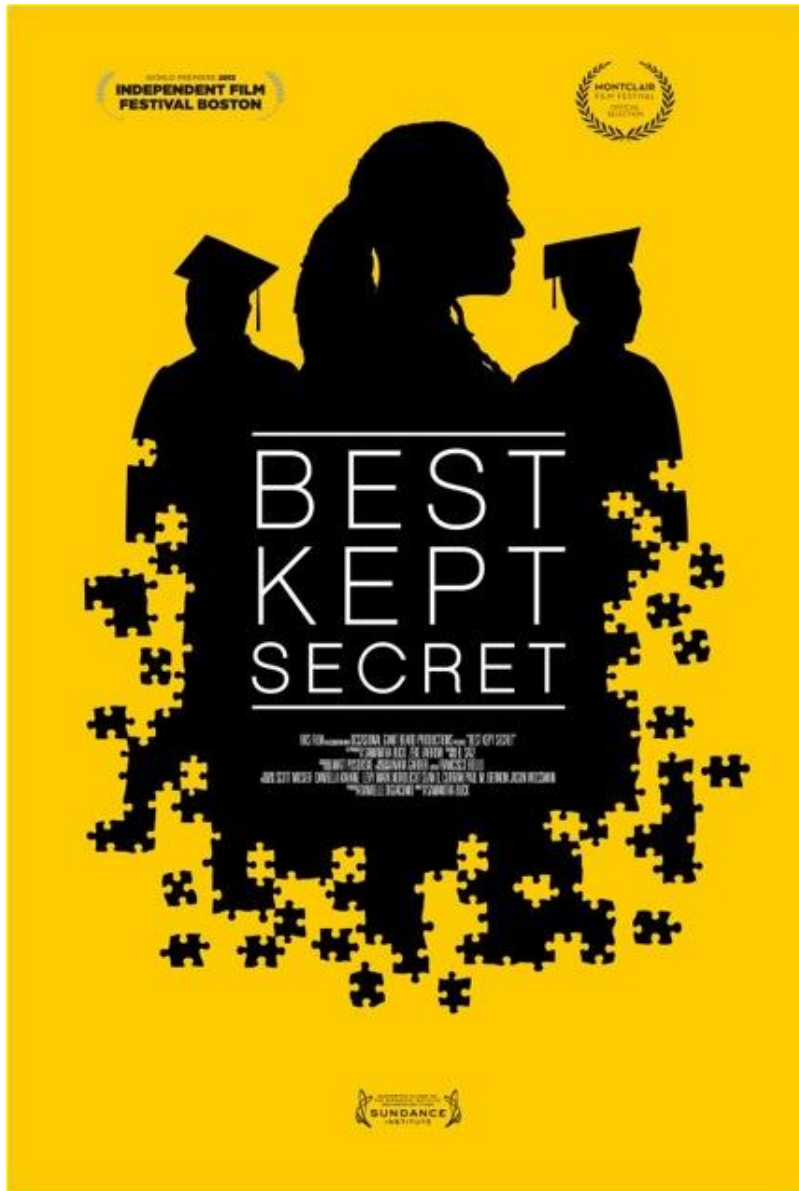


Argot Pictures presents



**Release date: Friday, September 6
at IFC Center in New York City
and Laemmle Playhouse 7 in Los Angeles**

85 minutes

Color, English, Not Rated

Website: <http://www.BestKeptSecretFilm.com>

Press downloads: http://argotpictures.com/best_kept_secret.html

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Synopsis

At JFK High School, located in the midst of a run-down area in Newark, New Jersey, the nation's 10th poorest city, administrators answer the phone by saying, "You've reached John F. Kennedy High School, Newark's Best Kept Secret." And indeed, it is. JFK is a public school for all types of students with special education needs, ranging from those on the autism spectrum to those with multiple disabilities. Janet Mino has taught her class of young autistic men for four years. When they all graduate in the spring of 2012, they will leave the security of the public school system forever. BEST KEPT SECRET follows Ms. Mino and her students over the year and a half before graduation. The clock is ticking to find them a place in the adult world – a job or rare placement in a recreational center - so they do not end up where their predecessors have, sitting at home, institutionalized, or on the streets.

Awards for BEST KEPT SECRET

WINNER – Audience Award for Best Documentary Feature

Independent Film Festival Boston, 2013

BEST OF THE FEST

AFI DOCS, 2013

More About The Film

In BEST KEPT SECRET, a Newark, New Jersey teacher struggles to prepare her students with autism to survive in the brutal world that awaits them once they graduate.

JFK High School, located in the midst of a run-down area in Newark, New Jersey, is a public school for all types of students with special education needs, ranging from those on the autism spectrum to those with multiple disabilities. Janet Mino has taught her class of young men with autism for four years.

BEST KEPT SECRET follows Mino and highlights the journeys of three of her students – Erik, Robert, and Quran – over the year and a half before graduation.

The film opens on the first day back at school, 2011. With the optimism of a fresh start, it's the time of year when possibilities seem limitless. Miss Mino hugs her colleagues and greets her students. Each student must learn to conquer his fears and control “socially unacceptable” behaviors.

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The clock is ticking to find them a place in the adult world – a job or rare placement in a recreational center – so they do not end up where their predecessors have, sitting at home, institutionalized, or on the streets.

Erik (photo below) is the class nerd — smart, talkative, and great at following directions. He is a joyful person with “two moms”; a biological mother who is too ill to care for him, and a dedicated and loving foster mother. It is clear that Erik is the student most ready to take on the real world.



Robert (photo below) is the biggest mystery and heartbreak in the class. His father home schooled him until he passed away 4 years ago, and Robert is now cared for by his aunt, a recovering drug addict. His chaotic home life has posed a problem in the classroom, as he is absent half the time. He is a smart student who can read and spell but over the last year has been digressing in class.



Quran (photo below) is the only student who has both of his parents raising him. He is a quiet soul who loves film. He is able to read and has control of all of his behaviors. Ms. Mino has high hopes Quran will find placement after school because of his good work ethic and parental support.



Ms. Mino joins JFK social worker and transition coach Cynthia Pullen-Thompson on a search for post-graduation placement options for her students. Mino quickly learns that the ideal place does not exist.

Filmmaker Statement by Director Samantha Buck

The first question I get about Best Kept Secret is usually, "What is your personal relationship to autism?" Until making this film, I always thought the answer was, "None." What I learned is that we are all connected to it. Autism is part of who we are as a society. Across the country young adults who turn 21 are pushed out of the school system. They often end up with nowhere to go; they simply disappear from productive society. This is what educators call "Falling off the cliff."

While I was on the festival circuit with my last feature documentary I saw many films about young children with autism. These films were moving and important, but they only spoke of a limited population - predominately White and financially stable. But what happens to children with autism who grow up in less fortunate circumstances? I began to research public schools in inner city areas all over and the best kind of accident of fate brought me to JFK and Janet Mino - a force of nature who changed my life. She has been a constant reminder to have faith, value every member of society, and believe in people's potential.

While Best Kept Secret may not help all of our boys, I hope it will pave the road for better options for the young men and women who come after them. I want the same thing for the young people depicted in this film as I want for any young person, a chance at a good quality of life and a bright future.

Q&A with Director Samantha Buck

Q: How did this film get its title?

BUCK: The motto of JFK High School is “Newark’s best kept secret.” Once we found that out, it just stuck for many reasons: First, public school is like a secret safe haven for autistic children before they turn 21. While many people have expectations that they will see terrible conditions for the not fully abled in public schools, more often than not, and especially with JFK, these are wonderful and supportive places in which students are really cared for before they have to enter the adult world, and many people do not know this. Second, the very subject of our film, these millions of young adults on the spectrum, is an unintentional secret that we hope to illuminate through this film. Finally, Janet Mino is the best kept secret for her six young students and their parents – a secret weapon, if you will.

Q: How did you learn about JFK and what led you to these film subjects?

In 2009 producer Danielle DiGiacomo and I were on the festival circuit with our documentary *21 BELOW*, and the market was inundated with films about autism. The majority of these films seemed to focus on a younger and more financially stable demographic. Most of them focused on the parents and cures. We cried like babies in almost all of them but it caused us to start wondering about the narrow lens through which we were seeing this issue. How were communities of color and low-income families dealing with the same struggles.

Around that time a friend of mine who had been extremely depressed started teaching in a self contained classroom with young adults on the spectrum in a public high school in New York City. It changed her life. It stabilized her. She talked very openly about her frustrations and the challenges these kids would face in the years to come. I started filming her in her environment. When I was around her and her fellow special education teachers I was captivated by their stories. They handled their jobs with love, and were so grounded. This experience hooked me.

I had a breakthrough many months into my research and my extensive efforts to gain access to a school working with students with autism. A mother in the Bronx told me that while she had some issues with the public schools anything was better than what these students faced once they hit age 21 and “fall off the cliff.” That was euphemism for what happens to people who “age out” of the school system.

I was shocked. The more I listened to parents, teachers, and organizations the more apparent it became that this was a massive issue that no one was talking about. As I learned the fate of what happens to most people when they fall of the cliff and looked at the number of kids who would be coming of age in the years to come, I was blown away.

Meanwhile, I had been trying to get into the New York public school system for almost a year, before getting shut out. After some research, we decided that Newark and JFK would be the best place to go, and after meeting with the Director of Communication for the schools there we were filming within two months. It was

fortuitous that we ended up in Newark, in a classroom where everyone was aging out at the same time, and met the remarkable Janet Mino.

Q: Can you please discuss the aesthetic choices you made in the production and finishing processes?

BUCK: Aesthetically we wanted Best Kept Secret to feel like the classic old school verite documentaries and follow the classic structure of a “school” film.

Two big influences were Laurent Cantet’s THE CLASS and all the Maysles brothers’ films, especially SALESMAN. We have seen many films about people on the spectrum where you get to know them solely through the lens of the neurotypical subjects. It was important to us that the guys in class were not seen just through the eyes of Mino or their parents.

Our guys are mainly non-verbal so they cannot tell you how they are feeling. We wanted the camera to be intimate but objective enough that it would allow them to just be themselves in front of the camera. We wanted to capture their personalities, behaviors, relationships, and ticks without placing judgment. We thought it would allow the audience to get to know and care about them on a personal level.

I was not interested in romanticizing or sensationalizing the realities of Newark. Rather I wanted the film to capture the reality of they day-to-day lives of our teachers and parents as much as it could. We wanted Newark to feel like the Newark we experienced. Desolate, yes, but with pockets of hope.

Most of the people we encountered were extremely positive and handled tough situations with dignity and humor, despite the enormity of what they were dealing with. I felt like the best way to not romanticize, place judgment, and be as objective as possible while still allowing a level of intimacy was to keep this as classically structured and observational as possible.

This is also why we did not oversaturate the film with music. We chose to use music in a more subtle way; not to manipulate emotions and tell the audience how to feel, but to move the story forward. Most of the sounds and music came from the subjects, not our own particular tastes.

Finally, we really eschewed the use of talking head “experts”, because of the choice to get the audience to feel intimately connected to our subjects. We did not want to have people talking about them and telling the audience how to think about them and their situation. We wanted to keep it to the journey of these particular characters.

Q: Why did you choose to focus on “aging out”? What do you see as some of the solutions?

BUCK: Statistically speaking there is a staggering population of young men and women on the spectrum who are beginning to age out. This is not a small problem or insignificant number. We aren’t set up or have not begun to seriously figure out

how to incorporate people on the spectrum into our society. It is nearly impossible for low income working families. We all have a right to some kind of quality of life. There are jobs that three guys in the film would relish at having. They would be the best and most loyal employees you could wish for.

There need to be more options. These centers need more support so they can have the hours that working parents need. These families need access to more transportation. There needs to be better access to job coaches. A simple thing like these centers staying open and being able to help with transportation would be life changing for some of these families.

Oddly, although it is a problem that will affect millions of people every year in the years to come, it has barely been addressed in both the mainstream media and in policy initiatives. This is such a striking omission. It is baffling. Every parent in the world gets nervous about the adult lives of their children when they graduate from the support system of school and home. What the parents of people on the spectrum, particularly those with scarce economic resources, have to face, is horrifying.

Q: What is your favorite scene in the film?

BUCK: In the car, after Janet Mino and Cynthia Pullen-Thompson, the school social worker, leave Pathways. Mino, saddened by seeing her former student just doing piecemeal work as if he is in a factory, questions Cynthia about the quality of options like these for her students.

Mino shouts, "We have to give them a life." Cynthia, the pragmatic realist, answers by explaining that is not how life after school works, and it is not Mino's responsibility.

It is a conversation between a realist who has had to let go and not think about the lives of these children once they graduate, and that of a hopeful idealist, who wants to fight for them to have rich lives. This articulates the entire problem. Without programs, money, and resources, these kids are not able to make their own lives; and they will end up sitting at home, institutionalized, or worse.

Q: What surprised you the most during the production process?

BUCK: It was a surprise to all of us how at this school in the middle of one of the most run-down and economically depressed neighborhoods in Newark, there is such a positive and uplifting energy. Walking into JFK is like walking into a hug. Seriously. Inside those walls, everyone is so supportive, welcoming, strong, and nonjudgmental. Considering what they deal with and see every day, it was stunning for the production team of people who complain and feel sorry for ourselves because of our petty problems, and see these people never complain or feel self-pity. You simply stop seeing any difference between the not fully abled students compared to the neurotypical population.

About the Filmmakers

Director/Producer

Samantha Buck's directorial debut *21 BELOW* earned critical acclaim and has aired on Channel 4 in the U.K. and YES in Israel. It was an official selection at Hot Docs in Toronto, AFI/Discovery SilverDOCS, Sheffield Doc Fest, Newport International Festival, Galway Film Fleadh, Helsinki's Docpoint, and the Woodstock Film Festival. As an actress she played one of Vincent D'Onofrio's partners on *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, and opposite David Wain on *Stella*. Other credits include: *Third Watch*, David Milch's *Big Apple*, *Golden Boy*, *Blue Bloods*, *Six Degrees* and *Z Rock*, and *Sex and the City*. Film credits include *Searching for Paradise*, *Wirey Spindell*, *24-Hour Woman* and *Gayby*. She can be seen in the upcoming films *What Maise Knew* and *Hellbenders*. Samantha is a graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. She currently attends Columbia University MFA Film program for directing.

Producer

Danielle DiGiacomo is the Manager of Video Distribution at The Orchard, a pioneering, 15-year old independent music and video distribution company operating in more than 20 global markets. Previously, she worked as the Community Manager at IFP, the nation's oldest and largest membership organization for independent filmmakers and as Head of Documentary Acquisitions for IndiePix Films. She associate Produced two documentary features, Jennifer Venditti's *BILLY THE KID* (Best Documentary Feature, L.A. Film Festival 2007, South by Southwest 2007), Samantha Buck's *21 BELOW*, and Andrew Semans' fiction feature *NANCY PLEASE*, which premiered at Tribeca Film Festival in April 2012. DiGiacomo was one of 6 producers selected to attend the 2011 Sundance Institute's Creative Producing Lab, where she was the Mark Silverman Honoree.

Director of Photography

Nara Garber is a documentary filmmaker who divides her time between directing, shooting, and editing, often wearing several hats on the same project. She currently directs and produces short-form documentaries for Carnegie Hall and has helmed projects for Sotheby's, Citigroup, Altria, The Point Foundation and the political satirists, *Billionaires for Bush*. She is also co-director, producer, and director of photography of *Flat Daddy*, a feature documentary about military families scheduled for completion in early 2010. As a DP, Nara has dragged gear across five continents in search of the perfect shot. Her camerawork has appeared on HBO (*Making the Crooked Straight*) and PBS (*NOW with Bill Moyers*), and her Best Cinematography award in the 2008 Asian American Film Lab's 72 Hour Film Shootout is a testament to her ability to frame a shot with no sleep. *After Roberto*, a feature filmed on location in Northern Italy, closed the 2005 Genova Film Festival, and *About Face* (Hot Docs, 2009), *Survive and Thrive*, and *Striking a Chord* (shot on military bases in Southern Iraq) are currently making the rounds of the domestic festival circuit.

Editor

Francisco Bello is an ACADEMY AWARD® and three time EMMY Nominee. He studied at the Cooper Union School of Art, and has worked in the post-production of films by Kevin Smith, Michael Moore, and George Butler, among others. His recent editorial work includes SUMMER SUN WINTER MOON (ITVS), NEITHER MEMORY NOR MAGIC (MoMA Documentary Fortnight), BETTY LA FLACA (HBO), and JULIETA Y RAMON (Showtime). Francisco launched Ropa Vieja Films LLC in 2007 SALIM BABA, which has screened in over 100 festivals worldwide including Sundance, Telluride, IDFA, Woodstock and Tribeca. In 2008 SALIM BABA was Nominated for an ACADEMY AWARD® for Best Short Documentary, followed by a News & Documentary EMMY Nomination in 2009. Francisco produced and edited WAR DON DON which won the Special Jury Prize at the 2010 SXSW Film Festival, and for which he was awarded the first Karen Schmeer Award for Excellence in Documentary Editing. "War Don Don" was Nominated for two 2011 Emmys in the categories: Outstanding Coverage of a News Story (Long Form) and Outstanding Editing. In 2010, Francisco also released his directorial debut commissioned by HBO Documentary Films, EL ÉSPIRITU DE LA SALSA ("The Spirit of Salsa") which premiered at the 2010 Tribeca Film Festival's Drive-In series. Most recently, Francisco completed his work as writer, producer, editor of CODE OF THE WEST (directed by Rebecca Richman Cohen), which premiered at the 2012 SXSW Film Festival. Francisco is currently at work with the reunited creative team behind SALIM BABA, co-directing a new film entitled MU XIN: NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND. He is also currently editing the feature length documentary, OUR NIXON. Both films are due for release in 2012. Francisco has been awarded the 2011 NALIP Estela Award, fellowships from the PBS/WGBH Producer's Academy, the Latino Producer's Academy, Tribeca All Access, and grants from the Tribeca Film Institute, Urban Artists Initiative, and Queens Council on the Arts. He has reviewed proposals for the Tribeca Film Institute and has mentored filmmakers for the NALIP and CineReach fellowships. Francisco has taught Final Cut Pro editing and post-production at the Cooper Union and continues to balance his time between freelancing as a filmmaker and developing upcoming projects from Ropa Vieja Films.

Writer/Co-Producer

Zeke Farrow. As a screenwriter: *Outward Blonde* (Miramax), *Slo-mo* (HBO, Sundance, Telluride, Atlanta Jury Award, Austin Audience Award, Nantucket Special Jury Prize), the feature length *Slo-mo* (Single Cell), *VOID* (Stellar Networks Screenwriting Award), *In Your Dreams: The Hot New Teen Musical* ([soundtrack](#)), *Drama School*, *Organics*, *My Mother the Rockstar*, *Five Year Plan*, *Reality Check*, *Killer Blondes From Outer Space*, *Gutter*, *Great Lakes*, ...and *Jane makes Five*, *Poolboys*, *My Mother the Pornstar*, *Gowanus*, and *Abilities*. Zeke is also the co-creator of the web series [Sherri Davis: R-CA](#). As a producer: *Woman in Burka* (co-producer, Slamdance Spirit Award, Arizona Film Festival Merit Award). Advertising: Creative consultant and writer of national television and print campaigns for Old Navy (fall 2006, summer 2007, summer 2008, Holiday 2008) and Baby Phat. Zeke is a guest lecturer in screenwriting at The New York Film Academy.

Executive Producers

Scott Mosier has produced, and co-edited, most all of the View Askew Universe's motion picture projects beginning in 1994 with writer-director Kevin Smith's *"Clerks."* The films Mosier has produced for Smith include *"Clerks," "Mallrats," "Chasing Amy," "Dogma," "Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back," "Jersey Girl," "Clerks II,"* and *"Zack and Miri Make a Porno."* Mosier also co-executive produced, with Smith, the Academy Award winning film *"Good Will Hunting"*. Mosier's editing credits include actor James Franco's directorial debut *"The Ape,"* the documentary *"Small Town Gay Bar,"* a Sundance and film festival hit; and Smith's *"Clerks," "Chasing Amy," "Dogma," "Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back," "Jersey Girl."* He Produced *"Salim Baba"*, a short documentary subject that was nominated for an Oscar and went on to also be nominated for an Emmy and is Executive Producing a slate of documentaries in various stages.

Daniella Kahane

Mark Nordlicht

Paul Bernon

Sean Curran

Credits

Director: Samantha Buck

Producer: Danielle DiGiacomo

Executive Producers: Scott Mosier, Daniella Kahane, Mark Nordlicht, Paul M. Bernon, Sean Q. Curran and Jason Weissman

Director of Photography: Nara Garber

Editor: Francisco Bello

Writer/Co-Producer: Zeke Farrow