

THE CANDIDATE (working title, now called RUN GRANNY RUN)

Producer/Director: Marlo Poras

...one of the most provocative and inspired candidacies this country has seen in years
The Nation magazine

Program Description

Doris “Granny D” Haddock smiles at her opponent, U.S. Senator Judd Gregg, as the cameras roll. The debate is airing live to thousands of potential New Hampshire voters, so Doris is careful to keep her trembling arthritic hands hidden behind the podium. She is intimidated by the formidable experience of her opponent, a two-time incumbent who played the role of John Kerry in President Bush’s mock debates. Having never debated before, Doris turns to her 94 years of experience as a housewife, office manager, and great-grandmother. When Gregg asks how she would improve upon his lauded environmental record, Doris’ eyes twinkle, “I saw a picture of you fishing recently, Senator. I hope you didn’t eat that fish: the lakes and rivers of our state are now poisoned with mercury, which was certainly not the case when you entered office.”

Emboldened, Doris pins New Hampshire’s record mercury levels to Gregg’s votes for coal industry subsidies. She doggedly asserts that Gregg, like most career politicians, is funded by the same special interests that he is supposed to be regulating, leaving him beholden to the demands of his donors rather than the needs of his constituents. It is an argument Doris has been honing since the age of 90, when she walked 3,200 miles across America to raise awareness about campaign finance reform. Racked with emphysema and arthritis, she logged ten miles a day for thirteen months. Doris’ quixotic trek won praise from Senator John McCain and former President Carter, and galvanized worldwide popular attention to an electoral system gone awry.

THE CANDIDATE (working title) is a first-person documentary portrait of Doris’ remarkable transformation from renowned citizen activist to novice political candidate. Crafted from over 350 hours of DV footage captured from May ‘04 through February ‘05, the film offers an intimate look at the nation’s oldest political newcomer as she struggles against the inherent liabilities of old age and challenges herself to run a U.S. Senate campaign that personifies her democratic ideals of a government of, by and for the people.

Much in the same style as MAI’S AMERICA, my previous film, Doris’ story is told through an intricate weave of real-time scenes (captured as they happened) and voice-over narration culled from original interviews with Doris and members of her campaign staff. Archival news footage of Doris’ epic walk is used to set up her back-story at the start of the film, and news segments which aired in NH during her Senate campaign are used as plot points a few times in the film. Special attention is paid to the sound design of the film—Doris is always radio mic-ed, and frequently other characters are as well, in order to help viewers feel an immediate, visceral connection to the story.

THE CANDIDATE opens in the months just before Doris announces her candidacy. In early 2004, determined to get democracy back on its feet, she revs up her flamboyantly

decorated van and travels over 20,000 miles on a voter registration drive. But Doris' trek is cut short when unexpected news hits the press in her home state of New Hampshire: the Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate has dropped out of the race. The Democratic Party has one day to file a new candidate and Doris—never one to turn down a near-impossible challenge—jumps into the electoral ring.

With diction and sass reminiscent of Katherine Hepburn, Doris handily captures the media's imagination at her first press conference. Still, Doris is keenly aware that she's David to Judd's Goliath right from the start. Feeling the weight of New Hampshire's role as a swing state, Doris works hard to not be dismissed as a sideshow or a sacrificial lamb. With less than four months to campaign, she quickly corrals a motley team of political aces and amateurs. Doris' son Jim lives next door and shuttles his mother between events. Jim's attitude toward his mother alternates between awe and ambivalence. One minute he proclaims, "I believe my mother travels in the palm of God's hand," and the next, "if you're 69 and you're still following your mum around, you need to figure some things out."

Together, Doris and Jim hire Dennis Burke—Doris' longtime cohort—as Campaign Strategist. Dennis is a 55-year-old, seasoned political activist with a solid track record for winning underdog campaigns. He is also a self-described introvert, a man who is more comfortable with computers than he is with co-workers. Dennis and Doris have a difficult time finding a Campaign Manager so late in the political calendar, but eventually they select Christine Kuwamoto to fill the role.

When Doris finally inspires Joe Trippi, Howard Dean's maverick presidential campaign manager, to offer his services as chief strategist, the campaign is ready to roll. Eager to hear the concerns and needs of New Hampshireites, Doris laces up her sneakers and takes off on a 200-mile walk around the state. At the start, Doris struggles for breath and gets testy when she has to walk and talk at the same time. Gradually, though, she builds stamina, and when she is joined by a three-piece band that plays Granny D-themed songs, her walk is in full swing.

As Doris gains her stride, she is haunted by her responsibilities as a mother. Doris' 70-year-old daughter Betty is suffering with Alzheimer's, the same disease that took Doris' husband after ten years of illness. Doris' visits to Betty leave her wracked with guilt—she wishes that she were ill instead of Betty, but she's not willing to let go of her activism in order to take care of her daughter full time. Doris is comforted that Betty is being well taken care of by her husband, and she's eager to use the precious time she has left to inspire change.

Back on the campaign trail, Doris fields the press with relish and marches in parades, all the while delivering impassioned speeches at colleges, senior centers, private homes and democratic events. Her presence on the campaign trail is deceptive: a little old lady sporting a worn straw hat with a turkey feather sticking out of it, Doris sometimes

struggles for words and is aggravated by unreliable hearing aids. But when she speaks to the issues, Doris doesn't hold any punches: she comes out vehemently against the Iraq war, tax cuts for the wealthy, and "reconstruction jobs in Iraq going to multinationals like Halliburton instead of to Iraqis."

Intent on meeting the needs of voters rather than the requests of donors, Doris pledges to run for office without funding from PACs or special interests, accepting only small donations from individuals. Doris' democratic ideals made fundraising a challenge, but her gritty determination, sharp wit and no-nonsense politics begins to capture the hearts and minds of voters.

Despite Doris' rising popularity, her progressive platform and her outspoken support of John Kerry, the Democratic Party disappoints her time and again; she is crushed when they fail to invite her to speak at the Democratic National Convention, angered when they refuse to support her bid to add "Granny D" to her name on the ballot, and finally livid when the Democratic candidate for governor comes out in support of Gregg, her Republican opponent.

Doris turns to her campaign for support, only to find their attention diverted by a rift that divides the staff into two opposing camps: Dennis and Chris are at odds over the campaign's management and scope. Fully absorbed by how little time there is left to campaign, Dennis argues for opportunistic, rapid-fire strategies. Chris, on the other hand, tends toward a more methodical approach. Tensions run high at the office and culminate in daily skirmishes. Frustrated by the precious time being lost handling internal problems, Doris fires Chris three weeks before the election, and hands the campaign reigns to Dennis.

Doris keeps on fighting. She does so well in the New Hampshire primary that Gregg, who has stubbornly attempted to ignore his nonagenarian opponent, finally agrees to a live, nationally televised debate. Instantly, Doris is racked with fear. She trains with a coach for three grueling weeks and arrives at the debate a bundle of nerves, but once the cameras roll, she stands up to her opponent with grace, eloquence and bite. The following day, 75% of polled viewers declare Doris the victor. Doris hurdles through the last days of the campaign, buoyed by the many Republican women who declare that they will vote for her and by the frenzied cheers she receives at rallies.

In the end, though, New Hampshire chooses more of the same and re-elects Judd Gregg. However, Doris receives 34% of the vote, a remarkable achievement for a first-time candidate with a no-fills four-month campaign. And while constituents might feel uncomfortable sending a 94-year-old political novice to the US Senate, Doris' focus on compassion and justice ultimately transcends her own race and helps sway presidential voters—New Hampshire is the only state in the country to swing from red to blue.

Audience

THE CANDIDATE offers viewers the unique opportunity to get to know an individual who embodies some of the pressing questions of our time: Whom does the government serve? Is it a tool for lobbyists and big businesses that have spent millions of dollars transforming our government into a private corporation? Or is it at the service of the people and their livelihoods, security, interests, and dreams?

What does it mean to refuse to give up on the ideals upon which America was founded, particularly during a time of deep-seated cynicism concerning the political system? How can citizens be inspired to take politics back into their own hands and effect change on their own terms? And what happens when the elderly decide to be active and involved beyond retirement in a self-fulfilling, significant way?

THE CANDIDATE appeals to a wide general viewership by addressing the entrenched cynicism toward the political system that leaves many skeptical about the motivations of politicians, who are often viewed as elected lobbyists. As a candidate, Doris bucks such suspicions: she is not running as a career politician, but rather as a reminder that the American government is meant to be of, by, and for the people. Doris' campaign reveals the problems embedded in political disenfranchisement on the basis of race, age, gender, and class, and the film explores her commitment to mobilize the politically marginalized. In a political climate where only half of U.S. voters go to the polls, Doris' exceptional passion can inspire and move the politically disinterested or ambivalent to reconsider and perhaps even get involved with politics on some level: her example has the potential to help shift the disaffection that is rampant in our civic life.

Doris' story also fills an obvious hole in the television landscape, that of senior citizens being represented not simply as retirees, but as active Americans still in pursuit of the American dream. In Doris' case, that dream is of a truly representative democracy. She serves as a striking reminder for the elderly, and for baby boomers as well, that retirement is only the beginning of what can be a deeply rewarding period of life. As Doris says time and again, "this culture of believing that when you're 65, you're through, is ridiculous. If you are lucky enough to retire at 65, then that's the time that you should take on something that is altruistic, something that is going to help someone else or help your country. That's what you're here for, not to sit down and watch TV. Get up, get out, and get busy."