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THIRTEEN Presents *First Degree*,
an Intimate Profile of Prisoners Who Receive Their
College Degrees Behind Bars
Airing on PBS in June

John Fugelsang takes viewers inside Sing Sing Prison and offers a unique window into a college behind bars that prevents released inmates from returning to prison

This June, as thoughts turn to mortarboards and college graduations, public media takes viewers inside a maximum security prison for an intimate profile of a unique college behind bars. The expression, “sent up the river” was originally coined by convicts who were sent up the Hudson River to do their time at the infamous Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, NY. ***First Degree***, available to PBS stations starting June 1 (check local listings), finds hope in this seemingly hopeless place by investigating a unique prison education program that is successfully preventing inmates there from being sent back up the river after their release. Nationwide, over half of released inmates return to prison within five years, but for the past 14 years, less than 1% of the inmates that received a college degree at Sing Sing returned to prison.

First Degree introduces viewers to some unforgettable Sing Sing inmates. We first meet Sean Pica, who was 16 years old when he went to prison in 1986. Sean’s high school friend, Cheryl Pierson, told Sean that her father was sexually molesting her, so Sean helped plan and carry out his

murder. After receiving a 24-year sentence, Sean thought his life was over until a prison education program called Hudson Link gave Sean an opportunity to earn a Bachelor's Degree. After serving 16 years, Sean was released, but he couldn't stay away from Sing Sing. Unlike most of the paroled prisoners that Sean met at Sing Sing who reoffended and quickly returned to prison, Sean came back to Sing Sing to run their college program. He takes us through his early days in prison as a hopeless 120-pound, 16-year-old inmate to his discovery that college could open up an entirely new world of opportunity and possibility.

Next, viewers meet Jermaine Archer, a former drug dealer who was sentenced to 22 years to life for murder. Jermaine talks about how his prison reputation changed from being a feared gang leader from the streets of Flatbush, Brooklyn to being a role model for college students at the prison. We attend Jermaine's college graduation ceremony and watch as he, for the first time in his life, brings tears of joy to his mother's eyes.

Lastly, viewers meet Clarence Maclin, who received his college degree along with Jermaine. Shortly after graduation, we catch up with Clarence, who is on parole and participating in Hudson Link's re-entry program. We watch as the staff and volunteers at Hudson Link help Clarence acquire work-appropriate clothing, write a resume, search for jobs, and train for interviews. Ultimately, Clarence is hired by a nearby residential treatment program to work as a counselor with juvenile offenders. He relishes the opportunity to help the young people he mentors avoid some of the costly mistakes he made as a teenager.

First Degree has been screened at 13 film festivals and won four top awards. David Rothenberg, the Founder of The Fortune Society said, "First Degree' is a dramatic and emotional powerhouse...exactly what an independent documentary film should be." And Tony Marx, the president of the New York Public Library, said, "This enlightening film brings much needed awareness to the issues surrounding incarceration, the U.S. justice system, and prison education programs across the country."

To support the film's broadcast is a robust website, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/dream-on/first-degree/>, which features shorter video clips for educational use; press materials; a Screening Toolkit; and a Viewer's Guide. The Guide contains background information on mass incarceration, re-entry, recidivism, and criminal justice reform; extensively researched facts and in-depth discussion questions for each of these topics; creative action steps to encourage community participation; and many other helpful resources including books, films, and organizations that work on the issues covered in the film.

First Degree is hosted and narrated by John Fugelsang. The film is produced and directed by Roger Weisberg, whose 32 previous documentaries have won over a 150 awards including Emmy, duPont-Columbia, and Peabody awards, as well as two Academy Award nominations. ***First Degree*** builds on Weisberg's extensive body of work and represents the culmination of almost four decades of documenting the struggles, aspirations, and achievements of disadvantaged Americans.

First Degree is a production of Public Policy Productions in association with THIRTEEN PRODUCTIONS LLC for WNET. Producer/Director is Roger Weisberg. Writers are John Fugelsang and Roger Weisberg. Executive-in-Charge for WNET is Stephen Segaller. Post-production Supervisor for WNET is Cara Cosentino-Marino.

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First Degree is broadcast as part of ***Chasing the Dream: Poverty and Opportunity in America***, WNET's multi-platform public media initiative providing programming on poverty, income equality, and opportunity. Since 2015, the initiative has produced 154 reports, including news segments, documentaries, and radio and digital stories. The stories have been seen by a cumulative 14.7 million viewers on television alone and the Facebook postings have had 3.5 million total impressions.

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About WNET

WNET is America's flagship PBS station and parent company of [THIRTEEN](#) and [WLIW21](#). WNET also operates [NJTV](#), the statewide public media network in New Jersey. Through its broadcast channels, three cable services (KidsThirteen, Create and World) and online streaming sites, WNET brings quality arts, education and public affairs programming to more than five million viewers each week. WNET produces and presents such acclaimed PBS series as [Nature](#), [Great Performances](#), [American Masters](#), [PBS NewsHour Weekend](#), [Charlie Rose](#) and a range of documentaries, children's programs, and local news and cultural offerings. WNET's groundbreaking series for children and young adults include [Get the Math](#), [Oh Noah!](#) and [Cyberchase](#) as well as Mission US, the award-winning interactive history game. WNET highlights the tri-state's unique culture and diverse communities through [NYC-ARTS](#), Theater Close-Up, NJTV News with Mary Alice Williams and [MetroFocus](#), the daily multi-platform news magazine focusing on the New York region. In addition, WNET produces online-only programming including the award-winning series about gender identity, First Person, and an intergenerational look at tech and pop culture, The Chatterbox with Kevin and Grandma Lill. In 2015, THIRTEEN launched Passport, an online streaming service which allows members to see new and archival THIRTEEN and PBS programming anytime, anywhere: www.thirteen.org/passport.