“William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe” Examines the Life of the Radical Lawyer From a Unique Angle; Documentary Kicks Off POV's Regular Season Tuesday, June 22, 2010, on PBS

The Daughters Who Idolized and Then Despaired of Stubborn Defense Attorney Rediscover the Man The New York Times Called “The Most Hated and Most Loved Lawyer in America”

A Co-production of ITVS

“A fascinating portrait. . . . The film’s point is clear. . . . The bravest lawyer isn’t the one who takes on the clients that allow him to feel good about himself. It’s the one who takes on the clients that give us nightmares.” – Michael O’Sullivan, The Washington Post

When they were small, Emily Kunstler and Sarah Kunstler idolized their father, who was famous for having championed the underdogs in some of the most important civil rights and anti-war cases of that contentious era known as the 1960s. By the time they were born in the late 1970s, however, those cases were behind William Kunstler, who was almost 60. As the sisters grew into their teens, they were embarrassed and then distressed when their father continued to represent some of the most reviled defendants in America — now accused terrorists, rapists and mobsters.

The man who had marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., and who had defended the Chicago 8 anti-war protestors, Native American activists at Wounded Knee and prisoners caught up in the Attica prison rebellion was now seen kissing the cheek of a Mafia client and defending an Islamic fundamentalist charged with assassinating a rabbi, terrorists accused of bombing the World Trade Center and a teenager charged in a near-fatal gang rape. The sisters remember the shock of disenchantment they felt. Disturbing the Universe is Emily Kunstler and Sarah Kunstler’s attempt to reconcile the heroic movement lawyer from the past with the father they knew.

Emily Kunstler and Sarah Kunstler’s William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe, an award winner at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, has its American broadcast premiere on Tuesday, June 22, 2010, at 10 p.m. on PBS, kicking off the regular season of POV (Point of View). POV continues on Tuesdays through Sept. 21 and concludes with a fall 2010 special. (Check local listings.) American television’s longest-running independent documentary series, POV is the recipient of a Special Emmy for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking as well as the International Documentary Association’s 2009 IDA Award for Continuing Series.

Using home movies, archival news footage, narration by Emily Kunstler and the memories of many of those who knew or worked with William Kunstler, who died in 1995 at age 76, the sisters retrace their father’s path from middle-class family man to acclaimed movement lawyer to a man labeled “the most hated and most loved lawyer in America” by The New York Times. Included in the film are interviews with American Indian Movement founders Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt; poet, priest and peace activist Daniel Berrigan; Margaret Ratner Kunstler, the filmmakers’ mother and an
accomplished civil rights attorney; Karin Kunstler Goldman, Kunstler’s oldest daughter from his first marriage and an assistant attorney general in New York; Leonard Weinglass, another movement lawyer and co-counsel with Kunstler at the Chicago trial; Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party co-founder and Chicago 8 defendant who was ordered bound and gagged in the courtroom when he tried to defend himself; and Jean Fritz, a juror in the Chicago 8 trial.

**Disturbing the Universe** reveals the young, Jewish suburban lawyer who practiced bread-and-butter law with his brother from 1946 to the early 1960s while dreaming of doing more exciting things. He first ventured into civil rights with a housing discrimination suit on behalf of an African-American couple in his own community in New York’s Westchester County, which he won. (Interestingly, almost 50 years later Paul and Orial Redd, who appear in the film, are still the only blacks in their housing complex.) The real siren call of Kunstler’s future came in 1961, when the American Civil Liberties Union asked him to go to Jackson, Miss. to defend the Freedom Riders, who were taking buses through the South challenging segregation laws in transportation and public accommodations — and who were regularly beaten and arrested by police and then tried and convicted in the legal system.

The experience transformed Kunstler. In his own words, he was “reborn into a man I liked better, one who contributed to society and tried to make a difference.” By 1966, he had founded the Center for Constitutional Rights with attorneys Ben Smith, Arthur Kinoy and Morton Stavis. After that, the sensational cases came as fast as the events that defined the times.

From 1968 through 1974, Kunstler defended the Catonsville 9, including priests and brothers Daniel and Philip Berrigan, and other religious activists who burned draft files to protest the Vietnam War; served as lead counsel in the trial of the Chicago 8, who were charged with inciting riots at the 1968 Democratic National Convention; tried to negotiate a peaceful end to the Attica prison takeover at the request of the inmates who were demanding better living conditions; and led the defense of Dennis Banks and Russell Means in the wake of the 71-day standoff between the U.S. military and Indian activists at Wounded Knee on Pine Ridge Reservation, S.D. In this period, Kunstler also met Margaret Ratner, a radical young lawyer who was defending Columbia University protestors and who would become his second wife and Emily Kunstler and Sarah Kunstler’s mother.

By the mid-1970s, however, the temper of the country had cooled considerably. A mid-1980s flag-burning case before the Supreme Court in which Kunstler successfully argued that burning the flag was political speech protected by the First Amendment recalled his heyday. Otherwise, he was to be found defending a drug dealer who shot six policemen, a 15-year-old accused (and later exonerated) in the notorious gang rape and beating of a jogger in New York’s Central Park, an Islamist militant accused of assassinating Jewish leader Rabbi Meir Kahane, several of the defendants in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and Mafia don John Gotti. This was the period when Emily and Sarah were growing up and growing increasingly terrified by the hostility their father was attracting. It was also the period when *The New York Times* gave him the “most hated and most loved lawyer” tag.

Kunstler had remarkable success throughout his career (he even managed to get the cop-shooting drug dealer acquitted of attempted murder charges and the Islamist militant acquitted of assassinating the rabbi). But his legal experiences changed him — especially the Chicago Eight trial, which he won, and his efforts at the Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York, where his intervention failed and 43 prisoners and nine guards were killed. As told in **Disturbing the Universe**, he went from believing in the law as an instrument of justice to seeing it as an instrument of repression wielded by the powerful. In archival footage, he can be seen telling a crowd during the Chicago 8 trial that he suspected that “more people have gone to their deaths through a legal system than through all the illegalities in the history of man.”

In **Disturbing the Universe**, this view emerges as the answer to Emily and Sarah’s key question.
Their father had come to see the perversion of the justice system in favor of the powerful as so pervasive that even the most reprehensible defendants had to have their rights protected. Indeed, he believed they were more likely to be treated unfairly from the start. This view may not convince all of Kunstler’s critics, but it is the thread that ties the great civil liberties advocate to the unpopular defense lawyer. William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe is a heartfelt, searching and enlightening portrait of a larger-than-life attorney who never ceased attempting to be someone “who contributed to society and tried to make a difference.”

“Sarah and I wanted to fit Dad’s life into a single unified theory,” recalls Emily Kunstler. “We wanted all of his clients to be innocent and all of his cases to be battles for justice and freedom. But by the time he died, we thought he had stopped standing for anything worth fighting for.”

“Disturbing the Universe grew out of conversations that Emily and I began having about our father in 2005, about 10 years after his death,” says Sarah Kunstler. “When we decided to make a film, we worried that the people we interviewed would see us only as his daughters. But this became a strength. While we loved our father’s extravagant greatness, we also suffered his frailty. And we knew that many other people take similar adult journeys toward reconciling the parent with the person.

“While our father lived in front of news cameras, we found our place behind the lens,” adds Sarah. “We hope our film communicates that the world we inherit is better because someone struggled for justice, and that those changes will survive only if we continue to fight.”

William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe is a co-production of Disturbing the Universe LLC and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

About the Filmmakers:
Emily Kunstler and Sarah Kunstler (Co-directors/Co-producers)
Emily Kunstler and Sarah Kunstler grew up in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village and attended the Little Red School House. In 2000, they founded Off Center Media, a company that produces documentaries focusing on injustice in the criminal-justice system.

The Kunstler sisters have produced, directed and edited a number of short documentaries, including “Tulia, Texas: Scenes from the Drug War” (2002), which won Best Documentary Short at the Woodstock Film Festival and helped exonerate 46 wrongfully convicted people, and “Getting Through to the President” (2004), which aired on the Sundance Channel. Other Off Center Media credits include “A Pattern of Exclusion: The Trial of Thomas Miller-El” (2002), “The Norfolk Four: A Miscarriage Of Justice” (2006) and “Executing the Insane: The Case of Scott Panetti” (2007). William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe is their first documentary feature.

Emily Kunstler graduated in 2000 from New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts with a bachelor of fine arts and honors in film and video; she previously attended Vassar College. She was a video producer for the independent national television and radio news program “Democracy Now!” and a studio art fellow with the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2004. Emily lives in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Sarah Kunstler graduated from Yale University with a bachelor of arts in photography in 1998 and from Columbia Law School with a Juris Doctor in 2004. She is currently a criminal defense attorney practicing in the Eastern and Southern Districts of New York and lives in Brooklyn with her husband, music producer Jesse Ferguson.

Credits:
Producers/Directors: Emily Kunstler, Sarah Kunstler
Co-producers: Jesse Moss, Susan Korda
Executive Producer: Vanessa Hope
Cinematographers: Brett Wiley, Martina Radwan
Editor: Emily Kunstler
Original Music: Shahzad Ismaily
Executive Producer for ITVS: Sally Jo Fifer
Executive Producer for POV: Simon Kilmurry

Running Time: 86:46

POV Series Credits:
Executive Producer: Simon Kilmurry
Vice President: Cynthia López

Awards & Festivals:
- L’Oreal Women of Worth Vision Award, Sundance Film Festival, 2009
- Honorable Mention, The Charles E. Guggenheim Emerging Artist Award, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, 2009
- Special Jury Prize for Best New Filmmakers, Traverse City Film Festival, 2009
- Best in Fest, Minneapolis-St. Paul International Film Festival, 2009
- Grand Jury Award for Best Feature, New Orleans Human Rights Film Festival, 2009
- Seattle International Film Festival, 2009
- Woodstock Film Festival, 2009
- BAM Cinemafest, 2009
- Denver International Film Festival, 2009
- St. Louis International Film Festival, 2009

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 PBS. ITVS was 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. More information about ITVS can be obtained at www.itvs.org. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people.

Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and beginning its 23rd season on PBS in 2010, the award-winning POV series is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today’s best independent documentary filmmakers. Airing June through September, with primetime specials during the year, POV has brought more than 300 acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide and has a Webby Award-winning online series, POV’s Borders. Since 1988, POV 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 is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)
POV’s award-winning Web department produces special features for every POV presentation, extending the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. POV Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, POV’s Borders. In addition, the POV Blog is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The POV website, blog and film archives
form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

**POV Community Engagement and Education**

POV works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, POV offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, POV’s *Youth Views* works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training so they may use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

Major funding for POV is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, The Educational Foundation of America, New York State Council on the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, FACT and public television viewers. Funding for POV’s *Diverse Voices Project* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Special support provided by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. POV is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston and THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG.

**American Documentary, Inc.** ([www.amdoc.org](http://www.amdoc.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.

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