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*Pressroom for more information and/or downloadable images:
www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos
Program companion website: www.pbs.org/getthefire*



**INDEPENDENT LENS's "GET THE FIRE!
YOUNG MORMON MISSIONARIES
ABROAD" EXPLORES RELIGIOUS
RITE OF PASSAGE**

*—Follow Three Young Mormon Missionaries on
Two-year Journey to Spread Their Faith in Germany—*

**Film by Nancy du Plessis
Premieres Nationally on "Independent Lens,"
ITVS's Acclaimed Series on PBS
December 23, 2003 at 10 P.M.
(check local listings)**

*"The things I'm going to miss the most while I'm on my mission are snow
skiing, skateboarding and dating girls."*

—BRADY FLAMM, 19-YEAR-OLD MORMON MISSIONARY

*"Oh Babylon, Oh Babylon, we bid thee farewell.
We're going to the mountains of Ephraim to dwell.
In desert, on mountain, on land or on sea,
And bring them to Zion, the pure and the free."*

—MORMON HYMN

(San Francisco, CA)—Almost every culture has its own set of rituals and rites of passage for youth to transition into adulthood. For young Mormons it's the mission. At age 19, Mormons (predominately males)



are expected to abandon their normal lifestyle and, usually with their families footing the bill, devote two years to spreading their faith across the United States and throughout the world. Approximately 60,000 young Mormons are sent each year. **GET THE FIRE! Young Mormon Missionaries Abroad**, a film which examines the experiences of three of these young men, will air nationally on the PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Don Cheadle, on Tuesday, December 23rd at 10 P.M. (check local listings).

GET THE FIRE! follows the three from Salt Lake City through two years of training and service in Germany until after their return home. To be successful, missionaries must manage full schedules and limited budgets, working hard with positive attitudes despite repeated rejection. For the entire mission, they must break completely with their past lives: phone calls home are allowed only on Christmas and Mothers' Day. No first names, newspapers, movies, television or radio, and only church-authorized music—in addition to the usual ban on alcohol, coffee, tea and tobacco. What's it like for these young men, boys, really, to be taken from their homes and families and sent to a foreign country—to talk to people about God in a language they barely know?

Filmmaker Nancy du Plessis first noticed the peculiar adolescent boys with short hair flooding the subway car as she rode the Munich *U-bahn* everyday to intensive German classes. They stood out from the other passengers, with their white shirts and dark suits with name badges, nervously talking and joking in American English. Gradually, as she traveled to other places in the world—Lisbon, Belfast, Paris and home in Manhattan—she saw similar pairs of young men. After a young woman missionary explained the program's scope, she decided to make a film about the strict training the missionaries are required to undertake and to find out what their lives are really like during the two years they serve.



GET THE FIRE! begins as Jake Erikson, Brady Flamm and Matt Higbee sit in their living rooms with their families and open letters that reveal where they will be sent on their missions: Munich, Germany. The boys undergo intensive preparation at the Missionary Training Center (shown as a flashback in black and white to underscore the radical change this makes from their pre-mission lives), where they are taught the rules of their new occupations as full-time missionaries for the Mormon Church, known officially as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Leaders admonish a roomful of young people to address each other only as "Elder" and "Sister," to dress conservatively and professionally, to read aloud to each other from the Missionary Handbook every day—and to follow its rules to the letter.



Once in Munich, Elders Erekson, Flamm and Higbee are greeted by the local Mission President and his assistants, then sent to live in different cities with their “companions,” fellow missionaries of the same sex that they are required to keep within eyesight and hearing 24 hours a day. The film follows these pairs through their daily routines, which they must plan and document hour by hour: manning a street exhibit in a snowstorm; singing and talking to passersby; knocking on doors in the evening asking to be let in to talk about the Book of Mormon; and visiting German Mormon families in their homes.

Nancy du Plessis includes five former missionaries, whose comments from their own experiences form a framework for the film. Although they have subsequently left the church, many credit the experience of doing missions as critical to their character development. Adam Bass grew up Mormon, but was sent home three weeks into his mission in Chile because he was gay. Robert Shiveley married a member and had two children, but became unable to reconcile what he believed intellectually to be true with church teachings and subsequently left the church. Dmitri Yatsenko says, “I spent two years knocking on doors and trying to convince people that American Indians were really from Israel and that they practiced Christianity before Columbus and that they wrote in Egyptian. . . I was supposed to be an educated, well-informed person. . . A lot of missionaries have this same feeling.”

Along the way, Elder Erekson becomes engaged over the telephone to the girl he left behind, and we learn Mormon slang for their mission experience: bump day (six months into the mission); hump day (the one-year anniversary when you have less time remaining than you have served); slump day (a year and a half into the mission); and dump day (the day you are sent back home).

Enlivened by the frequent singing of the authorized hymns (in German), with varying degrees of humor, conviction and absurdity, our three missionaries serve out their 22 months abroad and return home as heroes—leaving it for the audience to decide what the young Mormon missionary experience is all about. As Elder Erekson (then 21) puts it, “Returned missionaries. . . all the girls go for returned missionaries, and you can get better jobs.”

MORMON HISTORY

Following the 1830 establishment of the church (now officially called The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but commonly referred to as Mormon), missionaries were dispatched to England, Scandinavia and Germany. For many decades, European converts were provided financial assistance to help them “gather” in Utah, with the result that many American Mormons have ancestors from northern Europe and there are fewer Mormons in those countries than there might have been had they not been encouraged to emigrate.

Salt Lake City, home to Elders Erekson, Flamm and Higbee, is “Zion,” the world capital of Mormonism. Salt Lake City was founded in 1846 by Mormons who made a 1300-mile trek into the Utah Territory to escape persecution in the American Midwest. The city is studded with temples, statues and monuments attesting to the declaration of its founding prophet, Brigham Young: “This is the place.” For a group that claims to have “restored” Christianity to its roots, the capital’s proximity to a second “dead sea,” the Great Salt Lake, provides useful symbolism.

Following decades of hostilities, in the late 1800s, Mormon leaders made a deal with the United States Congress: in exchange for officially renouncing the practice of “plural marriages,” the Utah Territory was granted statehood. Today the church publicly distances itself from the numerous polygamous clans in Utah, yet unofficially, worthy male members are promised more than one wife in heaven. Although Mormons are no longer an absolute majority in Salt Lake City, they continue to politically control not only the state of Utah, but also much of the surrounding “Inter-mountain West.” As a missionary church, Mormon believers are sent throughout the world to spread the message of their faith.

Additional information and/or downloadable photographs from **GET THE FIRE!** are available at www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos.

The program’s interactive companion website at www.pbs.org/getthefire features detailed information about the film, including an interview with the filmmaker, cast and crew bios, as well as links and resources pertaining to the film’s subject matter. The site also features a “talkback” section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film, and more.

GET THE FIRE! Credits

DIRECTOR / PRODUCER / AUTHOR
CAMERA

ADDITIONAL CAMERA

SOUND

FINISHING EDITOR
ROUGH-CUT EDITOR
SOUND MIX
ONLINE EDITOR / GRAPHICS
ORIGINAL MUSIC
HUMANITIES CONSULTANT
CONSULTANT

Nancy du Plessis
Henning Biedermann
Waldemar Hauschild
Kirsten Lilli
Marty Metcalf
Nancy du Plessis
Peter Artner
Joe DeLuca
Sorin Dragoi
Roland Wagner
Mike Mang
Aron Prigg
Zoltan Ravasz
Juergen Schmidt
Max Vornehm
Peter Koehler
Yvonne von Bechtolsheim
Oliver Goertz
Franz J. Fuchs
Mark Suozzo
Klaus Hansen
Michael Amtmann

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

NANCY DU PLESSIS (Producer, Director and Author) Nancy du Plessis' award-winning first documentary, *Future Remembrance: Photography and Image Arts in Ghana* (with Tobias Wendl, 1998) focuses on the realistic painted backdrops used in Ghanaian photo studios. Opening her own production company in 1999, she produced, directed and wrote *If These Walls Could Speak! Mural Painting in Belfast* (2001) which received the "Prix Arts de la rue" in the XXVIe Festival international du film d'art (Paris, 2002).

Nancy studied performing arts (Circle-in-the Square Theatre School, NY and Northwestern University, IL), urban design and journalism (BA, New York University) and theater anthropology (MA, University of Paris) and has performed at theater and poetry festivals, art centers and universities in North America, Europe and Africa. Her articles, poems and performance texts have been published in *World Literature Today*, *Playbill*, *Women in Performance* and *La Tribune internationale de langues vivantes*. *Notes from the Moroccan Journals* and *Art New York*, her most-performed solo performances, were published in a bilingual edition by L'Harmattan (Paris, 1995). She has taught acting at the University of Paris and Münchner Schauspiel Studio and her voice narrates films and guides luxury-car drivers, museum visitors and Swiss telebankers, among others. Since 1985, she has traveled widely from her home in New York performing, teaching and making documentaries.

FEATURED APPEARANCES

Jacob Daniel Erikson	19-YEAR-OLD MISSIONARY
Brady Ellsworth Flamm	19-YEAR-OLD MISSIONARY
Matthew Lee Higbee	19-YEAR-OLD MISSIONARY
Laurence A. and Donna Harker	GERMAN MISSION PRESIDENT AND WIFE
Dimitri Yatsenko	FORMER MORMON MISSIONARY
Andrew J. McGuire	FORMER MORMON MISSIONARY
Robert Shiveley	FORMER MORMON MISSIONARY
Adam Bass	FORMER MORMON MISSIONARY
George Yancey	FORMER MORMON MISSIONARY

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

Independent Lens is a weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about a unique individual, community or moment in history, which prompted Nancy Franklin in *The New Yorker* to write "Watching Independent Lens ... is like going into an independent bookstore—you don't always find what you were looking for but you often find something you didn't even know you wanted." Presented by ITVS, the series is supported by interactive companion websites, and national publicity and community outreach campaigns. Further information about the series is available at www.pbs.org/independent-lens. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS.

ABOUT ITVS

Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web and the weekly series *Independent Lens* on Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. ITVS is a miracle of public policy created by media activists, citizens and politicians seeking to foster plurality and diversity in public television. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have revitalized the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting www.itvs.org. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.



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