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For downloadable images, visit <http://pressroom.pbs.org/>

For the program's companion website, visit pbs.org/independentlens/writwriter

**“WRIT WRITER” TO PREMIERE ON PBS’S *INDEPENDENT LENS*
ON TUESDAY, JUNE 3, 2008**

Unlikely Hero Fought the Texas Legal System and Changed Prisons Forever

(San Francisco, CA)—**WRIT WRITER** is the moving and inspiring story of self-taught jailhouse lawyer Fred Arispe Cruz and the legal battle he waged to secure the constitutional rights of Texas prisoners. By most measures, Cruz was an ordinary criminal, but his extraordinary battle to expose the officially sanctioned brutality of the Texas penal system paved the way for a legal path to state prison reform. **WRIT WRITER** will have its television premiere on the Emmy Award–winning PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Terrence Howard, on Tuesday, June 3, at 10 PM (check local listings).

In 1960, Fred Cruz, a young Mexican American from San Antonio, was arrested for robbery, convicted and sent to a state prison farm to pick cotton. He denied committing the robberies, but couldn't afford a lawyer to appeal. With only an eighth-grade education, he read every law book in the prison library and filed his appeal *pro se* (acting as his own lawyer). Cruz and his fellow prisoners experienced a life that was unimaginably brutal, cruel and violent, and Cruz believed it was wrong. So he wrote a lawsuit against the prison director—and the walls of solitary confinement closed in on him.

But Cruz received aid and comfort in the form of Frances Jalet, a Radcliffe-educated attorney who spent much of her career defending the indigent. Cruz contacted Jalet when he read an article in the newspaper about her. Once inside the prison walls, the unlikely pair (she, 57; he, 28) formed both a professional and a personal bond. When Jalet learned from inmates about the conditions in prison, she agreed to help Cruz with his litigation. And she recruited NAACP attorney William Bennett Turner, who appears in the documentary, to assist with what would become Cruz's watershed case—*Cruz v. Beto*.

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Among the conditions of confinement that Cruz challenged in the courts were:

- Prisoners' access to legal representation. At the time of his incarceration, prisoners were forbidden to help each other with lawsuits. Cruz argued that this blocked indigent and illiterate prisoners from due process and access to the courts.
- Freedom of religion. He filed suits against the Texas Department of Corrections claiming that the state was violating the prisoners' right to freely practice their religion. Cruz wanted permission to practice Buddhism using the prison chapel, and he also argued on behalf of Muslim prisoners.
- Prisoners' right to speak in their defense in disciplinary hearings. Cruz challenged the way prison officials conducted disciplinary hearings. Often prisoners were not allowed to speak in their own defense or question witnesses.
- Excessive use of solitary confinement as punishment.
- Use of "building tenders." Cruz objected to the use of inmates recruited by wardens to work as guards within the prison population. It was not unusual for these inmate guards to administer brutal punishments with the quasi-consent of and even with direct instructions from prison officials. Their abuse of power was typically violent and sometimes deadly.

WRIT WRITER combines narration adapted from the original writings of Fred Cruz, along with the recollections of his friends and contemporaries, including ex-convicts, prisoners and former wardens. The role of Cruz is performed in voice-over by actor Jesse Borrego (*24; The New World; Blood In, Blood Out*). Writer Dagoberto Gilb (*The Flowers, The Last Known Residence of Mickey Acuña, The Magic of Blood, Gritos*) adapted the narration from prison diaries, letters, legal pleadings and courtroom testimony from the years 1961 through 1977. The writings reveal Cruz's transformation. These texts were first edited by director Susanne Mason and editors Karen Skloss and Kristen Nutile to form the film's narrative spine. Gilb's adaptation unifies the different speaking styles of the texts—some very personal in nature (letters to his attorney, diary entries), and others more formal public presentations (courtroom testimony, legal pleadings)—to create an honest, unsentimental portrayal of Cruz.

Archival film footage is drawn from documentary films about Texas prisons dating as far back as 1947, educational and training films, network news films, and strike surveillance video from 1978. Several large collections of still photography complement the motion picture, including photos taken between 1967 and 1969 by photographer Danny Lyon at the Ellis Unit and photos by TDC and freelance photographers taken of various prison units between 1945 and 1985.

To learn more about the film and the issues, visit the companion website for **WRIT WRITER** at *Independent Lens* online. 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 for viewers to share their ideas and opinions. The **WRIT WRITER** companion website launches on May 6 at pbs.org/independentlens/writwriter.

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About the Filmmaker

Susanne Mason, Producer/Director

Susanne Mason's feature debut, **WRIT WRITER**, is the product of several years of research into the history of the Texas Department of Corrections and a lot of fund-raising. Prior to and during that time, she served as associate producer of a variety of public television documentaries, including *Are the Kids Alright?* (2004), *Struggle in the Fields* (1996), *Songs of the Homeland* (1994) and *Go Back to Mexico!* (1994, *Frontline*). More recently, Mason has written, produced and directed short documentaries about the history of Austin, Texas, for the Save Our Springs Alliance and Watershed Productions, including *Town in Transition*, a short documentary about growth in the Texas capital between 1950 and 1975. Mason's first film, *Stories From the Riverside* (1993), a 28-minute documentary that explores domestic homicide through the stories of three women incarcerated for murdering their abusive husbands, received a Silver Apple award from the National Educational Film and Video Festival, among other honors.

About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 PM on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features unforgettable stories about unique individuals, communities and moments in history. *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. Visit [**pbs.org/independentlens**](http://pbs.org/independentlens) for more information.

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