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**CONTACT**

Mary Lugo 770/623-8190 lugo@negia.net  
Cara White 843/881-1480 carapub@aol.com  
Randall Cole 415/356-8383 x254 randall\_cole@itvs.org  
Wilson Ling 415/356-8383 x231 wilson\_ling@itvs.org

Pressroom for more information and/or downloadable images:  
[www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos](http://www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos)  
Program companion website: [www.pbs.org/atouchofgreatness](http://www.pbs.org/atouchofgreatness)

**“A TOUCH OF GREATNESS,” A PORTRAIT OF RENEGADE  
EDUCATOR ALBERT CULLUM, TO AIR ON THE PBS SERIES  
INDEPENDENT LENS ON TUESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2005  
(check local listings)**

*—In An Era When Dick, Jane And Discipline Ruled America’s Schools,  
Albert Cullum Allowed Shakespeare, Sophocles And Shaw  
To Reign In His Fifth Grade Classroom—*

*Film By Catherine Gund and Leslie Sullivan  
Premieres Nationally On “Independent Lens”  
ITVS’s Emmy® Award-winning Series On PBS  
Hosted By Susan Sarandon  
Tuesday, January 11, 2005 At 10:00 P.M.  
(check local listings)*

(San Francisco, CA)—**A TOUCH OF GREATNESS** documents the extraordinary work of Albert Cullum, a maverick teacher who embraced creativity, motivation and self-esteem in the classroom through the use of poetry, drama and imaginative play. Directed by Leslie Sullivan, **A TOUCH OF GREATNESS** will air nationally on the Emmy award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Susan Sarandon, on Tuesday, January 11, 2005 at 10:00 P.M. (check local listings).

Regarded by academics as one of the most influential educators of the 1960s and ‘70s, Albert Cullum championed what is by today’s standards an unorthodox educational philosophy built upon the fervent belief that the only way teachers can be successful with children is to speak directly to their hearts and to their instinctive and largely ignored

capacity to quickly understand and identify with the great personalities, ideas and emotions found in classical literature. To that end, Cullum regularly taught his elementary school children literary masterpieces, exposed them to great works of art and engaged them in the events of world history. Without leaving the classroom, his students visited King Tut's tomb, attended joint sessions of the U.S. Congress, operated on bleeding nouns in his "grammar hospital," and clamored to play the timeless roles of Julius Caesar, Lady Macbeth and Hamlet.

In the early 1960s, while Cullum was an elementary school teacher at Midland School in Rye, New York, then unknown filmmaker, Robert Downey (the irreverent director of the independent classic *Putney Swope*) filmed many of Cullum's classroom events. These lush black and white films, with original music created by Tom O'Horgan, capture the work of this radical teacher and the amazing passion for learning that his students embraced. In one exhilarating scene, Cullum, dressed as old King Oberon of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and draped in a long black cape topped with a crown, runs outdoors through a sparkling wintry forest with a group of children scampering riotously in delight behind him. In a magical rite, Cullum gingerly places marshmallows in the open, eager mouths of his five-year-old students in order to make them as light as fairies. In another segment, Joan of Arc pulls out her sword, leads her army to Orléans and meets her death burning at the stake. Shot with stunning extreme close-ups, the footage recalls Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 masterpiece. However, Cullum's astonishingly brave Saint Joan is a fifth grade girl from Westchester. As Cullum, who passed away soon after the film was completed in 2003, says, "Every child should have the chance to play the part of St. Joan before the age of twelve, because the older you get, the more difficult it is to hear the voices of St. Margaret and St. Catherine calling you."

In other scenes, nine and ten-year-old students passionately recite soliloquies from Shakespeare's *Richard III*, hurl themselves from the make-believe walls of Troy and "swim" down the chalk borders of the Mississippi River marked on the playground pavement.

This inspiring, joyous film interweaves footage from these early films, rare television broadcasts and a treasure trove of archival photographs with lively, provocative comments from former students as they speak about how these experiences resonate in their lives today. Among them are a public service lawyer who taught in a Bronx high school, an emergency room doctor practicing in a Chicago hospital, a psychodramatist, a writer, a film festival director, an Emmy Award-winning actress, and a AME minister working in a small North Carolina community.

A trailblazer in American education, Albert Cullum ignited the imagination of his young students, and through his passionate use of poetry and drama, built their self-confidence and inspired them to new heights of originality and joy. What emerges in this film is a portrait of lives transformed by this maverick teacher who enabled children to embrace the "heroic deed" and through the power of language find their own inner greatness.

The program's interactive companion website [www.pbs.org/atouchofgreatness](http://www.pbs.org/atouchofgreatness) features detailed information about the film, including an interview with the filmmaker, links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter, and a "talkback" section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film and more.

### **About Albert Cullum**

Albert Cullum believed in the classroom as a place where joy, excitement and productivity are inextricably linked. **A TOUCH OF GREATNESS** affirms that mystery, magic and grandeur can create an atmosphere for effective learning that traditional lesson plans can never match. Cullum believed that elementary school children are open to greatness, for at such a young age they gravitate to profound ideas. Children are interested in revolutions and heroic deeds, the joys and sufferings of poets, and plays and books full of intrigue. In his teaching, Cullum proved that new doors to learning can be opened if educators transcend the limited models which currently dominate their understanding of artistic and intellectual experience. "Very early on," he said, "children understand the heroic deed, the heroic aspect of Shakespeare's characters... the feathered cap and the wooden sword that they have, that we as adults have lost."

Cullum's varied career as an educator included teaching at St. Luke's School in Greenwich Village in the 1940s and at Midland School in Rye, New York from 1956-66. From there, Cullum went on to become a professor of education at Boston University and Stonehill College, a liberal arts college outside of Boston. He trained future teachers for more than 30 years. After teaching his final class for the semester in May 2003, his health began to fail and he died two months later in July 2003.

Cullum was the author of numerous books including the best-selling *The Geranium On The Windowsill Just Died But Teacher You Went Right On* (which sold over half a million copies), *Shake Hands With Shakespeare*, *Greek Tears and Roman Laughter*, *You Think Just Because You're Big You're Right* and *Push Back The Desks* (considered a classic in the field of education).

### **About the Filmmakers**

#### **Leslie Sullivan (Director)**

Leslie Sullivan first met Albert Cullum while she was studying to be a teacher at Stonehill College in Massachusetts. Meeting him was a life-changing experience for her because he radically altered her view of education. Although he continued to be a mentor and role model, she did not set out to make a film which treats Cullum in a sentimental way. Rather, the film is an exploration of creativity in the classroom, looking at ways in which one teacher created an environment where academic success and self-esteem flourished without risking any one student's participation.

Sullivan has been the executive producer for two independent films, *The Other Olympians* and *Because the Dawn*. Funded by Canon, *The Other Olympians* focuses on physically disabled athletes and gained critical acclaim through its screening on PBS in 1989. *Because the Dawn* was shown at the Berlin and Toronto Film Festivals in 1988

and has become a cult favorite at independent art house theaters. From 1991 until 2001, she served as the director of development for Poets House, a national literary center and poetry archive founded by U.S. Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz. **A TOUCH OF GREATNESS** is her directorial debut.

### **Catherine Gund (Producer)**

Catherine Gund, the founder of Aubin Pictures, is an award-winning film/videomaker, writer and organizer. Her media work focuses on the radical right, race relations, art and culture, HIV/AIDS, reproductive rights, the concept of democracy, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues and has screened around the world in festivals, on public and cable television, at community-based organizations, universities, and museums. Her productions include **A TOUCH OF GREATNESS**, *Making Grace*, *On Hostile Ground*, *Hallelujah! Ron Athey: A Story of Deliverance*, *When Democracy Works*, *Positive: Life with HIV*, *Sacred Lies Civil Truths*, *Not Just Passing Through*, *Among Good Christian Peoples* and *Keep Your Laws Off My Body*, as well as work with the collectives DIVA TV (co-founder) and Paper Tiger Television. She was the founding director of BENT TV, the video workshop at the Hetrick-Martin Institute for queer youth.

### **About *Independent Lens***

*Independent Lens* is an Emmy Award-winning weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. Hosted by Susan Sarandon, 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 to write in *The New Yorker*: “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 [pbs.org/independentlens](http://pbs.org/independentlens).

*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 and the National Endowment for the Arts.

### **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 Emmy Award-winning 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 [itvs.org](http://itvs.org). ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.

## **About PBS**

PBS is a private, nonprofit media enterprise that serves the nation's 349 public noncommercial television stations, reaching nearly 90 million people each week through on-air and online content. Bringing diverse viewpoints to television and the Internet, PBS provides high-quality documentary and dramatic entertainment, and consistently dominates the most prestigious award competitions. PBS is the leading provider of educational materials for K-12 teachers, and offers a broad array of educational services for adult learners. PBS' premier kids' TV programming and Web site, PBS KIDS Online ([pbskids.org](http://pbskids.org)), continue to be parents' and teachers' most trusted learning environments for children. More information about PBS is available at [pbs.org](http://pbs.org), one of the leading dot-org Web sites on the Internet, averaging more than 30 million unique visits and 380 million page views per month in 2004. PBS is headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia.

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