

press release

THIRTEEN/WNET NEW YORK AND PUBLIC POLICY PRODUCTIONS PRESENT
ROSEVELT'S AMERICA, A LIBERIAN REFUGEE'S INSPIRING STORY OF INTEGRITY IN
THE FACE OF ADVERSITY, PREMIERING IN APRIL ON PBS

Upwards of 200,000 people – most of them civilians – lost their lives during 14 years of brutal civil war in Liberia. Thousands more were beaten, robbed, raped, and mutilated. The breakdown of law and order, which left much of the country's infrastructure in ruins and sent unemployment soaring to 85 percent, forced hundreds of thousands from their homes. With three children in tow and a pregnant wife still stuck in the war-torn capital, civil engineer Roosevelt Henderson joined the flood of refugees and immigrated to America. Once in Chicago, Henderson worked day and night as a janitor, assembly-line worker and airport van driver to build a new life for his children while trying to secure his wife's safe passage to the United States.

ROSEVELT'S AMERICA is the story of Henderson's day-to-day struggles, frustrations and achievements in a nation beset by growing anti-immigrant sentiment after 9/11. "There's a joke in Africa that says when you come to America, the next place you'll be going is...heaven," Henderson says in *ROSEVELT'S AMERICA*. "That's why I'm coming straight from Africa to America to improve my life."

ROSEVELT'S AMERICA premieres Wednesday, April 25 at 10:30 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). Produced and directed by Roger Weisberg and Tod Lending, the 30-minute documentary is a production of Public Policy Productions in association with Thirteen/WNET New York. Winner of a CINE Golden Eagle Award and top documentary honors at eight

international film festivals, **ROSEVELT'S AMERICA** was called “An uplifting portrait of dignity under duress” by *The New York Times*. *The Los Angeles Times* described the film as a “powerful and inspiring story of perseverance.”

“It would take a hard-hearted person not to be stirred by Rosevelt’s harrowing journey from torture and desperation in Liberia to security and stability in America,” says Weisberg, a Peabody, Emmy and duPont-Columbia award-winning director. “By putting a human face on one immigrant’s quest for a better life, I hope that **ROSEVELT'S AMERICA** can make a small contribution to efforts to counteract the prejudice and stigma that are faced by increasing numbers of new immigrants, especially refugees fleeing persecution in war-torn countries around the globe.”

ROSEVELT'S AMERICA is a cinema vérité profile that poignantly illustrates that it is difficult but not impossible to overcome poverty and prejudice in a new land. The film follows Henderson at church, at home – where he helps his sons adjust to life without a mother they can barely remember – and at his many jobs, where he earns less than \$10 an hour. The film also acts as a timely reminder of the numerous contributions immigrants make to this country, including an estimated \$10 billion each year to the U.S. economy.

In **ROSEVELT'S AMERICA**, Henderson matter of factly discusses his previous life in Liberia, which was settled by freed slaves from the United States.

“I saw a lot of violence,” says Henderson, the great-grandson of an American slave. “I saw soldiers taking people off the line, shooting them. I saw bodies all in the streets...I was caught in a situation where they assumed I was a soldier...Then I felt this sharp pain. Two of my fingers had already been cut off. Man, that was a moment...When I think about the difficult times I went through, the torture I went through, I feel that I was real blessed...I am alive.”

After civil war broke out in Liberia in 1989, Rosevelt’s sister – a U.S. citizen – returned to the U.S. alone. She was able to bring her parents over in 1994. When the war worsened in 2000,

Henderson's mother, acting through an Episcopal church agency, brought Henderson, his brothers and their children to America. In Chicago, Henderson and his two sons shared a small, two-room apartment with six other people: his grown daughter and her son, his brother and his brother's daughter, and his parents. Henderson juggled low-paying jobs and lay-offs for three years before he was reunited with his wife, Frances, and their baby daughter.

Today, the Hendersons live in their own apartment. Life continues to improve. Frances Henderson works as a certified nursing assistant in a nursing home. Henderson returned to school and got a degree as a medical tech assistant and is about to start a new job. The family also recently welcomed a new baby.

ROSEVELT'S AMERICA was produced and directed by Roger Weisberg and Tod Lending. Weisberg has won more than 100 awards for his previous 25 PBS documentaries and received an Academy Award nomination in 2001 for *Sound and Fury* and in 2003 for *Why Can't We Be a Family Again?* Tod Lending is an Emmy Award-winning producer, director and writer whose work has aired nationally on ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, and HBO. His feature documentary, *Legacy*, was nominated for an Academy Award in 2001.

Funding for **ROSEVELT'S AMERICA** was provided by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ford Foundation, David and Lucille Packard Foundation, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

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Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Secrets of the Dead*, *NOW With David Brancaccio*, and *Cyberchase* – as well as the work of Bill Moyers – to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, Thirteen reaches millions of viewers each week, airing the best of American public television along with its own local productions such as *The Ethnic Heritage Specials*, *The Thirteen Walking Tours*, *New York Voices*, and *Reel New York*. Thirteen extends the impact of its television productions through educational and community outreach projects – including the *Celebration of Teaching and Learning* – as well as Web sites and other digital media platforms. More information can be found at: www.thirteen.org.

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