

## Robert Townsend takes tales online

**'DIARY OF A SINGLE MOM' | Chicago-born entertainer creates webisodes to help parents**

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BY [SANDRA GUY](#) Sun-Times Columnist

Robert Townsend, Hollywood director and star of "Hollywood Shuffle," remembers how his mother, a single mom, raised four children on the West Side.

"We lived all over Chicago, but we finally settled on the West Side," he said.

Townsend watched lots of TV and started entertaining his mom with his impressions of actors from Bogart to Shakespeare. Townsend credits the late James Reed, his fifth-grade teacher at Hefferan Elementary, with recognizing his talent and driving him to speech festival competitions, which he won.

"My family was on welfare and didn't have a car," said Townsend, a graduate of Austin High School.

"Teachers can really affect a kid's life," he said. "I named my character, Jefferson Reed in 'Meteor Man,' after my teacher."

Townsend's background informed one of his latest projects -- an online video drama, "Diary of a Single Mom," debuting Jan. 27 on the Public Internet Channel, *PIC.tv*. (His documentary on the history of black comedians, "Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black History," debuted at the Sundance Film Festival Jan. 15).

The initial eight-segment Diary series focuses on three single moms from different cultural backgrounds: Monica Calhoun ("Sister Act 2," "The Best Man") is Ocean, 27, who tries to find a new job and get a GED while being consumed with her two children; Valery Ortiz ("South of Nowhere," "10 Items or Less") is 25-year-old Lupe, who struggles with being a young woman and a parent, and Janice Lynde ("Six Feet Under," "General Hospital") is Peggy, a white woman in her 50s who has never paid the bills but is forced to raise her 11-year-old grandson after her husband and daughter die in a car accident.

The series also stars acting icons Billy Dee Williams as Ocean's uncle and Richard Roundtree as Ocean's mentor.

Chicago native Cheryl L. West, whose play "Holiday Heart" was turned into a movie on Showtime that Townsend directed, created the characters and wrote the script for "Diary of a Single Mom."

West attended Bryn Mawr Elementary on the South Side, and graduated from Thornwood High School after her family moved to south suburban Markham.

West, a single mother of a 12- and 13-year-old, said the series reflects universal themes with which every single parent grapples: "How is there going to be enough time? Can I do enough? Am I providing well enough?"

"Yet there are millions of women and men who manage and do it well," West said.

West said she appreciated being able to create a serious drama with an African-American female as the lead actor.

"We're dealing with very real issues and situations -- people trying not only to strive but to thrive," she said. "These women [in the series] are able to marshal their strengths to help each other."

Each webisode lasts 12 minutes, and will let viewers comment on the episode page or on the series' page on MySpace.

Townsend hopes the series can change people's lives by enabling them to ask questions and find information on a Web toolbox.

The toolbox pops up on the side of the screen and offers online resources dealing with the issue at hand, whether it's finding child care or GED classes. The content will be localized for Chicagoans in the next couple of months.

The toolbox may point the viewer to a blog, a Web tool or content from TheBeehive.org, a Web portal created by the series' parent organization, One Economy (*www.one-economy.com*).

One Economy, a nonprofit that calls its mission public-purpose media, started nearly nine years ago to advocate for greater broadband access and quality information online.

One Economy plans to syndicate the toolbox so that other nonprofits and public-policy organizations can post the toolbox on their own sites.

"The organization could embed the toolbox on its Web site. The toolbox would come with a short snippet or a full video program in a media player," said One Economy's Rob Bole.

The groups that embed the toolbox could add their own content.

Bole sees the power of the Diary series partly because it is unique: The scripted fictional show, chock-ful of stars, lets people dream about themselves in a new way.

The key is to make the content engaging, authentic and relevant, rather than preachy and guilt-filled, Bole said.

"Because we come from the community development world, we have a better sense of how people's lives work in their communities," he said. "People know we're doing it in their self interest."