



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Contact: Indra Lusero, Assistant Director, 303-902-9402, [indralusero@palmcenter.ucsb.edu](mailto:indralusero@palmcenter.ucsb.edu)

### **NEW FILM ON GAYS IN THE MILITARY TO PREMIERE IN SAN FRANCISCO**

Award-Winning Filmmaker, Johnny Symons, Explores “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in New Documentary

Date: March 31, 2008

SANTA BARBARA, CA, March 31, 2008 - A new documentary about the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on gay troops will have its world premiere next month at the San Francisco International Film Festival in the Castro Theater. The film, “Ask Not,” was directed and produced by Emmy-nominated, Berkeley-based filmmaker, Johnny Symons, and will be broadcast on the prestigious PBS weekly independent film series, “Independent Lens” during the 2008-09 season.

“Ask Not” takes an innovative approach to exploring the military’s ban on openly gay troops. It follows several storylines that weave together the experiences of gay former and current service members, student activists protesting the policy and the political figures and military experts who helped shape and critique the ban. Taken as a whole, a rich portrait emerges of the full impact and hidden costs of the policy, which has caused the ouster of roughly 12,000 troops since 1994, and which burdens tens of thousands more with unique constraints on their speech and conduct.

Symons is known for his 2002 film, “Daddy & Papa,” which chronicled the struggles and triumphs of gay men with children. That documentary, which also aired nationally on PBS, premiered at Sundance and won more than fifteen awards. He is currently filmmaker-in-residence at the Palm Center, a think tank at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that studies gays in the military. The Center has given advisory support to the film, and assisted in providing historical background and in securing interview subjects. Dr. Aaron Belkin, Palm’s director and an associate professor of political science at University of California, Santa Barbara, appears in the documentary to discuss the historical and political context during which “don’t ask, don’t tell” was formulated in 1993.

Symons said his aim in making the film was to raise questions about what the policy does to service members as well as to young people who, in an age of increasing tolerance of homosexuality, are bewildered by a law that forces people into a closet that is evaporating in civilian society. “I felt like it was important to tell the real stories of what it’s like for troops to serve under this discriminatory policy,” he said, “specifically what it’s like to be in a high-stress combat position and not be able to be



open about who you are.”

Because of the continued ban, one of the film’s main characters had to be portrayed with his face in partial shadow. The soldier is shown first among friends in San Francisco before he deploys to Baghdad, and is then followed throughout his service and in harrowing communications with his friends back home, who strain to understand his commitment to, and sacrifice for, a military that treats him as a pariah while wearing the nation’s uniform.

Belkin said the obscured face of the gay soldier points to a larger issue about the nature of political discussion over gay service. “‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ is unique in that it bars the people who are targeted for discrimination from speaking up to defend themselves,” he said. “Symons’ film does a great service in this respect because it illuminates the stories of those whose voices are, by law, muzzled, and thereby elevates the political discourse that the policy tries to eviscerate.”

The film’s premiere at the San Francisco International Film Festival will be held April 26, and will be followed by a repeat screening on May 5. It will also be the opening night film at the Fort Lauderdale/Miami Gay & Lesbian Film Festival on May 1, and will show at the Seattle International Film Festival which runs in May and June. For more information, visit <http://www.asknotfilm.com>, and for tickets in San Francisco, Florida and Seattle respectively, visit <http://www.sffs.org> and <http://www.mglff.com> and <http://www.seattlefilm.org>.

“ASK NOT is a co-production of Persistent Films LLC and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).”

###

The Palm Center, formerly the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, is a research institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The Center uses rigorous social science to inform public discussions of controversial social issues, enabling policy outcomes to be informed more by evidence than by emotion. Its data-driven approach is premised on the notion that the public makes wise choices on social issues when high-quality information is available. For more information, visit [www.palmcenter.org](http://www.palmcenter.org)