

## David Jacobson, Class of 2004

By Karen Beman



David Jacobson on the set of *The Butler*

WHITE, COLORED, WHITE ONLY are iconic words that capture the tenor of a country divided by race, tradition, and gut-wrenching brutality. In 1952 Eugene Allen is interviewed for a job at the White House. He is a black man and the job title is pantry man.

What promises to be one of the blockbuster films of the fall season, *The Butler* starring Forest Whitaker, Oprah Winfrey, John Cusack, Robin Williams, and Jane Fonda also lists among the distinguished, David Jacobson, who co-produced the film along with Pam Williams.

The film is inspired by the life journey of Eugene Allen, who served as the White House butler for eight presidents, from the Truman through the Reagan administrations. The originator of the film, Laura Ziskin (*The Amazing Spider-Man*, *Dinner with Friends*, *Pretty Woman*)

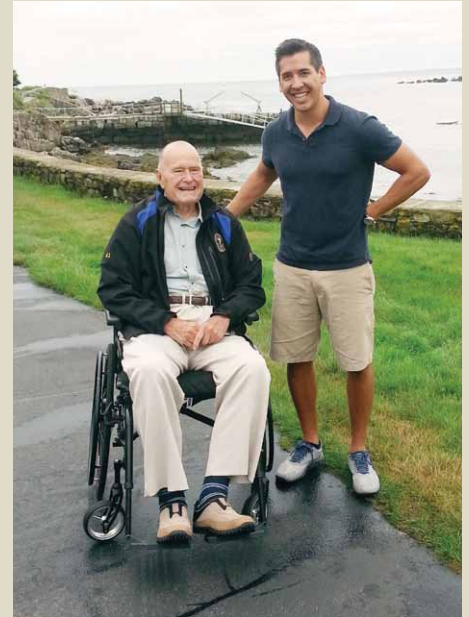
had optioned the underlying story from a 2008 *Washington Post* article written by Wil Haygood, and hired Danny Strong to write the script. Her untimely death in 2011 would have dramatically altered the film's course if it hadn't been for the passion and dedication of Pam Williams and Jacobson.

"I was incredibly blessed to be mentored by Laura," reflects David. "I was involved very early on when the project was set up at Columbia Pictures. After she passed away and her producing partner Pam Williams decided to continue to move the film forward independently, I remained committed to the project. It was a deeply personal commitment for both of us. I could not be more proud of what we accomplished for Laura. For me this was a passion project in the truest sense."

The experience also put David to an extraordinary test. "I wanted to prove to myself that I could roll up my sleeves and learn this independent film business on a limited scale that had massive ambition to it. The project itself was an unbelievably tough one to tackle, but that type of thing never caused Laura or those close to her to shy away from challenges."

During filming, David connected with an exceptional cast and crew including Lee Daniels, director. One of the great highlights was meeting the real-life butler's son Charles, who traveled from Washington, D.C. to visit the set. Joined by Forest Whitaker, David spent time discussing the value of the film and how much it meant to the Allen family and how "true to form" Forest's interpretation of Eugene Allen was.

"The impact of this film will hopefully lie in the profoundly unique and authentic perspective it offers. I had never seen a film like this or been afforded such an intimate peak into the home-life of an African-American family dealing with both the changes of the civil rights movement and the everyday, American business of raising a family. Lee Daniels really grounded it in the African-American experience and gave the entire film a rich vernacular that was very gritty and authentic."



David Jacobson with President George H. W. Bush

Additionally, David sees a critical impact of the film expressed by early film-goers. "Some of the best, most rewarding feedback we've received is from African-American audience members who say the film is spot-on in depicting how their families grew up and how their home lives felt, tasted, and sounded. I love that. Seeing things from a new perspective is incredibly important and will hopefully reveal how universal our story really is."

For David, working on a project of this scale and persevering through enormous obstacles was affirming of so much and on so many levels. "The entire process of getting this film made—or any film made for that matter—has been one of doubt, struggle, faith, hard work, failure, good timing, great luck, and everything in between. It has been a five year journey since it all really started, so I've experienced every emotion you can imagine associated with it. The film business is populated by some of the most incredible people of faith in the world—though you would not categorize them as religious or faithful or pious—they're all dreamers and you just have to not take no for an answer for a long time and take beating after

beating for a long time until your faith or your spirit results in something that is finally produced. So it is kind of surreal to come out on the other side of that, but certainly very affirming and very humbling.”

David’s contributions to the project primarily focused on structuring and raising over \$30 million in independent financing, assistance with on-set production, through all principal photography in Louisiana, and coordinating the postproduction and delivery to The Weinstein Company, which distributed the film.

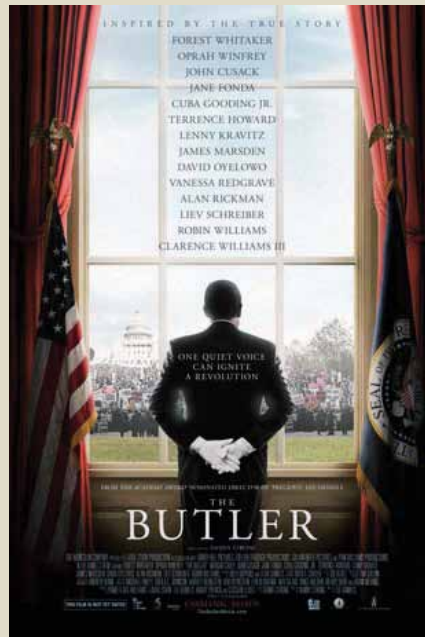
David hopes to keep making films of all budget ranges, but for the immediate future he plans to target projects under \$30 million, seek financing, and sell to interested studios. Currently David is working on a hip-hop and break dance-themed documentary called *Shake the Dust* with fellow Biola alumnus, Adam Sjoberg. He is also developing two additional films and raising capital and slate financing for a production company venture. *The Butler* was shot on the outskirts of New Orleans and David plans to bring his films back down to Louisiana.

When asked what advice might be valuable for students exploring film and media arts, David offered the following perspective. “I think the media and entertainment business is one of the most exciting and accessible areas available to students and young people. It’s all about marrying your passion with a skill set and certainly both can be developed while you’re still in high school. If you love watching movies and studying stories, then watch movies and study stories and read as much as you can—like it’s your job. If the business side of things makes you curious and is interesting to you, then stay for the end credits of every movie you go see. Search online and look up the producers you see on screen, and the production companies and studios, and all of the different department personnel and find out what they do.”

“I still love to sit through the credits of every movie I see because it allows me to see how they put that film together—where they shot, how large the crew was, how much they

must have spent on music licensing, which lawyers negotiated their deals, whether they used a completion bond, if they had foreign pre-sales, etc. The film business in particular is becoming more and more accessible and is very much an area in which you can self-educate. I have a book list that I give each of my interns and a lot of them have gone on to get top jobs assisting studio executives, producers, and directors in Hollywood, so reading everything you can about the business and educating yourself is hugely important.”

*The Butler* premiered in mid–August and did incredibly well at the box office; exceeding initial projections and taking the number one spot on the charts during the debut weekend, and grossing over \$8.32 million on opening night.



## Class of 2011

### Morgan Tompkins

This fall Morgan will begin her junior year at Washington State University, where she is studying human development with a minor in psychology. She still wakesurfs, and works for a wakesurf company on Lake Sammamish in the summer.

### Miaoyi Zeng

Miaoyi has been interning at a classical music management company called Alliance Artist Management this summer in New York. She works on marketing rostered artists to China, inviting local presenting organizations to artists’ concerts, sending out contracts and sales materials, and updating databases. As a part of her internship, she assisted with the Imani Winds Chamber Music Festival at Juilliard School this past summer. She also gives 30 piano students private lessons on a weekly basis in Brooklyn, NY. She was accepted to a four-year program at the Zicklin School of Business at Baruch College of City University of New York, where she plans to pursue a bachelor degree in business.

## Class of 2012

### Alexander Beare

Alexander studies computer science at Gonzaga University. He also plays trumpet in the Gonzaga Pep Band, with which he traveled to both the West Coast Conference tournament in Las Vegas and the second round of the NCAA tournament in Salt Lake City. He also participates in the Gonzaga club Ultimate Frisbee team and Gonzaga’s improvisational team.