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Contacts:

Cynthia López, 212-989-7425, clopez@pov.org, 646-729-4748 (cell)

Cathy Lehrfeld, 212-989-7425, clehrfeld@pov.org

Neyda Martinez, 212-989-7425, neyda@pov.org

P.O.V. online pressroom: www.pbs.org/pov/pressroom

American Son Rediscovered Stepfather's Past as South African Freedom Fighter In P.O.V.'s "Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela," Sept. 19 on PBS

Filmmaker Finds a Personal Legacy in the Exile and Struggle of a Generation
Of Black South Africans, and History in Danger of Being Lost

In the minds of many, the struggle of black South Africans for majority rule is framed by the massacre of rebellious youths in the streets of Soweto and by Nelson Mandela's towering dignity as he emerged from prison to lead his people to freedom. Less well known is the experience of a generation of young men who left their country clandestinely to build the African National Congress (ANC) and spread its liberation message in places as far-flung as Dar-Es-Salaam, Belgrade, London, Havana and New York. Left to their own devices, hunted by the Afrikaner regime (and considered terrorists by the U.S. government), lacking legal status and often socially isolated, these foot soldiers of the anti-apartheid cause forged ahead as one of the century's great freedom struggles stretched into 30 years of brutal conflict.

Bronx-born filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris knew more than most about this history. His stepfather, Benjamin Pule Leinaeng, or Lee as everyone called him, had been among the first wave of exiles to leave South Africa in 1960. Lee dedicated his life to becoming a broadcast journalist in service of South African liberation, ultimately going to work for the United Nations' anti-apartheid office; Harris' mother, Rudean, an American educator, was also active in the struggle. Harris had even spent part of his childhood in Dar-Es-Salaam. But none of this prepared him for what he experienced at Lee's funeral in Bloemfontein in the new South Africa in 2000.

Thomas Allen Harris' **Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela** has its national broadcast premiere **Tuesday, Sept. 19, 2006** at 10 p.m., as part of the 19th season of public television's groundbreaking P.O.V. series. (Check local listings.) American television's longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television's premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films.

Lee's funeral in January 2000 was the inspiration for **Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela**. Harris was attending as much out of duty as anything else. Though Lee had raised Harris and his younger brother with all due care, Harris had never really accepted Lee as his father. Lee had already been in exile for over 15 years—spending time in Tanganyika and the former East Germany before coming to the U.S. on a journalism scholarship—when he married Harris' mother in New York in 1976. She was a chemistry professor at Bronx Community College who had taught in Africa. "Lee thought of you as his children and would refer to you as his sons," Rudean reminds the filmmaker. "He would never say his stepsons."

Harris felt respect and romantic sympathy for Lee's struggle, but he'd had trouble with the older man's bouts of depression and drinking, and had often rebelled against Lee's authority. Moreover, lingering distrust from his biological father's abandonment had left Harris instinctively distant.

In Bloemfontein, however, Harris was confronted with an image of Lee dramatically different from that of the moody, foreign stepfather. He was especially affected by the recollections of two of Lee's associates, Moses Medupe (Dups) and Mochubela Seekoe (Wesi), who were among the group of 12 students, including Lee, who left Bloemfontein in 1960. Dups and Wesi spoke fondly of Lee as a young man and what life was like for blacks in Bloemfontein under apartheid and during the long years of exile. The brave and cheerful youth setting out to battle apartheid, and the comrade who never wavered in that struggle even as it wore him down, was recalled by family and friends who gathered at the funeral to eulogize Lee. They all told stories of the ANC's beginnings in Bloemfontein, in the heart of Afrikaner country, and of the terrible repressions that drove the organization underground and to establishing centers of resistance outside the country.

These were stories Harris had heard as a child, but now, fleshed out and told by people for whom they'd been life-and-death struggles, they took on new depth and urgency. Harris also felt a radically different sense of his "stepfather" in the way he was greeted without reserve as Lee's eldest son, and as the heir to Lee's legacy of honesty and commitment to his people. He could even see it the name of the local library—the B.P. Leinaeng Library.

The group of 12 Bloemfontein students—they all considered themselves disciples of Mandela (then president of the ANC) —were reacting to new "Bantu laws," that prohibited all but vocational education for black South Africans, when they burned their pass cards in 1960. Their act of defiance by the 12 effectively rendered them stateless criminals, and sealed their commitment to seek the weapons to battle apartheid, above all education, outside the country. With reckless idealism, they simply set out north on foot, across the harsh African bush, in a bootstrap attempt to establish the ANC abroad. This leads Harris to the visual inspiration for **Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela**—a photograph he'd grown up with. It's an old black & white photo of the "Bloemfontein 12" when they arrived in Tanganika, five months after they left Bloemfontein). Harris realized the various fates of the 12, with some of the survivors among them attending Lee's funeral, provided a remarkable historical window on the ANC's struggle in exile.

Harris also talks to another of the surviving 12, Percy Mokonopi, who joined the military wing of the ANC and became a general in the new South African police after liberation. They help Harris recover the varying histories of the 12—some of whom died in mysterious circumstances—and especially Lee's important work that included helping establish the ANC Mission to the United Nations in the 1980s. Isabella Winkie Direcko, a tireless educator and community activist (and member of Parliament in the new South Africa), who taught the boys at Bantu High School and encouraged their desire to resist apartheid, adds her insight on the unforgiving choices faced by the "Sharpeville generation," and the history they ultimately made out of those choices. Harris' mother and Lee's widow, Rudean Leinaeng (who served as a producer on this film), rounds out Lee's story from her uniquely entwined perspectives of wife, mother and anti-apartheid activist in her own right.

Harris uses dramatic re-enactments, performed by Bloemfontein acting students, to tell the early story of the 12 and their escape from South Africa. While South Africa today is definitely post-apartheid, it is also post-anti-apartheid. The country's population is overwhelmingly young, and the liberation struggle is more often a history lesson than living memory. Harris' use of Bloemfontein youth to recreate a history they only partly knew paralleled his own reclamation of a past that had framed his childhood.

Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela is Harris' posthumous embrace of the father who raised him. By recovering Lee's history, and the history of the 12 and the generation they represented, Harris also pays homage to the legacy of an extraordinary struggle for justice in the face of overwhelming odds, that isn't always fully remembered, even in South Africa.

“When Lee’s comrades shared with me their struggles with alienation, depression and homesickness, I gained an appreciation for their strength and stamina and felt tremendous remorse for rejecting Lee as my father,” says director/producer Harris. “I wanted to reconnect with him by way of the men who were bonded to him by a common political, historical and emotional journey. It was only in the process of making this film that I realized just how much I was his son.”

Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela is a co-production of the Independent Television Service (ITVS), in association with American Documentary | P.O.V. and the National Black Programming Consortium.

About the filmmaker:

Thomas Allen Harris

Producer/Director/Writer

Born in the Bronx and raised in New York City and Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, Thomas Allen Harris is a graduate of Harvard College with a degree in Biology. His critically acclaimed documentary, **É Minha Cara/That’s My Face** (2001), premiered at the Toronto, Sundance and Tribeca Film Festivals and won seven international awards, including the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury of Christian Churches at the 2002 Berlin International Film Festival. A recipient of Guggenheim, Rockefeller, CPB/PBS Producers and Sundance Directors Fellowships, Harris is a former tenured Associate Professor of Media Arts at the University of California, San Diego. He worked as a producer for public television in New York, prior to founding Chimpanzee Productions, Inc. Chimpanzee Productions is currently developing new projects, including a sex comedy, **On the DL**, and a documentary series, **Reflections in Black: Black Photographers from 1840 to the Present**. **Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela** is Harris’ third film to make its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival.

Credits:

Producer/Director/Writer:	Thomas Allen Harris
Co-Executive Producer	St. Clair Bourne
Producers:	Rudean Leinaeng, Woo Jung Cho, Don Perry
Cinematographers:	Jonathan Kovel, David Forbes
Editors:	Sam Pollard, Sabine Hoffman
Associate Editor:	Gabriella Garcia
Music Composer:	Vernon Reid

Running Time: 86:46

Awards & Festivals:

- U.S. Premiere, Los Angeles Pan African Film Festival, 2005, *Best Documentary Award*
- World Premiere, Toronto International Film Festival, 2005
- African Premiere, Cape Town World Cinema Festival, 2005
- Bloemfontein Premiere, Macufe, 2005
- Nashville Film Festival, 2005
- San Francisco International Film Festival, 2006
- Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, Durham, N.C., 2006
- Santa Cruz Film Festival, California, 2006
- Santa Fe Pan-African Film Festival, 2006
- Maryland Film Festival, 2006
- Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival, Greece, 2006
- Independent Spirit “Truer Than Fiction” Award Nomination, 2006



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and in its 19th season on PBS, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running series on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through October, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought nearly 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. It also produces a Web site for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through community-based and educational applications, focusing on involving viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov houses our unique *Talking Back* feature, filmmaker interviews and viewer resources, and information on the P.O.V. archives as well as myriad special sites for previous P.O.V. broadcasts.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films. *Youth Views*, P.O.V.'s youth engagement initiative, expands these efforts by working directly with youth service organizations.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Educational Foundation of America, the Ford Foundation, PBS and public television viewers. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television station including KCET/Los Angeles, WGBH/Boston, and WNET/New York.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.americandocumentary.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, on line and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback, to educational opportunities and community participation. Cara Mertes is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

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