

Against the odds

For Immediate Release

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***AGAINST THE ODDS*, NEW PUBLIC RADIO INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY SERIES DEBUTS TUESDAY APRIL 7TH WITH HOUR-LONG FEATURE ON RWANDA TIMED TO 15TH ANNIVERSARY OF GENOCIDE**

ELLIS COSE, Noted Newsweek Columnist / Best-Selling Author, Writes, Hosts and Executive Produces Four New Programs about Rwandan Genocide, Inner-City Achievers, Indian Social Outcasts and US Foster Care

New York, NY; March 16, 2009 – *AGAINST THE ODDS*, a new Public Radio International (PRI) documentary series profiling individuals who have overcome significant obstacles in life, debuts Tuesday, April 7 (check local listings) with a one-hour feature, *Hope on a Pile of Bones*, which examines the Rwandan genocide 15 years to the day of its start in 1994.

Ellis Cose, award winning-columnist for Newsweek and best-selling author, writes, hosts and is the executive producer of the series which will air on public radio stations throughout the US. *AGAINST THE ODDS* tells stories of uplift with a serious underlying message. They focus on people from marginalized groups who are not often covered on US media and tackle a range of important issues, both in the US and abroad.

Three additional programs will air on public radio following the debut. They take a look at former

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street hoods who have left behind lives of violence and drug dealing; social outcasts in India breaking the bonds of centuries-old bigotry; and two sets of siblings who excel academically despite traumatic childhoods before being dumped into the US foster care system.”

“The personal stories we tell in *AGAINST THE ODDS* are uniquely suited for radio, which is an inherently intimate medium – more so than print, where I began my career,” says series’ host, creator and executive producer Ellis Cose. “Radio allows us to connect with the ancient tradition of oral story telling; we are essentially whispering stories into listeners’ ears. And, the opportunity to have one-hour of radio airtime for narrative journeys is a real rarity today.

“I obviously had no idea the world would be experiencing such social and economic trauma when we began work on these stories,” says Cose, “but I think listeners in these uncertain times will appreciate their upbeat message.”

Short video adaptations of all shows will be viewable online at www.elliscese.com.

Program Descriptions

Hope on a Pile of Bones

Airdate: Beginning April 7 on Public Radio Stations (check local listings)

I needed to see what was going on personally. I didn't want anybody to tell me. I needed to see it myself, first hand. I needed to have the grip of the horror and then be able to be part of it, and part of the solution.

Bishop John Rucyahana

Hope on a Pile of Bones will introduce listeners to a range of people who are building the new Rwanda. We profile a young genocide survivor who escaped the slaughter by pretending to be a woman. He stood by, helpless, as his father and brothers were murdered. He later hid out in a church that ended up being a torture chamber. That young man is now studying sociology, to better understand what happened to his country; and he works at the Kigali Genocide Memorial, to help keep alive the memory – and lessons.

We also spend time with an Anglican archbishop who has built a boarding school for orphans and has founded a village where victims and perpetrators live in harmony. Finally, we meet a group of remarkable individuals – Rwandans and a retired American doctor – on a mission to build a new medical school. That school would only be Rwanda’s second medical school.

We also meet a range of other people, as the show paints a richly rendered picture of human survival and resilience in Rwanda and reflects on the genocide 15 years earlier. The April 7, 2009 airdate marks the 15th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide.

Nerds in the Hood
Airdate: TBD

They said, “We got our own commandments. We got our own code that we live by.” And they began to list them. “Thou Shalt Not Snitch. Thou Shalt Not be No Punk. Thou Shalt Get Thy Money On. Thou Shalt Get Thy Respect. Thou Shalt be Down for Thy Homey Right or Wrong.” I turned around and looked at them and said, “Well no wonder you're in jail.”

Joseph Marshall, co-founder Omega Boys Club

Nerds in the Hood looks at kids from some of the toughest streets on both coasts who have managed, despite their harsh-backgrounds, to become exemplary achievers. We profile a former San Francisco drug dealer whose business cost him the use of his legs, but whose second act includes study at UCLA.

In one of the more touching moments in the hour-long story, Walter Simon talks about coming to terms with being a paraplegic as a result of his drug dealing. “Generally I feel like karma is real. And just because I'm sitting in this wheelchair and I'm hurt and I don't have my ability to walk anymore, I don't use that as a reason for me to sit around and say, ‘Oh, woe is me.’ Because there's a lot of people that's probably waking up right now that I caused a lot of hurt and a lot of trauma. And, so I'm appreciative of my existence. And even though I did get shot eight times, I have found some enlightenment. I'm not here to sell drugs. I'm not here to shoot people. Not here to rob people. I'm here because I have something to contribute. I'm here because my life is salvageable.”

In the program we also meet others who, with the help of some special mentors, have transformed their lives in similar ways.

Breaking the Bonds of Tradition
Airdate: TBD

The so-called upper caste men would enter any house of the Dalits that they wanted and do anything with the women they wanted. So, for example, a higher caste man has come and entered the house where a woman is alone. He sets his shoes outside the house. If the husband comes from market and sees the shoes, he understands somebody's there, so he won't go inside. He will go back to the market.

Dalit leader Martin Macwan

Breaking the Bonds of Tradition focuses on several remarkable people in India who have said “no” to prejudice and low expectations. We profile a Dalit, i.e., Untouchable, leader who is providing scores of young people from poor villages with their first chance ever at receiving an education with dignity.

We also look at a group of women widowed by the Gujarat anti-Muslim riots of 2002. Instead of giving in to despair, the woman started a collective enterprise that manufactures cloth and provides them with a living.

Trauma, Turmoil and Recovery: Surviving Foster Care
Airdate: TBD

Those were the first nights that we actually cried ourselves to sleep. We had family and we thought we could trust these people, and now we're being put in foster care. It just didn't

make sense to us. And no matter what they said, it didn't make it better. So, we just said, well, here we go. And at least we have each other. Katherin Bellew, former foster care child

Trauma, Turmoil and Recovery: Surviving Foster Care, profiles survivors of foster care, including two sisters who last year graduated from Smith College and Virginia Polytechnic, respectively.

Their father was a drug addict who was incapable of caring for them after their mother ran off with a lover. After their parents abandoned them, the two girls were taken in by an aunt. Overwhelmed by her own life, she eventually put them into foster care and then committed suicide. Despite the upheaval and hardship, both sisters persevered and are doing well.

We also look at two brothers whose mother was murdered by their own father outside a shopping mall. Even though traumatized, the brothers have thrived. One is studying and working in London. The other is a teacher and a basketball coach. The program also addresses some of the larger questions raised by foster care.

PostScript

Abass Mohamed, the subject of the *AGAINST THE ODDS's* pilot program, incidentally now has a literary agent who sees a major book in Abass's story. This development in his life is a direct result of the pilot's broadcast in 2007 and 2008 on public radio stations and the companion multimedia presentation.

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