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Note to Editors and Producers: Local spokespeople may be available for interviews.
B-Roll and Photos are also available.

“Freedom Machines”

Showcases “Enabling” Technologies – and Takes Aim at Barriers that Limit their Use

*Narrated by “The Station Agent” star, Peter Dinklage, **Freedom Machines** has its broadcast premiere Tuesday, September 14, on PBS’ s P.O.V. (Check local listings).*

“Leave your misconceptions and low expectations behind.” That is the message at the heart of **Freedom Machines**, a new film that has its television premiere September 14 on PBS’ acclaimed documentary series, P.O.V.

It’s a message that resonates for Susanna Sweeney-Martini, disabled since childhood, who is completing her college education with the aid of a power wheelchair and voice-input software; for Floyd Stewart, paralyzed in mid-life by a car accident, who uses “enabling” tools to teach other disabled people to lead independent lives; and for Shoshana Brand, who has blossomed as a small business owner with the aid of a programmable keyboard.

These and other personal stories are at the center of **Freedom Machines**. Yet the film is also a story of broken promises and wasted human potential.

There are 54 million disabled people living in the United States today. Yet, despite the promise of innovative new technologies and landmark legislation like the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), lack of funding, information, and political will have left crucial liberating technologies out of reach for most Americans.

Take Latoya Nesmith. A bright 17-year-old who dreams of becoming a translator at the United Nations, Nesmith is determined to get the best education she can. Yet the lack of assistive technology in her public school is a seemingly insurmountable hurdle. “What happens is that every time it comes to ordering high tech equipment they ask for another evaluation,” says her mother, Felicia Smalls. “...This has been going on for the last four years, doesn’t matter what district.”

The lack of accessible tools has thrust many parents into the role of advocates – a role that has become a lifelong mission for Jacquelyn Brand, Shoshana’s mother. As the founder of the nonprofit Alliance for Technology Access, Brand urges all parents of children with disabilities to make their voice count. “We have to stand up and demand that our children be provided with these crucial,

life changing tools because nobody else will do it for us,” says Brand. “We’re just asking for the same thing that all parents want for their children: the opportunity to lead independent and happy adult lives.”

Fourteen years after the passage of the ADA, its promise of equal access to education, employment and other essential activities and services for the country’s largest minority group remains largely unfulfilled. Yet the film makes clear that assistive technologies are not just a human rights imperative—in many cases, they are also sound fiscal policy.

“People should not be warehoused in a facility like cattle, but due to the lack of programs that provide assistive technology and attendant care, you have no choice,” says Stewart, who, rendered quadriplegic in his mid-30s, freed himself from a de facto life sentence in a nursing home and now teaches others to follow his trail. “Why pay \$65,000 a year to keep someone in a nursing home when \$25,000 will allow them to live independently?”

Interweaving the stories of unforgettable individuals with commentary from the creators of assistive technologies, and advocates for disability rights and “universal design” concepts, ***Freedom Machines*** throws out old concepts of disability, showing that technological advances can accomplish the impossible. By emphasizing possibilities, the film challenges the very language we use. Dean Kamen, inventor of the first stair-climbing wheelchair, asks: “I want to play tennis at 75, I want that new knee. Is the new knee a ‘disability device?’ It’s an ‘enabling device.’”

Narrated by Peter Dinklage, the four-foot, five-inch star of the film “The Station Agent,” ***Freedom Machines*** will premiere on national television on September 14, 2004, on PBS’ acclaimed documentary showcase, P.O.V.

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