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For downloadable images, visit pbs.org/pressroom

For the program companion website, visit pbs.org/independentlens/village-called-versailles

**A VILLAGE CALLED VERSAILLES, A FILM ABOUT THE TRIUMPH OF
A VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY IN NEW ORLEANS FOLLOWING KATRINA,
TO PREMIERE ON THE PBS SERIES INDEPENDENT LENS ON
TUESDAY, MAY 25, 2010**

When They Lost Their Homes, They Found Their Voice.

(San Francisco, CA)— *A Village Called Versailles* is the empowering story of how an isolated community in eastern New Orleans, originally settled over 30 years ago by Vietnamese “boat people,” turned a devastating disaster into a catalyst for change and a better future. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Versailles residents impressively rose to the challenge by returning and rebuilding before most other neighborhoods in New Orleans, only to have their homes threatened by a proposed toxic landfill just two miles away. A film by S. Leo Chiang, *A Village Called Versailles* will premiere on the Emmy® Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Maggie Gyllenhaal, on Tuesday, May 25th at 10 PM (check local listings).

Prior to Katrina, Versailles was a thriving working-class enclave of 8,000. The community had achieved material success, but was unsure about its identity. The elders eyed their American-born, hip-hop-loving grandkids with suspicion, questioning their cultural allegiance, while the youth dismissed the elders as out-of-touch. Legally citizens of the U.S., but uncomfortable being American, Versailles residents were perpetual outsiders in New Orleans, largely ignored by the government.

All this changed when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in August 2005. Most residents evacuated Versailles, but several hundred stayed behind. Trapped after the levees broke, the residents were transported to the living nightmare that was the New Orleans Convention Center, and then dispersed across the country. Some were taken in by relatives, while others were placed in shelters, forced to rely on inadequate translation to help to navigate through the massive FEMA red tape.



Scenes from A Village Called Versailles, coming to Independent Lens May 2010.

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Six weeks after the flood, residents were allowed to return to “look and leave,” but the people of Versailles chose to stay. By day, they fixed their homes, and then drove 30 miles to sleep on a church floor. Help from the outside arrived too, mostly from idealistic young Asian Americans. Shortly after the initial group’s return, the spiritual leader of the community, Catholic priest Father Vien, called the community to come back for mass. People came back, and stayed. 300 people attended the first mass; 800 the next Sunday. Friends and family financed much of the rebuilding, without help from FEMA. By January 2006, while the rest of New Orleans was still reeling from the shock of the flood, over half of the residents of Versailles had returned.

Community leaders decided to turn the tragedy into progress, and put together an ambitious redevelopment plan that included senior housing, a cultural center, and a community farm and market. At its Lunar New Year Festival in February 2006, the community proudly unveiled the plan, but a challenge arrived to spoil the celebration. Mayor Ray Nagin exercised his emergency power to open Chef Menteur Landfill less than two miles from Versailles for toxic Katrina debris disposal, without an environmental impact study, without protective lining on the bottom of the dump, and literally next to the body of water that flooded the community in the first place.

Outraged, Versailles fought back. Residents crowded the public hearings, making the city’s Vietnamese presence felt for the first time. Reaching across racial lines, they worked with religious groups including All Congregations Together (ACT) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as well as environmental groups such as the Sierra Club. Legal battles were waged at the state and federal level, and a demonstration at City Hall prompted Mayor Nagin to promise that dumping would be suspended until tests were done to ensure the safety of the dumpsite. The promise was quickly broken. Tired of being ignored, the community decided to go for broke, staging a protest at the landfill to shut it down.

At the protest, old and young fought side by side, chanting in English and Vietnamese. They turned away dump trucks and, for the first time ever, spoke out for the world to hear. Nagin backed down and shut down the landfill.

The victory gave the community a new-found sense of identity and pride and their determined drive to return and rebuild inspired and empowered other New Orleanians to do the same. Their victory against the landfill has won them a political voice that can no longer be ignored. As Father Vien says, “Now, no one would dare speak about rebuilding New Orleans without mentioning our community, because they know we are back. They know we are here.” Once upon a time, the Versailles clan was known as quiet Vietnamese refugees, way out east of the City. Now, they are Vietnamese-American New Orleanians. Now they are Americans.

To learn more about the film and its subjects, visit the companion website for *A Village Called Versailles* at www.pbs.org/independentlens/village-called-versailles. Get detailed information on the film, watch preview clips, read an interview with the filmmaker and explore the subject in depth with links and resources. The site also features a Talkback section where viewers can share their ideas and opinions.

On Air Participants

Charismatic **FATHER VIEN NGUYEN** is an eloquent speaker. He is an unexpected mix of a traditional Catholic priest and a progressive social activist, and was the primary leader of the Versailles community following the devastation of Katrina.

Although 30-year-old **MIMI NGUYEN** is not from Versailles, she has more in common with the elders in the community than most people her age. Mimi’s family paid for her escape from Vietnam by boat when she was already a teenager in the early 90’s, much later than most Vietnamese refugees. Like the elders 20 years prior, she spent time at a refugee camp. She relates to the Versailles elders so much so that she uprooted herself from Northern California and took a job as an aide to City Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis so she could fight for the community.

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NGO MINH KHANG is one of the most respected elders in the community. He treasures what he and his family and friends at Versailles have built, and will do anything to defend it.

Born and raised in Versailles, **MINH NGUYEN** and **MARY TRAN** were two 20-somethings, starting their careers and already considering leaving the community before the hurricane struck. After Katrina, Minh rallied the youth of Versailles to step up, working hand-in-hand with the elders to fight for the community. Mary has taken the helm at the community development corporation in charge of the future of Versailles.

Attorney **JOEL WALTZER**, the only non-Vietnamese lawyer with an office in Versailles, has represented community members for over 15 years. Versailles is a part of City Councilwoman **CYNTHIA WILLARD-LEWIS'S** district, and she has been a long-time advocate for the community. Her New Orleans East district happens to also include the majority of the Ninth Ward, the area in New Orleans most devastated by the flood.

About the Filmmaker

S. Leo Chiang (Producer/Director)

Born and raised in Taiwan, Chiang immigrated to the United States as a teenager and received a MFA in film production from University of Southern California. In 1998, the Directors Guild of America commissioned Chiang, then a student, to direct and edit *Directing: How to Get There*, for which he documented the early careers of several well-known directors including Robert Wise, Norman Jewison, and Steven Spielberg. His other films include *To You Sweetheart*, *Aloha*, about the 94-year-old ukulele master Bill Tapia (PBS 2006, Audience Award at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival 2005), *One + One*, a documentary about mixed HIV-status couples (CINE Golden Eagle Award 2002, Cable Positive Award 2001), and *Safe Journey*, a short fiction film. Leo also collaborates with other documentarians as an editor (*True-Hearted Vixen*, PBS/POV, 2001; *Recalling Orange County*, PBS/*Voces* 2006) and as a cameraman (*It's STILL Elementary*, 2009; *Ask Not, Independent Lens* 2009). Leo is an active member of New Day Films, the social-issue documentary distribution co-operative.

CREDITS

S. Leo Chiang	Director/Producer
Brittney Shepherd, Eva Moss & Loan Dao	Associate Producers
Rebecca Snedeker	Archival Researcher
Kristy Guevara-Flanagan, Amy Young & S. Leo Chiang	Editors
S. Leo Chiang & Francis James	Camera/Sound
Joel Goodman	Composer
Idle Hands Studio	Graphic Design
Philip Perkins	Sound Editor & Mix

About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about unique individuals, communities and moments in history. Presented by the Independent Television Service (ITVS), the series is supported by interactive companion websites and national publicity and community engagement campaigns. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts. The series producer is Lois Vossen.