Most recently, Jennifer Grausman co-produced Eric Mendelsohn's narrative feature, *Three Backyards* (2009). Before beginning production on *PRESSURE COOKER*, Jennifer Grausman produced six short films. *Dear Lemon Lima*, premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival (2007), and *Solidarity* screened at the New York Film Festival (2005). In 2006, she was the production supervisor on *The Killing Floor*, an independent feature film. A graduate of the MFA film program at Columbia University, Grausman was honored with the 2005 Best Producer Award at the Columbia University Film Festival and the Arthur Krim Memorial Award in 2004. Prior to graduate school, she was the Manager of Exhibition and Film Funding at The Museum of Modern Art. She earned her BFA in Art History at Duke University.

<http://www.nonsequiturproductions.com>

### **Mark Becker**, Director and Editor, Cinematographer

Mark Becker produces, directs, shoots and edits documentaries in New York. As a filmmaker, Becker made the acclaimed *Romantico*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize, and received two Independent Spirit Award nominations (Best Documentary and Truer Than Fiction Award). *Romantico* was released theatrically in 2006 by Kino International. Becker was co-editor of *Lost Boys of Sudan*, winner of an Independent Spirit Award. He earned a Masters Degree from the Documentary Film Program at Stanford University.

<http://www.meteorfilms.org>

### **Justin Schein**, Cinematographer

A director, cinematographer and sound recordist, Justin Schein has shot over 45 films internationally for broadcasters including A&E, PBS, National Geographic, BBC, The Discovery Channel, HBO, The Learning Channel, and MTV. For PBS he recently completed *Return to Ground Zero*, a one-hour look at rebuilding the World Trade Center and a companion piece to his *America Rebuilds: A Year at Ground Zero*, which chronicled the rescue and recovery efforts in the aftermath of 9/11/01. Most recently he completed work as director and cameraman on the feature documentary *No Impact Man: The Documentary* (2009).

**Leigh Iacobucci**, Cinematographer

After working on educational documentary videos for The George Lucas Educational Foundation, Leigh Iacobucci was inspired to enter her own classroom, teaching a course in documentary video production at a non-profit film school in Ghana. In the fall of 2004, Leigh enrolled in Stanford University's Documentary Film Program and completed her Master's Degree in June 2006. During her time at Stanford, she produced, directed, shot and edited four short films. Currently, she works as a freelance shooter and assistant editor in New York City and Philadelphia.

**Myna Joseph**, Co-Producer

Myna Joseph is a recent graduate of the MFA film program at Columbia University. Her thesis short *MAN* screened at Sundance, SXSW, New Directors/ New Films, and Cannes. The film won the New Line Cinema Award for Best Director in the 2007 Columbia University Film Festival and the Grand Jury Prize for Best Narrative Short at the Florida Film Festival. Short films she's produced have received awards from USA Film Festival, New Line Cinema, HBO, and Eastman Kodak. Most recently, she co-produced *The Second Line*, which won a Special Jury Prize at SXSW and showed at Sundance this year. Currently she is developing two feature-length projects.

**Jeff Skoll**, Executive Producer

Jeff Skoll founded Participant Productions (now Participant Media) in January, 2004 and serves as Chairman. Skoll's vision for Participant is to create a long term, independent, global media company to produce and finance entertainment focused on long term benefit to society. He cites classic films such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Gandhi* and *Erin Brockovich* as examples. Skoll most recently served as executive producer on Participant's films *Good Night, and Good Luck*, *North Country*, *Syriana*, *American Gun*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The World According to Sesame Street*, *Fast Food Nation*, *Angels in the Dust*, *Jimmy Carter Man from Plains*, *Darfur Now*, *The Kite Runner*, *Charlie Wilson's War*, *Chicago 10*, *The Visitor* and *Standard Operating Procedure*.

**Diane Weyermann**, Executive Producer

As Participant Media's Executive Vice President, Documentary Films, Diane Weyermann is responsible for Participant Media's documentary slate. This includes the 2008 releases, Brett Morgen's *Chicago 10* and Errol Morris' *Standard Operating Procedure*, which won the Silver Bear Grand Jury Prize at this year's Berlin International Film Festival, as well as the 2007 releases *Angels in the Dust*, *Jimmy Carter Man from Plains* and *Darfur Now* and 2006's Oscar® winning *An Inconvenient Truth*. Prior to joining Participant in October 2005, Weyermann was the Director of the Sundance Institute's Documentary Film Program. Before that, she was the Director of the Open Society Institute New York's Arts and Culture Program for seven years. In addition to her work with contemporary art centers and culture programs in the Soros Foundation network, which spans over thirty countries, she launched the Soros Documentary Fund (which later became the Sundance Documentary Fund) in 1996. Since the inception of the Fund, she has been involved with the production of over three hundred documentary films from around the world.

**Prince Paul, Score**

Beginning his career as a DJ for Stetsasonic, rapper and producer Prince Paul has lent his skills to albums by Boogie Down Productions, Gravediggaz, MC Lyte, Big Daddy Kane, and 3rd Bass, among others. Paul's big break came when he produced De La Soul's *3 Feet High and Rising* album. In 1994, Paul returned to rapping, joining RZA and Stetsasonic member Frukwan in Gravediggaz, a side project that debuted with *6 Feet Deep*. He also began working with the new elite in underground rap, recruiting the Automator, New Kingdom's Scott Harding, and Spectre for his debut solo album, 1997's *Psychoanalysis: What Is It? A Prince Among Thieves* followed in 1999, and later that year Paul formed Handsome Boy Modeling School with the Automator to release the album *So...How's Your Girl?*. His own *Politics of the Business*, another concept album surfaced in 2003 (a year after a second Handsome Boy Modeling School album), and was followed by 2004's 2<sup>nd</sup> Handsome Boy Release, *White People* and 2005's *Instrumental* as well as The Dix' *The Art of Picking Up Women*. In 2008 Paul co-produced *Baby Elephant* with long-time collaborator Don Newkirk and the world renowned Bernie Worrell (of Parliament Funkadelic fame). Most recently Paul created *Baby Loves Hip Hop presents The Dino 5* with guest appearances from Chali 2na, Ladybug Mecca and Wordsworth. Among Prince Paul's previous film credits are the scores for *Pootie Tang*, and *The Best Thief in the World*.

**Donald Newkirk, Score**

A former Def Jam recording artist, Donald Newkirk came onto the scene with his release *Funk City*. Also known for his feature on the classic Prince Paul CD *A Prince Among Thieves* where he covered the classic "Mood For Love". However, many only know Newkirk's voice, which resides in the collective subconscious of the hip-hop community of the world due to his infamous voice-overs on legendary hip hop albums such as De La Soul's *Three Feet High and Rising* and 3rd Bass's *The Gas Face*. Currently he produces tracks for artists such as The Black Flames, Alyson Williams and Keon Bryce. Newkirk's affiliation with best friend and legendary hip hop producer Prince Paul has been responsible for the projects *Bigger and Blacker* and *I Ain't Never Scared* (Chris Rock), music for the movie *Pootie Tang*, several commercials and the score for the Showtime independent film, *The Best Thief in the World*.

## **ABOUT PARTICIPANT MEDIA:**

Participant Media is a Los Angeles-based entertainment company that focuses on socially relevant, commercially viable feature films, documentaries and television, as well as publishing and digital media. Participant Media is headed by CEO Jim Berk and was founded in 2004 by philanthropist Jeff Skoll, who serves as Chairman. Ricky Strauss is President.

Participant exists to tell compelling, entertaining stories that bring to the forefront real issues that shape our lives. For each of its projects, Participant creates extensive social action and advocacy programs, which provide ideas and tools to transform the impact of the media experience into individual and community action. Participant films include *The Kite Runner*, *Charlie Wilson's War*, *Darfur Now*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Good Night*, and *Good Luck*, *Syriana*, *Standard Operating Procedure* and *The Visitor*. For information, visit [www.participantmedia.com](http://www.participantmedia.com)

## **ABOUT C-CAP:**

Careers through Culinary Arts Program (C-CAP) works with public schools across the country to prepare underserved high school students for college and career opportunities in the restaurant and hospitality industry. A national nonprofit, C-CAP manages the largest independent high school culinary scholarship program in the United States. Since 1990, C-CAP has awarded students \$25 million in scholarships and donated \$2.2 million in supplies and equipment to classrooms.

In addition to awarding scholarships and providing high schools with needed products and supplies, C-CAP offers training and curriculum enrichment programs including: cooking competitions, teacher training, job shadows, job training, internships, college advising, and career guidance.

C-CAP operates in seven locations including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Hampton Roads, VA, Washington, D.C. and statewide in Arizona. For information, visit <http://www.ccapinc.org>