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By Nancy Colosurdo

If there are, in low-income areas across America, what film director Mary Mazzio calls “hundreds of thousands of dry seeds that just need a few drops of water,” then her latest project has brought some welcome rain.

Her documentary, [Ten9Eight, Shoot For The Moon](#), is a gripping account of what happens when kids facing major obstacles enroll in a course at school that teaches them about entrepreneurship and then go on to compete in a national [business plan](#) competition through the [Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship](#) [NFTE]. The film’s name is derived from the statistic that a kid drops out of high school every nine seconds in America.

Mazzio, an award-winning filmmaker and former Olympic athlete, brings us the stories, the respective challenges on the journey of each student, and how the spirit of competition and the power that comes with knowledge inject a new level of enthusiasm for life into them. As I watched the stories unfold, statements like this made me sit up and pay attention:

“I don’t want to end up dead.”

“One day your struggle is going to prepare you for greatness.”

“I am an entrepreneur.”

Imagine making the former statement as a teenager. Imagine being able to say the latter with conviction in high school. Both seem mind-boggling.

“Some are going to school hungry, have no parental support, drugs infested their school or whatever their circumstances,” Mazzio said in our recent interview. “Then they get into this class by happenstance and they’re learning about invoices and communication skills. How

these kids are learning these skills is totally relevant to their lives. To a kid whose parents are on crack, what does Shakespeare or trigonometry mean? I studied Shakespeare, and it was great, but you know what I’m saying.”

Mazzio first learned of NFTE upon meeting its [founder](#) and president, Steve Mariotti, at a screening of her film *Lemonade Stories* in 2004. Later, she was on the verge of doing another project that fell through and, given that her discussion with Mariotti never left her, she began exploring the possibility of making a film about NFTE’s national business plan competition.

Enter financing from the Templeton Foundation, which loved the idea of reaching inner city kids, and ancillary funding from the Kauffman Foundation, and Mazzio was able to start filming in April of 2008. The competition had more than 24,000 entries and there were 12 semifinalist centers around the country.

“I thought, if I’m going to jump in on the state or regional level, I better take a film crew,” Mazzio said. “I’m so glad I did. We went looking for who had a unique story, who was charismatic. We didn’t want to have to reverse engineer (tell the story after knowing the winner), so we had to use our instincts.”

The film culminates at the NFTE finals in New York and captures the excitement of the students, who by then are well-versed in Power Point presentation, business principles, public speaking and appropriate professional attire. It’s immensely gratifying to watch.

“The mission of the film is to get kids to see other kids just like them,” Mazzio said. “If one kid doesn’t wind up behind bars because of this film ...”

*Ten9Eight*, set to release during Global Entrepreneurship Week (Nov. 16-22), has a passionate introduction by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

“The president has drawn a line in the sand,” Duncan said on *The Colbert Report* last month. “By 2020 we have to lead the world in percent of college graduates ... Either we’re going to invest in education early or keep building jail cells at the back end.”

Among the many supportive calls about this film that Mazzio has received was one from the office of Karen Hughes and Dana Perino.

“It’s wonderful,” Mazzio said. “There are very few issues where the right and left can come together.”

In a recent David Brooks column in *The New York Times* about the Obama administration’s \$4.3 billion Race to the Top Fund for education, he quotes Jeb Bush: “I’ve been deeply disturbed by a lot that’s going on in Washington, but this is not one of them. President Obama has been supporting a reform secretary, and this is deserving of Republican support.”

If all this governmental focus on education wasn’t enough to bring attention to the film, Mazzio’s next brainstorm led to another terrific boost.

“We scored a really unique deal with AMC [Theatres],” Mazzio said. “We have an exclusive relationship with them to release *Ten9Eight*. Normally there’s a middle man in distribution.”

She had tried the conventional route, but came up empty.

“I thought, why don’t I call up theatre owners?” she said. “It was the luck of the Rolodex. AMC

really believes in the content. This is not *Transformers*. They’re not going to make a ton of money.”

The real magic of this relationship is that Mazzio got in there just as AMC has been embracing a new philosophy.

“We have new leadership [at AMC] the last year or so,” said Nikkole Denson, the recently hired vice president of specialty and alternative content for AMC Theatres. “We recognize our guests have different preferences, not just for commercial films but culturally relevant films. The plan is to celebrate independent film. *Ten9Eight* is not just about the story, but what it does for the community.”

In what Mazzio called a “perfect” dovetailing, she has also signed a deal with BET; BET and Viacom (VIA-B) have launched Get Schooled, a new initiative of the Gates Foundation.

“Going in, I thought [the NFTE competition] would be so compelling, but I didn’t realize how universal it could be,” Mazzio said. “I had no idea.”

Early on, she rose to a particular professional and personal challenge that made quite an impact on the film and her life.

“I said to my husband, ‘I’m a 40-something hockey mom with blue eyes,’” she said. “I was worried the kids wouldn’t be able to identify and trust me, so I was going to hand off the interviewing to someone else. My husband said, ‘Don’t you dare.’ ... I’m so glad I didn’t succumb to that characterization of myself. I feel like I have this whole new group of friends.”

Let it rain.