

Remarks at the White House Student Film Festival

March 20, 2015

The President. Hello! Thank you so much, everybody! Have a seat. Well, hello, everybody, and welcome to the second annual White House Film Festival. It's like the Sundance or Cannes of film festivals that are open to the public through a Government website. *[Laughter]* It may also be the only film festival where one of the entrants has his tooth loose. *[Laughter]* And is—may pull it out right here at the ceremony. *[Laughter]* Everybody looks wonderful, of course. You'll be disappointed to know I will not be doing a musical number based on this year's films.

Audience members. Aww.

The President. That's the job of your emcees, Kalpen and Terrence J. Give them a big round of applause. I don't know if they'll be doing musical numbers either. *[Laughter]* But I do want to thank the folks at the American Film Institute and Participant Media for partnering with us on this event. Thank you very much. Give them a big round of applause.

I want to give a shout out to all the honorees' dates tonight, which I assume are either parents or teachers or somebody who's supported these outstanding young people every step of the way. And of course, most importantly, let's give it up to our outstanding young filmmakers! *[Applause]* Yay! Yay!

So I love this event. This is the second year that we've hosted the White House Student Film Festival, and it's a great example of what happens when we just unleash the skills and the imagination of America's young people. In this country, if we give all of our kids the best opportunities and technology and resources, there's no telling what they'll create, now and the years ahead.

This year, we received more than 1,500 submissions that came from all across the country, actually, even came as far as Azerbaijan. Our theme was "The Impact of Giving Back." And today we are proud to honor our 15 official selections, because these aren't just great films, but they're great examples of how young people are making a difference all over the country.

Today we're celebrating a 6-year-old in Montana. *[Applause]* Is that you? He's the guy without—he's missing teeth and—*[laughter]*. But he's also challenging us to see conservation through a child's eyes.

We're honoring a young man's story of service to his family and our environment in his Navajo Nation, Navajo tradition; a teenager who started a wheelchair challenge and raised tens of thousands of dollars to make his school more accessible to folks with disabilities; a third-grade superhero who wears a cape as he delivers clothes and food to the homeless. You see, even in indie film festivals, superhero movies are infiltrating. *[Laughter]* I'm going to have to see "Super Ewan 2" next summer. *[Laughter]* There's going to be a sequel.

And then there are two young women, Allyson Edwards and Madison Jaco, who adopted a highway to clean up the roads in their hometown of Hawkins, Texas. Where are these young ladies? Raise your hands. A little higher. There you go. So they decided they wanted to make an even bigger impact, so they reached out to young people all across the globe—and this is part of the power of the Internet—and now you've got groups in India, France, Nigeria, Benin,

Argentina, all getting into the act—cleaning up their schools and beaches and roads—just because of these two young women.

And as Allyson and Madison say in their film, "In today's society, we're often told how much we are different and how much divides us, but through our shared community service, we realized how much brings us together." That's a profound statement, guys. *[Laughter]* I don't think I was that smart when I was your age.

But that's the idea that lies at the heart of service: empathy, understanding, being able to make a connection. And as these young people are showing us, it's a message that can be told powerfully through film, because that's a media that connects us with people and stories we might otherwise never know. And it puts us in the shoes of people on—potentially on the other side of the world or a neighborhood very different than the one we grew up in. And that's true whether you're a middle schooler with a GoPro or a Hollywood director on a custom-made soundstage.

Now, we know that if today's middle schoolers are going to become those big-time directors—and we've got some big-time folks here. I mean, is Steve McQueen here? Has filmed "12 Years a Slave." It was a big Oscar winner last year and a profound film. And we appreciate his presence here today. So you guys could get some tips. *[Laughter]*

But the next Steve McQueen or Scorsese or Spielberg or documentarian like Ken Burns—if we're going to make sure that these young people have those opportunities, then we've got to do our part to support them.

That means we've got to give them a world-class education, access to science and technology and engineering and math, as well as the arts. It means that they've got to have access to the technology they need to learn and explore and grow.

It's not optional to have access to that technology in today's world. That's one of the reasons I launched the ConnectED initiative: to connect 99 percent of our students to next-generation broadband and wireless. Because when we expect free WiFi with our coffee, then we should at least have it in our schools and our libraries too.

And the good news is, we're making great progress. More than 1,800 school districts have pledged to bring high-speed broadband and digital learning to their students. Companies have committed billions of dollars in free technology for schools and libraries around the country. And it's making a difference. Students in rural Alabama used software donated by Adobe to make a music video that won first place in a contest and then earned their school \$10,000 of new musical equipment. So we know this can make a difference.

But we also know that it takes more than technology to help our kids thrive: parents, teachers, people who love and inspire them, coaches, mentors to help guide their way. So today, as part of our "United We Serve" effort, I'm proud to announce that AFI and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists are pairing up to give each of the young filmmakers here a mentor who can bring out the best of them in the months ahead. Now, that's pretty cool. *[Applause]* What do you think? Right?

And the organizations are also reaching beyond these young people. They're going to pledge a million hours of educational and mentoring programs for young people across the country over the next 3 years, which is a remarkable commitment, so we want to thank AFI and SAG–AFTRA for that wonderful contribution.

We've seen how impactful these mentoring experiences can be. I'll just take a minute to give you one example, the story of a young woman who we honored here last year named Shelly Ortiz. And Shelly made this wonderful video—is Shelly here?

Student filmmaker Shelly Ortiz. Yes!

The President. There you are. There's Shelly. Good to see you. So I'm going to brag about you for a second.

So Shelly made a great video about how technology in her classroom helped fuel her passion for filmmaking. But when Shelly came to the White House, she was still working on another project that meant a lot to her, which was a short documentary about how her father was abandoned by his mom as a child and all the ramifications, what that meant.

After the festival, AFI connected her with an accomplished documentarian, who served as her mentor, in giving Shelly detailed notes and the confidence to take risks as a director. A few months later, Shelly's documentary was featured at AFI's International Documentary Festival. Pretty cool. And today, she says that the mentoring she received and the technology she's been given didn't just help her become a better filmmaker, it helped her become closer than ever with her dad.

So that's the power of what is being done here. Experiences like these aren't just about a young person's future career. They're about helping them to connect in new and meaningful ways, whether it's somebody as close as your parents or somebody on an iPad halfway around the world who may share more in common with you than you think.

And we don't know what these new connections will produce down the road, but if these movies are any indication, I know that these young people are going to make an even bigger impact for their communities and their country in the years ahead.

So I'm proud of you. Keep up the great work. I can't stay to watch them all, but I'm going to get them all digitally. And I'm going to give them big thumbs-up. All right. Thank you. I'm really proud of you guys. Now it's time to begin our feature presentations. So see you guys!

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:36 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Noah Gue, student, Meadowlark Elementary School in Bozeman, MT; actors Kalpen S. Modi and Terrence Jenkins; Keanu B. Jones, student, Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy in Flagstaff, AZ; Archer Hadley, student, Austin High School in Austin, TX; Ewan Drum, student, New Haven Elementary School in New Haven, MI; and Shelly Ortiz, student, Metropolitan Arts Institute in Phoenix, AZ, and her father Epi Ortiz.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : White House Student Film Festival.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Burns, Ken; Drum, Ewan; Edwards, Allyson; Gue, Noah; Hadley, Archer; Jaco, Madison; Jenkins, Terrence; Jones, Keanu B.; McQueen, Steve; Modi, Kalpen S.; Ortiz, Epi; Ortiz, Shelly; Scorsese, Martin; Spielberg, Steven A.

Subjects: Communications : Broadband and wireless technologies; Education : Technology and innovation, expansion efforts; Voluntarism; White House Student Film Festival.

DCPD Number: DCPD201500186.