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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE!

“Searching for Sequoyah” documentary distributed nationally by American Public Television to premiere on PBS stations in November, 2021.

Pacifica, CA 08/11/2021. American Public Television (APT) will distribute the 56-minute documentary film *Searching for Sequoyah*, which will premiere nationally on PBS stations in November, 2021. *Searching for Sequoyah* was produced by Canadian Ojibway filmmaker James M. Fortier and Choctaw author/filmmaker LeAnne Howe. Howe was also the lead writer with assistance from Fortier and Co-Producer/Host/Narrator, Joshua Nelson (Cherokee Nation). Fortier also directed and edited the film. Major funding for the production was provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting through producing partner and presenter Vision Maker Media. The film was also produced in association with the University of Georgia, Athen’s - Dept. of English and the University of Oklahoma’s Dept. of Film & Media Studies., with additional support and cooperation from the Cherokee Nation Film Office, Tahlequah, OK, the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokees, also in Tahlequah and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in Cherokee, NC.

Short Synopsis:

“Searching for Sequoyah” chronicles the life and accomplishments of the legendary 19th century Cherokee visionary, Sequoyah (George Guess), through the oral stories of five modern day Sequoyah descendants. While much is known about Sequoyah's Cherokee writing system or syllabary, very little is known about the man himself. How did this illiterate Cherokee invent a writing system that transformed the future of his people? From Tuskegee, Tennessee to Zaragoza, Mexico, “Searching for Sequoyah” takes viewers on a journey retracing his final quest to reunite his fellow Cherokees in Mexico, the mystery surrounding his death, and the legacy he left behind.

Long Synopsis:

Searching for Sequoyah explores the mystery and legacy of the Cherokee genius George Guess, more commonly known as “Sequoyah,” who created a writing system for the Cherokee people in the early 1800’s. The story spans two countries and three Cherokee nations, leading viewers on a journey through the life and death of Sequoyah, his travels across the continent, and his final 1842 expedition to Mexico where he hoped to persuade the “Mexican Cherokees” to reunite with the new Cherokee Nation in Indian Territory. Starting in 1838, the Cherokees were forcibly removed from their southeast homelands by President Andrew Jackson and relocated to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. Thousands died along the way on what is now known as the “Trail of Tears.” The film chronicles the mysteries and legacy of Sequoyah across the fabric of history through the Cherokee syllabary, and through the modern lives of some of Sequoyah’s descendants, who continue his legacy through their own work as artists, storytellers, performers, Cherokee language teachers and more. From early 19th century cave walls in the southeast, to the first Cherokee language newspapers, to smartphones in the digital age, Sequoyah’s tracks are all around us.

Sequoyah spent much of his life living outside the boundaries of the Cherokee homelands, yet he was culturally and linguistically wholly Cherokee. Known as an artist, soldier and diplomat, Sequoyah’s advice was often sought out by leaders of the various Cherokee factions who drove a wedge between those who favored removal to Indian Territory, and those who wanted to stay and resist. In 1842, Sequoyah sought to reunite the “Old Settler” Cherokees who were forced out of the new Republic of Texas and migrated further southwest into Mexico, just as the newly established Cherokee Nation in Indian Territory was attempting to heal old wounds leftover from the Trail of Tears forced removal. The historical record is spotty, but in *Searching for Sequoyah*, Sequoyah’s descendants come together with Cherokee scholar and host, Joshua Nelson, to share some surprising stories and anecdotes of their famous ancestor. Winnie Perdue, Nathan Wolfe, John Ross, Sequoyah Guess, and Verna Bates—all lineal descendants of Sequoyah—share their family’s stories of Sequoyah, passed down through the generations, shedding light on what motivated their elder ancestor to risk his life and travel to Mexico to bring Cherokees back into the newly reunited Cherokee Nation.

Sequoyah is an enigma—he spoke no English, only Cherokee. Most of the facts about his life are open to debate, including his paternity, his age, his appearance and even his name. Cherokee Language Director and artist Roy Boney, Jr., states, “His entire life is shrouded in mystery.” While working in a blacksmith shop at the Tellico Blockhouse circa 1808 (Fort Loudon, TN), Sequoyah allegedly observed American soldiers writing and passing letters on paper, which would become known to the Cherokee as “talking leaves.” Though illiterate in English, Sequoyah was a natural genius and visionary who was determined to give his Cherokee people the power of a written language. Around 1809 he began working in secret on his writing system. Some Cherokees thought he was crazy, attempting to thread sounds on an invisible symbol. Others put him on trial for practicing sorcery, assaulted him, burned down his cabin and destroyed his work. In the beginning, even his own wife was suspicious and unhappy with his efforts.

In 1821, after more than a decade of trial and error under enormous obstacles, and with the crucial eventual assistance from his wife and daughter, Sequoyah finally completed his syllabary, made up of

one character for each syllable in the language—86 in total. After initial skepticism, the Cherokee National Council officially adopted Sequoyah's syllabary in 1825. It was the only indigenous writing system north of Meso-America, and it lifted the Cherokee people into literacy almost overnight.

The historic record of Sequoyah's death is scant, but apocryphal tales are plenty. *Searching for Sequoyah* retraces Sequoyah's final 1842 journey into Mexico, from the mountains outside Múzquiz, deep in the Mexican state of Coahuila—where members of the Kickapoo tribe settled after being expelled from Texas along with the Cherokees in 1839—to a cave outside of Zaragoza (formerly known as San Fernando de Rosas), where local oral traditions allege he died and was buried. Sequoyah's great-great-great-great granddaughter, 81-year-old Winnie Guess Perdue of Tulsa, accompanies Joshua to retrace her famous ancestor's final steps in Mexico. Along the way, Winnie and Joshua meet local Mexican historians, the mayors of Morelos and Zaragoza, museum curators, descendants of escaped slaves from southeastern tribes, and many Mexican people familiar with the stories of her ancestor, Sequoyah. Winnie also meets local historian Alberto Galindo. His archival and genealogical research has documented the history of Cherokee and Kickapoo Indians in the area as early as 1820. Alberto accompanies Winnie to the local cemetery in Morelos, where one crumbling headstone over a century old still reads "Cherokee." Is it Sequoyah's grave, or that of another, forgotten Cherokee? Could he, or other strangers she encountered along the way turn out to be her Cherokee kin? Perhaps discovering familial connections such as these, the structural foundations of tribal community, was what drew Sequoyah to Mexico in the first place. As Cherokee scholar and author Daniel Justice states, "In some ways, the search for Sequoyah is really a search for us."

Filmmaker Bios:

James M. Fortier (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg First Nation) Producer/Director/Writer/Cinematographer/Editor

James is an enrolled member of the Biigtigong Nishnaabeg First Nation (formerly known as Ojibways of Pic River First Nation), located in Ontario, Canada. Born in Ontario and raised in the Chicago area, James set out for California at the ripe age of 20 to complete film school at San Francisco State University. His first documentary, *Alcatraz Is Not An Island* screened at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival in 2001 and aired nationally on PBS and APTN in Canada. For nearly 30 years James has been a Director of Photography on thousands of productions for Fortune 500 Companies, broadcast and cable television, PBS and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network in Canada. Since 1995, James' documentaries have focused primarily on Native American and environmental issues. He has won numerous awards, including three regional Emmy Awards and the DuPont Columbia Award For Broadcast Journalism as episode Producer/Director of *Bad Sugar*, part of the national PBS health series *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Society Sick?* James' 2013 documentary, *Gifts From the Elders* screened at several film festivals and aired on PBS in Minnesota. Other documentary works include the six hour PBS Ojibwe series *Waasa Inaabidaa: We Look In All Directions, Voices for the Land (Twin Cities Television, PBS)*, *Indian Country Diaries: Spiral of Fire*, *Playing Pastime: American Indians, Softball, and Survival*, *Green Green Water*, and two documentaries for the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe, *Pulling Together* (2003), and *Gathering Together* (2006). In 2007 James was the Artist in Residence at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign where he conducted a four week video production lab for the

American Indian Studies Department course, *American Indian Stereotypes in Film*, and presented several of his documentaries for students and faculty.

LeAnne Howe (Choctaw Nation)
Producer/Writer

LeAnne was the on-camera narrator and writer for the 90-minute PBS film, *Indian Country Diaries: Spiral of Fire*, 2006, set in North Carolina homelands of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Produced by the forerunner of *Vision Maker Media, Native American Public Telecommunications*, the film is a journey of discovery to understand the mix of tourism, community, and cultural preservation on the Qualla Boundary of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (Cherokee, NC). Along the way, Howe reconciles her own complex identity as the illegitimate daughter of a Choctaw mother, fathered by a Cherokee man she never knew, and raised by an adopted Cherokee family in Oklahoma. She was also the co-producer, writer, and on-camera narrator for the 2007 short documentary *Playing Pastime: American Indians, Softball and Survival*. Howe writes fiction, poetry, screenplays, scholarship, and plays that explore historical and contemporary Native American experiences. Howe's first novel *Shell Shaker*, 2001 received an American Book Award in 2002 from the Before Columbus Foundation. The French translation *Equinoxes Rouge* was the 2004 finalist for Prix Medici Estranger, one of France's top literary awards. *Evidence of Red*, Salt Publishing, UK, 2005 won the Oklahoma Book Award for poetry in 2006. Howe's second novel, *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story*, Aunt Lute Books, 2007 was chosen by Hampton University in Virginia as their 2009-2010 Read-in Selection. In 2013 she published two books, *Seeing Red, Pixeled Skins: American Indians and Film*, co-authored with Harvey Markowitz and Denise Cummings; and the award winning *Choctalking on Other Realities, a Memoir*. Her recent awards include: the 2015 MLA prize for Studies in Native American Literatures, Cultures, and Languages; and the 2015 Western Literature Association award for the Distinguished Achievement Award co-recipient for creative and critical work. She was the recipient of the 2012 USA Ford Fellowship, and a \$50,000 grant from United States Artists, a not for profit organization. Howe joined the class of 2012 awardees that included Annie Proulx, Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, David Henry Hwang, Edgar Heap of Birds, Adrienne Kennedy, and many others. During the Arab Spring, 2010-2011, she was a Fulbright Scholar at University of Jordan. Other awards include a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas, and the 2011 Tulsa Library Trust's "American Indian Author Award," at the Central Library in Tulsa, OK. Currently Professor Howe is the Eidson Distinguished Chair in American Literature at the University of Georgia, Athens.

Joshua B. Nelson (Cherokee Nation)
Co-Producer/Writer/Host/Narrator

Oklahoma, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and a native Oklahoman. He is Chair of the Film & Media Studies Department, Associate Professor of English, and affiliated faculty with Native American Studies and Women's & Gender Studies, focusing on American Indian literature and film. His book, *Progressive Traditions: Identity in Cherokee Literature and Culture* (University of

Oklahoma Press, 2014), looks to dismantle the pervasive assimilated/traditional dichotomy plaguing American Indian literary criticism. It explores the empowering potential of traditional, adaptive strategies and practices to address cultural and historical dilemmas. He earned his B.A. in Psychology at Yale University and his Ph.D. in English at Cornell University. Prof. Nelson takes a pluralist interest in tribalist, postcolonial, anarchistic, feminist, and pragmatic theoretical perspectives. His work has appeared in the American Indian Culture and Research Journal, The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature, and The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Film Comedy. He is at work on a book on representations of the body in Indigenous film, and is coproducer, narrator and interviewer on the forthcoming PBS documentary Searching for Sequoyah. He teaches courses on American Indian literature, literary criticism, and film, and he is the lead organizer of the Native Crossroads Film Festival and Symposium. He and his wife divide their time between Norman and Park Hill, Oklahoma.

Jerod Impichchaaha' Tate (Chickasaw Nation)
Composer/Music Supervisor

Praised and honored for “his ability to effectively infuse classical music with American Indian nationalism (Washington Post),” Jerod Impichchaaha' Tate, born in Norman, Oklahoma, is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation. Tate is dedicated to the development of American Indian classical composition. He is a 2011 Emmy Award winner, a Governor appointed Oklahoma State Creativity Ambassador and his music was recently featured on the HBO series Westworld. His commissioned works have been performed by the National Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony and Chorus, Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Minnesota Orchestra, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Oklahoma City Philharmonic, Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, Colorado Ballet, Canterbury Voices, Dale Warland Singers, Santa Fe Desert Chorale and Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. Tate has held Composer-in-Residence positions for Music Alive, a national residency program of the League of American Orchestras and New Music USA, the Joyce Foundation/American Composers Forum, Oklahoma City's NewView Summer Academy, Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation and Grand Canyon Music Festival Native American Composer Apprentice Project. Tate was the founding composition instructor for the Chickasaw Summer Arts Academy and has taught composition to American Indian high school students in Minneapolis, the Hopi, Navajo and Lummi reservations and Native students in Toronto.

Jennifer Kreisberg (Tuscarora)
Theme Song Composer/Performer

Mother, Singer, Composer, Producer, Teacher, and Activist - Jennifer (Tuscarora, North Carolina) comes from four generations of Seven Singing Sisters through the maternal line. She is known for fierce vocals, soaring range and lilting, breath-taking harmonies. Jennifer has been singing since she was a child. When she was seventeen, she joined the critically acclaimed Native women's Trio ULALI. Her voice perfectly wove the high strand of Ulali's renowned harmony with incomparable skill and grace for over twenty years. Together, they created a new sound in Indian Country. Jennifer's sharp wit and stage presence infused Ulali's shows with strong vocals, humor and camaraderie with the audience.

Jennifer is frequently called upon to guest lecture and conduct vocal workshops at universities, schools, in Native communities and at festivals throughout the United States and Canada. She has worked in film and television and has toured with renowned musicians throughout the world.

Joseph Erb (Cherokee Nation)

Lead Animation Artist

Joseph Lewis Erb is a computer animator, film producer, educator, language technologist and artist enrolled in the Cherokee Nation. He earned his MFA degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Erb created the first Cherokee animation in the Cherokee language, "The Beginning They Told". He used his artistic skills to teach Muscogee Creek and Cherokee students how to animate traditional stories. Most of this work is created in the Cherokee Language. He has spent many years working on projects that will expand the use of Cherokee language in technology and the Arts. Erb teaches at the University of Missouri teaching Digital Storytelling and Animation.

Jonathan Thunder (Ojibwe, Red Lake, MN)

Animation Artist

Jonathan Thunder is a multi-disciplinary artist currently residing in greater Minnesota, who works in canvas painting, animation, film making and 3D projection mapping. He has attended the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, NM and studied Visual Effects and Motion Graphics in Minneapolis, MN. His work has been featured in many state, regional, and national exhibitions, as well as in local and international publications. Thunder has won several awards for his art/animation work on multiple projects.

Karl W. Schmidt

Photographer/Videographer/Location Sound

Karl Schmidt is a photographer based in Norman, Oklahoma. He graduated from the prestigious photojournalism program at Western Kentucky University in 2006. He is currently the manager of the Digital Media Lab in the Film & Media Studies program at the University of Oklahoma. Karl spends his weekends traveling to weird places in Oklahoma and his summers searching for the mythical West.

About Vision Maker Media:

Vision Maker Media (VMM) is the premiere source of public media by and about Native Americans since 1976. Our mission is empowering and engaging Native people to share stories. We envision a world changed and healed by understanding Native stories and the public conversations they generate. We work with VMM funded producers to develop, produce and distribute programs for all public media. VMM supports training to increase the number of American Indians and Alaska Natives producing public broadcasting programs. A key strategy for this work is in partnerships with Tribal nations, Indian organizations and Native communities. Reaching the national public and a global market is the ultimate goal for the dissemination of Native public media that shares Native perspectives with the world. VMM is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) funded in part by the [Corporation for Public](#)

Broadcasting (CPB). For more information, visit visionmakermedia.org, or contact us at visionmaker@unl.edu or (402) 472-3522.

About American Public Television (APT):

American Public Television (APT) is the leading syndicator of high-quality, top-rated programming to the nation's public television stations. Founded in 1961, APT distributes 250 new program titles per year and more than one-third of the top 100 highest-rated public television titles in the U.S. APT's diverse catalog includes prominent documentaries, performance, dramas, how-to programs, classic movies, children's series and news and current affairs programs. *Doc Martin*, *Midsomer Murders*, *America's Test Kitchen From Cook's Illustrated*, *AfroPoP*, *Rick Steves' Europe*, *Pacific Heartbeat*, *Christopher Kimball's Milk Street Television*, *Legacy List with Matt Paxton*, *Lidia's Kitchen*, *Kevin Belton's New Orleans Kitchen*, *Simply Ming*, *The Best of the Joy of Painting* with Bob Ross, *Live From the Artists Den*, James Patterson's *Kid Stew* and *NHK Newslines* are a sampling of APT's programs, considered some of the most popular on public television. APT also licenses programs internationally through its APT Worldwide service and distributes Create[®]TV — featuring the best of public television's lifestyle programming — and WORLD[™], public television's premier news, science and documentary channel. To find out more about APT's programs and services, visit APTonline.org.