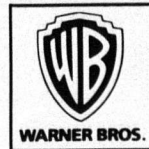




LEAN ON ME

THE TRUTH BEHIND EASTSIDE HIGH



Definition: *expeditious* — acting or done with speed and efficiency; for synonyms see *fast*.

Joe Clark is a high school principal. His favorite word is 'expeditious.' But, he's got problems — big problems. He's in direct conflict with most of the teachers on his staff and most of his students' parents. The fire chief hates him. The mayor sends him to jail. His wife divorces him. His best friend calls him a loser. However, his 2700 students learn to love him, respect him and fight for him.

Lean on Me is based on a true story. "Crazy Joe" Clark (Morgan Freeman) is still the principal of Eastside High in New Jersey. He did appear on the cover of *Time* magazine, looking stern and clutching a baseball bat. He was arrested for chaining every entrance and exit of the school to keep drug dealers out. And he, expeditiously, helped 75% of the students pass a minimum basic skills test which only 38% had previously passed.

Lean on Me begins in 1967. Joe Clark is a dedicated teacher at Eastside High, one of the country's top secondary schools. He and fellow teacher Frank Napier (Robert Guillaume) have been trying unsuccessfully to get their union's support. Known as an agitator,

Clark is betrayed by the union and reassigned.

Twenty years later, the school has become "a cauldron of violence." Napier, now a school superintendent, begs his old friend Joe Clark to take over as principal and turn the school around before the state takes it over.

With cold, calculated and expeditious behavior, Clark does take over. He immediately expels 300 "incorrigible" students, mainly drug dealers and users. He promotes Joan Levias (Beverly Todd) to vice-principal and then treats her like a slave. He fires other teachers for little reason. "This is not a democracy this is a state of emergency" he says. "This is a war to help save 2700 students."

Crazy Joe's methods do contain a lot of madness. He not only wields a baseball bat or bullhorn, he encourages a young boy to jump off the school roof. "You will sing the school song on demand or you will suffer dire consequences" he says. This means suspension. Captain Bligh was a pussy-cat in comparison!

Lean on Me was directed by veteran John G. Avildsen, winner of an Oscar for *Rocky* and rave reviews for both *Karate Kid* films. "Clark's accomplishment has been formidable, when one considers the obstacles placed in his path, from obstreperous parents to local authorities" says Avildsen. "But all

you have to do is spend a day at Eastside High. He has instilled pride. He has changed the school for the better and his influences have made him a local hero. I find it a very inspiring story.

Screenwriter/associate producer Michael Schiffer agrees. Fresh from writing the screenplay for *Colors*, he admits that *Lean on Me* provides answers, whereas *Colors* chose not to. He spent six weeks with Clark researching the film and says the man never shirked his responsibility or tried to maintain the status quo. "He went to the wall with it" says Schiffer. "He offended and treated some people badly. But underneath all that is this urgency that 'we can't wait another day' because every day kids are quitting, dropping out, failing and falling into

the pit." Expeditious, again.

Morgan Freeman has only praise for the man he portrays. And he was fortunate enough to be able to observe and work with Clark in the halls of Eastside. Filming was done in the school with the cooperation of Clark, his staff and the student body.

Last year's Oscar nomination for Freeman's electrifying performance in *Street Smart* was a far cry from his character of Easy Reader on the PBS show *The Electric Company*. Primarily known as a theatrical actor, Freeman has won many drama awards. He says that he could understand the concepts being heralded in *Lean on Me* because he grew up in Chicago "in a jungle". School became his salvation. "I got nurtured. I got help."

Beverly Todd's character, vice-principal Joan Levias, comes into direct conflict with Clark. She is sympathetic to his objectives but not his methods. The attractive Todd began her career as a model and then appeared in theatre. In addition to many fine TV appearances, Todd recently played Whoopi Goldberg's nemesis in *Clara's Heart* and a sympathetic adoption agent in *Baby Boom*.

Robert Guillaume, superintendent Frank Napier, rose from being a butler on *Soap* to becoming a lieutenant governor in his own series *Benson*. Guillaume was twice honored with Emmy awards, first as Best Supporting Actor and then as Best Actor.

Lean on Me is a group effort by all the actors and production people. They believe in "Crazy Joe" Clark's motto for all students, for all people. "If you don't succeed in life, I don't want you to blame your parents; I don't want you to blame the white man. I want you to blame yourselves. What you learn in school will determine the kind of job you will get, the kind of money you will earn and the respect you deserve. I want you to be proud of yourselves. The alternative is to waste your time and to fall into the traps out there of crime, drugs and death."

— Nicole-marie Squires

