

How Democracy Works Now: Twelve Stories

Media Kit

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ABOUT THE SERIES

***How Democracy Works Now: Twelve Stories* is a multi-part documentary film series that chronicles the inside and outside fight for immigration reform, on Capitol Hill and across the country, with unprecedented access and intimacy. Each feature-length film stands alone, but together they create one very big story - a story that's only visible at the end of the arc.**

In August 2001, it seemed the stars were about to align for a sweeping overhaul of America's troubled immigration system. The gathering signs of a societal shift on the scale of the Civil Rights Movement were unmistakable. Out of public view, the Bush administration and key leaders in Congress were thinking along similar lines.

In response, a dozen crucial, engaging characters - a think tank expert, a union leader, a non-profit lobbyist, a Latino activist, business executives, politicians and Capitol Hill staffers - crafted an audacious new plan to reform the national immigration policy. Their "Grand Bargain" promised to change the lives of tens of millions of immigrants and affect every citizen and every state in the union.

Veteran filmmakers Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini determined to record history in the making, negotiating exclusive, intimate and unprecedented access to drill deep into the lives and strategies of principal players. They reached the private offices of numerous Senators and Congressmen, including Ted Kennedy and Sam Brownback, and listened in on the phone calls of dozens of Hill staffers, lobbyists, and immigration activists.

Invited into meeting rooms and secret conferences all over the country where heated discussions and private bargains could yield a breakthrough, they followed the democratic process close-up and across state lines, weaving cinema vérité portraits of personal defeats and victories into a grand story arc. *HOW DEMOCRACY WORKS NOW* is a vast and immersive chronicle of the American political process at work.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Shari Robertson

Shari Robertson grew up in Texas and New Mexico where she trained in anthropology and ethnographic film. She began her career in the Southern Highlands rainforest of Papua New Guinea with the Bosavi people, observing the effects of rapid culture change on a small-scale tribal society. Since then, her work has often examined difficult situations in inaccessible places: young Khmer Rouge guerrillas crossing Cambodian minefields, Indian archaeologists fighting to restore the wondrous ancient temple of Angkor Wat and the tragi-comic crossroads of domestic politics and the American drug war in Peru.

Michael Camerini

Michael Camerini shoots, directs and produces films and documentary series that travel across geographical and subject areas as diverse as women's rights and social change in India, artists both famous and not yet so and the struggle to balance religious and cultural identity with mainstream values in the United States. His approach to filmmaking is notable for a camera technique that is fluid and non-intrusive, and a style of filming that encourages people to tell their own stories, whatever the cultural context. An interest in what it means to be a foreigner is the unifying theme in his work.

The Epidavros Project

Robertson and Camerini had each been making films about cultures and political situations outside the US for years before they met. Since the early '90s they've been married and working together from their production company, The Epidavros Project, in New York City.

Together they have filmed oilmen in Eastern Java, parliamentarians throughout Africa, coca growers in Peru's Upper Huallaga Valley and tribal elders in Kankan, Northeast Guinea. In every case, they've worked to understand and translate into film the life experience of a particular group of people for audiences in other places. In 2000, they completed their first US collaboration, an inside look at the American political asylum system which became their groundbreaking feature documentary, *Well-Founded Fear*.

In the summer of 2001, still in the United States, they began following the path of a think tank idea about the right way to achieve Comprehensive Immigration Reform, something that looked likely to become the law of the land within the year. It was a way into the most compelling and by far the most complex culture and political situation they had encountered so far. Twelve years later, Epidavros will debut the full existing set of ten feature documentaries in the resulting project, *HOW DEMOCRACY WORKS NOW* at the 51st New York Film Festival.



STORY SUMMARIES for *HOW DEMOCRACY WORKS NOW*

Story One: THE GAME IS ON

Summer, 2001: Secret negotiations between the governments of the US and Mexico break into front page news, igniting a national debate on the overhaul of the US immigration system that reflects the country's split over the issue. Advocates see the pro-reform perspective shared by President Bush and Senators Ted Kennedy and Sam Brownback as an incredible alignment of the stars. Then 9/11 attacks shatter any hope of comprehensive reform, but around the country, the issue still dominates November's local elections. In a heated city council race in Iowa, we discover the seeds of the battle to come.

Story Two: MOUNTAINS AND CLOUDS

Spring 2002: Kennedy and Brownback have rejoined forces, though security is now the national obsession. Their Border Security Bill must come before immigration reform but there's a mysterious hold-up in the Senate. Finally it's revealed a single Senator is at the bottom of the delay - Appropriations Chairman Robert Byrd, Kennedy's longest-serving and most feared colleague. Meanwhile, the White House proposes a small, immigrant-friendly provision be added to the stalled Border Security Bill. This unexpected detour creates more trouble every day it lasts. But to unlock the deadlock, what does Senator Byrd want?

Story Four: SAM IN THE SNOW

Summer 2002: The Border Security Bill is now law. Kennedy, Brownback and their staffers Esther and David are eager to move back to immigration, but the fight over creation of a Department of Homeland Security eats up the summer. Once Republicans take the Senate in November midterms, Senator Brownback goes "into cycle" with his own re-election campaign. Committee choices for the next Congress loom, and immigration is not playing well in Kansas. Will one of the Senate's most compassionate advocates decide to give up the Judiciary Committee and his upcoming chairmanship of the Immigration Sub-committee?

Story Five: THE KIDS ACROSS THE HILL

Winter, 2003: As the new Congress begins, a lot of people have ideas about an immigration bill. For pro-immigration advocates, the best bet remains Kennedy's plan. But across the Hill in the House, young staffers for two Republican congressmen from Arizona, Jim Kolbe and Jeff Flake, are quietly crafting something that sounds very different - a revolutionary guestworker bill with a path to citizenship. Esther's not too worried as long as their bill is Republican-only, but once her rivals begin courting a Democrat, the race is on. Suddenly Esther's got a crisis on her hands.

Story Six: MARKING UP THE DREAM

October, 2003: High-school students stage a mock graduation ceremony on the Capitol lawn. Next day, the DREAM Act gets its first chance. Because DREAM is a small bi-partisan bill to help kids, supporters are optimistic. But anti-immigrant groups see it as "amnesty for illegals". The Senate Judiciary Committee markup is heated. After two weeks, an amended version is finally recommended for full Senate debate. But what exactly did Senators agree to in the confusing markup? The bill's final language must still be defined by opposing staffers. Will they negotiate a deal before it's too late?

Story Seven: AIN'T THE AFL FOR NOTHIN'

Autumn, 2003: Esther, Senator Kennedy's Immigration Counsel, has plenty of reasons to worry. She's got just 8 weeks to accomplish a small miracle: get business and labor to agree on a comprehensive immigration deal, and find a Republican to co-sponsor it in the Senate. Driving cross-country, the Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride buses are coming to lobby Congress, creating a very public impression that unions support Kennedy. But Esther learns forces inside the AFL-CIO are working to derail her bill. Years of work, and the future of millions of families, end up riding on one conversation.

Story Nine: PROTECTING ARIZONA

Summer, 2004: Across America, grassroots supporters and opponents of comprehensive immigration reform are spoiling for a fight at the ballot box. In Arizona, no one can ignore it - voters' frustration is at a boiling point. Citizens launch a wildly popular ballot initiative, PROTECT ARIZONA NOW. Alfredo Gutierrez, radio host and ex-politician, is galvanized out of "retirement" to try to beat it. Eventually national groups see that if things go badly in Arizona, they will surely go worse in Washington. The rollicking campaign becomes a case study in local-national strategic alliances and the many ways they can founder.

Story Ten: BROTHERS AND RIVALS

Fall, 2004 - Spring, 2005: Congressmen Kolbe and Flake's reward for their innovative 2003 guestworker bill: tough primary challenges in 2004, facing determined opponents who capitalize on Arizona anger over "amnesty for illegals." The very different campaigns, both hot and colorful, leave the winners vowing to do something about immigration. By winter, staffers for Kennedy, McCain, Kolbe, Flake, and firebrand Democrat Congressman Luis Gutierrez all sit down in the same room. Can they join forces to combine the best of earlier, competing bills into the first bi-partisan, bi-cameral comprehensive immigration reform ever introduced in the US Congress?

Story Eleven: THE SENATE SPEAKS

January, 2006: The House just passed the toughest anti-amnesty, enforcement-only immigration bill in history. Immigrants feel targeted, and "Sensenbrenner" (the bill's sponsor) becomes a household word for Latinos. Finally the Senate tackles immigration reform. Millions of people take to the streets all over the US, marching until a bi-partisan compromise modeled on last year's Kennedy-McCain bill goes to the Senate floor. But leaders in both parties seem to want an election issue, not a bill. Advocates smell a double-cross, and go public with an attack. What will it take for the Senate to respond?

Story Twelve: LAST BEST CHANCE

Spring, 2007: This year, immigration advocates and grassroots expect great things. But Senator Kennedy has lost his partner McCain to presidential primaries, and the Republicans now put a very different offer on the table. Deep at the heart of this fast-moving story, we find a moral tale of modern American politics. Ted Kennedy, one of the handful of people who, through his personal efforts, truly changed the face of America, will be forced to decide how much he wants the deal, and what he is he willing to trade for his greatest legacy.