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INDEPENDENT LENS ON PBS TAKES AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT COMPETITIVE TOP COLLEGE ADMISSIONS IN DEBBIE LUM'S ACCLAIMED DOCUMENTARY "TRY HARDER!" PREMIERING MAY 2, 2022

The Documentary Goes Inside a Prestigious Public High School with a Majority Asian American Student Body, where High Achieving Seniors Share Hope and Heartbreak of Getting into a Top University

(San Francisco, CA) December 20, 2021 — At Lowell High School, the top public high school in San Francisco, college admission is at its most competitive within its high achieving, city-wide student body—nearly 70 percent Asian American—as they work tirelessly to get into their dream schools. With humor and heart, “Try Harder!” from acclaimed filmmaker Debbie Lum, pulls back the curtain on the reality of the college application process and the intersection of class, race, and opportunity through the eyes of high school seniors applying to America’s top schools.

Lauded as an “endearing, alarming doc” by *Variety* and “impossible to resist” by *Indiewire*, “Try Harder!” will make its broadcast debut on PBS’s INDEPENDENT LENS on May 2, 2022, at 10:00 p.m. ET ([check local listings](#)). The film will also be available to stream on the PBS Video app.

Inside the hallways and classrooms of Lowell High, Lum follows seniors as the pressure intensifies to impress admissions officers at prestigious universities, like Stanford and Harvard, with every aspect of their application—from their SAT scores and GPAs to their extracurricular activities and even down to their racial identities. Starting from the moment students apply to college to the moment they receive the news if they got in, Lum captures a year in the life of these high schoolers, one considered the most pivotal in determining their futures.

The film encompasses perspectives of students from all walks of life at Lowell: an outgoing aspiring surgeon and son of Taiwanese and Chinese immigrants who spends his time dancing between classes; the daughter of Chinese immigrants who’s both captain of the tennis team and editor of the school newspaper; and an aspiring writer who, as a biracial African American at Lowell, is in the minority. The students proudly own their identities as “nerds” and tell their stories with candor and humor, despite the weighty and immense stress of the admissions process.

Alongside the Lowell students, Lum spotlights parents who take different approaches toward their children’s career paths and identities outside of academics, and teachers who just want the best



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for their students. The film, ultimately, is a portrait of young adults in the most diverse American generation ever, as they navigate the external and internal pressures of growing up and figuring out their futures.

“I’ve dedicated my filmmaking career to telling Asian American stories, and being able to visit and capture the essence of Lowell High School—where being Asian American is not only the norm, but celebrated—became crucial,” said director Debbie Lum. “Similarly, I wanted to hand the mic over to the students themselves, whose voices often get drowned out, in all the headline-grabbing reports on the insanity of the college admissions process, and the stereotype of the Asian American identity as it relates to academia. In meeting with the students at Lowell High, I sensed a deep yearning to break out of the model minority pigeonhole, and connected with a group of unique and dynamic achievers.”

“Debbie Lum returns to INDEPENDENT LENS through ITVS’s Diversity Development Fund, created to support authentic stories like ‘Try Harder!’” said Lois Vossen, Executive Producer. “Set in San Francisco’s iconic Lowell High School, it’s a wholehearted, informed portrait, especially of Asian American students, as they embark on a journey toward their—and their parents’—version of The American Dream. We’re honored to welcome Debbie back, after her earlier success with ‘Seeking Asian Female,’ with her new film about a topic that is top of mind for all generations.”

A staple on the 2021 film festival circuit, “Try Harder!” made its world premiere as an official selection at the Sundance Film Festival, and continued as official selections at AFI Docs, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, and CAAMFest, among many others. In addition, the film was nominated for a Cinema Eye Honors Audience Choice Prize and a Film Independent Spirit “Truer Than Fiction” Award.

Visit [pbs.org/try-harder](https://www.pbs.org/try-harder) on INDEPENDENT LENS for more information about the film.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS:

Debbie Lum (Producer/Director)

Debbie Lum explores cultural stereotypes in “Seeking Asian Female” (SXSW) and “My Tiger Mom” (in development). She made two short docs for Wayne Wang about his films “Chan Is Missing” and “Dim Sum,” co-produced and edited “Kelly Loves Tony” (PBS’s POV), and edited “To You Sweetheart, Aloha” and the Emmy-winning “a.k.a. Don Bonus” (POV). Lum wrote and directed fictional films “Chinese Beauty, A Great Deal!” and “One April Morning.”

CREDITS:

Director

Debbie Lum



Producers

Debbie Lum
Lou Nakasako
Nico Opper

Executive Producers

Lois Vossen
Sally Jo Fifer
Tony Hsieh
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Bryn Mooser
Naja Pham Lockwood
Geralyn Dreyfous
Yun-Fang Juan
Tracy Chou
Jean Tsien

About INDEPENDENT LENS:

INDEPENDENT LENS is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS, Monday nights at 10:00 p.m. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, Acton Family Giving, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more, visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation: facebook.com/independentlens and on Twitter @IndependentLens.

About ITVS

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for over 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films and then airs them for free on PBS via our weekly series, INDEPENDENT LENS, as well as on other PBS series and through our digital platform, OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, The National Endowment for the Humanities: American Rescue Plan, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Wyncote Foundation. For more information, visit itvs.org

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