



LEFT: Cody Perkins (left) and Chris Johnson walk the train tracks through their hometown in eastern Kentucky. The boys are profiled over three years (1999-2002) from ages 15 to 18 in *Country Boys*, a film by David Sutherland. ABOVE: Cody Perkins with his girlfriend's father, Ray Riddle, who becomes a key mentor to Cody.

# Helping Hands

An intimate television documentary on the lives of two young men has become a call to action. **By Patricia Harrison**

**I**n my current role as president and CEO of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), I'm constantly impressed by the power that public broadcasting has to inspire people to start volunteering. Producer David Sutherland's powerful documentary *Country Boys* is a recent example of the breadth of public television's reach. It follows the lives of two teenage boys, Chris and Cody, in eastern Kentucky as they struggle for

dignity and hope under adverse circumstances. Sutherland Productions teamed with WGBH, *Frontline*, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) to produce this special program, with funding by the CPB and the PBS Program Challenge Fund.

The documentary, shown in three episodes, connects viewers to these two extraordinary young men while they face personal, economic, and educational challenges at school, at home, and in their rugged

Appalachian community. After seeing the film and being touched by this real-life human drama, many viewers asked, "How can I help? What can I do?"

David Fanning, producer of *Frontline*, said, "We had an extraordinary outpouring of response, and were deluged with more than 2,000 e-mails in the hour immediately after the first episode. This was followed by 6,000-plus e-mails in the days thereafter. People are going to the website and pouring out their own stories and offering to help Chris and Cody. Maybe this will be a lifeline for them. I hope so." As one viewer wrote, "This is why we need public broadcasting. The program shows why we need to help our young. These boys represent thousands of children who need and deserve our support."

Through the Country Boys Community Engagement Campaign, *Frontline*, PBS, CPB, and the ITVS are working with national partners such as 4-H, Al-Anon/Alateen, MENTOR, and Health Ministries Association to respond to the offers of help from public television viewers.

This extraordinary response to one television program tells us that Americans, today more than ever, in the face of both man made and natural disasters, are focused and committed to making a difference where we can. Volunteering is part of America's DNA. Helping others and offering aid to those we've never met strengthen and affirm our connection to communities beyond our own. ★