Documentary Profiling Pioneering Women in the Newsroom to Air Dec. 18 on PBS

By Jo Kadlecik

Only 40 years ago, journalism was a man’s world. Rare was the woman who could endure the macho arena of investigative reporting or hard news. But some did, and, as a result, they created the opportunities that young women reporters today often take for granted. These pioneering women are the focus of a one-hour documentary, “She Says/Women in News,” to be aired on PBS Dec. 18. The film spotlights ten women who climbed the newsroom ladder through their award-winning reporting and today enjoy positions of influence and power as editors, columnists, general managers and anchors in newsrooms across the country.

“She Says/Women in News” is the collaborative effort of Joan Konner, producer and former dean of the Graduate School of Journalism, and Barbara Rick, a Peabody and Emmy Award winning journalist and filmmaker. The co-production of Rick’s company, Out of the Blue Productions, and Joan Konner Productions, Inc., was funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Whitehead Foundation, and is a presentation of six television stations, all headed by women.

“These women are heroes—smart, insightful, funny, highly professional—who have succeeded in the business while remaining real people with real lives,” Konner said. “We have attempted to show how they’ve transformed and expanded the agenda of news while bringing an element of humanity to news and the newsroom environment.”

The documentary follows the lives of women like Judy Cordich, who started her career in 1948 and was the first woman producer, writer and director for the acclaimed “CBS Reports” documentary unit; Nina Totenberg, the legal affairs correspondent for National Public Radio who broke the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas story; and, a former UPI reporter and the first woman to be accepted into the White House Press Corps where she’s covered over seven presidential administrations.

“There is acceptance now, but every door had to be broken down,” Thomas said. “We weren’t allowed to become members of the National Press Club until 1971. That’s a long way from 1920 when women got the vote. It’s been a struggle.”

These ten women, along with others, helped change the landscape of news through the past four decades. “What’s news in this business is what’s on the front page,” said Narda Zacchi, senior editor of the San Francisco Chronicle. “And when you change the kind of stories that go on the front page and have them more family-oriented, more health-oriented and more education-oriented, then you’re changing the definition of news.”

The documentary also shows the personal lives of women who have had to learn how to balance their careers in journalism with their family responsibilities. It follows the life of CNN anchor Judy Woodruff as she cares for her handicapped son, as well as the different choices Washington Post Writers Group Syndicated Columnist Geneva Overholser made. When she was editor of the Detroit News Register, she ran a series of stories that included the name of a rape victim. The series won the newspaper a Pulitzer Prize.

Despite the gains made by women in positions of influence in journalism, “She Says/Women in News” also points out that "the work is far from over."
Industry Expert Seymour Melman Seeks Economic Revolution in Manufacturing

BY SUSANNE TERRIEL

For more than 40 years, although economic downturns and boom times alike, Seymour Melman, one of the country’s leading experts on manufacturing and a Columbia faculty member for more than half a century, has warned about the consequences of industrial decline throughout the sport of manufacturing jobs abroad. Now, he is attempting to reverse the trend in his own backyard, New York City.

Melman, who turns 84 this month and is professor emeritus of industrial engineering at the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science, remembers when much of Manhattan below 34th Street was given over to small manufacturing lofts, many of them family-owned factories that turned out knitwear, leather goods, and other consumer products while supplying steady and substantial jobs for the New York working class. Melman counted himself lucky to have landed a good-paying summer job in one of these knitwear factories when he was a high school student during his junior and senior years. These Manhattan factory lofts disappeared decades ago— their goods now produced overseas, a story that is retold in newer manufacturing centers across the nation. Melman believes passionately that factories can be wooed back to New York through the creation of a computer-literate population.

The classic argument for why U.S. manufacturing declined—that union laborers priced themselves out of competition, leading industry to move to the developing world for cheaper labor—is dead wrong, says Melman. As he states in the case rein industrialization in his latest book, “After Capitalism: From Management to Workplace Democracy,” published this fall by Alfred A. Knopf, Melman notes that Japan and South Korea by 1996 had combined merchant exports of $17.70 in the United States, $21.00, compared to $17.70 in the United States.

Melman argues that deindustrialization is a dangerous course of action. The “danger,” he says, is particularly evident now with layoffs occurring in many service-dominated industries since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

“After Capitalism” lists dozens of industries that have experienced a catastrophic drop in production in the second half of the 20th century, including machine tools, whose work force was cut by more than one half from 1977 to 1996, office machines, ball and roller bearings, and mining and textile machinery. The factories of today, says Melman, are dependent on the sweat of their workers but on their brains. To be competitive today manufacturers need workers able to operate highly-sophisticated computer-based operating equipment. Melman gathered together a group of 40 like-minded academics in November—a second meeting is planned for early next year—to shape a strategy for reindustrialization, with New York City as its main target. “We believe a highly educated, high-wage labor force affords unmatched opportunities for economic growth. Deindustrialization can be reversed,” says Melman. In addition to political scientists, urbanists and business experts, some from the ranks of his former students, the Melman group also includes administrators from the East New York- Technology High School in Brooklyn, who are interested in the state of the light rail manufacturing in the metropolitan area. The group began to explore the prospects for reinvigorating two product classes, representing capital goods and consumer goods—subway cars and knitwear. Melman notes that northern Italy has established a thriving knitwear manufacturing center, using computerized machines that require one technician and logistically savvy workforce. Melman was distressed to discover some time ago that subway cars are no longer made in the United States and that when New York City invited bids for $1.5 billion in new subway equipment, companies in Japan and Canada responded but no U.S. firm sought the contract. Prospects for hi-tech knitwear production will be examined in a Feb. 1 meeting at Columbia, open to the University community (RSVP to 854-2936 or sm279@columbia.edu).

The disturbing implications of deindustrialization, Melman warns, is the prospect that the American workforce will not be competitive today manufacturing centers across the nation. But Melman is heartened by a new development on the factory floor that he believes can point the United States toward a stronger, more resilient and more equitable economy—what he describes as the movement toward workplace democracy. Decision-making at General Motors’ Saturn plant near Lordstown, Ohio, he says, is possible for a range of tasks, including scheduling, budget only and budget keeping. This authority and responsibility, says Melman, traditionally belongs to plant management, empowers workers and represents the best hope for reversing a situation of serious inefficiency and threat of unemployment and displacement among American workers, Melman says.

School of the Arts Professor and Alumna Team Up to Produce “Ball in the House”

BY KRISTIN STERLING

Ira Deutchman, associate professor and supervisor of the producing concentration in the School of the Arts Graduate Film Program, and alumna Tanya Wexler (MFA 1995, Directing) to produce “Ball in the House,” which screened at the Toronto Film Festival in September.

The film was produced by Redeemable Features, of which Deutchman is a founder and partner, and Chimera Films, co-founded by Wexler. “Ball in the House” is based on a book by Wexler and is a dark comedy about a likeable “ screw-up” who deserts his family from drugs and alcohol, but whose highly dysfunctional family seems to be doing everything they can to prevent him. Wexler describes the film as a “dark, absurd drama with comedic aspects.” During her time at Columbia, Wexler only took one class with Deutchman. Their professional relationship began when Wexler’s business partner, Stephen Dyer, was working with Deutchman’s partner, partner, Paul Newman, who was pleased with Wexler’s work on that film and were interested in her next project.

“it was actually good the way we became connected,” said Wexler. “It was round-about, but it lent me credibility to my work. Era is incredibly support- ing of young filmmakers. He gives freedom to the filmmaker while staying involved and serv- ing as a mentor.”

“Working with Tanya and Stephen [Dyer of Chimera Films] on ‘Finding North’ had been a great pleasure,” Deutchman said in making the produc- tion announcement for “Ball in the House.” “When we met and I asked what they were working on at this time, Wexler was thrilled when they came to us with this terrific, well-written screenplay. We jumped at the chance to become involved.”

Throughout his 27-year career, Deutchman has worked on over 130 films. His screen credits include: associate producer of John Sayles’ “Mate- rian,” executive producer of Jonathan Demme’s “Swimming to Cambodia,” Gaby Sana’s “Miles from Home” and Paul Bartel’s “Scenes from the Class Struggle in Beverly Hills.” He is currently the president and CEO of StudioNext, a New York-based digital film and new media production company. Formerly, Deutchman was the founder and president of Fine Line Features and senior vice president of parent compa- ny New Line Cinema. He serves on the advisory boards of the Sundance Film Festival and the Los Angeles Independent Film Festival.

While at Columbia Wexler directed the short films “The Dance” and “Cool Shoes.” “The Dance” played at the Telluride Film Festival, The Seattle Film Festival and the First Look Series.

Wexler likes her time at Columbia to her role as a mother of children two— “When my children try to climb the stairs, I spot them, and help them do it on their own, much the same way pro- fessors and graduate school programs offer students a gen- ius—development. These help me develop—to help them take that extra step on their own. Colum- bia is a school for people through professors like Ira [Deutchman] and Zipporah Trop, an Israeli film director,” said Wexler.

“Ball in the House” allows you to have a transitional moment, where you are pre-professional but still don’t know how to cook a little bit. It gives you the opportunity to hone your skills and break it all out and come on out further ahead,” she said.