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ACTIVIST RUBY DUNCAN PROFILED IN DOCUMENTARY “STORMING CAESARS PALACE” SET TO PREMIERE ON PBS’S INDEPENDENT LENS ON MARCH 20, 2023

January 23, 2023

Based on the Groundbreaking Book of the Same Name, the Film Chronicles the Iconic Las Vegas Activist Who Kickstarted a Grassroots Movement That Fought for a Basic Income Guarantee for Families

(San Francisco, CA) January 23, 2022 — “Storming Caesars Palace” chronicles the extraordinary story of Ruby Duncan who went from a boisterous protestor to a strategic organizer to a White House advisor. As she led a grassroots movement that fought for basic income guarantee for families, challenging presidents, and the Las Vegas mob, everyday Americans had to rethink their notions of the “welfare queen”—a derogatory stereotype of women who allegedly misuse or collect excess public assistance through fraud or manipulation.

The film will make its television debut on PBS’s Emmy Award-winning documentary anthology series INDEPENDENT LENS on March 20, 2023, at 10:00 p.m. ET (check local listings). “Storming Caesars Palace” will also be available to stream on the PBS app.

Through interviews with Duncan, her family, and key players in the movement such as Gloria Steinem, filmmaker Hazel Gurland-Pooler weaves together a trove of archival footage to tell the story of the brave fight for justice, dignity, an adequate income, and democratic participation for low-income mothers.

Based on the groundbreaking book by Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*, the

documentary spotlights an unsung leader and movement, whose stand for America's principles of justice, inclusion, and opportunity for all continues to shape the calls for economic justice that ring today.

"When I began filming with Ruby Duncan 15 years ago, her story of courage and activism truly inspired me," said director Hazel Gurland-Pooler. "As an adoptee, Ruby's determination to take care of her children—even mobilizing a grassroots anti-poverty movement to provide for all the children in her community—proves how transformative 'Mother Power' can be. Low-income mothers are often ridiculed in our society and stereotyped in the media, but I knew PBS was the perfect place to shift the narrative so that the mothers of the welfare rights movement could be recognized as visionary political strategists, standing up for America's principles of justice, opportunity, and democracy for all. INDEPENDENT LENS's no barrier to entry—that everyone can see this film for free—allows access to the widest audience to learn about how an ordinary group of women led one of the most extraordinary Black feminist movements in U.S. history, providing a path to an equitable future."

After losing her job as a hotel worker in Las Vegas due to a workplace accident, Duncan went on welfare, and discovered firsthand the stigma and harassment by an overzealous welfare department.

In response, Duncan joined a welfare rights group, alongside Mary Wesley and Alversa Beals, to fight for adequate income, dignity, and justice. They, along with low-income mothers across the country, formed the National Welfare Rights Organization with the support of George Wiley and Frances Fox Piven. Together, they introduced a guaranteed adequate income campaign which, with feminist Gloria Steinem at their side, became part of the Democratic platform in 1972.

When the Las Vegas mothers were slashed from the welfare rolls, they launched "Operation Nevada," and led an army 1,500 strong—including Ralph Abernathy and Jane Fonda—down the Las Vegas Strip, taking on the Vegas mob, and storming into Caesars Palace, shutting it down.

Later, Duncan formed Operation Life, one of the first women-led community corporations in the nation, bringing medical services and meaningful jobs to her Westside neighborhood. With the success of the movement, Duncan became influential in Washington, eventually leading to her appointment to President Carter's Council on Economic Opportunity in 1979.

The film had its world premiere as the opening night film at the BlackStar Film Festival in Philadelphia, August 2022. At the festival, the film won the Shine Award for a first-time filmmaker and was nominated for Best Feature Documentary. “Storming Caesars Palace” received Open Call funding from ITVS, as well as funding from the Diversity Development Fund.

Visit the [“Storming Caesars Palace”](#) page on INDEPENDENT LENS to learn more about the film.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER:

Hazel Gurland-Pooler, Director

Hazel Gurland-Pooler is a Colombian-born, NYC-based director/producer and documentary filmmaker. She directed 10 episodes of PBS’s FINDING YOUR ROOTS WITH HENRY LOUIS GATES JR. and co-produced the 6-hour THE AFRICAN AMERICANS: MANY RIVERS TO CROSS, also with Gates Jr., which won Emmy, Peabody, duPont-Columbia, and NAACP Image awards.

Nazenet Habtezhgi, Producer

A journalist-turned-filmmaker, Nazenet has produced highly acclaimed documentaries for HBO and PBS, including *The Secret of Tuxedo Park*, *The Great War* and *The Weight of the Nation*. Prior to working in documentary film, she launched and executive produced Essence Magazine’s video platform with an interactive web series and subsequent TV One special. She received her B.A. in Journalism from the University of Oklahoma.

[Storming Caesars Palace](#) is a co-production of Gurland Documentaries, LLC, Independent Television Service (ITVS), and Black Public Media (BPM) in association with Firelight Media, with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

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Visit the INDEPENDENT LENS [website](#) for more information.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

INDEPENDENT LENS is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series, airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 p.m. ET. 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, Action 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 on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram at @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, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and Wyncote Foundation. For more information, visit itvs.org.

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