



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Jennifer Houlihan 212-989-7425
Email: povpublicity@pov.org

POLITICAL ASYLUM IN THE UNITED STATES: WHO DESERVES IT? WHO GETS IT? WHO DECIDES?

Well-Founded Fear, Premiere of 13th Season of **P.O.V.**,
Features Unprecedented Access to INS Applicants and Procedures

Two-Hour Film to Debut **June 5, 2000** on PBS

Unprecedented access to applicants and officers of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) provides dramatic insight into the seeking and granting of political asylum in America in the premiere broadcast of the 13th season of **P.O.V.** on PBS.

WELL-FOUNDED FEAR, a two-hour film by Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini, inaugurates a new series of films on **P.O.V.**, PBS's award-winning showcase of independent non-fiction films, beginning **Monday, June 5, 2000 at 9 p.m. ET**. The film has been selected to compete at the January 2000 Sundance Film Festival.

WELL-FOUNDED FEAR documents a variety of dramas unfolding in INS offices in the New York City area. The filmmakers focus on both the pleas of immigrants to stay in the United States, and the consideration of their cases by INS officers. At issue in every case are the requirements of asylum. To be granted, applicants must demonstrate a "well-founded fear" of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

For applicants with a genuine "well-founded fear," the asylum process is fraught with tension. A brief in-person interview requires that the applicant recount the horrors of life in the old country, dredging up memories that have been suppressed or best forgotten. And the stories must be convincingly told and documented.

The officers charged with deciding about each applicant's future sometimes must sort extensive documentation and at other times, no evidence at all, then attempt to discern truth from lies. The job requires convincing a supervisor that each person either deserves to be invited to stay in America in safety, or to be put on the road to deportation. No other recommendation is possible.

Cases are assigned at random by computer. Applicants, after submitting the necessary paperwork through lawyers and intermediaries — in some cases, applicants cannot even read the material provided — have one hour in a small, florescent-lit office to tell their stories in a convincing enough way in order to be granted asylum. On the other side of the desk is a case officer who listens to story after story, many filled with brutal details. He or she then has about 90 minutes of additional deliberation before deciding the fate of another human being.

(Continued...)



Two weeks later, applicants return to an INS processing window pick up a paper from someone they've never seen. This page tells them their fate.

WELL-FOUNDED FEAR reveals a rich humanity in the situations of all the film's characters. Officers are skeptical of liars, but are articulate and surprisingly concerned with their decisions. Applicants are hopeful, heartbreaking, sometimes slick and too polished, but all may be telling some version of the truth. The film's triumph is that it is able to show and share the dilemma of a nation that has traditionally opened its arms and culture to the influx of immigrants, yet is wary of continuing to do so without checks and balances, so that even a proud tradition of generosity toward refugees becomes suspect.

Central to the film of **WELL-FOUNDED FEAR** are the testimonies of key individuals and their case officers — Dissident Chinese poet Huang Xiang and the very pregnant Farida from Algeria with Gerald; Mr. A. from Nigeria with Martha-Louise; Cristian from Romania with Paul; Gladys from El Salvador with Todd. Details from many other cases show how the process both works and doesn't work.

"Asylum is an institution that clearly turns the spotlight back on us as Americans — how we deal with others in need reveals fundamental truths about ourselves and our institutions, and cuts to the core of our commitment to human rights," says filmmaker Michael Camerini.

Adds Shari Robertson: "At the level of public discourse, the film is about America's relationship to its ideals and to the complexity of living up to an ideal. At a personal level, it's about how easy it is to take on the distancing role of judge, how ephemeral one's own compassion can be, how hard it is to be fair, and how nearly impossible it is to really know the truth."

"As we watch asylum officers struggle to balance sympathy with good sense and tough-mindedness," say the filmmakers, "we may also realize that their decisions mirror the larger choices about our role in the world that America as a whole must make."

WELL-FOUNDED FEAR is made possible by grants from The Ford Foundation, The Spunk Fund Inc., The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Emma Lazarus Fund, and The Soros Documentary Fund of The Open Society Institute, The Overbrook Foundation, The Peter L. Bittenwieser Fund of The Tides Foundation, and The Eastman Kodak "In The Works" Prize for 1999.

(Continued...)

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Michael Camerini

Michael Camerini shoots, directs and produces award-winning films and documentary series, moving across geographical and subject areas as diverse as women's rights and social change in India (*Dadi's Family*, 1974; *Kamala And Raji*, 1990), the life and art of the Mexican painter Diego Rivera (*The Frescoes Of Diego Rivera*, 1987); and the struggle to balance religious and cultural identity with mainstream values in the United States (*Born Again*, 1988; *Becoming The Buddha In L.A.*, 1993).

His approach is notable for a camera technique that is fluid and non-intrusive, and a style of looking that allows people to tell their own stories, whatever the cultural context. As senior producer for *Local Heroes Global Change* (1990), Camerini produced a four-hour documentary series in ten countries on four continents.

Since 1993, he and Shari Robertson have completed *These Girls Are Missing*, *Tashilham* and **WELL-FOUNDED FEAR** through their independent production company in New York.

Shari Robertson

Trained in anthropology and ethnographic film, Shari Robertson began her career in the Southern Highlands rainforest of Papua New Guinea with the tribal Bosavi people, observing the effects of rapid culture change on a small-scale society. Since then, her award-winning films have followed young Khmer Rouge guerrillas across Cambodian minefields (*Inside The Khmer Rouge*, 1990), captured Indian archaeologists fighting to restore the wondrous ancient temple of Angkor Wat (*Temple Under Siege*, 1988) and explored the tragic and comic crossroads of domestic politics and the American drug war in Peru (*We Ain't Winnin'*, 1992).

Her documentary work has appeared on Channel 4 London, the BBC, FR3, WDR, TVE, National Geographic's *Explorer*, PBS, and Ovation. In 1994 she began a two-year film project with Michael Camerini on culture, gender roles and the education of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa (*These Girls Are Missing*, 1996), then completed a film on New York artist Irving Kriesberg's 32-part dyptych (*Tashilham*, 1997) before launching field research for **WELL-FOUNDED FEAR**.

P.O.V.



P.O.V. (a cinema term for “point of view”) is PBS’ critically-acclaimed series of independent nonfiction films. Since its premiere in 1988, **P.O.V.** has evolved into a working “media laboratory” dedicated to presenting bold, diverse voices while exploring the potential of television as a tool to stimulate dialogue and connect people nationwide.

Major funding for **P.O.V.** is provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Florence and John Schumann Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Cordelia Foundation, PBS and public television viewers. Funding for **P.O.V.**’s “Talking Back” is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations including KCET/Los Angeles, WGBH/Boston, and WNET/New York. Cara Mertes is executive producer of **P.O.V.** The series is produced by American Documentary, Inc.; Ellen Schneider is executive director. Ward Chamberlin is chief executive officer.