

# HYDE PARK HERALD

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## Educator Sue Duncan's lifelong passion as seen through the lens



*Sue Duncan greets a student on the red carpet*

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A sneak preview of “Remember Me Sue,” a documentary about the life-changing work of educator Sue Duncan, was shown Thursday evening at the ShowPlace ICON Theater in the South Loop. Duncan, her family and many of her past and present pupils were in attendance to celebrate the film and her legacy.

Duncan is a Hyde Park native and the mother of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. In the midst of the civil rights movement in 1961, Sue was a 26-year-old white teacher who opened a children’s center for inner city Black youth on the racially divided South Side of Chicago. Once they got over the shock of seeing this young white woman in her blue van come and go from their neighborhood every school day, the children began to anticipate her arrival and over the next 50 years Duncan taught thousands of children at her center and became a mother figure to multiple generations of families.

Notable alumni of the Sue Duncan Children's Center include late actor Michael Clarke Duncan, singer R. Kelly and Chicago Bulls basketball player Nazr Mohammed.

Melina Kolb, director of the film, was a volunteer at the center during her college years at University of Chicago between 2003 and 2008.

"Sue's program was unlike any other program I've worked with," Kolb said. "I never had a boss care to ask I how felt after my first day. It shows her personality. She's always conscious of others. That's why people are drawn to her."

Kolb began filming Duncan's program about 10 years ago when she joined the film club at her school. As a result she ended up with a short documentary about the center.

It was in 2011, when she heard about Duncan's retirement from the program due to her Alzheimer's diagnosis, that Kolb realized she wanted to create a longer documentary about Duncan's work with the program. She raised money through Kickstarter to get the project done.



*Left to right: Sue Duncan Children's Center board member and vice president of Loop Capital Markets Booker Whitt; Mary Hughes, SDCC staff and alum; Ted Richards, SDCC staff and founder of the Chicago Wisdom Project, and Jeff Gray, SDCC board member and president of Hales Franciscan High School.*

At the preview screening, the interactions between Duncan and her students young and old mirrored the footage in Kolb's documentary. The students ran up to Duncan and

asked, “Do you remember me?” and then said, “I miss you.” In reply, after giving them a big hug, Duncan asked them their names and the spelling.

Kolb’s film uses archival footage from 1967 to 2004 along with recent scenes and interviews with Sue, her family and students and their families.

When asked what she thought about having a documentary about her program, Duncan just shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s seamless — her life is the program and the program is her life,” said Kolb.

Kolb, who said Duncan remembered her as the girl with the camera, said filming Duncan after the Alzheimer’s diagnosis wasn’t difficult but “I would have to keep reminding her what I was doing.”

Since Sue’s retirement, her son Owen Duncan has succeeded her in running the center, which is located in Jackie Robinson Elementary School, 4225 S. Lake Park Ave. The center’s also has a new second location, Fiske Elementary School, 6020 S. Langley Ave.

Sarah Duncan, Sue Duncan’s daughter, said that from the time she was born she and her brothers Arne and Owen traveled with their mother to the program every day. She said the preview-screening event was like reuniting with family.

She said Kolb, who she refers to as “Mel,” did an amazing job with the documentary.

“Mel really captured the essence of the center and Sue’s lifework,” Sarah Duncan said. “She knocked it out of the park. I just loved it.”

The television premiere of “Remember Me Sue” will air at 9 p.m. Thursday, May 1, on PBS.

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