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Newark's JFK High School Is No Secret to the Autistic Students Who Thrive in Its Dynamic Learning Environment, As Seen in POV's 'Best Kept Secret,' Monday, Sept. 23, 2013 on PBS

Passionate Teacher Janet Mino Struggles to Find Her Graduating Students a Place in the Adult World, Before They "Age Out" of the System

"In and out of the classroom, Mino fights for her kids, first to teach them life skills, then to help ensure they don't spend that life neglected . . ."—*The Washington Post Express*

At Newark, N.J.'s JFK High School, the staff answers the phone by saying, "You've reached John F. Kennedy High School, Newark's best-kept secret." It doesn't take long watching the new documentary **Best Kept Secret** to see why. Hardly anyone would expect an inner-city public school to be able to marshal the innovative programs, exceptional teachers and passionate commitment that JFK brings to its special-needs students. The film focuses on the school's work with students with autism, who are characterized by difficulties with language and social interaction. The staff is not content only to give these students survival skills. They fight a tough, daily battle to open students up to the world. As teacher Janet Mino, puts it, "If I can teach you to take care of yourself . . . I can teach you to express yourself." JFK High just may be one of the country's best-kept secrets.

But the remarkable efforts of the school come with an expiration date. Its students, who can enter at age 10, are "aged out" at 21. Parents and teachers call it "falling off the cliff," because of the scarcity of continuing adult education programs and accommodations. In 2012, Mino faces the prospect of her entire class of six young men going off that cliff, and she begins a desperate search for alternatives to homebound idleness, institutionalization or homelessness for her graduating students.

Samantha Buck's **Best Kept Secret** has its national broadcast premiere on **Monday, Sept. 23, 2013** at 10 p.m. (check local listings) on PBS during the 26th season of the award-winning PBS series **POV (Point of View)**. American television's longest-running independent documentary series, **POV** was honored with a 2013 MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Mino is the focus of **Best Kept Secret**, and her work with three of her students—Robert, Erik and Quran—and their families forms the drama of the film. Mino is tough, energetic and mentally on the job 24/7. She has bottomless reserves of patience and compassion for her students. One of the pleasures of the film is seeing the determination and optimism Mino and her fellow teachers bring to unrelenting daily challenges.

Erik is Mino's highest-functioning student, the class cut-up who is smart, talkative and good at following directions. He is happy and loves his "two moms": a biological mother who is too ill to care for him and a dedicated and loving foster mother. Erik seems the most ready to graduate. In fact, he has a dream—to work at Burger King.

Quran is a quiet soul who works well, is able to read, successfully controls his social behavior and has strong support from two parents. Mino has high hopes for Quran but finds herself at odds with Quran's father, who fears the teacher's emphasis on education comes at the expense of acquiring basic life skills.

Robert is the biggest mystery and source of heartbreak in the class. A troubled boy who cannot express his pain, he is given to erratic behavior. Robert's father home-schooled him until he passed away four years ago, and Robert is now cared for by his aunt, a recovering drug addict. His chaotic home life often keeps him away from school and he begins to regress. Robert may be an unfortunate example of Mino's contention "Skip a day . . . and you have to start all over."

Newark is among New Jersey's poorest cities, with more than 25% of the general population and more than 40% of children living in poverty.¹ In the state of New Jersey, one in 49 children is believed to fall somewhere on the autism spectrum.² Autism can include difficulties with speech and reading non-verbal clues, repetitive behaviors and other impediments to social interaction. In Mino's work with Erik, Quran, Robert and their families, we see her conviction that these students have greater potential for living a full life than is often recognized. What is needed to realize that potential, in Mino's view, are daily, one-on-one educational programs—the kind that make JFK a rare institution and that are even harder to find for adult autistics.

Mino isn't willing to accept the limits of what the school and she can do for her students after graduation. Ignoring the cautions of the school's social worker, Mino resolves to investigate the programs available to her students beyond "the cliff."

Her search takes her to the jobs program Pathways to Independence, to a recreation center called the WAE Center, to the medical daycare center Birchwood and to a local Burger King. She has early luck at Burger King. Erik realizes his dream and is soon a model janitorial employee. After a while, though, his attention begins to flag and he cannot get a job coach. Without regular individual support, the autistic is likely to regress. Yet there is precious little funding for ongoing programs.

Mino discovers that the organizations have pluses and minuses. On the plus side are programs that provide training in semi-skilled piecemeal and organized group recreation. On the minus side, Mino feels many programs fail to provide enough individual attention. Mino aims high, but soon she faces frustration rooted in the mundane. For the families of her students, even middle-class families like Quran's, the deciding factor will likely come down to something as practical as which program provides transportation.

Best Kept Secret lets the cat out of the bag. The film implicitly asks why JFK High is a secret at all when it might easily serve as a model for the schooling of special-needs students. But how much public support is there for such programs? And does the lack of continuing adult-education programs undo what schools like JFK accomplish, as Mino so strongly fears?

"This wasn't meant to be a film about the causes or possible cures of autism," says director Samantha Buck. "This is a personal story about some young men who live with it and their very dedicated teacher in one remarkable school. It's about the struggles they face beyond the confines of that school."

¹ United States Census Bureau: <http://1.usa.gov/cB4pvl>; ACNJ 2013 Report: <http://bit.ly/18Q3493>; NJTV: <http://bit.ly/XgkGTA>

² "Autism survey finds 1 in 50 American kids are on the spectrum," *The Star-Ledger*, March 21, 2013. <http://bit.ly/WWJskx>

"I saw so much quiet strength in the spirit of Janet Mino, her fellow teachers and the parents of these incredible young men," says producer Danielle DiGiacomo. "Samantha and I chose to tell a story about under-resourced people of color—arguably the most ignored population in the country—with dignity and without sensationalism. I believe we accomplished something more than a straightforward vérité film—a subtle and layered story that manages to touch upon the delicate issues of race, class and disability simply by telling the stories of these characters."

Best Kept Secret is a production of BKS Film in association with Occasional Giant Beard.

About the Filmmakers:

Samantha Buck, Director/Co-producer

Samantha Buck's directorial debut, the feature documentary *21 Below*, aired on Channel 4 in the U.K. and YES in Israel, as well as at festivals worldwide, including Hot Docs, Sheffield Doc/Fest and AFI-Discovery Channel Silverdocs. As an actress, she was a regular on *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, opposite Vincent D'Onofrio, and *Stella*, opposite David Wain. Her other acting credits include *Third Watch*, *Big Apple*, *Golden Boy*, *Blue Bloods*, *Six Degrees*, *Z Rock* and *Sex and the City*. Buck's film credits include *Searching for Paradise*, *Wirey Spindell*, *The 24 Hour Woman* and *Woman in Burka* (which won a Spirit of Slamdance Award in 2008). She can also be seen in the recent films *Gayby*, *What Maisie Knew* and *Hellbenders*.

Buck was born in Dallas, grew up in Washington, D.C. and now lives in Brooklyn. She is a graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and is currently a student at Columbia University School of the Arts' master of fine arts film program.

Danielle DiGiacomo, Producer

Danielle DiGiacomo was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., and grew up in Cumberland, Md. and Princeton, N.J. She is the manager of video distribution at The Orchard, a 15-year-old independent music and video distribution company operating in more than 20 global markets. She is also an independent film producer and consultant. Previously, she worked as community manager at the Independent Filmmaker Project (IFP), the nation's oldest and largest membership organization for independent filmmakers, and as head of documentary acquisitions for IndiePix Films.

DiGiacomo developed and produced the first two annual Cinema Eye Honors for Nonfiction Films and associate produced two documentary features, Jennifer Venditti's *Billy the Kid* and Samantha Buck's *21 Below*. In 2010, she produced three short films, two of which premiered at Cannes' Short Film Corner, and was associate producer for Andrew Semans' *Nancy, Please*, which premiered at the 2012 Tribeca Film Festival. DiGiacomo consults as a panel programmer for several international film festivals, and was one of six producers selected to attend the 2011 Sundance Institute's Creative Producing Lab, where she was the Mark Silverman honoree. She has a bachelor's degree in film studies from Wesleyan University and a master's degree in media studies from the New School.

Credits:

Director:	Samantha Buck
Producer:	Danielle DiGiacomo
Executive Producers:	Paul Bernon, Sean Curran, Daniella Kahane, Scott Mosier
Co-Producers:	Samantha Buck, Zeke Farrow
Cinematographer:	Nara Garber
Editor:	Francisco Bello

Associate Editor: Matt Posorske
Original Music: Brian Satz
Running Time: 86:46

POV Series Credits:

Executive Producer: Simon Kilmurry
Co-Executive Producer: Cynthia López
Vice President, Programming and Production: Chris White
Coordinating Producer: Andrew Catauro

Awards and Festivals:

- Winner, Audience Award, Best Documentary, Independent Film Festival Boston, 2013
- Best of the Fest, AFI Docs Film Festival Presented by Audi, 2013
- Official Selection, Montclair Film Festival, 2013
- Special Screening, Rooftop Films, 2013
- Sundance Documentary Fund Grantee, 2012

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POV Digital (www.pbs.org/pov)

POV's award-winning website extends the life of our films online with interactive features, interviews, updates, video and educational content, plus listings for television broadcasts, community screenings and films available online. The POV Blog is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss their favorite films and get the latest news.

POV Community Engagement and Education (www.pbs.org/pov/outreach)

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POV has the honor of receiving a 2013 MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. Major funding for POV is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, the desJardins/Blachman Fund and public television viewers. Funding for POV's Diverse Voices Project is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Special support provided by The Fledgling Fund and the Lucius and Eva Eastman Fund. POV is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KQED San Francisco, WGBH Boston and THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG.



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