P.O.V.’s “Arctic Son” Measures the Distance Between Father and Son, Tradition and Modernity, Tuesday, Aug. 21 on PBS

In the tiny village of Old Crow, 80 miles north of the Arctic Circle, a father and his son are reunited after almost 25 years apart. They share a name and a bloodline, but the worlds they know and the lifestyles they lead are as different as their respective hometown climates. Stanley Njootli Sr. is a hunter, a man of the land steeped in native traditions. Stanley Jr., who has been raised by his mother in Washington State, immerses himself in hip-hop music and video games, and is drifting deeper into drugs and alcohol. After a lifetime apart, the two meet again in the raw, quiet beauty of the Canadian Yukon.

Andrew Walton’s Arctic Son has its national premiere on Tuesday, Aug. 21, 2007 at 10 p.m. on PBS, as part of the 20th anniversary 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.

In Old Crow, there are no strip malls, restaurants, bars, movie theaters or even roads in or out. What Old Crow does have plenty of is natural beauty, a punishing climate and isolation. As Stan Sr. says, “there are two kinds of people in Old Crow, those who want to be here and those who can’t afford to live anywhere else.” He is one of the former. After youthful experiences with urban modernity “down south,” which included his own bouts with alcohol and drugs, he returned to Old Crow. This tiny village, population 250, would enable him to live the traditional fishing and hunting life of his First Nations’ Gwitchin people, the “good life” he had known as a child. Now he’s hoping to instill these same traditions in his adult son to help give him a new direction and repair the distant relationship that has existed between the two for so many years.

As evocatively portrayed in Arctic Son, Stanley Sr. believes that connecting with the land and ways of his ancestors will give his son identity and a sense of purpose. Stan Jr. goes along, but only begrudgingly. And the father realizes his son isn’t the only new thing in Old Crow. The Internet and satellite television — and the desires they inspire in young people everywhere —increasingly challenge long-standing traditions.
Arctic Son allows the two men to tell their own stories. The father is soft-spoken and philosophical, convinced that the rigors of living close to the natural world instill self-discipline and a respect for knowledge. He makes his way by daily and seasonal rounds of work that would be crushing — and a life that would be austere — to most of us, but which leave him invigorated and at peace. Although he wasn't there for most of his son’s upbringing, he wants to pass on the ancestral wisdom that, perhaps, saved his own life.

Despite a flair for art, Jr. is a self-described “black sheep” who would rather party than be serious about anything, even his drawing. He pretends he doesn’t care about his father’s absence, and he views going to Old Crow with an amused cynicism. Yet there’s also the sense that he wants to be rescued — above all by the father he’s lacked till now.

What follows in Arctic Son depended on a remarkably candid relationship between filmmakers and subjects. The film captures a halting, moving reunion, one that includes the conflicts between Native and Western ways, between tradition and modern life, old and young, nature and technology. Stanley Sr. tries to impart the knowledge needed to live in Old Crow — how to shoot a gun, hunt caribou, skin a rabbit, make a fire, catch a fish. Jr. goes along reluctantly, even petulantly at first, frustrated and cutting a forlorn figure in a wilderness he is clearly unprepared for. Although Old Crow is a “dry town,” he finds some homebrew, falls in with the wrong crowd and begins reverting to his old ways.

But gradually something begins to change in Jr.’s attitude. His father’s patience and abiding faith, the grandeur of the land and Jr.’s own curiosity begin to take him in. He starts showing youthful glee in conquering some of the survival tasks he has been handed, and the inspirations of a new landscape and culture begin to show up in his art. His respect for his father’s outlook and abilities grows, and their relationship warms. Though neither man can quite let his guard down, Stan Jr. goes from treating Stanley Sr., as a virtual stranger to accepting him as a father he wants to know.

Arctic Son, of course, is a documentary and not Hollywood fiction. There comes a time for Jr. to return to Seattle where all he has learned “up north” loses clarity in a world of lights, asphalt and social pressures. What, after all, does skinning a rabbit have to do with the temptations of drugs and alcohol? Back in Old Crow, the father is left to ponder not only his son’s struggles, but the fact that retreating to this place may no longer hold off the distractions and temptations that in many ways underlie his son’s conflicts.

As Jr. struggles to decide where he belongs and what he values, it becomes clear that the Stanleys’ story is a metaphor for larger issues of identity, choice, change, redemption and ties that bind to us all to family and place.

“Arctic Son is the result of 10 years of hard work and was inspired by my chance meeting with a former Gwitchin Chief named Johnny Abel,” says director Walton. “Johnny felt that a film about the Gwitchin lifestyle could be a valuable tool in preserving the culture. I didn’t plan to tell this story through a father and son who had been estranged for most of their lives, but this story emerged as one of the strongest cultural lessons I witnessed.

“That is the nature of vérité filmmaking,” Walton continues. “You begin with an idea, and the final film is defined by the characters as their lives unfold before the camera.”

Arctic Son is a production of New York-based Arts Engine, Inc./Big Mouth Films.
About the filmmaker:

Andrew Walton
Director
Since beginning his career in 1997 by directing a project for MTV, Andrew Walton has avidly pursued a humanistic style of storytelling using evocative portraiture and stylized realism. He has directed commercials, short films and Internet content for some of the world's top ad agencies and brands – The Nature Conservancy, McDonald's, Ford Motor Company, Kimberly Clark, Teach for America, Eli Lilly, and The United Way among others. Arctic Son is his first documentary feature. Walton grew up in Grosse Pointe, Mich., where he began experimenting with film and video cameras at a young age. He attended the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and lives in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Credits:
Director: Andrew Walton
Producers: Dallas Brennan Rexer and Elizabeth Mandel
Cinematographers: Jonathan Furmanski and Jeff Stonehouse
Editor: Bryan Gunnar Cole
Original Score: Michael Rohatyn
Running Time: 86:46

Awards & Festivals:

- Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, Durham, N.C., 2006 -- World Premiere
- Hot Docs Film Festival, Toronto, 2006 – Canadian Premiere
- Independents Night presented by IFP & the Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, 2006
- Independent Film Festival of Boston, 2006
- Seattle International Film Festival, 2006
- Newport International Film Festival, 2006
- Munich Filmfest, 2006
- National Geographic's All Roads Film Festival, Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; Santa Fe, 2006
- Tiburon International Film Festival, Tiburon, Calif., 2007
- Ashland Independent Film Festival, Ashland, Ore., 2007

Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and celebrating its 20th season on PBS in 2007, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through September, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought more than 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 at www.pbs.org/pov.

P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)
P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces special features for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video, and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. P.O.V. Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, P.O.V.'s Borders. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov houses Talking Back, where viewers can comment on P.O.V. programs, engage in dialogue and link to further resources and information. The P.O.V. Web site and P.O.V. archives, including special sites from previous broadcasts, form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.
**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 original 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 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 Ford Foundation, the Educational Foundation of America, PBS and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.’s *Diverse Voices Project* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with additional support from JPMorgan Chase Foundation, the official sponsor of P.O.V.’s 20th Anniversary Campaign. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston, and Thirteen/NET New York.

**American Documentary, Inc.** ([www.americandocumentary.org](http://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, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

**TAPE REQUESTS:** Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.