



## NEWS RELEASE

### **AFI CHIEF EXECUTIVE JEAN PICKER FIRSTENBERG TO RETIRE IN 2007**

*Long-Serving CEO Has Led AFI through Era of Growth and Heightened  
Global Profile*

**Los Angeles, Calif. (June 8, 2006)**—Culminating a long and distinguished career as a leading national advocate of the arts and American film, Jean Picker Firstenberg has decided to step down from her position as chief executive officer of the American Film Institute (AFI) in 2007 following AFI's celebration of its 40th anniversary and a search for her successor, it was announced today by AFI Board of Trustees Chairman Sir Howard Stringer.

Firstenberg has led the internationally recognized arts organization since January 1, 1980—only the second person to head AFI since its creation 40 years ago—making her one of the longest serving chief executives of any non-profit organization in the US. She informed the AFI Board of Trustees of her decision earlier today at its June meeting, and agreed to the Board's requests to remain in her position until a new chief executive is found and to lead the organization through its 40th anniversary celebration in 2007. Sir Howard plans to make a formal announcement about Firstenberg's decision to the creative community this evening at the 34th AFI Life Achievement Award tribute to Sean Connery.

"AFI's past 26 years have been marked by remarkable growth, innovation and reinvention, and the driving force behind it all has been the leadership of Jean Picker Firstenberg," said Sir Howard. "When Jeannie took the helm in 1980, AFI faced innumerable challenges, but her boundless energy, grace and vision has made AFI the national cultural force that we know today. Jean has championed the young filmmakers who learn their craft at the AFI Conservatory; she has fought to rescue, restore and catalog America's film history; and she has brought the magic of the movies to generations through both AFI's national exhibition and television programs. Through her leadership and commitment, she has, herself, become an American treasure."

Firstenberg was named chief executive officer in 1980 by the AFI Board and its then-Chair Charlton Heston. Since that time, she has worked closely with the Board—comprised of studio heads, network presidents, academics, top corporate executives, and a range of other influential individuals from industry and the arts—to successfully position AFI as one of the most respected arts organizations in the nation.

“Leading AFI since 1980 has been an incredible experience and I am deeply grateful to the board of trustees for giving me this exceptional opportunity for so long,” said Firstenberg. “The world of film and television has gone through many transformations these past decades, and I am particularly proud that AFI has been at the forefront throughout, especially with the advent of new media. AFI understands that the digital world offers many new dimensions to storytelling, and we will continue to recognize and celebrate these storytellers no matter in what form their stories are told. We have big plans for AFI’s 40th anniversary, and I look forward to that special celebration. It seems fitting to hand the baton to my successor after that, so that person can start the next chapter in AFI’s history. I then plan to travel, write, consult and continue to be an advocate for the art and artists of film and television. While I will no longer be CEO, I will always be part of the AFI family, supporting its role in our nation’s cultural landscape.”

During Firstenberg’s tenure, AFI dramatically expanded beyond its founding missions—to train America’s next generation of moviemakers and preserve the nation’s film heritage—to also become the largest non-profit film exhibitor in the US, undertake major celebrations of excellence in American film and television, and evaluate and integrate new media in the world of film and television. During her 26-year leadership, the organization acquired its current eight-acre Los Angeles campus, opened the AFI Silver Theater and Culture Center outside Washington, D.C., and built on Filmex to establish the thriving AFI Los Angeles International Film Festival (AFI FEST, which will celebrate its 20th anniversary this fall.

Under Firstenberg, the AFI Conservatory expanded to a two-year graduate degree program that today is recognized as one of the world’s preeminent programs training the next generation of great American moving image artists. In 1984, the Conservatory received full accreditation by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design and in 2002 by the Accrediting Commission of Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Firstenberg also made it a priority to re-launch the AFI Catalog, the most definitive database of information about every American feature film ever produced. And in 1999 she led the establishment of AFI’s K-12 Screen Education Center, using the moving image to train teachers across the US to effectively educate students in language arts, history, science and other subjects. AFI’s K-12 Screen Education program has been so successful that later in 2006 it will become a nationwide curriculum available to 60 percent of American schools.

Perhaps the most challenging accomplishment of Firstenberg’s tenure has been to charter AFI through extraordinary changes in its funding base. Under her direction, the organization has transformed itself from a traditional non-profit—once the largest recipient of federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts—into a self-sufficient, entrepreneurial organization that today derives the vast majority of its operating budget from a blend of individual and institutional philanthropy, along with unique revenue-generating programs that honor achievement in American film. Key to that transition was the 1998 launch of AFI’s celebration of the centennial of American film. That program began with **AFI’s 100 Years...100 Movies**, a three-hour primetime CBS television special unveiling the 100 greatest movies ever made,

which has been built into a franchise that has also saluted the greatest stars, music, comedy and other aspects of film, and will air its ninth annual special on the network in June through **AFI's 100 Years... 100 Cheers: America's Most Inspiring Movies**. Firstenberg also oversaw the establishment of the annual AFI AWARDS—an almanac of excellence in film and television in the 21st Century. As part of the almanac, each year juries of leading filmmakers, historians, critics and AFI board members determine the greatest achievements in film and television.

In a joint statement, Ed Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz, who studied together as Fellows at the AFI Conservatory, said: "When we met Jean Firstenberg in 1980 our first, gleeful, thought was, 'They hired a kid to run the place.' And how remarkable that kid turned out to be. In the years since, she has weathered the storms of funding, inspired the cynical, and taken our anarchic, loveable AFI Conservatory and turned it into a world-class teaching facility, with technology and a curriculum that makes us wish we were Fellows again. All while she has worked fiercely to protect the soul of the founders' philosophy, which is the difficult and demanding pursuit of excellence."

Firstenberg added: "There are so many things I will miss about AFI. The quality of the programs reflect the professional standards of an amazing group of colleagues. The men and women who make up the extraordinary AFI staff have made a commitment to each other and to the art and artists they represent. The AFI work-family is a place where pride in a work ethic is dominant. On the board of trustees, I have made many friends whose leadership in their profession has made an impact on the world. Through their active involvement with AFI they reflect their dedication to the role of film and television in our nation's life and history. These two groups, the trustees and my colleagues, have made my years at AFI even more meaningful. I shall always be grateful for their trust, friendship and gracious support."

AFI Trustee and Board of Directors Chair, Jon Avnet said: "AFI and Jean Firstenberg have been synonymous for more than 25 years. And, the organization is truly fortunate to have been the beneficiary of her wisdom, judgment, dedication and dynamic leadership. The AFI Conservatory has grown and evolved into an ever more remarkable experience than the one I so experienced thirty years ago. In addition, AFI has transformed its educational component to include an AFI K-12 Screen Education program that has the potential to impact America's educational system by insuring that all students have access to AFI's innovative curriculum. If the measurement of one's achievement is the impact they have on the individuals and the communities they touch, then Jean Picker Firstenberg sets a very high bar indeed. She knows she will be missed by all of us at AFI."

John Cooke, an AFI Trustee who, with Avnet, serves as Chair of the Board of Directors, said: "AFI's Jean Picker Firstenberg is one of the most extraordinary ambassadors that American film has ever had. She dramatically expanded AFI's role and mission and developed the organization into a major force in film culture. She is also a skilled and eloquent advocate for the moving image, and particularly for the men and women who create this great art form. I can speak for the trustees when I say not only has she been a superb leader of AFI, she is respected and appreciated by the entire film and television community. It is an understatement to say she will be missed."

The following is a complete list of chairs of the AFI Board of Trustees, with asterisks denoting those under whom Firstenberg has served: Gregory Peck (1967-1969); Roger Stevens (1969-1972); Charlton Heston\* (1972-1981); George Stevens\* also Founding Director (1980-1983); Richard Brandt\* (1983-1986); Bonita Granville Wrather\* (1986-1988); Gene Jankowski\* (1988-1992); Fred Pierce\* (1992-1996); Tom Pollock\* (1996-1999); Sir Howard Stringer\* (1999-present).

### **About AFI**

AFI is a national institute providing leadership in screen education and the recognition and celebration of excellence in the art of film, television and digital media. AFI trains the next generation of filmmakers at its world-renowned Conservatory, maintains America's film heritage through the *AFI Catalog of Feature Films* and explores new digital technologies in entertainment and education through the AFI Digital Content Lab and K-12 Screen Education Center. As the largest nonprofit exhibitor in the US, AFI ON SCREEN encompasses the annual AFI FEST presented by Audi: AFI Los Angeles International Film Festival—as well as year-round programming at ArLight Hollywood and the AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center in Silver Spring, Maryland, including SILVERDOCS: AFI/Discovery Channel Documentary Festival. AFI AWARDS, the annual almanac for the 21st century, honors the most outstanding motion pictures and television programs of the year, while AFI's 100 Years...series has ignited extraordinary public interest in classic American movies. And, during the past 33 years, AFI's Life Achievement Award has become the highest honor for a career in film. Additional information about AFI is available at [AFI.com](http://AFI.com).

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