

NEW YORK, Feb. 21, 2014 /PRNewswire/ -- ESSENCE, the #1 media brand for African-American women, has named **Stefani Saintonge** as the winner of its first *The Essence Black Women in Hollywood Short Film Contest: Spotlight On Our Journeys*, it was announced today.

An ESSENCE first, the *Black Women in Hollywood Short Film Contest* challenged entrants to present unique, refreshing visions of Black women—multidimensional portrayals that are different from the stereotypical and often negative images that respondents in a recent ESSENCE study said don't reflect the totality of who they are. Last November, ESSENCE invited aspiring filmmakers to showcase their own inspiring images reflecting the truths and triumphs of Black women's lives by entering the contest. Contest finalists were selected from an eclectic gathering of submissions by a team of ESSENCE editors. From there, ESSENCE's Black Women in Hollywood Academy, featuring top industry tastemakers chose Saintonge as the winner—who will be recognized in the company of A-listers during the 7th

annual
ESSENCE Black Women in Hollywood Luncheon
held on
February 27, 2014
. Saintonge will receive the
Black Women in Hollywood Discovery Award
. Saintonge's journey will be chronicled on
Essence.com
, and a portion of her film will be shown at the
Black Women in Hollywood Luncheon
.

The Black Women in Hollywood Academy featured: **Shonda Rhimes**, creator and executive producer of hit shows *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*

; actress

Regina King

;

husband and wife producing team

Mara Brock

and

Salim Akil

; film director and writer

Gina Prince Bythewood

; producer

Stephanie Allain

; PEOPLE movie critic

Alynda Wheat

; director and editor-in-chief of

Shadow and Act

Tambay Obenson

; filmmaker

Ava DuVernay

; director of development for 34th Street Films

Amber Rasberry

; and screenwriter and director

Dee Rees

.

At 26, Saintonge, who hails from Queens, N.Y., is a daring young risk-taker who loves exploring provocative new stories to tell and the opportunity to expand her repertoire from documentary to narrative. With tenacity, she made the film in just 9 months—writing it, casting an amazing pool of talent through the Casting Network on Craigslist and throwing every dime she had into her dream. The result: *Seventh Grade*, a unique coming-of-age story about a brave young Black girl who discovers the politics of sexuality and in the process stands up for a friend and makes it count.

"It's great to get validation from your own community, and ESSENCE represents that community very well. I'm really happy to be a part of it," says Saintonge of winning the contest. "When I was in middle school I remember...the stories that are out there for when [men] come of age, [was] about them being interested in sex. For women, they become the sex objects. So I wanted to explore what that's like for women to deal with your body becoming a sex object. That's why it's really amazing."

This year, the 7th annual *Black Women in Hollywood Luncheon* will honor three of the year's

most impactful and inspiring talents, both in front of the camera and behind-the-scenes, including: 2014 Academy Award® nominated actress

Lupita Nyong'o

(Best Breakthrough Performance); Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences President

Cheryl Boone Isaacs

(Trailblazer Award) and award-winning director/writer

Ava DuVernay

(Visionary Award). Award presenters include

Sidney Poitier

,
Oprah Winfrey

,
Alfre Woodard

,
Kerry Washington

,
David Oyelowo

,
Spike Lee
and
Tonya Lewis Lee
and

Danai Gurira

. In recognition of the 50th

Anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the event will also pay tribute to legendary performers who were Champions of the Civil Rights Movement:

Nichelle Nichols

,
Jim Brown
and

Denise Nicholas

,
among others.

For more details on this year's honorees and to watch the live streaming of the red carpet of the *Black Women in Hollywood Luncheon*, visit Essence.com/BWIH.

ABOUT ESSENCE COMMUNICATIONS INC.:

ESSENCE Communications Inc. (ECI) is the number one media company dedicated to African-American women, with a multi-platform presence in publishing, live events, and online. The company's flagship publication, ESSENCE magazine, is the preeminent lifestyle magazine for African-American women; generating brand extensions such as the ESSENCE Festival, ESSENCE Black Women in Hollywood and Black Women in Music, Window on Our Women and Smart Beauty consumer insights series, the ESSENCE Book Club, ESSENCE.com, and ventures in digital media (mobile, television and VOD). For 43 years, ESSENCE, which has a brand reach of 9.8 million, has been the leading source of cutting-edge information and specific solutions relating to every area of African-American women's lives. Additional information about ECI and ESSENCE is available at www.ESSENCE.com

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